

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

By VINCENT ROCHFORD

THE love that God the Father and God the Son bear for each other is a mutual out-pouring of themselves, each towards the other, and this shared love has a personal existence: it is the Holy Spirit. That Spirit dwelt in Christ, and after his resurrection is his gift to us.¹ He ranges throughout creation; wherever the work of Christ is to be carried on in the reconciliation of creation with its Creator or man with man, there the Spirit is active, either as permanent presence in man or as a transient energy.² It is in him that men are caught up into Christ's movement of return to his Father. The christian life consists in docility to him and co-operation with him in his action.

Loving God is not our doing. 'The love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom we have received'.³ God had from the beginning given his people the command: 'You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength'.⁴ But they could not be expected to understand how the mighty, transcendent God could be bound to man in an exchange of love, until they had seen him living out his love in their own human condition, and had received the Spirit who enables us to love; indeed, who loves in us.

They had also been commanded: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'.⁵ But this command had been proclaimed in less solemn fashion than the first, it had been interpreted narrowly, and did not include the foreigner. Our Lord left his followers in no doubt: the second commandment is 'the like' of the first. In its scope it embraces every human being, even, as his story of the good Samaritan brought home, those who hate one's race and religion.

This linking of the two loves was not arbitrary on Christ's part, for they are one love. What can we really give to God, what good or pleasure? The good our love wants to do him can be done only for our neighbour, and it is in others that God demands to be recognized and loved. In all others: not just those we happen to find congenial.

¹ Gal 4, 6.

⁴ Deut 6, 5.

² Cf Rom 5, 13-23.

⁵ Lev 19, 18.

³ Rom 5, 5.

They are to be loved for his sake, not for our own; for their good, not for anything we can get from loving them. In loving them we shall be loving him. The two loves cannot be separated. 'This is the divine command that has been given us; the man who loves God must be one who loves his brother as well'.¹

This love will be patterned according to God's own: 'Order your lives in charity, upon the model of that charity which Christ showed to us'.² It is not sentimentality, nor is it necessarily connected with sentiment; it means being concerned, really caring. How exacting God's love could be for his people! Christ's love, too, is exacting, untainted by any self-indulgence; because caring for people means willing the growth towards maturity of the person loved. So love must at times be hard, as Christ was hard with the rich young man whom he loved, or with the lad who hesitated to throw in his lot with Christ until he could go home to bury his father.

As Christ's friends we have to love the world; we must really care about what is happening to it. Of course it is sinful, and to its sinfulness we are enemies; but the world itself is to be loved, so that it may be saved by allowing itself to be loved by its Saviour. Some christian sects have hated the world; many christians could see it as nothing else than God's rival for our interest. The clergy viewed with suspicion the first laymen to acquire a secular education; their theological preoccupations made them look askance at scientific advance and humanitarian endeavour. Ultramontanes saw it all as anti-Christ: much social reform has been largely due to non-Catholics or even non-christians. It is easy to forget that the Word became flesh 'for us men', not just to save our souls, but to save the whole person, all of us in our human condition, in our families, our social groupings, even internationally. In the same way we are to care about persons, their jobs, their homes, their leisure and human development. To try to save people's souls without caring for the whole person is inhuman. Our own salvation depends on loving as Christ loves. He cares about the whole man: and so must we, if we are to love as he loves.

Many of us fail to do this. Fulfilling our 'spiritual duties' is, after all, a limited and habitual action, and much less trouble than bothering with other people – especially the social failures. The lawyer's question 'who is my neighbour?' and Christ's answer in his parable of the good Samaritan, should make us feel as uncomfort-

¹ 1 Jn 4, 21.

² Eph 5, 22.

able as the priest and the Levite. What do we do for the large numbers of Catholics in prison? Why must our socially inadequate types, our drunks and down-and-outs, have to turn to Salvation Army or doss-house for a night's lodging? The man in the street is not scandalised that the body which claims to be the Church of Christ should produce every kind of sinner in such numbers. He can swallow that. What does scandalise him is that the Catholic body sometimes gives the impression of washing its hands of its social failures; for however little his knowledge of Christ, he knows that this is not Christ's way. Our failure to love so often nullifies all our many efforts to spread the word of God.

Again, if we give the impression that for us religion is an affair of a thousand rules and regulations and prohibitions, this is often because many of us see it that way ourselves, instead of straight-forward loving. Love cannot be confined to book-keeping, nor to casuistry; neither is it an ethic, an egoistic 'keeping out of mortal sin'. Such a feeble, anaemic aim is not the warm, virile, courageous ideal our Saviour offers.

To love is hard; it is only the Holy Spirit within us that can love — never mind whether we be Catholic or non-Catholic or even 'nothing'. Christian life culminates in love; not emotional, though it is in the heart, for it is at the same time an act of our reason and will. Love must tend towards the other person, must be for the other and be at the other's service. It is this love alone which produces a fruitful union of God and man in Christ:

Our spiritual life began in a parish, when we received new birth into Christ. The great moments of our lives are sanctified there through the sacraments, and it is there that we are nourished by hearing the Word of God proclaimed each week and by feeding on the Word-made-flesh in the eucharist.

It will be in the parish that love begins to express itself. Its supreme action is its Sunday celebration of God's saving act, and through the Mass the parish builds itself in union with Christ. That union necessarily brings with it union with the other members of the body; worshipping round the altar through, with and in Christ is both a proclamation of unity and its intensification. Sharing one table brings friendship; which is why Christ chose a religious meal as the framework within which to leave us the sacrament of his sacrifice. Love must be expressed in the way in which we share in the Mass: no room for egoism nor withdrawal from the community, but sincere, confident responses to the celebrant, sharing collective gestures

and joining in the hymns. It is an act of family worship where each contributes, in love, what he can. I may not like the person at the end of the pew, nor the rosary-rattling gossip in the next bench; they are not the ones I would myself have chosen for company. But it is the Father who has chosen and invited them as he did me; we are all of us brothers in Christ, whether I like them or not. This conviction is essential to Mass and is part of it. Without it Mass could be an empty formality for me.

This brotherhood nourished at God's holy table continues down the church-steps into the street, and prolongs itself through the week. 'The spirit of the parish', wrote Pope Paul VI, 'is the spirit of peace to which we have all been called in order to form a single body. It is also a spirit of justice which does not tolerate . . . the hypocrisy of a brotherhood in the Church, which fails to produce more fraternal social relations'. Need I always hurry home from the church as I would from a railway station, a stranger to those who happened to be on the same train? A word of greeting is due, not merely to my usual group of acquaintances, but to anyone who happens to be passing out of the door next to me. And the stranger: how often someone moves into a parish and after ten years not a single fellow-worshipper has bid him the time of day! And the foreigner, the seaman, the coloured brother in Christ, how can I ignore them? Would it have happened to a Catholic from Ephesus who happened to be passing through Corinth and came to the Lord's Day assembly there?

My love must spread itself through the week. There is the old-age pensioner, who has just enough money to live on, but feels so lonely. How welcome anyone who will call and spend an hour chatting, and, more important, allowing them to talk. Our separated brethren often enough provide a model for us: small groups of christians doing their best at worship, at reading the bible, at work for social causes. We serve the same Lord, we are a minority in a missionary country; each has much to give to the other and to receive from him.

But my fellow-Catholics of the parish are not my sole concern; there is the general good of the locality. One of London's dockland districts makes exemplary provision for local old-age pensioners, even to providing holidays by the sea; it is due to the voluntary effort of some of the dockers, all non-Catholics. For youth there is a football club which puts three teams in the field each Saturday, organised by a bus-driver, his son, and a few friends, all non-Catholics. Who shall say which is nearer to Christ, these men or a Catholic who attends Mass on Sunday and ignores the needs of his neighbours?

A residents' association focuses attention on local problems and solves many of them. Public libraries welcome constructive suggestions. Housing is everywhere a dire human problem; it cannot but be our concern, and among other avenues of influence are the parties on the local council. It may call for political involvement, as indeed the wider issues in the nation may. Though we shrink from the bigotry or low comedy which mark party politics, we have to realise that the conditions for influence on society are laid down by the terms of modern life; they simply have to be accepted and used.

Perhaps I prefer to work quietly on my own, without joining an organisation. There is something to be said for this. Organisations can develop sclerosis; they sometimes end by serving no useful purpose, and continue only because those responsible never get beyond thinking, 'but we've always had it'! Yet organisations are necessary in human life. The Church herself is one of them; even she may suffer attacks of sclerosis, at any rate local. In the parish the social may outweigh the personal; we often congratulate ourselves on crowded churches, but fail to enquire what the crowds are engaged in during Mass. The parish sick club may be so concerned to build up reserves that it grows stingy in its payments. The parish choir may not help us to sing because it is singing to us; it has become a glee-club. Organisations can lose sight of their purpose. They may become ends in themselves – a danger always for their officials, even the Church's! These weaknesses reveal the need for reflection, for self-criticism and reform. Our social nature implants in us the need for support of every kind in our enterprises, which we can draw from our fellows and in turn give to them who also need us. How much the spiritual formation of a Young Christian Worker owes to the efforts his mates in his section are making, to the common meeting with Christ in his gospel at their weekly meeting. Where else would he find the courage for his apostolate in factory and cafe?

But behind the activity which the world would recognise as charity, there is the true charity, the *agape* that gathers together the scattered sons of God and brings them to him: the apostolate. For Christ sends us as his apostles or envoys on a mission to the world. This is not something voluntary, like total abstinence or membership of a third order. It is essential to our christianity, our membership of Christ's body. Through us, his body, he can communicate with men, gather them round to teach them and feed them, in which he can pursue them and heal and forgive and raise to new life, yes,

and even suffer for them. It is through us that he wants to reach out and make contact with men: we have no right to be idle and refuse to lend ourselves to his saving work.

It may be true that in the past clericalism and the paternalism of the clergy reduced the role of the layman to that of a mere 'consumer', a spiritual proletarian; but the day when one could say, 'That's not my business, I'm only a layman', is long passed, as pope after pope has shown. The layman who is content only to receive from the Church and does not labour for the coming of the kingdom is little better than the pagan, who also receives grace through the mystical body but of course does not work to strengthen it. It is more widely understood today what we are, the people of God, parties to his new covenant, a priestly people on the march through history, committed to establishing his kingdom.

Secondly, we are explicitly deputed to the apostolate by the sacrament of Confirmation, which involves growing up and leaving religious infantilism behind us. 'It confers the fullness of the Holy Spirit in view of the spiritual vigour that befits an adult man, namely, a man who begins to communicate his actions to others'.¹ The grown-up contributes to the well-being of his spiritual family as he does to his natural family at home. The character given makes us participate in the prophetic mission of Christ: we are now his witnesses to another world, another order of things at work among men.

Juridically, our mission is beyond any doubt; its soul is love. 'As my Father has sent me, so I am sending you',² said our Lord to his first apostles; but he also said, 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you'.³ Love lay at the heart of these sendings or missions; love which gives, not for profit nor reward, but simply for the sake of giving, because it comes from a loving Spirit. Love thus being sent comes down from Father to Son and from Son to apostles and bishops to us.

To whom are we sent? To a world that does not recognise the Christ who is beckoning to it all the time. A world of ignorance and folly and sin, certainly; but a world of great goodness as well. Look at its noble aspirations, its desire to secure justice for the poor and educational betterment, an opportunity for a decent life, its efforts to learn the equality of all men irrespective of colour, its desire for peace. Yet its very ideals help to estrange it from its God. For it thinks to attain them by efficient organisation of men's lives and

¹ *Summa Theologica* III. 72, 2.

² Jn 20, 21.

³ Jn 15, 9.

activities; whereas the Church, which also seeks them, wants us to keep them in proportion, to judge them in relation to eternal life. So Church and world accuse each other of alienating man and leading him away from his true objectives. The new civilisation does not merely try to do without God: it denies him.

So we are tempted to escape the dilemma or to ignore it by penning our 'religious' life in a private sector: that is, to become deserters. An apostle may go to a place for the first time, like a missionary, or, with the same missionary purpose, he may stay where he is and become present in a new way. We meet the 'world', that is, our brothers, all the time; we cannot escape them, they live next door, jostle us on the bus, share factory or office. God means us not merely to live side by side, but to live with them. We can bring something of Christ to all whom we meet, by our very attitude; what is frightening is that if we do not try to do this, our brother may never come into contact with Christ. All our encounters are providential; they are willed by God, intended by him as conductors which permit his charity to pass from one person to another. Often we are the only persons who make Christ's Church present to others. (And how much they sometimes expect from us!) We share their lives, their problems and their destiny. We too need peace; we need the same houses, shops and public services; we must care about their hopes and fears, problems and aspirations. We are indigenious, fully incarnate with them as is the Word-made-flesh: in our natural circle, not from condescension but from love; wanting, as Christ did, humbly to serve them.

The greatest benefit a man can receive is to be brought to make his response to God by faith, and so to full participation in God's redeeming action through the sacraments. To be instrumental in any measure in preparing someone for all this grace is exciting. Yet even here we can be prey to insidious temptations. We meet Catholics whose attitude is one of insolent assurance in the possession of dogmatic truth, as if it were their own. There is also a danger of enjoying one's influence over another, a sort of moral clericalism. Others again seem to aim at increasing the Church's effectives, rather as a politician might win supporters for his party; whereas what matters is their growth in Christ. It is for their own sake we must love them, not in so far as they serve our purposes: anything less is less than genuine love. One recalls the teen-ager who was giving up the Y.C.W. in discouragement. One of his mates remarked to him, 'Look, you're popular in the section, and our chaplain is very

fond of you'. 'He isn't', the lad replied, 'he's only fond of the Y.C.W. in me'.

Loving the world in this way is the principal way in which we increase our own faith; it brings us nearer to Christ, whose work we are doing and whose spirit we imitate. In former days social laws and institutions and public opinion exerted pressure in favour of orthodox christian standards; the unbeliever was a rarity, a rebel against society itself, he was odd. Today the shock is meeting a genuine believer; so that nothing less than personal conviction will sustain us. Those convictions remain vital only by the effort to share them. It is forty years since Canon Cardijn saw the alternatives: apostle – or apostate. Without this effort we absorb into our personalities, unrecognised, ideas, attitudes and values which reflect those of an un-christian society. Part of our mentality becomes, in practice, estranged from Christ, 'missionary' territory: and this underneath the outward practice of our faith.

So we must learn to live with them fully and not give the impression of belonging to another race which is remote from their preoccupations, still less, superior to them. And there is a huge fund of idealism and generosity to which to appeal, with which to enter into dialogue.

Life in the world is changing, and without the work of the lay christian living in the world, it will be lost to Christ. The world is convinced that perfection lies within itself; it is pressing on with the specialisation and socialisation of life, convinced that future human happiness lies there. It entertains unbounded hopes from automation, electronics and sputniks. It offers a picture of massive energies ferociously concentrated on the exploitation of nature. Yet under the surface lies existential dissatisfaction, an anguish in its heart which is close to despair. 'Whilst progress', said Pope John, 'is perfecting man's technical resources, his soul is increasingly invaded by loneliness, sadness, despair'. But he adds: 'let the world know that the Church looks at it with love, she is filled with sincere admiration for it, she sincerely wants, not to dominate it, but to be at its service; not to despise it but to increase its dignity; not to condemn it but to bring it consolation and salvation'. The christian must be with the world, feel its problems, sympathise with the questions it is asking and the answers it listens to, even when they are false or half false. If we allow Christ to mould our attitudes, our reactions to the problems which they and we are facing will provoke questioning, and often lead to the first stirrings of a christian answer. Man never owned so much and never was so hungry, never enjoyed such power

and never felt himself so powerless. His distress leads him to continuous activity and noise if only to stifle its voice; yet the ultimate questions from which he is running away remain, and part of our task is continually to suggest them. Men's goodness often provides the point of insertion. If a man can be induced to interest himself in Freedom from Hunger, the problem of motive is easily raised.

Our efforts have to be organised. Where an individual can do little to influence professional, scientific or industrial life, a group can: the trade union is the obvious example. But the medical body, the chemist, the journalist and the entertainment industry will all accept certain standards if groups are pressing for it.

Justice and respect for human rights are ideals shared by millions; but the inspiration in the battle to preserve them ought to come from those who see their brethren as sons of God and brothers of Christ. 'The fight for the cause of the Faith is fought not only in the secrecy of the conscience or in the privacy of the home, but also in public life in all its forms'. Every degree of progress may either help or handicap christian and even human living. Progress is not an end in itself.

The christian must serve the community so that it will try to enable men to live in a genuine human fashion. This will not result from quoting abstract principles from encyclicals, whilst condemning those seeking reforms in a mistaken direction. Men who have mastered sane principles and who understand the problem from within have to work out concrete, definite suggestions. Here the lay christian will be fulfilling his special mission. General ethical principles, however sound, bring no relief to the harrassed family who can have no more children: only the christian gynaeccologist who has collaborated in fertility research can do that.

In all these ways the christian makes the Church present on all fronts, and the Church is the sacrament of God's encounter with man. 'The Church has the mission', said Cardinal Montini in 1957, 'of bringing the sacred into a specific relation with the profane in such a way that the sacred will be not contaminated but communicated, and the profane not deformed but sanctified . . . This is the continuation of the mystery of God-made-man'! No sector is exempt from God's saving work. The very word 'profane' meant the space immediately before and leading up to the temple.

The priest stands apart from the world so as to serve the world; the layman remains in it to serve it and save it. The motive of both must be love, love of God flowing out to all his creation and all his creatures. Anything less is false.