

# THE SINS OF PRIESTS

By VINCENT ROCHFORD

ONE wonders how Cecil B. de Mille missed them! What an epic he could have produced in Ciné Città: the jewelled, poisoned goblet, the swift gleam of a dagger in the moonlight, plash of a body in the Tiber, all in glorious technicolour, with close-up of the Borgia Pope smiling diabolically . . . The tenth century would yield an even more coloured story, in purple. But these are celebrated highlights, without great relevance to the lives of the parochial clergy; nor are they the sins which God has commonly blamed in his priests.

The man who is 'chosen from among his fellow-men to be their representative in their dealings with God'<sup>1</sup> has a difficult role when he is chosen by his fellow-men, as happened in primitive societies; when it is God himself who calls him it is more delicate still. The part of mediator demands closeness to both the parties, the priest is the man of God but still remains with his fellow-men, and the more intimately he shares their aspirations and problems the more effective his mediation. At the same time he is placed in a special category, he is separated, and marked off, too, by a certain authority.

This brings inescapable temptation to abuse that position, to forget in varying measure that it is a *diakonia*, a humble service of his brethren – a temptation that is hydra-headed. It may take vulgar forms or it may be more subtle. None of us escapes it.

It was this temptation that brought down the wrath of God on the priests of his chosen people. 'Thus says the Lord God: Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should shepherds not feed the sheep? it is you who eat the fat, who clothe yourselves with the wool, who slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep . . .'<sup>2</sup> The same theme recurs in the prophet Zachary: 'The Lord said to me, Lo, I am raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for the perishing or seek the wandering or heal the maimed or nourish the sound . . . Woe to my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock'.<sup>3</sup> The situation was so bad that Yahweh promises that he himself will become his people's shepherd, 'I will myself seek

<sup>1</sup> Heb 5, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ezek 34, 2 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Zech 11, 15.

the lost', words which our saviour was to use of his own mission.<sup>1</sup>

Alas, the distortion of power and authority to serve one's own ends has often marked the shepherds of the new covenant as it did their predecessors. Even if one may dismiss the allusions of Chaucer and the biting scorn of Langland as exaggerations permissible to men of letters, there remain the letters of reforming saints, who feel driven to recall not only village priests, but legates, curial officials and popes themselves to a sense of their vocation. 'In all that belongs to earthly magnificence you have succeeded not to Peter but to Constantine,' St Bernard warns a pope.<sup>2</sup> 'You have been raised to the pinnacle of honour and power. But for what purpose? Not to enjoy the glory of lordship . . . Learn to use your position of eminence not to show your authority but to do the work the time requires'.<sup>3</sup> 'There is a kind of folly which renders foolish the very wisdom of our faith. I speak of ambition'.<sup>4</sup> 'As for you, of whom the Lord complains by the prophets, They have reigned, but not by me: they have been princes, but I knew not,<sup>5</sup> you reject, you do not accept the keys'.<sup>6</sup>

Two centuries later Catherine of Siena is telling a nephew of Gregory IX, 'You ought to work with the Holy Father to drive out the bad shepherds, who think of nothing but sumptuous fare, luxurious palaces and beautiful equipages'.<sup>7</sup>

It is interesting that the vices denounced by the prophets of the old law are substantially those castigated by the saints of the new. They would seem to be inherent weaknesses for the clergy.

Now it is true that certain concrete manifestations of them no longer exist. No prelate is today a member, by his priestly office, of a feudal hierarchy – even if the televised opening of the Vatican Council or papal coronation created an unfortunate impression of nostalgia for that dead world. We no longer belong, as clerics, to any established rank in society, with opportunities of wealth and power. In our pluralist societies we priests are ordinary citizens, we are 'little men'. Prestige and influence are to be won only by personal worth, by ability and sincerity. Yet human nature has not changed, and if the stage on which our lives are played out is smaller than in earlier ages, with correspondingly restricted scope for evil, may we, too, not be infected, at least in germ, with the recurring weakness of any priestly caste?

<sup>1</sup> Lk 19, 10.

<sup>2</sup> *De Consideratione*, Bk IV, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk III.

<sup>5</sup> Hos 8, 4.

<sup>6</sup> *De Conversione ad Clericos*.

<sup>7</sup> Letter 109.

It is common knowledge that a man's most serious faults are those of which he is least conscious. Is this true of the priest? It was in St Bernard's day; for in a conference to the Paris clergy he remarked, 'Those which are the most grave, he least perceives, and his conscience suffers less remorse from the memory of envy or pride than it does from shameful deeds'.<sup>1</sup> This explains why so many good and even holy men not infrequently display grave defects of character.

Commonly absent from the sins we recognize are those of omission, so severely censured by our Lord.<sup>2</sup> Our formation inclines us to search for concrete actions opposed to the divine law, and to stop short there, so that eventually this inattention brings a disproportion into our sense of values and the effectiveness of our apostolate is diminished.

Certainly the vices arraigned in the Jewish and Catholic priesthood by the prophets and saints cannot be imputed to the clergy of today. The seminary system set up after the Council of Trent – whatever its failures to adapt itself to changing needs – has given the Church a priesthood of high moral standing and great devotion to duty. Their concern for their flocks, their efforts to provide Catholic schooling for the children, their patience, their acceptance of burdens only distantly connected with religious duty, are quite outstanding. Wherever blame may lie, it is not in that direction.

But we are still victims, labouring under the weight of history and of an inadequate theology. Our leaders still seem reluctant to break finally with the world of Constantine and of medieval Christendom, a spirit reflected in canon law. Roman pronouncements too often breathe a phoney triumphalism which we are growing to think unsuited to a Church which, as Pope John so often reminded us, is in the world in order that, like its Master, it may serve humanity. Pope Paul, in his first encyclical, has declared the papacy itself a 'primacy of service'. Like the Church itself, it is a 'ministration of love'.

But history has brought about an impoverished relationship between priest and layman, which has tended towards de-pastoralising the priest. 'Since the end of the patristic period of the Church, she rather takes herself for granted as a mere institution, a clerical organisation for which the other elements, that is, the laity, are objects of direction and care, of instruction, guidance and possible sanctification, but not really subjects engaged in a joint enterprise'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *De Conversione ad Clericos*.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 25, 42.

<sup>3</sup> K. Rahner, 'Jubilee', April 1964.

This tendency was strengthened by the view, common enough before the doctrine of the Church as the body of Christ was rediscovered, that the Church is an 'institution for salvation'.<sup>1</sup> Such an impoverished idea of the Church makes of the priest a dispenser of God's mysteries and of salvation, and the layman as mere recipient, a consumer. The laity thus become the Church's proletariat. The priest is no longer a 'man amongst men, brother amongst brothers'; he belongs to the privileged class in the ecclesial structure. He is still a good shepherd of his flock, but his love is fatally tinged with condescension. His sheep must be watched over, kept in the fold by his vigilant staff, kept 'regular at their duties'. He may wear himself out by his efforts; but his sheep will not be the sort that Christ could 'send among wolves', for they will not mature and achieve spiritual adulthood; and the world will pass them by.

This is the error of clericalism, and however hard we work, it makes us less pastoral. For we are set apart for the service of our fellow-Christians and of all men, giving them the word and the sacraments and helping them in their dealings with God. When the bishop's hands were laid on us, they brought us no increase of intelligence or of knowledge, which, like other men, we acquire only by effort. What we did receive was the Holy Spirit, who created in us the powers of Christ's own priesthood. It is we who make present the saving act of Christ so that the whole body of Christ may offer it to the Father; it is we who perform the sacred symbolic acts through which divine life flows into men. But we are no more grown up, no more mature and understanding than our people. In other respects they are our equals, our partners in Christ's mission of gathering the scattered into union with God and with each other. We, too, are of the faithful, we, too, belong to God's holy people, his laity. Every day in the canon of the mass we call ourselves his 'slaves', our folk his 'holy people'. It is they who live in the world and share its preoccupations, its hopes and fears. It is they who must be Christ's witnesses in their own circle, must hold dialogue with their fellows and win the world for him. In Pius XII's phrase, it is they who must 'consecrate the world', be its mediators with Christ, and so exercise their Christian priesthood, communicated to them in baptism. This mission calls for totally mature and responsible men and women, and a great part of our priestly ministry must be the formation we give them so that they may be equal to the demands it makes on

---

<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Döpfner, Pastoral Letter, Lent 1964.

them. If our fatherhood degenerates into paternalism, if there be any patronising, any hint of condescension in our attitude, we shall be of less value to them in their apostolate.

The root of priestly vices in the Old Testament and in the middle ages was egoism and neglect of the flock. It lies deep in human nature, however its manifestations may vary with different epochs. Egoism and failure to be pastoral are faults which lie in wait for the priest in the parish. Clearly, some men are in a position of special peril, for instance the curial official, consulting the records in search of a precedent: how easily he could forget the background from which a query he is answering came. Or priests engrossed in finance, in teaching the pagan classics, or working in offices . . .

But these are special cases. We are thinking of the priest working in a parish. Surely his primary task is house-to-house visiting. Apart from persuading people to 'practise', or in the homes furthest away from religion, serving as a reminder of the presence of God, how else can he show love and concern for his people? This is the way he grows to know them by name, their home, trade, children, interests: that is, know them as human persons. If his people see him only at the altar, how can they know him as a man, see his concern for them and know him as a man of flesh and blood, warts and all, instead of a hieratic figure in vestments? It is by their own fireside that they gain confidence and introduce their doubts, misunderstandings and their real problems, of marriage, of work, of rearing their children. They would never pluck up courage to knock at the presbytery door, face the housekeeper, meet a strange priest in a dingy waiting-room. All that would be artificial. It is by the fire that the real things emerge.

And it keeps the priest human; he remains in contact with his fellow-men and enables him to give concrete advice; his mass-homily will contain practical suggestions to help them express their love of God in the reality of their daily lives, because the problems common to the locality and its industries are known to him. An old woman told a priest who was leaving the parish: 'I'm sorry you're going, I can talk to you as I used to talk to my old man'. Another, not long a Catholic: 'Whenever we had any problem in the family I could always say, Go down and see Father'. A young wife, mother of four children, 'Will I be able to talk about it to the next priest?': meaning regulation of births. And young workers, who felt their problem of remaining christian in the factory was at least understood. Such a relationship can grow only where a priest has shown

on door-knocker and by the hearth that he cares about them. And if he neglects visiting, how many of the babies he baptizes, at any rate in a working-class parish, will ever commence a eucharistic life?

Visiting was never so difficult, since so many are out at work during the day, and the priest's evenings largely occupied with catechumens, marriage preparations, group-meetings and casual callers at the presbytery. Yet it has to have high priority, nor may we imagine that filling up forms for public authorities (or diocese) is pastoral work. Unless a man can say, 'I know mine – and mine know me', like his Master, he is not a pastor, however efficient an administrator. An anonymous sea of faces in the pews on a Sunday morning is not a flock in the christian sense. 'The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought . . .'<sup>1</sup>

We need to reflect on our people's dignity as human persons and as our brothers in Christ. This must be made evident above all in the supreme activity of worship. We may not celebrate mass as if it were our private devotion, unjustly depriving them of their right and duty of expressing by voice and action their share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> They have a right to respond to the priest, to pray with him, to sing the praises of God, and every means must be offered them of doing this, whatever the difficulties put in the way by the current western rite; lector and commentator must provide the link between priest and people. To condemn them to remain mute and passive would also be to distort the liturgy itself. Besides formal teaching they need to learn through action that Christ associates his bride with himself in his worship of the Father; that in mass they are drawn into the *transitus Domini*, his own movement of return to his Father; their lives, like his, a mission in the world given them by God. Anything less is surely deserving of Ezekiel's strictures on shepherds who fail to feed the sheep – and with food that is theirs by right.

The ministry of the word is to be taken seriously, scriptural pericopes read articulately and with meaning, because Christ himself is present in a new way during their proclamation, speaking directly to the hearts of his people here and now.<sup>3</sup> And surely the remote preparation for fruitfully listening to God's word begins with bible groups, which help people at least to understand the background?

<sup>1</sup> Ezek 34, 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Constitution on the Liturgy* 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

The homily at mass offers a great opportunity. Often it represents our people's only chance of learning about God in a week given over to so many activities. How easy it is to talk without serious preparation, to mumble or to prose away in vague platitudes! Or to give a catechism lesson because our folk are simple, or to retail syllogisms and distinctions from an old seminary manual! This would be an opportunity lost of proclaiming the kerygma, reminding people of God's saving interventions in history, the multiple forms of Christ's presence amongst us today. A pseudo-scholastic sermon can leave the hearers thinking 'Oh, really?' or, 'So what?', whereas announcing the works of God's love of us challenges a response, it stimulates appreciation and gratitude and love. The man in the pew needs help if he is to influence the materialist ambience of his existence, he is grateful for suggestions how his response to God's love can find its expression in the coming week in his home and working and leisure life; all of which must be related to the sacrifice that is about to begin, and so be integrated into the action of Christ himself. Notices, mere business matters and so forth, can be relegated to a notice sheet or given after the post-communion prayer, so as not to diminish the religious climate whilst the word of God is being celebrated.

The sacraments are sacred signs which veil and convey the power of God, signs of our faith as well as encounters with the Lord Jesus. To say that they produce their effect *ex opere operato* does not justify a perfunctory celebration. The Church always prepares us for a sacrament by her catechesis; but in this age it needs amplification for people unfamiliar with the bible. Baptisms, for instance, can be individually arranged and we can dwell on the privilege of this second birth into the family of the Trinity itself, thus providing a background for explanation, during the liturgy of baptism itself, of the rich prayers and symbolic actions that surround it. It is fatally easy to enter the Church at a fixed hour each week, baptizing every infant that is presented, with no questions and no teaching.

Similar opportunities are offered when preparing couples for marriage, suggesting it as a christian vocation parallel with the priesthood; using St Paul's words to the ephesians to show them more deeply the nature of the Church as well as of christian wedlock. How often the priest comes to the sanctuary to find a crowd of people gossiping to each other, yet he plunges into the ceremony without even a sign of the cross and an introductory prayer to emphasise the sacredness of the occasion. A few words on scripture will

help many Catholics present; and, for the non-Catholics who come to attend a friend's wedding, may often be their first introduction to the Church.

Respect for others demands dialogue. Ought we not to discuss parish policy with our people? Invite suggestions for sermons, promote discussion in hall or school over a cup of tea. Then we can explain why the Church wants their participation in mass, why we would like to remove some pious bric-à-brac from God's house and find out their reactions, so that in the end decisions are taken by the whole christian community instead of being ukases from the parish priests. 'Any legitimate claim to authority in the Church is supplemented by collegiality through dialogue, exchange of views and common responsibility; this includes the relationship between bishops and priests, between parish priest and curate, between priest and layman'.<sup>1</sup> In the presbytery itself individualism must be avoided; however strong a man's personality or his views, all in the house need to form a living, fraternal community. This is the condition of forming communities within the parish.

Priests are commonly zealous in the work of conversions. We have to be at least equally enthusiastic for the ecumenical movement, which is so clearly the work of the Holy Spirit in this age. And not less important than either must be the formation of men and women with apostolic vocations: to be on the look-out in all our contacts for young men and women and married couples who could acquire a sense of responsibility for their surroundings, and devote ourselves to their formation, so that they can become adult christians and carry Christ into the circles where, by God's will, they live.

Respect for others implies also that we should continue to learn, and not make do all our lives with what we picked up in the seminary. The faith gains new insights through dialogue and reflection; a man can easily grow out of date. Men today feel great intellectual and moral difficulties, they are quick to detect a text-book reply we committed to memory in our teens, and have much more respect for a perhaps halting answer to a problem which we have ourselves felt.

The world is shocked and left much less ready to pay any attention to us if we show ourselves out of sympathy with our time. We have to understand and sympathise with the yearnings and aspirations of our generation, whatever their actual embodiment. Feeling

---

<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Döpfner, *loc. cit.*

for the undernourished peoples, the movement for peace, the world-wide anxiety for education represent generous feelings, indifference to which would be unbecoming to any christian. The Church is not, after all, a narrow sect; she must assume all that is best in the world and baptize it where she can.

Respect for others must extend to our contemporaries; we must not imagine that the last word was spoken before our birth or in our youth. It is natural to resist change because it calls for effort; it is disturbing – and do we not often use the sacred word tradition when all we mean is, ‘That’s how it was when I was young’? There is such a disease as mental sclerosis!

The final threat from our egoism is disillusionment. It is probable that we were sustained in our youth by generous illusions: we had the recipe for school instructions, the gimmick for a sermon, and such-and-such a movement was going to convert the world! None of them worked; one succeeded another; now we know there is no simple recipe . . . As we matured our illusions fell away from us, but not our ideals. The priest needs to shed his illusions without becoming disillusioned. What harm is done by the priest who deals kindly but in a tired way with those who seek his help! He has no time for any group or movement, he has seen it all before. ‘It doesn’t work, believe me . . .’ What a douch of cold water to younger colleagues and to his people! The continued pressure of failure, loss of youthful zest, dissatisfaction, the ravages of the *demonium meridianum* of the passing years can lead to that sin so hard to forgive in the priest: cynicism.

Much of our life consists in dealing with people, with the public, and this carries with it the temptation to acquire the mentality and outlook of an official – even if the Church’s official. The Church is indeed an institution; but more basically, she is the bride and even the body of Christ, whose servants – and friends – we are. He was the servant of all humanity, as well as his Father’s. He prolongs his service in us. Our priesthood is a *diakonia*. We must be clerics without clericalism; fathers without paternalism; always shepherds of the Good Shepherd.