

Evangelisation

'The delicate, difficult, unpopular task of revealing that Christ is the Saviour of the World.'

Pope Paul VI

Conversion is the test of our Catholicity. The attitude of very many Catholics on the question of conversion is disturbing to the point of causing wonder as to whether they have the Catholic faith at all. Throughout the greater portion of the Church conversion has been turned off, just as much and just as deliberately as you would turn off electricity. But to turn off converting and to turn off electricity are two different things. Electricity is meant to be turned on and off according to our convenience and handy switches are provided for the purpose. But converting is no matter of our convenience. It is in the Catholic system what the heart is in the physical order. The heart is not meant to be switched off and neither is converting. Converting is basic and essential to the very life of the Church. It was the subject of the last instruction

left to the infant Church by Our Lord. It was the very peak-note or crescendo of his preaching, delivered in circumstances as dramatic and as awesome as those of Mount Sinai; such that his words must have burnt themselves into the very brain tissue of everyone who heard them. And the sequel was that everyone went off and did what he told them to do.

Then how does it become possible that Catholics can dispense themselves from what Jesus so overwhelmingly laid down? The only explanation must be that they regard non-Catholics as being all right where they are. But in this explanation there is the fatal flaw that they also show no inclination to convert the non-Christians.

So let us fact up to the supposition that such people have in their minds a totally different conception to ours of what the Catholic Church is; so different indeed that it would be a sheer waste of time even trying to imagine what their conception is. At best it could only coincide with the broad Protestant definition that the Church is the collection of those who believe in Christ in a sense which does not concern itself with his nature nor with the particular Christian doctrines.

But at worst it could resolve itself into a mere Humanism which does not believe in the Holy Trinity nor in the Divinity of Christ; which would not regard doctrines as essential or stable things but only as opinions and helps to right living. But this is so far removed from the Catholic Church as to be a caricature of it. No, worse than a caricature. A caricature, while indulging in mockery, is supposed to catch the real likeness. But there is no likeness between that mere Humanism and Catholicism. The two are in fact opposites. Humanism is no more than a refined paganism.

So we have to be very definite in regard to what faith is. A programme of going to Mass, or even of saying Mass, does not necessarily prove the presence of true Faith, as millions of examples testify today. It would appear that persons can offer such prayers to deity without admitting in their hearts that Catholicism is the one true religion.

Whatever conception of Catholicism those non-converting ones may have, their policy has for the moment succeeded in forcing itself on the Church. The position is that the Legion of Mary is one of the few societies in the Church which just now stands uncompromisingly for conversion. It has nailed those colours to its mast-head. It has animated its members with the urgent desire to go out and convert. It has caused the Lord's command to echo in their hearts.

As the Koran commands every Moslem to go at least once in his life to Mecca, so the Legion urges its members to do another sort of Mecca; that is to travel off at least once on what Pope Paul describes as 'the delicate, difficult, unpopular mission of revealing that Christ is the Saviour of the world'. This appeal has struck chords in hearts. The Legion of the world will soon be literally obeying – for a short spell at least – that global commandment: 'Go out into the whole world and give the Gospel to every creature' (Mk 16:15). If that approach is made in *all* places, it would mean even as a merely human proposition that the little, universal ripples would add up to a tidal wave which could carry great multitudes into the Church. But it is certain that God would then cap that process by doing something bigger still; that is bestowing the grace of mass conversions.

We are now witnessing the development of that idea. At the outset it was only a little stirring from Ireland. But

that was like the well-spring which grows into the mighty river. The Amazon begins with a trickle on the watershed between Brazil, Peru and Bolivia. Already this idea of travelling for Christ, what we call the *Peregrinatio*, has caught on in many countries. We have not to be prophetic to say that soon it will be fermenting in them all.

But God has not to await for the final accumulation of drops of water. Nor is he hampered by the operation of any law of nature. If his conditions are met, he can give the ultimate result instantaneously. He does not insist on the co-operation of absolutely everyone. He is content with the response of a substantial number. In a current article I have ventured to say that our operations in Asia and Africa are already setting the stage for multitudinous conversions from Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam within a century.

By 'setting the stage' I mean presenting Catholicism to the people on a scale sufficient for them to be fully aware of it and to enable them to see how far its stature ascends above their own poor shadowy, primitive conceptions of religion. This process of showing them may have to begin with 'symbolic action'. Soon it will be running big and deep like the Amazon. An incidental idea is that having worked intensively for weeks on a project, a fuller realisation will have been gained, firstly of the extreme need for such work and secondly of their own capacity to handle it. They return home with that supercharged outlook which then expends itself on the domestic tasks.

The further impression gained – a melancholy one – by those travellers is that almost nobody but themselves attaches any importance to the winning of conversions to the Church. This applies even to higher quarters. How often is the permission to approach non-Catholics only

grudgingly given? Worse than that, in very many cases that permission cannot be obtained; in which event our policy dictates that no party will be sent to that place.

Perhaps at this there is the protest: What about the great numbers of lapsed Catholics in that place to whom you *could go*? Is not their plight grave enough to justify you going, even though you are cut off from the non-Catholics? *Certainly* their plight is grave but vital principle is at stake here.

It is that there is something radically wrong in the set-up where very many Catholics are lapsed and where non-Catholics are not even being thought of. It would not do to condone that policy by aligning ourselves with it. True Catholic instinct would and must embrace both problems. There is something disastrously astray when one of them is deliberately left out.

It is significant that just in the places where conversion is ruled out; Catholicism steadily loses its spirit. Life is lived at the lowest routine level and non-practice and then unbelief begin to take over. So both problems are really united. Attention to one or neglect of one affects the other.

I give an example from a neighbouring country over a great portion of which there has been no Catholicism since the Reformation and no desire to convert. In excuse it used to be said that efforts to convert would be resented to the point of retorting with violence. That suggestion has been disproved 200% by which I mean that the presentation of the Faith is welcomed. Yet the barriers remain. There are to be no conversions! The legionaries of that country will not be let attempt it. Neither will the legionaries from outside! Surely it is a very great sin thus to deny the Faith to the people!

Or take the current case where the English legionaries went to Norway with the orders of the local bishop that they were to call on all the non-Catholics. The priests sternly refused to have anything to do with the enterprise and would give not the slightest help. A fine example of defiance of their bishop and of the words of Our Lord!

Now I specify a particularly gross instance. One of our teams, by the cordial invitation of the bishop, entered a certain territory in which there were no Catholics at all. They were evicted by the Parish Priest. He declared as follows: 'Can you not leave those people alone? They are all right as they are. In my whole life I have never spoken to a non-Catholic on the subject of religion.'

I ask: what effect are those priests having on the Catholics? Answer: they are devastating them. They are perverting them. Perceiving that outlook in the shepherd, what can the outlook of the flock be?

If the majority of them are not already lapsed, they are soon going to be.

Those instances sound pretty awful, but are they exceptional? You know that they are not. In what way different to them is the present-day prevalent attitude of deliberate abstention from converting? I cannot see any difference between the two. The one declares its attitude in words. The other refrains from uttering the crude words but puts them into crude effect. Those things denote an indifference to souls, and those who perpetrate them are a barrier to the Church. They are saying 'STOP' where Jesus says 'GO'.

Even if there were no visible results from attempts to evangelise, that would not dispense from trying. But there *are* results on a big scale, frequently very dramatic ones. Instant conversions, baptisms on the spot, cases akin to

that of Mary Magdalene – and these proved by the lapse of time to have the quality of the conversions described in the gospel itself.

Is it not dumbfounding to have our returned peregrine assure you that they could see faith coming into the eyes of those to whom they were speaking; or to hear one balanced legionary assert that he was convinced that his party left five hundred believers behind them in an atheist land. Or when the lady, whom you have asked if the thought of becoming a Catholic had ever come to her, replies with unutterable earnestness: 'Oh yes, often. I greatly want to be a Catholic.' But all that seems to mean nothing to many of those above us. What is wrong with them? It is bad enough when those above us refuse to give us a lead. It is impossible, tragic when they prevent us from undertaking that necessary work.

I repeat: ordinary Catholics could not possibly stand up against such an attitude which amounts to a blunt affirmation that one religion is as good as another. This not only denies the unique position of the Catholic Church but it destroys all religion whatsoever. How can true religions contradict each other down into detail? Nor would it be any use to the Catholic Church to be labelled as having the edge of superiority over all the others. To be the best of a poor lot is no classification of excellence, and above all it is not a hallmark of the Truth.

How such attitudes can persist among people who seem to be sensible and sincere is not comprehensible. It shows that the human mind is far from being an instrument of precision and that it can be caught up by every wind of thought that blows.

Take the older Protestant outlook on the Bible which held that the Holy Spirit interpreted it to the honest reader.

This rule of Faith was long held onto in spite of the fact that it produced not only a thousand formal religions but really a different set of beliefs in each individual. That this could be is evidence of the baffling quality of the mind.

Obviously the divine truth must be clear-cut and reasonably exclusive of contradictory interpretations and fringe matter. It must stand out to the extent that a seeker will be forced to think: 'I have to investigate that.' It cannot be a freak product like the Mormons or the Jehovah Witnesses or the Seventh Day Adventists or the Pentecostals. It may be decried but not just laughed off the stage. It must be a religion and not merely a social gospel, but at the same time it must exert a revolutionary, purifying effect on society. It must be based on faith but likewise it must be logic; for otherwise how are we to get at it? Moreover, the Faith and the logic must interweave and balance nicely so that the greatest mind can comfortably submit to it. Pascal says that we know the truth not only by the reason but also by the heart. And while it must appeal to the intellectuals, it must have the common touch so that the ignorant will feel at home in it. It must suit all times and all men, and the child as well as the man. It must be able to tame the successors to the ruthless Goth and the Vandal while simultaneously attending to the little and the lesser ones. It must be able to teach the primitives while at the same time forming the arts and inspiring genius. It must be able to stand up in each generation to some new philosophy, brilliant and convincing but proud and materialistic, which hits at the roots of the spiritual and usually at human conduct, and even at civilisation itself. The Church has withstood all those earthquakes of thought and it will continue to do so.

Then on the other hand the Church is able to forsake human paths altogether and to work miracles prodigally – just as the Lord himself did, and for the same reason: to prove its divinity and to confound the one-sided science which denies its divine architect.

Then it must be catholic, that is worldwide, everywhere. It must fit in to that text of scripture about the city set on the hill which is visible to the whole world.

The Catholic Church and it alone conforms to such exacting requirements. Likewise alone it complies throughout two thousand years with the Lord's promise of permanence. Vexed from the very beginning by internal ailments and external assault from every angle, it has survived in such a way that the every-lengthening testimony of history has endorsed the various promises of Christ: 'The gates of Hell shall not prevail against you ... I will be with you all days even unto the consummation of the world.'

Few nobler sentences than those of Lord Macaulay have been spoken on that aspect. They are all the more remarkable inasmuch as he disliked the Church that he was praising. Since then, well over a hundred years of history full of convulsions of every kind have flowed by and those have only served to reinforce his argument.

He says: 'Nor do we see any sign which indicates that the term of her long dominion is approaching. She saw the commencement of all the governments and of all the ecclesiastical establishments that now exist in the world; and we feel no assurance that she is not destined to see the end of them all. She was great and respected before the Saxon had set foot in Britain, before the Frank had passed the Rhine, when Grecian eloquence still flourished at Antioch, when idols were still worshipped in the Temple of Mecca. And she may still exist in undiminished

vigour when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a great solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St Paul's.'

Those are vastly picturesque words which will live as long as the Church itself. But the fact that they are picturesque does not lessen their force and their truth. For they *are* true. We do not know anything about that traveller from New Zealand nor of the future fate of St Paul's, but we do know that the Church will outlast every existing institution and will be there at the end of the world according to the divine promise.

That Catholic Church is the institution, which the false ecumenists and like belittlers would reduce to the rank of one among the others. Their crime is great, for thereby the Church would be demoted from teacher to pupil and therefore deprived of any credentials to teach the nations. In such circumstances it is a rare joy to find the Legion as a special standard-bearer of the Church, with no doubts in all her far-flung hosts about its unique, divine position and playing a foremost part in extending it. To be part of the Church in that way is indeed to be privileged.

We possess a treasure, but it is one to be shared. The opportunities which we have of offering it to those outside the Church are fleeting. We must present it effectively. We have a mere snapshot chance of influencing souls. We must make the most of them.

The message from Christ which we deliver must not be a mere lesson because that would leave the listeners cold. Moreover, it must tell of a person rather than an institution, because institutionalism is a bad word in these days which think that institutions are of their very nature static and always in need of reform; that they stifle initiative and cripple even common action.

Accordingly, present the Church so that it shines as Christ, for it *is* Christ. In that short innings of ours we must go straight to that essence of the Church. Explain that by baptism there is established a union between Christ and the soul such that they live a sort of joint life with sharings of mission and of goods. The Mystical Body which is thus built up of Christ and the believers is the Catholic Church. Christ's mother is likewise its mother. She who played a necessary part in Redemption continues to play an analogous part in the salvation of each man. The Pope is the visible head of that body; through him, Christ's voice speaks authoritatively, infallibly. That body re-enacts the life of Christ from the cradle to the grave. It is filled with the Holy Spirit and its food is the Eucharist. The other sacraments admit us to Christ's forgiveness of sin, unite us in matrimony, prepare us for death, and bestow the function of the priesthood. The Mass is Calvary in our midst; it is the divine expedient which enables us to be repeatedly present at Christ's sacrifice. Thus built into Christ and helped along the way, the Church must seek to extend its life to all men.

Such a presentation might be called the living core of Catholicism. Do not overload it with secondary things which may only obscure. Plumage decorates but it is not the living bird. I think that is all that can be got home in a hit-and-run progress. Brief though it is, it delivers an appealing message which represents the essence of the Church.

'Great is the truth and it shall prevail,' goes the proverb. 'We are conquered by the truth,' says Erasmus. Another saying bids us to arm ourselves for the truth. *Our* special arming should be the putting into order of our motives and interior dispositions. I give principal mention to one

ingredient which can spoil things. It is pride, the great original sin which continues to take a universal part in human affairs, seeking to enter in just as much as the air we breathe.

Without intending it, we insert self into every situation. To the degree that this happens we are the less fitted to carry grace. It would be a sad thing if by thus taking credit to ourselves we rob God of his glory and at the same time prevent him from using us.

Here lies a bundle of anomalies: the Omnipotent desires most ardently to convert the world but it is his arrangement that it has to be effected through the Mystical Body, and the members of that body can limit his operation. We want earnestly to help him and yet we can disqualify ourselves for that role by taking pride out of what we do. Thus we can turn our good will against itself so that it can do us harm.

In this connection may I plead for a re-reading of the handbook section on humility? It deserves better than the passing attention and joking which it usually receives.

Perhaps the very simplest formula, which we can propose towards safeguarding our apostolate, is that God will avail of us to the extent that we permit him; that is to the extent that we do not appropriate his glory to ourselves. Our action is necessary in its order, just as are the wires, which convey the electrical energy. But God it is who gives the grace. We are only the recipients and transmitters of it, but unspoiled transmission *could* mean the conversion of China.

Here enters also the operation of the Blessed Virgin whose role in salvation was treated by the Vatican Council in such a dynamic way that the Holy Father describes it as the culminating point of all the legislation. She is

mother of all men without exception. She is the Queen of Apostles and also of apostleship. She is the co-operator in Redemption and the Mediatrix of all graces. Therefore she *must* as the very justification of her existence reach out to every soul and clutch at every suitable aid which offers itself.

We might say that it is her providential function to protect us from that corrosive pride. It is her special mission to crush the serpent's head – which we could paraphrase as the overcoming of pride, the arch-sin of mankind.

On the lesser level of the psychological it is obvious that if we regard ourselves as working in a close partnership with her, or in a dependence on her, we will tend to ascribe to her the results which otherwise we would inevitably be claiming for ourselves. So the best way to keep self out is to bring Mary in.

The importance of this cannot be over-estimated. In my observation of legionaries at their work, and particularly when considerable achievements were in question, it was evident to me that they were attributing to Our Lady the fruits which were issuing. I have concluded that this was why such great things were proceeding from their work. They were simple and selfless in the transaction. I think that therein lies the great legionary secret. They see Jesus and Mary working through them. They understand what their own share is, and what is the share of Jesus and Mary. In spite of her grandeur, Mary did not magnify herself. She understood her true place. By conscious union with her, we assign ourselves to our proper rank and she helps us to keep it.

I believe that the problem of converting the world resolves itself down finally to this aspect of motives and

purity of intention. If it has been easily possible to teach legionaries their true place in the scheme of God and to mobilise them towards fulfilling it, then all mankind can be equally taught and utilised; because the Legion is typical of mankind.