

THE WORK OF THE APOSTOLATE

By DONALD NICHOLL

IS AN ARTICLE in *The Way* on *The Work of the Apostolate* itself a work of the apostolate? As I sit here on a grey Sunday afternoon, watching the rain streaming down the trunks of the silver birches, what am I trying to do?

Broadly speaking there are two choices before me. The first is that I should provide a commentary on the decree on the Apostolate of the Laity. In front of me on the table are two articles I have just read which do precisely that. They are composed in that latinized english which is the jargon of catholic preachers and writers, and as I read them I couldn't help feeling that they have emerged from a catholic computer into which certain Vatican words had been fed, and out of which the authors of the articles had extracted further latinized phrases that were somehow supposed to represent a development of thought – or even, presumably, a work of the apostolate. Each of these articles is stone dead. To provide them with a third dead companion would be quite easy. Sometimes our catholic journals seem to me to be cemeteries in which catholic writers bury their still-born thoughts.

The other choice is that I should try to say something. But the chances of my saying something are fairly small. Of course it is possible to go on indefinitely with such statements as 'Two and two equals four' or 'The layman's apostolate derives from his christian vocation, and the Church can never be without it', as the decree on the Apostolate of the Laity proclaims. But there is no point in doing so, and repetition does not make a point out of no point.

The sad thing is that I think I have something to say – just one thing. But readers of catholic journals are so used to articles which say nothing that they can read away at them for hours, content in the knowledge that nothing is going to be said. They know that nothing is going to be said in the sense that what they read will in no way stir them to do anything; and they can contentedly place the journal at its appropriate position on their shelves, knowing

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that they can refer to it, quote it or refute it when they themselves also want to say nothing, or to think seriously about nothing. So I am doubtful whether what I have to say is going to be heard even by those who have paid to listen to it. Especially since what I have to say is not original, and the only reason I am saying it is that I have only just realized it.

Probably there are many priests who have never realized it. How, otherwise, can one account for the fact that so many of them who have given up their priestly functions lately have proclaimed their intention of going in for social work? And have spoken of doing good in social work as though it were as easy as falling off a log? Certainly almost none of the americans I met realized it. How, otherwise, can one account for their dismay at anti-american feeling in a world where they said they have simply gone about doing good? The fact that almost everywhere they went doing good has been turned into a spiritual desert never seems to have occurred to them. They still seem to think that one can do good simply by turning one's hand to it.

So, on the negative side, what I want to say about the work of the apostolate is that it is extremely difficult to do any good, and it is correspondingly easy to do harm. Here the story seems relevant of the dominican lay-brother at Hawkesyard priory who was dying. He was dejected as he surveyed his life; and a famous dominican preacher who also lived in the priory tried to comfort him: he reminded the lay-brother of how he would himself come into the kitchen before going out to preach and would ask the lay-brother to pray for him. 'And I'm sure', said the preacher, 'it counts for a lot that you should have prayed for my sermons to do good'. The lay-brother sat up in astonishment and said 'But I never imagined that your sermons would do good, father; I only prayed that they should do no harm'.

Nor is this just a droll story to remind us of the dangers of 'do-goodery'. It brings home to us the harm we may do whenever we enter into the lives of other people, whether by words in sermons or words on paper or by actions of any kind. And we need to hesitate on the threshold of any entry into other people's lives – as Merfyn Turner told us the other day, that soon after beginning prison visiting, he stood outside the cell-door of the man he was going to visit, and thought 'He isn't trying to change my life. By what right am I trying to change his?' The other thing he realized, which again makes one hesitate on the threshold of any apostolic activity, is that if one takes it upon oneself to enter into another person's life then

one is in there for good – to the end of their lives if they want you, or to the end of your own life, whichever is the shorter.

Which brings me to the positive mode of what I want to say: anyone wishing to join in the apostolate has to be a Lazarus; like Lazarus, he has first of all to be dead, down there in the grave, and every time that he does anything he has to climb out of the grave to do it. Only when he has climbed out of the grave can a person bring with him the only gift that is really good, that is, resurrected life.

One can go on for ages quoting Christ's saying, that we have to be like the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, otherwise we remain alone; or that it is necessary to lose our lives if they are to be any good. But, of course, christians have gone on quoting these phrases over the centuries until they have lost their meaning. This is just what the late cardinal Veillot had in mind when he so movingly said from the hospital bed on which he was, literally, dying: 'We all know how to compose fine phrases about suffering – I have done it myself with great fervour. Tell the priests to say nothing about it. We don't know what it is. I have wept and wept about it'. And the same is true about one's self-dying: it is not a romantic notion, or the title of a moving story by René Bazin: it is a stark, terrifying reality: it is seeing the whole of one's life brought to nothingness. But if one is going to be a Lazarus, one has first to die.

What is being said here clearly runs counter to the trends in contemporary christianity which encourage the notion that christians and humanists have simply to give themselves to others and all will be well. But what on earth leads people to imagine that anyone wants them, even when given away? Or that you are improving anyone's situation by presenting your own self to them? As if they hadn't enough trouble already with their own self without having the burden of yours as well. It is no good giving yourself to others unless you have first given yourself to God and died; and then he has decided to resurrect you for certain obscure reasons of his own.

So I suggest that an apostle is like Lazarus because he is lying there in the grave, dead to the world. He is dead to the world in the sense that he simply cannot get out of the grave for any purpose of his own. Only when the Lord calls him does he receive the strength to climb out; even then it is not easy; the action does not come easily in the way that striking a ball comes naturally and easily to a skilled cricketer. It is a great effort because all one's natural desire to be up and doing has gone dead and one's limbs are heavy and unrespons-

ive. So that whatever act one manages is an act of resurrected life, performed in response to the Lord's call. But since it is an act of pure obedience it also carries with it a pure joy that is the mark of resurrected life, joy not only for Lazarus but equally for those whom he greets.

A further weight upon the apostolic Lazarus is that from his previous existence he can at least remember certain occasions when his life had a natural flow to it, when his brains and wit and charm had a visible effect upon other people, so that they admired him and admired the religion he professed. In those days he could almost measure the success of his apostolic work. But now it is all hidden from him; then it was visible to him; now it is visible, if at all, only to others.

By now the patient reader of this article must be wondering if all this about Lazarus has anything to do with the work of the apostolate. After all, is it not simply an obscure way of expressing what is already being done by scores of Catholic organizations such as the Knights of St Columba, the Catenians, the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, the Catholic Evidence Guild, and even by Catholic Action, etc? Well, is it?

Long observation of catholic organizations has forced me to the conclusion that very many of them have nothing to do with resurrected life. Maybe they begin with a call from the Lord, but within a very short space of time they become responses to quite different calls. In particular they seem to me to become hobbies which certain types of people go in for, much as some people go in for golf and others for gardening; this explains the ease with which in England they become tea-parties.

And then, inevitably, they becomes stages, upon which the members of these organizations can display and exercise their natural talents. Which is all very pleasant and nice, of course, but it does mean that what is put across from these particular stages is on the same level as what comes across from the world's stages: it sometimes stimulates, sometimes it makes you think a bit, often it pleases; but rarely does it bring the resurrected life which alone gives abiding joy.

In this sense many catholic organizations are instruments for ensuring that their members do not have to face death and so cannot be resurrected, as Lazarus was; first you have to be dead. These organizations are instruments for ensuring that nothing happens at any other level but that of the world, for making sure

that everything goes on just as before. Their adaptation towards these ends has been finely illustrated by the way in which they have on the whole absorbed and rendered innocuous the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which at one time threatened us with death and resurrection. The numerous organizations called into existence since the Vatican Council by catholics are comparable to the antibodies which the human body creates in order to protect itself; in this case, to protect the catholic community against the danger of finding itself in the grave and having to climb out again. It is as though these organizations actually shield their members from having to look at the Church, which is the only organization that is necessary. Perhaps the Church is at its weakest in those periods when the number of organizations within it is at its highest, precisely because these organizations shield their members from the gospel.

Still, we must assume that our present organizations will continue, otherwise we should have to form a new organization in order to get rid of them. So assuming that these organizations remain, how can Lazarus nevertheless do the work of the apostolate from his position in the grave?

The answer is really very simple, but has been cunningly complicated in the past. Lazarus does his work, bringing resurrected life to this world, every time he answers the Lord's call.

When does the Lord call? Every time that any creature is in need. And the supreme need of every creature is that pure joy which only resurrected life can bring.

Let me illustrate what I mean by saying that this simplicity has been cunningly complicated. There was once a young man in great need and who went for help to a well-known writer of spiritual books; the young man soon found himself sent away again, unhelped; and I later discovered that the spiritual writer had not been able to attend to the young man because he was busy putting the last touches to one of his spiritual books.

What the spiritual writer does not seem to have realized is that when the young man came the writer was supposed to climb out of the grave he had dug with his pen and answer the Lord's call in the person of the needy young man. For, as Fr Elchaninov has said: 'There are no casual encounters: either God sends us those we need, or, without our knowledge, we ourselves are sent to others by his will'.

That is the second truth about the apostolate. The first truth is

that the apostle is a Lazarus who has to keep stepping out of his grave bringing resurrected life and joy. The second truth is that there are no casual encounters. Once we grasp this second truth we stop worrying if we are in the proper organization for doing apostolic work. So long as we are breathing we are within the framework of the organization that God has established, that is, the world in which we live; and every single meeting we have with another human being is potentially charged with grace. Every meeting is fired with grace by the action of any Lazarus in climbing up out of the grave at the Lord's call.