

A LAYMAN'S POINT OF VIEW

By HUGH KAY

THE layman's retreat has tended to degenerate into a few days of perplexed boredom, in which we make desperate efforts to feel an emotional relationship with God. The process can be smug self-assurance that we are just that little bit different from the other men at the office, or for the victim of scruples, a torturing business leaving the penitent wrung out like a wet dishrag, and his jaded confessor in urgent need of a Scotch. What should be an oasis of quiet becomes an orgy of inversion. So busy are we sucking at our feelings that we forget entirely what we are there for – a tranquil encounter with God in which the only prayer that really matters is summed up in the simple word 'adoro'. Sometimes I wonder whether we could all do with a little less thinking and a lot more loving. The good Catholic is all too ready to possess God, even to try and devour Him. The rub comes when he is asked to join God on the cross. The cross is more acceptable when it is polished, and we can indulge in the sweet sorrow of a pain that is not too acute and leaves our basic sense of security unvexed. The trouble starts when the veneer is removed by a sense that God has gone away, by doubts against faith, doubts about our own motives. Until we of the laity have it sternly put to us that his rough wood is the real cross, that the emotional awareness of God's presence is a sweetmeat and not the common texture of Christian living, that it is not to Mount Thabor but to Gethsemani that we must ordinarily look, we shall go on mouthing our prayers without praying, and our retreats will be mere bouts of obsessive compulsive neurosis. We have to learn to enjoy God without the luxury of enjoying ourselves – at least not all the time.

If a layman may use these pages to make some suggestions to priests, and especially to those giving retreats, the first thing to say is: for heaven's sake, get tough with us. Most lapsing from the faith is due either to boredom at Mass or to having to unlearn the exaggerated emphasis placed on the fairy godmother qualities of Our Lady and the readiness of Our Lord to put up with anything from

us, to make our paths easy as well as straight. The poor old sixth and ninth get blamed for far too much; those troubles are symptoms rather than causes. What really does the damage is the gigantic confidence trick perpetrated in our youth by those who stress 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' to the exclusion of the stern Jesus who offered a blood, sweat and tears formula to the rich young man. Then we grow up, only to find that God can be mighty tough and that there is cause to have a little healthy fear of Our Lady who will not have her Son treated like a circus magician. This breeds bitterness, frustration, a consciousness that we are ill-equipped for the spiritual life, that the battle is bound to be a losing one, that we are being asked for too much. If not bitterness, then at least the sorrowful turning away that makes the rich young man's story one of the most pathetic in human history. Somehow, the priest must learn how to teach even the child that we have to find God in His act of 'withdrawal' from us. The shock experienced by the apostles when the transfiguration turned into the agony in the garden is perpetuated in time and is the catchpoint at which faith must fulfil itself or die. The perversity of youth these days bears one patently obvious hallmark: a resentment that society has failed to offer them such a challenge. Why else Aldermaston? Why else the sight of Catholics joining the Young Communists League? Why else the attraction of those humanists who, without God, seem to be trying to do something for their neighbour?

Basically, the failure of the Church in Britain is that practising Catholics are busily engaged in trying to worship and love a God they know about without knowing, to whom they have never received a personal introduction. And if, in the green wood, we worship a system rather than a person, loving Him at best in the way that the maudlin fall for a character in a book, what can we hope for from the dry save the misery on the faces of the young as they seek oblivion in sin? The fervour of the crowd at a devotional rally can so easily get its love of God disproportionately mixed with social solidarity, and delude itself that it has reached the glorious mysteries with barely a nod to the sorrowful. If retreats are to probe and heal this cancer, the retreat-giver must first be prepared to uncover something from which, in my respectful submission, he often tends to shrink – namely, that among his audience there is often a far greater crisis of faith than they will even admit to themselves. It is a bold assumption that the monthly communicant is sure that he believes in the faith he professes and practises. Too often he is

papering over cracks. Catholic Action has never become a social reality in Britain largely because potential actionists are not comfortable in the basic premiss that Catholicism is right.

I do not think this is an outrageous statement. The gift of faith imparted at Baptism is not dead in these cases, of course: there has been no deliberate act of unbelief. But doubt has become a paralysis of spiritual function, a neurosis blocking the flow of the grace undoubtedly received with each sacrament. There are three problems here, one philosophical, one theological, and one dynamic. All three are matters demanding treatment at retreat level. In the first place, the truth was stated last year succinctly by Lord Longford when he spoke of logical positivism as dead, but reaching out from the grave. A climate has been generated by the modern dead-end philosophies in which the man of average intelligence and education has an idea that all really intelligent people have accepted as a truth that no man is capable of making up his mind, of reaching any sort of absolute truth, of making a deliberate choice. Opinion has replaced certainty to the point where to make a positive statement becomes an act of indecent exposure. Conditioning has replaced free will. The inter-action of will and intellect is confused with wishful thinking. Young graduate teachers have spoken to me of the distress they feel when they have to teach boys proofs for God's existence in which they have no confidence. Logic has become divorced from life. The nature of the act of faith is misunderstood, despite Newman, despite Fr. D'Arcy (to whom so many of the luckier ones owe their sanity and perseverance), despite the work of a man like Fr. Lonergan. In the act of stating, very properly, the separate identities of intellect, will and emotion, we forget that they act in concert, and the study of apologetics in total separation from the study of the living Church and the living God made manifest in His creation remains barren, unconvincing, fraught with fear. (In passing, may one be forgiven for saying that the tongue-tied performances of some Catholic protagonists on television in the teeth of the polished self-confidence of charming nihilists contributes in no little measure to this tragedy?) Burdened with this kind of anxiety, who can make a good retreat unless these problems are tackled in it?

On the level of theology, we have at least come to recognise that the catechism provides only a scaffolding and that our religious teaching fails so often because, while teaching God's law impeccably, we calmly omit to teach the discovery of God. The only hope for most of us is that sometime in a retreat the priest will not reduce the

nature of the Church to a company lawyer's Memorandum and Articles, that he will make some attempt to explain how the Church is the Body of Christ. It would be so good to hear the occasional sermon or meditation on the nature of God, on the inter-relation of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity. How rarely we are taught to meditate on the *Gloria* or the Preface of Trinity Sunday, those sublime daily statements of who and what those Persons are. The retreat-giver must face the fact that he is dealing with an audience to whom God the Father is an austere, overshadowing law-giver, His Son the alchemist of the grace we so frequently confuse with magic, the Holy Ghost the one who waves the wand. This is the crudest blasphemy; it is also the way in which the faith is caricatured in many Catholic lives. It easily breeds a form of quietism, in which the action of grace is regarded as therapeutic. Thus it is that we are ready to take, rarely to give, ready 'to pass the buck' to the Holy Spirit; and it is this which may in part explain why Catholics, who pay lip service to good works, are in fact so much less assiduous than those outside the Church in practical works of charity. It is comfortable to be able to say a novena or make an offering without having to dirty one's hands and give up time to work whose best results are not always visible.

The glimmerings of an answer to all three problems under consideration seem to emerge when we examine the third one, namely the dynamic. In the meditations he gives, the priest conducting the retreat must not, I suggest, assume as much as he tends to about the basic knowledge and dispositions of his hearers. But, in addition to re-presenting the facts and the justification for believing in them, he must strengthen his case and give it vitality by giving us Christ in action, and thus lead us to the sort of certainty in Christ that comes only when we shoulder the yoke of action in tandem with Him. There is nothing like working together for getting to know someone well. It seems to me that much is suggested to the retreat-giver by the work of Fr. Teilhard de Chardin. If he is right, then for the first time after using the phrase for nearly two thousand years, we have caught a realistic glimpse of what is meant by the restoration of *all things* in Christ. The layman's principal difficulty comes when he tries to understand the real, non-magical nature of the inter-action of grace and nature. He learns it in terms of providence *superseding* the natural order, and rightly feels suspicious. He is not helped to see it in terms of the redemption *transforming* nature and involving it in the life of the Mystical Body. A better under-

standing of God's scheme of things, and the layman will be better able to work in and through it, to see how his action and Christ's interlink. He is no longer batting about in misty vapours, but begins to perceive what it is all about.

It is at this point that he begins to reflect on the deception of a contemplation that does not overspill into activity, and the worthlessness of an activity not rooted in contemplation. It is also at this point that I shall be told how unrealistic it is to suggest talking high theology to an average bunch of retreatants, let alone uttering the mysterious name of Teilhard. I believe there is a major 'heresy' involved in this attitude. It is a cosy get-out, when we find ourselves inept at translating sublime matters down to commonsense terms, to say that such translation is impossible. So we shelter behind the formula of 'our simple people' who cannot be expected to understand anything bar novenas to St. Anthony and pietistic practices suggestive of a sort of Catholic voodoo. I am reminded of the lay Catholic lecturer in philosophy who once told me that he could not give me an interview for my paper because what he had to say would never be capable of transmission in anything less than a book or in language that I would understand. Unflattered but undeterred, I cross-questioned him for three hours. At the end of it, I was able to produce 700 very simple words, which, to his utter astonishment, conveyed all that he really wanted to say. And it was well worth saying. All I had done was to force him to present a difficult thought in a way which gave me an understanding of it that was quite true and quite adequate, though admittedly much more shallow than his own. The point is that it did take me three hours, and this kind of translation is very hard work and demands very great skill, rather like the writing of an English dictionary. But it has to be faced if we are to give a richer understanding of the truths of faith to reasonably intelligent youth.

I have in mind the all too familiar story of the late adolescent who tells his confessor that he is in trouble about faith, only to be informed that he ought not to think about such things, that all he needs to do is say his rosary, and that presumably the real trouble is that he is not keeping the sixth commandment. May I again be forgiven for branding this as plain spiritual murder. It would be a big day for such a young retreatant if the spiritual director could talk to him in such terms as these, 'The darkness you are encountering is in itself a rich experience. If it be that you really want to meet Our Lord, then it is by moonlight that you must seek Him under an

olive tree. You will find Him flat on the ground, and you will have to lie down on your face with Him if you are to catch His words. It is through utter dereliction that you will grow to a knowledge of Him quite unattainable for most of us through the distracting satisfactions of emotional consolation. It may even be that this darkness will come to you often for most of your life. If you accept this chalice, you will be a saint. But don't ask me to tell you that it will ever be anything but a foretaste of Purgatory. At the end of it, however, is a Resurrection undreamt of by you or by anyone else. His agony in the garden was not a mere stage in the Passion. It was of the essence of His sacrifice. It must be of the essence of yours. This was, so to speak, His fourth temptation – to despair. From His conquest of it He derived great strength'. This said, the retreatant would then hear reasoned answers to his questions, and be told not to be afraid at the toughest moments to let himself go completely, relaxing into simple acts of adoration and love; that the two, reason and trust, are not mutually exclusive but complementary. But the point I am making is this: if he is to follow a crucified Master, the young man must be told the facts of a crucified life. Thus disciplined, he can learn to compose himself in tranquillity to hear about the vine and the branches and how he is to fill up what is wanting to the sufferings of Christ through his action, not merely through passive acceptance of providential disposition.

The next stage is to use the retreat as a means of introducing the Christian to Christ incarnate in society. In his deliberations and resolutions, the retreatant should not, one would think, confine himself to generalised promises about the practice of specific virtues, but he should make definite decisions about the active part he is going to play in the social order and in the work of making it congruent with the life of the Mystical Body. It would seem a suitable time to remind him of Gandhi's love of Christ and distrust of the Christian, to bring into partnership his prayer and his study of the Church's social experiment, so that he may glimpse the way to heal the great dichotomy between Christian principle and practice.

It would, therefore, not seem irrelevant to introduce meditations on practical social experiments being conducted by the Church at the present time in various parts of the world. One thinks of the housing co-operatives in the West Indies, Fr. Windey's co-operatives for handicapped Indians, the Antigonish-type experiments in the Fiji Isles and British Honduras, the work of Fr. Van Straaten's Order of Builders and Fr. Pire's Europe Villages. I select these because there

is one pattern running throughout them – the leadership or at least the initiative of a dynamic priest as the focal point of an intensive body of volunteer lay actionists giving up time and energy they can ill afford. For wholly lay initiative there is Raoul Follereau or Leonard Cheshire. Fr. Windey's experiment is especially illuminating, because his institute of sociology ran so much better when the local people had encountered living Christianity in the co-ops, which restored status to social outcasts deprived of dignity by physical handicaps, and turned them into proprietors and producers. The theory which, like all Western systems of thinking, was hard for the oriental to accept in all its abstract form made much more sense when he saw it simultaneously working out in practice. The Antigoinish principle is, of course, the basis for a politico-economic programme which would sweep Britain if any political party were prepared to take it up. It not only works so much better than the welfare state; it also vastly surpasses it in its effect on human character, because it is essentially a matter of self-help by local communities, helping one another, too, within the framework of a closely-knit tangible 'family' in a comparatively narrow locality. Similarly, one might well meditate on the charity involved in the system of industrial family allowances (whereby single men help family men and workers, and managements combine for the preservation of the family), or on Pius XI's corporate or vocational order of society, towards which steps have been taken in the Netherlands.

It would transform our Catholic life in Britain and give us the basis of a real, living parish life if, on parochial and diocesan levels, retreatants elected together to form housing co-operatives to build homes for young married couples, homes which would be geared to the possibility of a large family (as opposed to the small family unit favoured by municipal building), and homes which could be purchased without heavy deposits and at low rates of interest. The directly spiritual apostolate calls for specific election too. It is not good enough to form generalised ideas about converting Britain. What is much more to the point is to determine to mark one's man as on the football field. This particular potential convert, this moral leper, that lapsed Catholic, that homeless discharged prisoner, or whatever it may be – mark him or her, and resolve to devote two or three hours a week exclusively to their needs. It is odd how tragically slow Catholics are to open their homes to the lonely and the despised, or to those just needing decent lodgings in a family atmosphere. I always remember being asked to find a home for a discharged

Borstal boy, handpicked and very promising. He had a job; he needed somewhere to live other than a cheerless room with a gas ring. The trouble was that he was an enuretic. I knocked fruitlessly on many doors. In the end he was taken in by a reformed East End prostitute, now a devout Anglican and happily married to a publican. But there was no room for him at any Catholic 'inn'. Surely these are matters for solemn reflection and resolution at retreat times.

Now, of course, it will be said that these notions totally upset the traditional form of a retreat. This is not necessarily so, because they can all be introduced deftly into any or every type of meditation, and can be mulled over at times outside periods of formal prayer. In preparing for the latter, one wonders whether the tendency is to fill the retreatant's head with far too many images and thoughts. Just as I plead for courage in presenting complex theological truth to the average retreatant, so also I plead for courage to offer him the almost wordless prayer. A priest once suggested to me that the best prayers are offered to God when one simply breathes in to signify one's acceptance of His will and breathes out to signify a positive act of love, without saying very much more than ejaculations. If we of the laity could only learn to relax in the presence of God, to drink in great draughts of His quietude, rallying ourselves from time to time by one simple idea, one simple phrase or two, we would give God a chance to do something with us instead of driving him out by our own feverish application. To say this to an experienced priest is no doubt to teach one's grandmother to suck eggs, but the fact remains that many retreats are still much too 'noisy', involving far too much straining and tension, far too much cramming of notions and concepts and forced images into a mind which in turn tries to crush God into some form which it can apprehend through the senses. This is death to all prayer. We still have to learn that God is nearest when He seems farthest away; learn to relax in God, fall back on Him, let Him do most of the work. It is in the traditional time for reflection, as opposed to meditation, that one examines facts, arguments and courses of future action. But the two will frequently overlap and run into each other, of course, and this natural ebb and flow will integrate prayer, thought and resolution.

I would like also to talk about the psalms, but I would be out of my province altogether. All I will say here is that all too few of the laity realise the grandeur of these finest of all vocal prayers, and their power for soothing, for taking one right out of oneself, and building up a sublime sense of the grandeur of God. The value of

office in community in connection with the therapeutic treatment of the neurotic has been examined and proven in distinguished circles which can speak for themselves. I only know that when life gets really rugged, I go to Vespers in Westminster Cathedral!

Finally, let us stop looking on retreats as pious luxuries for the chosen. Much of what I have said in this article is surely justification for two interesting experiments tried out at the Jesuit Retreat House at Craighead in Scotland. The first is the industrial retreat, which marries a course of social theology with the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. The second is the astonishingly successful series of retreats for youth, with special emphasis on those who have been away from the Sacraments and even Mass. Untold credit must go to the Bishop of Motherwell, the Retreat Fathers at Craighead, and those priests and laymen of the Motherwell diocese who go out into the highways and byways, and even the juke-box cafés, to rope them all in. They do so by devices which tax ingenuity to the utmost, but once they are there, the adolescents who have lapsed because of boredom at the Mass they could not understand are surprisingly pliant in skilled hands. Week-end after week-end they fill the house, with the end-product of nearly 100 per cent confessions and communions. Fr. Montgomery will say that the talks and communal exercises are the least of it. The real work is done in the closed sessions, when the young men can take their pick of any of four or five priests and walk in at will to thrash their problems out. The fame of these retreats has spread. Now one even hears of the odd non-Catholic who wants to come, or of the lapsed Catholic who has turned Communist being brought into retreat on motives he hardly understands himself, and has there not only been restored but introduced to a life of faith he had not dreamt of. It is a terrifying comment of the failure of our Catholic education, and an urgent justification for the third type of retreat organised at Craighead for considerable numbers – the school leavers' retreat.

So there it is – a vast incoherent mass of things one layman would love to see woven into the ordinary retreat as a matter of course. Our basic longing, in spite of all our sins and stupidities, is to get to personal grips with the God we know all too dimly; and the difficulty is that, although He manifests Himself in His creation, we cannot finger Him in its texture. Rather, we have to let Him do the fingering, and this is the hardest thing of all, as Fr. Hopkins knew. Awareness of nature touched by grace must be balanced by detachment from created things. God's providential action in history is not

to be plotted like a graph. His non-miraculous interventions cannot be pinned down to a point of time or place. Our cry to the giver of retreats is a simple one; where is our God, of whom it is said: *Omnes gentes venient et adorabunt coram te, Domine, et glorificabunt nomen tuum; quoniam magnus es tu, et faciens mirabilia; tu es Deus solus.*¹ We grope for Him; and may He reach out for us, as for Peter sinking in the waters of Genesareth.

¹ Ps. 85,9-10; All the nations thou hast made shall come and adore before thee, O Lord: and they shall glorify thy name. For thou art great and dost wonderful things: thou art God alone.