

# YOU SHALL BE MY WITNESSES

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

**A**FTER two thousand years the layman in the Church is at last coming into his own. The day is past when the apostolate was regarded as the monopoly of the clergy, and there is no need to convince the laity that they too must be apostles. The steps by which this has come about have yet to be fully analysed, but it would be an error to imagine that the layman has been forgotten for centuries. It would also be unfair to the clergy and inaccurate to present this emergence of the role of the laity in the Church as the giving of a completely new status to the layman. It is more correct to see the movement towards a theology of the laity and towards a more precise definition of the priesthood of the laity as the recognition of values which have always been present and to some extent operative in the Church.

Since patristic times the three orders of the Church, the clergy, the religious, the laity, have been typified in the biblical figures of Noah, Daniel, and Job.<sup>1</sup>

But Job has been left on his dung heap, plagued by good advice and well-meant exhortations, but not encouraged to present his point of view. There was indeed a time when religion was looked upon as the business of the clergy, and in many countries a minister of religion was, and often still is, alas, looked upon as a professional man, like the lawyer and the doctor. The layman was rather the object on which the priest exercised his ministry than a co-worker within the household of faith. The relationship between priest and people tended to be paternalistic if not even patriarchal; and the stock phrase, 'Father knows best', was supposed to be the final word in any discussion on religious or moral topics.

But now Job has begun to speak: 'I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all . . . I also could speak as you do if you were in my place'.<sup>2</sup> The clergy have woken up to the fact that it is not Job who is out of touch with reality, it is themselves. They

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<sup>1</sup> Cf *infra*, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Job 16, 2, 4.

are beginning to realise that only Job knows what it is like to sit on a dung heap and wrestle with problems which do not affect the clergy and of which they have no practical experience. The Vatican Council is now opening the way for a closer dialogue between clergy and laity. But it must be remembered that it is a dialogue. Daniel, Noah and Job complement each other within the community of charity which is the Church of Christ, and there is no room for a monologue from any one of them. It would be an error to imagine that the clergy have nothing to say about the role of the laity in the Church; but it would also be erroneous to imagine that they can have that say without having previously listened to the layman.

The old categories of Daniel, Noah and Job may seem artificial and contrived, but the men who used them knew what they were about. For them they expressed that diversity in unity in Christ which constitutes the richness of the Church. There is no point in making a priest into some sort of half-baked layman, or the layman into a part-time priest. To do so would be to destroy that special competence of each which can come only from whole hearted absorption in a particular vocation. The error has been to regard the priesthood as the only vocation within the Church, and the religious life as the only really sure way of salvation. Nowadays Noah realises that in floating along tranquilly and securely in his ark, he runs the risk of drifting into a quietly stagnant backwater of clericalism, unless he listens to the cries of those who are battling with the violent currents of ordinary human living. There is need, and urgent need, of a spirituality of the laity which grows out of their situation and is adapted to their circumstances. So many books on prayer, for example, presuppose the situation of monastic or religious life, and can only discourage those who live in a completely different world from that of the cloister. Unity has too long been thought of as uniformity, and not enough confidence has been given to the infinite modulations in the working of the divine Spirit, 'who distributes his gifts separately to each individual at will',<sup>1</sup> within the unity of the one people of God. The layman's apostolate is not that of the priest, though the two must blend together harmoniously. The proper work of the priest can never be taken over by the laity; but the priest must not think of the layman's apostolate as merely ancillary to his own. As a specific apostolate it will cover a sphere of human living into which the priest cannot penetrate. The Church needs both priest and lay-

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 12, 11.

man because of what each represents in himself; and the full reality of the Church is expressed through the unity in diversity of both, not in the same sort of lowest common denominator found in each. The layman will need the priest to encourage him in his human task, to reassure him of the abiding presence of God; but the priest will need the layman to keep him in contact with the realities of human history in which that presence must make itself felt. 'The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you'.<sup>1</sup>

The task of the Church as a whole is to bear witness to Christ throughout the course of human history until its final consummation. In this way she continues the work of her founder: 'For this was I born and for this I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice'.<sup>2</sup> It is Christ who is the 'faithful witness',<sup>3</sup> who has borne witness to the world of what he saw and knew of the Father, making known God's plan of salvation.<sup>4</sup> This witness of Christ is given by his very presence in this world as the one sent by the Father. The enduring word of testimony which he speaks is himself, the Word made flesh giving himself entirely to the Father, so that the Father may be known by men. So perfect is the witness Christ bears in the world that he can say, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father';<sup>5</sup> and the Father can say of him, 'This is my beloved Son, listen to him'.<sup>6</sup> In Christ God is present in this world actively working out the salvation of mankind, and it is this presence of God in Christ which is Christ's essential witness to the Father. Hence his witnessing is inseparable from his being. He bears witness because of what he is, God made man, quite apart from anything that he does: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'.<sup>7</sup> So too the Church bears witness to Christ by manifesting his enduring presence in this world and by making accessible to men the call which is inseparable from his presence: 'I came not to call the righteous but sinners'.<sup>8</sup>

When Christ said to his apostles, 'You shall be my witnesses',<sup>9</sup> they understood that their witnessing to him was to be centred on the supreme event of his life: his resurrection.<sup>10</sup> For it was this event which guaranteed their faith in Christ and inspired their preaching. The apostles themselves were eye-witnesses of the risen Christ; they testified to 'what we have seen with our eyes',<sup>11</sup> and faith was born

<sup>1</sup> Cor 12, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 18, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Apoc 1, 5; 3, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Cf 1 Tim 2, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 14, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Mk 9, 8.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Cor 5, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Mt 9, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 1, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Cf Acts 1, 22; 2, 32.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Jn 1, 1.

in the hearts of men who accepted their testimony. Their testimony is not something added to the testimony of Jesus himself. It is their very incorporation in Jesus which makes of them witnesses to him. It is his testimony which is perpetuated in them and through them. The Spirit which Jesus communicates to them at Pentecost makes them his witnesses, speaking through them. Furthermore, the presence of the Spirit within them not only bears witness to Christ, but also to the fact that 'we are sons of God'.<sup>1</sup> So the bearing witness to Christ is inseparable from that special relationship with God in Christ into which the christian enters by his baptism. The source of the christian witness to Christ is to be found primarily in what the christian is. A son of God in Christ, he is by that fact made a sharer of the witness which Christ bore before mankind.<sup>2</sup> The life of the christian must therefore manifest the saving presence of Christ within him, for Christ dwells by faith in his heart so that he can say: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me'.<sup>3</sup> To belong to the Church means that the baptised christian is dedicated to the work of making known to men the presence of Christ in the world. Hence the apostolate is not an option for the baptised, but rather an essential part of their lives.

Within the unity of the Church each particular order bears witness to Christ in its own way. No one type of christian has the monopoly of this task which was given to the Church as a whole. No particular era of the Church's history reveals the full richness and depth of the mystery of salvation contained in the presence of Christ. The fullness of the presence of Christ is always with the Church - 'I am with you all days',<sup>4</sup> but that plenitude is constantly revealing itself in new ways. The charisms of the early Church are not the charisms of the Church today; but it is the same Spirit which inspires both. It belongs to each age to emphasize some particular aspect of the witness of the Church, but the purpose remains the same, to make accessible and intelligible to mankind the salvation which Christ has won for all men.

The gift of faith in the risen Christ is not made to man so that he may keep it to himself. The yeast is buried in the dough in order to transform its inert mass. The salt is sprinkled on food in order to give it a new savour. It is essential to faith that it be imparted to others. The faith that is kept to itself can only atrophy and harden into sterile formalism, for it is not a thing which man possesses, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 8, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Apoc 12, 17; 19, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Gal 2, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Mt 28, 20.

a dynamic, living principle which infuses into man a new life. Unless that life grows it will wither. Christ gives himself to the christian in the gift of faith, and the christian must give himself whole-heartedly to Christ in his acceptance of that gift. This giving of self is the activating of that charity through which the faith becomes operative, so that the christian 'grows up in every way, into him who is the head, Christ'.<sup>1</sup> The Church of Christ is a living organism that must grow, and its growth must come not merely through the numerical increase of its members but also through the intensification of the inner life of those members. Within the Church there are not two classes of people, one which acts and one which is acted upon. The laity are not some sort of spiritual cannon-fodder for the clergy. Together clergy and laity form the Church; together they bear witness to the common life in which they share equally. Nor is the Church a ghetto in which the initiated can live an enclosed and tranquil life; it is a principle of action in the world. The door of the household of faith stands ever open, not only that the unbeliever may enter but also that the believer may go out to spread his belief.

But we must be careful about the way in which we understand this mission of bearing witness to Christ, and about the way in which we present it. Few people today respond to an exhortation to 'give good example'. For the younger generation the phrase has a victorian and slightly pharisaical ring about it. It connotes the 'goody-goody' type of person who is always watching out of the corner of his eye other people's reactions to his virtue. Nor is this merely a question of terminology. There has been a certain way of presenting christianity which treats the world and other people as the objects upon which the christian exercises his virtue. But the world is not a place where christianity is applied, nor are our fellow-men targets for our virtuous actions. The world is the place in which the faith becomes a living reality and our fellow-men are those whom we must invite to share in the gift that God has given us. The christian does not set out to convert others; he begins by converting himself. He does not set himself up as a standard for others to imitate, but seeks first of all to imitate Christ, who gave himself in truth and justice and charity to all men. The christian has first of all to discover in his faith the real meaning of his own life. By so doing he is inviting others to seek that same meaning in their own lives. For the christian is not distinguished by the fact that his life con-

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<sup>1</sup> Eph 4, 15.

tains an element of the sacred which is absent from the life of the non-believer. He is distinguished because the same profane gestures and occupations which he shares with the unbeliever are transformed by the meaning and direction which his faith in Christ gives to them. The life of the christian does not consist of certain apostolic activities super-added to the structure of human living. The christian lives by faith in the sense that in every activity of his life he seeks to become more christian. He is not a christian and a lawyer, a christian and a student; but he is a christian in so far as he is a lawyer or a student. His faith becomes a reality in and through his human life, not in spite of it or in addition to it.

The christian bears witness to Christ not primarily by what he does but by what he is and by what he is endeavouring to become. Many christians are made to feel that they are failures because they do nothing extra; whereas the truth is that they have no time for extra activities. If the witnessing to Christ consists in making his presence a reality in this world, and a reality which attracts the non-believer; if that presence is essentially a personal, real, presence, it must come primarily not through an activity but through a person. That person is the christian who is ever seeking to be another Christ in his particular situation in life, whatever it may be. Hence the christian's first duty is not to pass a judgement of condemnation upon his own generation in an attempt to dissociate himself from the burden of sinful responsibility. His first task is rather to pass a judgement of value in which he makes his own the genuine human values he discerns around him, and also accepts his responsibility in shouldering the burden of the sins of his generation: 'Then let us no more pass judgement on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of a brother'.<sup>1</sup> The act of faith which the christian makes in Christ has, as one of its essential elements, a belief in the presence of Christ in the world in which he lives. Faith is nourished by the effort to recognise that presence even when it is hidden under the disfigurement of sin. Because he believes in Christ, the christian must believe in and seek out the true values in his own life and in the lives of others. The faith would be merely an escapism if it did not lead the christian to enter confidently into a more intimate contact with the men whose history he shares. A witness to Christ, the adult christian does not set out to dominate or to conquer by the strength of his personal convictions.

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 15, 13.

He goes forward to meet others in order to liberate them by communicating to them the truth and charity of Christ.

Today the unbeliever often no longer recognises anything in common between his life and the life of the religious or priest. He may admire and accept their lives from outside; but often he finds no point of contact between himself and them. The old anti-clerical who was violently opposed to the clergy and all things clerical could ultimately arrive at a reconciliation; but today the unbeliever can see no common ground between himself and the cleric. This does not mean that he is to be despaired of, for it is precisely here that the layman plays his indispensable role. He shares common ground with the unbeliever. Is the unbeliever a doctor, lawyer, scientist or dustman, there is a christian leading the same life. The point of contact in which the faith can be transmitted is there in the common human setting of their lives. Admittedly God does not need this human setting, and many times he seems to have imparted the gift of faith in spite of it. But it would be presumption to base an apostolate on such a premise. The faith is transmitted through a human setting, the Word of God is spoken in the language of men; and the dialogue with the unbeliever must begin by fidelity to the human values which his life contains, and which the believer recognises. It is, however, essential that the faith appear not merely as a value amongst others in the life of the believer, but as the supreme value in which all others find the plenitude of their meaning.

The believer must show not only that he is, for example, a doctor, because he is a christian, but also that he is a christian because he is a doctor.

But in order to do this, the believer must first of all believe wholeheartedly. His faith must lead to an action in faith which does not merely repeat, 'Lord Lord', but which seeks the will of God in every aspect and act of his life. This search for the will of God characterises the believer who is convinced that his whole life is a gift of God in which God is everywhere present. Here again it is insufficient to restrict the will of God to certain moral precepts no matter how right these may be. Christ's accomplishing of his Father's will went far beyond obedience to a moral law; and the christian is called to share in Christ's fulfilment. The accomplishing of God's will demands of the christian a constant effort of discernment which is a continual interior transformation and renewal as he refuses to be moulded by his circumstances but seeks to ratify his destiny by a free exercise of his liberty in Christ: "Then you will be able to discern the

will of God and to know what is good and acceptable and perfect'.<sup>1</sup> The gift of faith obliges the christian to live his life as a vocation received from God, a mission which he alone can accomplish. It is a constant call to come to grips with the purpose of human existence with greater purpose and seriousness. In this way the faith distinguishes the believer from those who are prepared to tolerate everything because they believe in nothing.

If the layman is to manifest the presence of Christ in this world, he must enter upon that way of continual conversion which is nothing less than the constant rediscovery of Christ in his own life, and the free assumption of the responsibility which that discovery entails. For too long the laity have been treated like children. They have had to be content with vague exhortations to penance during lent understood in terms of giving up this or that enjoyment, or doing something extra. But such self-denial tends to be merely episodic and even automatic in their lives; it rarely does anything to integrate the individual more deeply into the Church and into the human society in which he lives. There are too many who give up smoking for reasons of health or economy, and who willingly take a starvation lunch once or twice a week to help the world's hungry, for the believer to be able to maintain before the unbeliever that such penance is specifically christian. Indeed the unbeliever is often more impressed by the austerity of the moslem Ramadhan than by the christian Lent. To fast in order to feed the hungry is for many today a humanitarian expression of solidarity with the underprivileged. But it is within the power of those who have faith in Christ to discern the religious value in this activity, and to see that such solidarity with suffering mankind is also solidarity with Christ hungry in the desert. Only the believer can discern the full breadth and scope of what is externally a routine gesture. He can understand that it is impossible for man to associate himself unselfishly with human suffering or with any genuine human effort and endeavour, without at the same time associating himself with Christ. The christian should not feel that he must necessarily distinguish himself by some sort of esoteric penitential practices if he is to bear witness to Christ. His task is to discover the presence of Christ in the lives of those who do not even suspect that presence. Once he has discovered that presence he can give himself whole-heartedly to it.

But what then is the characteristic of the christian? What does his

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 12, 2.



faith in Christ add to the gestures which he shares in common with the unbeliever? It is surely the fact that he manifests not merely his own solidarity with a suffering and sinful world, but the solidarity of God made man with stricken mankind. He transmits not his own belief and love but the truth and charity of Christ. We know that God loves us because we see in Christ suffering the incarnate expression of that love. The world of unbelief must be able to recognise that same love of God in the attitudes of the followers of Christ. The baptism of Christ and his fasting in the desert have always been understood in the Church as the expression of Christ's identification of himself with the sinner. It is in that context that christian penance must be understood. Like his Master, the christian does not do penance in order to differentiate himself from sinners. His penance is the proclamation of his weakness which needs Christ, and not a pharisaical parading of his personal will-power. He bears witness to the power and efficacy of the death and resurrection of Christ in his admission through the gestures of penance that his weakness is in need of salvation, and that such salvation is assured in Christ.

The christian can never bear witness to Christ as an individual. He shares in the witness of the Church. It is her universality which gives value to his individual efforts. His witness is authentic because he belongs to the community of the people of God. He is what he is because he is of the Church. But he must also remember that he is the Church. He belongs to the Church but he must also build up that Church, for the Spirit is at work through each individual in the Church 'edifying' the body of the Church. The Church feeds her children with the eucharist and is herself nourished by the faith, hope, and charity of their lives. There in the sacrifice and sacrament of the Mass is contained the essential activity of the christian community, for there 'they proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes'.<sup>1</sup> This sacrifice is the perfection of Christ's witness to the Father; and for this reason the early Church designated those who died for Christ by the simple word martyr – witness. The christian community is essentially a sacrificial community in Christ, priest, victim, head of the Church, the unique mediator between God and man. In Christ each christian, be he cleric or layman, is dedicated to the salvation of his fellow men, and this dedication is renewed each time he eats the body that was given for us and drinks the blood shed for himself and for the multitude of mankind.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 11, 26.