

HAVE WE KEPT THE FAITH TO OURSELVES

Frank Duff

It was once said that the world suddenly wakened up in consternation to find itself Arian, this being the heresy, which denied the divinity of Christ. Today we could apply the same figure of speech and say that we are shocked that among Lay societies the Legion of Mary finds itself ploughing a rather lonely furrow in seeking conversions to the Catholic faith. Are we to assume that this turning away from conversion amounts to a tacit acknowledgement that one religion is as good as another? If so, it would truly be a conglomerate heresy, that it would include every heresy from the beginning.

If a Catholic thus degrades the Church in his thought, it means that he has dethroned all our venerable doctrines: the Mass, the Eucharist, the Sacraments, Mary. These are reduced to an equivalent to the codes and Practices of the other religions. We have our system which saves us! Others have their systems which saves them, and which perhaps suit them better! It is but a short step from that to thinking that none of them matter very much at all. History tells us what then happens. Indifference, non-practice and complete loss of faith succeed each other in inevitable sequence. Already many have set their feet on that downward flight of stairs.

So it is with mixed feelings that the Legion of Mary finds itself a principle exponent of the correct position: which is that only the Catholic Church contains the fullness of truth and that all other religions are either false or only partially true.

This is not to say that the Legion, while holding the proper point of view, is wholeheartedly applying it. That is far from being the case. You see what has emerged from examination into our three priorities: conversion, preservation, comforting. We have to admit that in actual practice they have been reversed. Legion energies, which could convert multitudes, have been dissipated on unnecessary and even silly things. And this in a world which has abandoned the moral law and where civilisation itself is in peril.

Last year a large host of legionaries engaged in the peregrinatio. Many countries took part and many places were the scene of their venturesome activities. It would be accurate to say that nowhere did they find any notion of converting. They gave themselves to it. Invariably the local legionaries joined in with great heart. They were willing, they proved themselves competent but they had not previously thought of that work. Evidently there is a failure in leadership. But the fact that we can point to the cause does not rectify this quasi denial of the Church.

Instead Of A Great Wall, A World Open To Us

One would think from this abandonment of our mission that an iron wall stood in the way of converting. This is not the case. The world is now more ripe for converting than ever before. The special reason for this is the development of the means of communication which has, so to speak, presented a visible weighing up of all the religions against each other. I think it would now be admitted that the whole world has more or less consciously concluded that the only one which emerges as a rational proposition is the Catholic Church. This Judgement will assume greater substance according as education advances and as the other religions progressively disintegrate.

In this connection I have previously told you the story of Japan. I do not repeat the startling details. I have to content myself with saying that when in the 1930's that nation realised the futility of its existing religions and then faced up to the filling of the vacuum. It unhesitatingly chose Catholicism. Coming from a traditional enemy, this step represented a dramatic testimonial.

Later on in the 1950's, Communist China, feeling that it had to stage some religion, contemptuously pushed its native religions to one side and assigned Catholicism to the role of the Church of China. But, alas it wished to make it a creature of its own, a state Church – which spoiled everything.

I think that things have progressed to this stage that if any enlightened and unbiased country were to be seeking a religion for its people, it would have to decide on Catholicism. It might not thereby be acknowledging it as a Divine revelation but only as the holiest and wisest and most beneficial code in the world. But I comment that the latter is just what we would expect the true religion to comprise. I cannot see how any other choice could be made if the best is really being sought.

All the others palpably represent human devising and human folly in varying degrees.

And what I have said of the nation holds equally for the individual. The Church today is the city set on the hill so that all see it. Everyone in his heart acknowledges it as somehow different, in a classification of its own. Speak to anyone in the world and you will find in him that strange recognition of the uniqueness of the Church. This is not to say that he believes in it or accepts it or likes it. There are things which stand in the way of that. Firstly, he is not having the Church fully and correctly explained to him. Secondly, the world, the flesh and the devil tell him that the Church is a "hard saying", too hard for human nature. But supposing we do make an approach to him, what happens? I have been listening to the reports made by many of the peregrini returned from their various fields which are typical, one can claim, of the whole world. It has been a religious experience, like a bringing up to date of the Acts of the Apostles, a turning of print into persons and voices. By reason of the wealth of material the peregrini had to be limited to a single episode each. I cannot give you even that much. I can offer only a few gleanings. But at least these will show what is there waiting for the apostle:

1. "I have no religion but I am interested in what you have to say"
2. From the manageress of a brothel: "I would wish to be a Catholic but how can I, considering my profession?"
3. "None of us here bother about Churches anymore"
4. "I have never heard people talk like you"
5. "You have told us things we never heard before, and everybody should hear them"
6. "You have given us much to think about and personally I feel there is something in it"
7. "If you were here for another week you would have me in your Church"
8. "You have revived the idea of Christ which has been dead in me for 60 years"
9. "I do not believe, but I would like to talk with your priest"
10. "I have to postpone my promise to be baptised. I have two friends who are almost ready to be baptised along with me" that comes from one who had been professing atheism.
11. "I would like to continue this talk. I am beginning to believe"
12. "You propose your religion very nicely. I am grateful to you for not preaching at me"
13. "I am 62 years here and you are the first Catholics who have ever visited me"
14. "I have had to send my children to the Protestant school so that they would learn about God"
15. "I have been contacted by every religion under the sun. this is the first time by Catholics"
16. A Jew said: "I am grieved that I will never see you again. You have taught me much. You have given me courage to face the future which looks so frightful to us Jews"
17. "Today for the first time in my life I entered a Church. Now you stop me and talk to me about that religion. I am overwhelmingly impressed"
18. "All my life I have wanted to be a Catholic. You are the first who has ever invited me to be one"
19. "I am an atheist but I would like to bring my boyfriend to listen to your religion"

You see, a welcome awaits. No trouble anywhere, even in the officially atheistic lands. Good done in every case. Misconceptions corrected. People stirred up. Some advance into belief in almost every case. No resentment to the Catholic approach – just the opposite. All this proceeding from a short peregrinatio and a brief contact with each individual. What could not be accomplished if the local legionaries were attending to this work all the time? And is it not manifest what the possibilities would be if the entire Church were mobilised to the task. I add that the most sickening impression which I have gained from all my listening to those accounts is the frequency of the phrase: "You are the first persons who have ever asked me to become a Catholic". That the ordinary Catholic could be so dead towards the Church and his neighbour is almost inconceivable. But there is the fact.

Not only is the world prepared to listen but you see how strangely receptive is its attitude. This endorses the Legion doctrine that Jesus and Mary are not only helping us on but are likewise operating in the souls of those we go to. These are never combative; they are grateful. They accept what we say. They want to hear more. They regard it as a compliment that we want them in the Church.

Exterior Hardness May Hide Inner Yearning

In a way all those persons are a little like children compared to you. They are spiritually immature. In their hearts they are longing for the things you are able to give them. They react surprisingly to your interest and affection because most people do not receive any real interest from others. If you show a deep interest, it has strange effects. This holds even where the surface is unpromising. Many display a hard exterior who are inwardly soft.

A number of our recent contacts has proved this. A nobleman who had presented the air of an iron bigot wrote a letter of congratulations to his daughter when she was received into the Church. Subsequently he questioned her on articles of the Faith and then declared his wish to be a Catholic.

Another nobleman asked casually by a Catholic friend if he had ever thought of the Church, replied that of late he had been turning it over in his mind. And two others in current letters to the press show how little their nominal Protestantism means to them.

Other non-Catholics suffering from acute worry have eagerly accepted the medal of Our Lady of Mental Peace and have obtained that peace.

It is remarkable what small acts on our part can be made the instruments of Providence. A legionary said to a Protestant with whom he had been touch for a long time: "Apparently you are never going to make the sign of the cross which is the acknowledged symbol of our Redemption". The other made no reply but at their next meeting very solemnly made that Sign and added: "You made a point there. You set me thinking. I want you to shepherd me in".

Others to whom you address our little formula: By any chance did the thought of being a Catholic ever occur to you?"-return the answer: "Yes, I have always wished to be one". When you inquire why they had never done anything about it, the invariable reply is that you are the first who had ever proposed it to them.

Incorrect Attitude of Some Catholics

From that universal responsiveness it would seem justified reasoning that millions are similarly waiting for the first word of invitation. But the invitation is not being given because of that strange Catholic reluctance to speak about the Faith. Whence proceeds that silence? It is not found in persons of other religions. It is noteworthy that legionaries do not suffer from it and yet they are just typical Catholics in all save their Legion membership. Evidently motives have been supplied to them which overcome the natural hesitancy.

It is not as if difficult questions will be put. In practice nothing will be asked which the normal Catholic cannot answer, remembering of course that it is humanly impossible to explain purely supernatural things, such as the Blessed Trinity or the Eucharist. It is only necessary for us to state our belief. No sane person will expect us to explain how it is.

These are days when perversity seems to be the prevailing atmosphere. Too many among us are bent on depreciating the Church and proving that non-Catholics are all right where they are. I know of many cases where really interested non-Catholics sought information about the Church and were put off by the Catholics to whom they applied. What are we to think of such Catholics? Bodily they may be in the Church but their spirit is elsewhere.

Ingenious phrases have been coined to the effect that Catholics should not obtrude their beliefs on others: Religion is too personal and sacred a matter to interfere with! It is indelicate to tamper with another soul!-and so on with that destructive litany.

Perhaps the idea which would weigh most with a Catholic would be that just as he would not like a Protestant trying to convert him, similarly he should respect the others feelings. But the circumstances are totally different. It is our conviction that the Lord has through the Church taught absolute truth which we must live by and pass on to others. That has no analogy with the case of the ordinary non-Catholic whom we encounter. They have little that could be called a faith. Most of them regard their religion as permitting them to believe what they like and to do what they like. They do not attach any certainty to doctrines. They are ready to modify these according as they get new ideas or come under new influences. They court those influences and they would be willing to be affected by Catholicism if it offered itself to them.

With regard to the suggestion that it would trespass on the liberty of a person to propose Catholicism to him, is it to be inferred that Our Lords command to preach and Gospel to every creature was an infringement on human rights?

And why make an exception of religion in these days when freedom to express ones views is made a first principle and every subject under the sun is openly discussed.

Our Silence Is Misunderstood

I sum up by saying that whatever the motive which keeps Catholics from presenting their Faith to others, it is going to be misinterpreted in ways that we would not like. For example:

"Catholics are very limited in their knowledge of their religion. They are incapable of explaining it. They run like a redshank if they think you are going to ask a question about it."

OR:

"Those Catholics are the strangest people. They appear to have a belief in their religion but they are determined to keep it to themselves. They never invite anyone into it. They never talk about it to others. If you ask one of them a question, he closes up like an oyster. You would think it was a secret society.

OR:

"Of course the reason why the Catholics never propose their Church to us is that they do not want us in it. They cannot forgive us for the ill-treatment which our ancestors gave them. They do not forget or forgive. Not much Christianity about that! We are not our ancestors".

OR:

The Catholics here regard themselves as socially superior to us. In the main we are the working people. That is why they do not ask us to join them".

OR:

"Catholics say they do not believe in the colour bar. Why then do they never ask us Negroes to be Catholics? Of course their reason is racial".

Would we be satisfied with any of those hurtful explanations of our silence? You know that we would be dismayed and humiliated to the depths of our nature by them. But really what else are people to think in regard to our determined silence?

Our Catholic Faith is a jewel of great price, the answer to the puzzle of the world, the key to eternal life, the only true consolation in this vale of tears. It should be our over-mastering instinct to explain its treasures. But no. For one reason or another we do not open our mouths. It is the one subject we do not talk about.

When our Lord instructed His disciples to go to every individual in the whole world with His Gospel, it must have seemed beyond human attainment. For the world to them ranked as large as the whole universe does to us. Yet those disciples did not retort with a litany of excuses. Neither have you when these great enterprises have been proposed to you. You have shown the readiness to travel to the ends of the earth to obey the divine command.

Historical Roots of the Problem

But in regard to most of the problem there is no need to go travelling. Because it is all around us. In particular I discuss the Protestantism of Europe. Macaulay points out that none of the nations which left the Church at the time of the Reformation have ever returned. One reason for this is that we have not attempted to bring them back. In their case there are other circumstances than those of pure religion which buttress up their position. These have been political and social considerations which reached their heights in Great Britain and Ireland where the Catholics were reduced to levels below which they could not go.

All that built up a massive barrier and the years of political equality have not worn it away. We have tried to behave towards them in a Christian manner, but rooted in them is the idea that the Church wishes them ill and that our good behaviour is only a subterfuge.

In regard to Ireland they used to say that Home Rule would mean Rome Rule and that political power would be used to crush them out of existence. This has not happened but in their hearts they still feel that we would like to do it, and that in propitious circumstances we would do it.

Centuries of propaganda have represented the Church as essentially cruel and intolerant. With a uniformity which did not apply to doctrine, every Protestant was taught about the Inquisition, the Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and other alleged ill-treatments by Catholicism, without a word as to the other

side of the picture.

All that preserves sufficient grip to hurt their relations with us and in particular to interfere with our efforts at conversion. They do not think that our wish to convert them springs from a genuine faith in Catholicism but that it is only a way of getting rid of Protestantism as a problem.

Protestants may grant to the ordinary Catholics a correct intention but will nevertheless be convinced that the higher government of the Church has malign intentions in regard to them and would not refrain from persecution if it got the chance. This is not the case. In modern ages the mind of the Church has completely clarified itself in regard to its relation with other religions. It is recognised that it would be wrong to persecute another for his religious opinions. That is now peremptorily enshrined in Catholic legislation, so that never again in any circumstances could the Church be found indulging in it.

An overpowering testimony to the foregoing is provided from an unexpected quarter, none other than Winston Churchill. The occasion was an address to the Dutch Parliament at the Hague. Coming from such a man in such a position, the judgement is too weighty to be disregarded. He said: "Since the estrangement between Protestants and Catholics in the XVI and XVII centuries, there has arisen at least one important new fact that everyone should keep in mind. The Church of Rome has ranged itself on the side of those who defend the rights and dignity of the individual as well as the cause of personal liberty all over the world."

To that new and important fact of Winston Churchill's I would add an old one. In the Middle Ages the State had assumed such power over the Church as almost to deprive it of liberty of action. It used this control to implicate the Church in acts of misconduct of its own, but Protestants have always given the entire blame to the Church. Such was the servitude to which the Church was reduced that the historians say that events like the Reformation and the French Revolution, which looked like disasters to the Church, were in reality blessings in disguise. They relieved the Church from State domination and enabled it to be itself.

Persecution by Reformed Churches

Another fact, to which in their own interest we must ever so gently call the attention of Protestants, is that they themselves have cut no creditable figure in the matter of persecution. They persecuted as heartily as ever the Church did. But what makes their position more grave is that they did it inconsistently. They had proclaimed that religious persecution was intrinsically evil, and nevertheless they went on to practice it. Secondly, they taught their peoples that persecution was exclusively a Catholic sin, creating a feeling against the Catholic Church which still survives.

The magazine "Time", what cannot be accused of partiality towards the Church, has the following comment: "Like the Church of England, wherever the major Reformation Churches flourished they followed the Catholic pattern of State-Church partnership and were just as savagely relentless as the Roman Church in persecuting religious minorities".

Lest "Time" be not regarded as convincing enough, I quote Protestant historians of the first rank:

"Persecution is the deadly original sin of the Reformed Churches which cools every honest man's zeal in their cause in proportion as his reading becomes more extensive".

That is from Hallam's Constitutional History, a work of first importance.

In his work "Lollardy of the Reformation", Gardner observes: "The theory that Protestantism was more tolerant than Romanism will not bear investigation".

In recent years much clamour has been caused by the allegation that Pope Pius XII did not defend the Jews sufficiently. I think that the final judgement would show the Papacy as having risen above all other authorities in their historical behaviour towards the Jews. At this moment the Jews are oppressed with the feeling that every man's hand is against them but I do not think that they need have any fear in regard to the Papacy or the Catholic Church.

Catholic Church's Face Now Set Against Persecution

Now a final word on this subject of persecution.

When the Church of the Middle Ages failed in that regard it was due to the applying to religion of the idea, which is correct in the secular sphere, that punishment for our misdeeds is an aid towards good conduct. So pressure was mistakenly put on the heretic in order to restore him to the way of salvation.

But all that belongs to the past. It is impossible to imagine the Church as ever again persecuting or permitting its members to persecute. Furthermore, I claim that the Church succeeds in imprinting on the mind of the individual Catholic a detestation of the very idea of persecution. Included would be any form of pressure minor to persecution. To the Catholic mind it would be abominable to bring people into the Church by inducement or false pretences or by any improper means. The very notion would be odious to us of receiving into the Church anyone who did not believe in it.

The setting out of the true circumstances in regard to past persecution tactics is necessary lest Catholics be driven into a purely defensive position while allowing Protestants to retain their self-satisfied attitude. That ground cleared, let us now return to the Catholic duty of approaching every soul.

Our approach must be based on love and show it. We must exhibit gentleness, simplicity, interest and the other things which denote love. Never must our tone be that of trying to conquer others. We are offering the Faith to them because we love them and wish to give them the greatest gift we know

The Test is the Genuineness of our Love

St. John the Evangelist tired people by repeating that the final test of religion was love. It is questionable if it can be communicated other than through that channel. It is the case that religious knowledge can be imparted by persons without either faith or love but it is to be doubted if it carries with it the spark of authentic religion. Therefore from the first moment we must speak words which proclaim us as friend and not foe. The reflex to that will be friendliness. The handbook asks the question: "Can we love to order?"

That is can we dispense genuine love to people whom we meet for the first time and who may even be unpleasant to us? It answers affirmatively, explaining that God is in us; God is Love, and by His very nature He has to shine through us if there be a certain transparency in us. That is if our motive is pure; if we want to pass on the faith that is in us; and if self is not too assertive. Almost automatically we can suppress self by making an act of union with Jesus and Mary. Thinking of them, we project their lustrous personality.

People are somehow conscious of this and show themselves strangely responsive. How often have we heard legionaries report that their offering of the Miraculous Medal produced an immediate and visible change in people. That effect is due to the thought and reliance on Mary for which the medal stands.

Electricity has its laws. You turn it on and you turn it off and it accomplishes your purposes. But the laws of grace are infinitely more certain. Even defects in our handling do not interrupt the flow of grace.

It is abundantly evident from the success which has been attending your efforts that you possess the holy art of displaying your faith advantageously. For everyone listens and it is certain that your message remains on in their minds.

As a deliberate operation the Legion must plan towards the addressing to each person outside the Church of an invitation to come in. Put that way, it seems a fantastic proposition. But treat it as a parochial problem and where is the impossibility, that is if the Legion is there. Very often the Legion is not there and this proposes the question why?

If a parish cannot or will not produce a branch of the Legion, it puts that place into a dubious category. Likewise it means that no attempt to convert is going to be made there. I think it can be claimed that if the Legion exists in a place, then simple planning can ensure that everyone outside the Church will be spoken to. Nothing can exempt us from doing this. An item of that litany of false excuses has it that the desire to enter the Church must proceed exclusively from the person concerned. That would eliminate the idea of apostleship altogether. But apostleship is not our idea; it is a requirement of God's. It is His insistence that we help each other in every way and above all in the spiritual order. You will recall the classical phrase of Ozanam, expressive of the Doctrine of the Mystical Body, that according to the laws which govern the spiritual life the attraction of one soul is needed to elevate another. The capital exemplification of this is that Our Lord in a total manner committed to His disciples the original diffusion of the Gospel. The Church inherits this task. It can only perform it through its members. The Council has proclaimed that every Catholic must be apostolic and this allocates to each one a share in the evangelising of the world. So let each one repeat to himself the Mount Olivet commandment and reflect that it is really addressed to him.