

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

By IAN LINDEN

IT IS STRANGE to think of ourselves pinned into the album of twentieth century catholicism, staring out with Teilhardian optimism, and a great fuzz of post-freudian *psychosprach* ballooning from our heads. But that is the way our children may see us. Unfortunately there is no hope of seeing our own period in historical perspective. We can never seem to gain a vantage point. Any pretence of objectivity is suspect. But this still does not stop us asking the questions. In particular, why the cross appears as an anachronism, totally alien to today's culture and spirit.

Certain contemporary forces cannot be missed. We live with a backdrop of marxism and americanism shouting in their different ways, 'Follow me and there will be no more suffering'. One more machine, another revolution, so we are told, and everything will be all right. It will all be controlled: the cancer will be irradiated, the neurosis transferred, the ghetto cooled, the living shot to the moon and the dead put in a cryostat. *Résurrection par rechauffage*. If only we manage to hide behind our pet ideology – the suburban gardens of the soul, death and affliction will depart.

Unlike even fifty years ago, we are remarkably immune from physical suffering. In the western world most people reach old age without feeling intense pain. In striking contrast to the third world, our children are unlikely to die suddenly of disease, or slowly of malnutrition. Disease and discomfort are not the norm of daily existence. Our experience of suffering, though more sensitive, is limited. Affliction and moral evil take on meaning in the astonishingly new context of effective medicine, psychology and sociology, within the context of human evolution understood as progressive control of the world.

When we do point to the cross, it is not at the centre of a layered cosmos, 'out there', but in our subjective mythology of ego and id, or in Sartre's terms as the medium of human inter-subjectivity. The experience of suffering is increasingly understood with reference to man's absurdity and isolation in mass society or mental and social disease. Far from adding to our understanding of the cross, the conditions of modern life have made its mystery more distant and more confusing.

read more at www.theway.org.uk

The paradox of the cross has been pushed aside too often in the past, bypassed for more immediate gains on spiritual outlay, for us to fail to scrutinize the concept of 'fulfilment' as it is presented today. The limitations on our western experience of suffering help us fall into the intellectual anaesthesia of contemporary forms of humanism. The crucifix becomes simply a decoration on the wall. Maritain seems stubborn in his insistence that this will not do. So the unanimity with which he, and similar writers, are consigned to the scrap-heap of irrelevance soon becomes suspicious. But this is not a unique feature of the technological era; the willingness 'to barter eternity for twenty years in Chelsea', as St Thomas More put it, is nothing new. It seems to be only great disasters such as major wars that force the cross into human consciousness. Then national leaders pour God over everything like ketchup, and we suddenly march off in a glow of sacrificial love, to crucify and be crucified.

There cannot be much doubt about the prevailing spirit of the times, but the discernment of spirits leaves us in confusion and perplexity. It appears to be the Sierra Maestra now, and all up with the hill outside Jerusalem. We seem to be more distant from God than any australopithecine, nomadic tribesman or tiller of the soil that ever was. The distance labelled 'the death of God' seems infinite. Only by turning to face the reality of the crucified Christ can we have any hope of unravelling the truth of this contemporary separation from God. The cross is the only vantage point and objectivity that Christians have been given. We cannot ignore it – above all now.

Separation from the Father

The cross gives us a surprisingly realistic anthropology. It proclaims the essential nature of mankind, not as an alien message that we can neither decipher nor corroborate, but as an existential truth in which we 'live and move and have our being'. Whether it is with the experience of dread, anxiety and the terror of dying, or in the realization that creation is defective for us in famine, disease, and natural disaster, the idea of 'fallenness' has held its meaning through history and is meaningful today. Even if the understanding comes indirectly from hearing about Hiroshima, Auschwitz, Dresden or Guernica, we cannot avoid the conclusion that human community contains within it a force of disintegration. These are symbols of the reality underlying the human condition into which the newborn child is thrown, the social aspect of the emptiness and nothingness that every man can feel within himself. The growth and personality

of a child expresses in some way the nature of its family, a human analogy of Christ's perfect expression of the love within the Trinity. But the world the child takes on is a fallen one and the family community it enters is anything but perfect. This is our 'flesh', the way we are in the world. It stays with us for the duration. It is the texture of human life, the 'original sin' which every child takes on as the framework of its existence.

The winning or losing hand of genes, our social situation, all the forces that mould us, are beyond our direct control. Regardless of any personal decision we are sharers in the world's finitude and imperfection. From conception we are determined 'in the flesh' with implications dwelt on by St Paul: our limitations and degrees of freedom, the inevitability of our response to broad physical, biological and psychological laws. So far the natural sciences. Whether we like it or not we are obedient to the laws of creation. The effects are not just skin deep. We do not salvage some inner core, a god in the corrupt machine. According to the apostles, even the risen Lord bore the wounds he had suffered on the cross. The pauline epistles are firm that the world goes right to the heart of us. Otherwise, presumably, there would be no possibility of going to the heart of the world. There is a complete interpenetration.

To love in this world, however little, we must turn to face towards its heart, to its beauty and joy, its disintegration and sorrow. We become involved more fully in its limitation and finitude, in the paradox of its separation yet union with God. Inasmuch as we are drawn by this force towards the centre of creation, to a person, and we do not turn in fear, we are drawn inexorably towards the truth of the cross: in Simone Weil's words, towards 'the world's infinite distance from God'.

As love becomes a true self-emptying, sharing in the spirit of Christ's sacrifice and abandonment on the cross, his ultimate separation, it shares in his union with the Father. The cross is the point where our distance from God is spanned in Christ's person. The place of violence and death, where for the apostles and us man's desolation and separation from the Father seemed definitive, is the locus of reconciliation between God and man.

A consent to creation, then, both in its agony of obedience and in its joy of union with God, is given implicitly with each decision to love. This resolution to love involves an acknowledgment of the cross. We accept the fallenness and limitation in loving another, not as the last word but with the expectation of something different.

We suffer because we believe things could be otherwise. So suffering is grounded in hope, in the resurrection for christians. In this mystery of faith, what was broken is healed and death is turned into new life. The finality of the cross is forever the beginning of the new creation.

From the gospel it is clear that Christ understood himself as representing a radically new departure for the world, a revolution in the law, renewing and fulfilling in his person its deepest meaning and intentions. Yet his life in obedience to this mission gives us no pattern which could be subsumed under some easily handled concept as non-violence, revolution, liberation. Quite the reverse. The christian sense of all these concepts has to be discovered in the spirit of Christ's life and death. There is no way in which the scourging of the buyers and sellers in the temple, the brilliance and humour of his debates with the pharisees, the silence before the romans, can be pulled into a christian formula that meets future problems.

So there are no rote answers to political and personal questions to be drawn from the historical Jesus. Any attempt at this would be far from the life sketched in the gospels: Christ's developing discovery of his sonship and its meaning for the world, the prayerful search for the Father's will. The truth unfolds in the life of the gospel Christ as the gradual growth, then flowering, of a plant. Not as a computer tape programmed for divinity, but with the freedom of the Son of Man.

There can be no programme, of course. Christ's sensitivity to the Father grew as a loving response to the concrete situations of his life, from prayer and withdrawal for meditation. Since we are asked to live in his Spirit, there can be no ideological solutions to the various demands to love. We stand in the obscurity that Christ shared as a man. We read a few signposts and hope that former generations, when they put them up, realized that the landscape would change. Although they were on the same journey, there is no coming home from Barth's 'far country' with a Michelin road map along the autobahn for us. There is no such map. It must be emphasized that anything written about the cross is bound to be tentative, often specious and beside the point. This particular discussion, which is couched in the well-worn terms of a balance between action and passion in christian love, does not attempt to escape the pervasive vagueness that honesty demands.

The structure of the cross

Just as the suffering of the cross is only meaningful within the context of faith and hope, the meaning of perfect charity is also to be

found in the crucifixion of Christ. The passion, the culmination of the world's action on Christ, was also the fulfilment of his life's activity. In his life action and passion – being acted upon, the passive sense – achieved a perfect balance and integrity. Although he constantly showed himself to be the interpreter of the law, he submitted to it utterly. While his personality snatched men from their daily lives, calling them to repentance and change, he was overcome by events himself. The cross represented the climax, not the accidental end, of his work as the suffering servant of Israel, healing and freeing men for union with the Father.

This dynamic structure of passivity and activity lived by Christ from childhood, through his public ministry to ridicule and a criminal's death, shows us the direction of charity and delimits the meaning of the true cross. This direction and movement in Christ's life is the structure of christian love. Any cross which falls outside this structure, failing to share in its dynamic balance, is likely to be a cross of our own manufacture, *ersatz* and unbalanced, a 'false cross'.

Often an oblique approach of studying the pathology of a situation can provide valid insights into its true nature, when a more direct approach will fail. So it is worthwhile to look into the problem of the 'false cross' further. The way in which christian love can become unbalanced and twisted into subtle selfishness can add to our understanding of the true cross of Christ that we are asked to take up.

The false cross: personal relationships

The chorus goes, 'All that I have gone through for you'. Looming larger than life over catholic Italy and Ireland, the great white mother travails in childbirth – no psychoprophylaxis for her – and agonizes over her offspring. Her reward is in heaven: 'A little irish mother in her faded tattered gown, will receive the crown too long to her denied'. These co-equal mediatrices of all graces need careful study. For they are professionals, mistresses of the false cross. Not that this is a maternal privilege alone. For every faded tattered gown there is a father worried stiff by ambition, terrified that his daughters will get pregnant and all his sons become happy failures. Then, in America, permissive parents go to their deaths singing praises to Spock, trampled under foot by packs of mad children; fathers go down gored to death by enraged wives. The litanies of the fireside martyr are international.

Much suffering in family life is of this manufactured kind and

unnecessary. The home-made agonies are for home-consumption and have nothing to do with obedience to the will of God. The sacrifice turns out to be a tool in a game of mutual exploitation. Husband and wife end up ignoring or using each other. Any change runs the risk of revealing the truth of the matter, that all the 'self-sacrifice' is inward-directed and the children's role is to reflect the martyr's glory. The aim of the game is controlling people, not self-giving. The fruits of this brand of conjugal religiosity are apparent in institutions for the mentally ill in every country.

Couples living at close quarters cannot get round the conditions and suppositions on which christian marriage rests. Either there is real self-giving and sacrifice, or the need for falsity and dissimulation quickly arises. Distortions of caricature proportions are found in marriage precisely because the expression of human sexuality is fundamental to christian love. The love relationship is nothing other than a meshing and harmony in the balance of activity and passivity between a couple. The demands of the situation are so concrete, the imperative to love so irreducible, that a real choosing must take place. The dynamic structure of christian love can be entered in faith and struggled with as a joint project of a life-time, or the many false crosses must be taken up. Sexual intercourse, as the most tangible expression of this structure, can be its most perfect human realization, or equally, its most debased distortion. The expression of sexuality and love in the celibate vocation may take longer to become turned inward to such an exaggerated degree.

Of course, the problem of accepting suffering arises out of situations that are not manufactured, and that share the normal grey quality of most moral issues. Any defect, affliction or mere weak spot, whether physical or psychological, in ourselves or in a person we love, opens up the possibility of taking up a false cross. It can be accepted with a false passivity, pre-empting the will of God – it would be as if Christ had asked for the cup of suffering to stay with him – or it can be accepted with an active response, the dimension of the cross that healed and liberated those around the Lord. One partner in a marriage might accept the other's nervous breakdown as the will of God, too busy preparing for the suffering involved to notice that a little positive loving might avert the situation. This form of *fiat* is a subtle type of disobedience, a refusal to co-operate with the transforming fire of love that centres in Christ. The will of God readily becomes our preconceived notion of the way to individual salvation.

Once things have gone wrong with the way we allow the world to act on us, the imbalance shows up in the way we love, in the response of the beloved. There is no emptying and openness, so no real gift of ourselves. Above all there is no room for the beloved, whether human spouse or Christ. The inertia of sin discussed by St Paul is felt intolerably in this inability to alter and respond to another. Being in this position, knowing it fully yet being unable to alter, brings a person into an acute awareness of human limitation and sin that can partake of the desolation of the cross. The attempt and failure to undergo the *metanoia* demanded by a situation pulls a man into the way of the cross and therefore into its mystery. Brought into this painful isolation and seeming total separation from God, we are brought straight before the crucified Christ, to the place of reconciliation. For it was in poverty of spirit that Christ fulfilled the will of the Father.

However, by now everyone knows that the pre-conciliar Church was plagued like a late-night movie with good guys, bad guys and not enough action. If there is a false cross that characterizes the modern world, it is the opposite pole to the private tortures of passive spirituality, a false activism. This amounts to a downright denial that passivity comes into the christian life. Implicit in this stance is a refusal to recognize the binding character of human limitation and finitude. The false cross is then met in the unwillingness to be human in the deepest sense, in a hopeless flight from imperfection and suffering into perpetual empty progress.

The cult of action is noticeably more respectable today than its opposite. A father forever engaged in parochial affairs, or on endless local boards, avoids the primary demand before him, to love and cherish his family. Love can be reduced to a 'providing for', almost a commercial transaction. A mother at coffee sessions with the pious matrons, or at repeated novenas, puts herself in the same position. Religiosity is not much different from frequent recourse to the pub -- and far less efficacious. Only a matter of taste. However, while there is a dearth of escape routes, 'churchmanship' and 'success' alone are commendable. Success is the magic word of the action liturgy. And at the word success many surprising and often clerical knees will bend. Quite a change from the response given by our most successful layman, St Thomas More, in his day.

When^W all the weight is put on one side of the scales, activity becomes^W inhuman. Action becomes violence. What in distorted passivity was a disguised attempt to demand love now becomes

overt personal dictatorship. But as the greatest irony, in trying to overcome the disintegration and nothingness at the heart of creation by force, man becomes its unwitting agent. In trying to leap outside the limits of being human, man confirms them and obeys them against his will. There is only one alternative in St Paul's mind to the freedom 'in Christ Jesus', and that is the unchosen slavery to sin. Once outside the balance of christian love, the scales swing wildly, from the drugged, mind-blown quietism of the 'hippies' to the parisian barricade beavers.

Trite as this sounds, the home is the centre of a lot of violence. And not just 'thumping', which is probably its most innocuous form. A refusal to accept the suffering involved in some personal affliction or defect can increase its damage beyond measure. There is no getting round arthritis, migraine, deafness, obsessive and compulsive behaviour, neurotic fears, in most cases. We can do violence to ourselves if we try. Similarly, with someone we love, the idea that it is our *christian duty* to help them can easily get out of hand into a subtle form of violence. Transformation is then sought through immediate effective action, not through the longer term process of a balanced love. Basically there is a refusal to accept the conditions as they stand. It is forgotten that in marriage the promise was made for better or for worse. No conditions had been set. The same might be said of the relationships between Christ and the Church. We forget that love is a spontaneous movement, precluded by the denial of freedom and by violence. When it comes to the pinch we are willing to side with the Grand Inquisitor.

The false cross: social relationships

Since even supposedly sacrosanct and private affairs like marriage are shaped by social demands, the presentation of cross situations divided into social and individual categories tends to be artificial. The black man in the U.S.A., avoiding his wife so that she can draw welfare benefits, the black african wrenched from his family to provide a cheap labour force, the communist crèches, the white american paying for an untenable standard of living by working at two jobs; all these marriages are defined by the prevailing social structure. Mass media, sex and violence, polluted air, intolerable cities and all the classic liberal issues, can be traced back to roots in distribution of power within a society. In the U.S.A., the disintegration of society is directly attributable to the power of small industrial, military, and, to a certain extent, university élites: the worshipping

community of the dual gods, profit and progress. Concern for the quality of human life is secondary. The modern corporation has become the servant of the technological few, whose private interests crowd out the public good. Only extensive social change can alter these relationships.

In Christ's time, it was the law that provided the nexus of limits and relationships which defined jewish society. The question of the roman occupation was only irrelevant since Christ was concerned with the principal framework of jewish life; and this was the theocratic structure of levites, pharisees and scribes centred around the temple. It was this structure that he overturned, refusing the temptation to be sidetracked into more superficial issues. In as much as the word 'political' is understood to mean the way men are in the world with each other, then Christ's mission was profoundly political. He went to the heart of human society. So in no sense do we stop speaking about personal salvation when we discuss the structure and reformation of society. Concern for social structure, justice and revolution is not a passing fad of the post-conciliar Church, but expresses a legitimate and deeply christian insight of contemporary spirituality.

It is easy to project the range of response to personal situations onto the level of politics. But in doing this a 'quantum' jump has taken place. The relationships in society are not always personal in the same way as within a big family, so it does not follow that things said about the family can be applied without modification to society. Things that happen to societies, like genocide and total war, are more than the sum of the individual events. Something qualitatively different from the slaughter of large numbers of american indians occurred when indian culture was destroyed by the first american settlers. The same could be said of Vietnam today. Exceptional men can perform acts of little individual importance whose significance cannot be discovered by mere inspection, yet which, like burning a draft card, confront a nation. Political prisoners are often jailed not for 'criminal acts' but for acts that dissociate them from the crime of an entire society.

However, societies share with individuals the dualism of defining the conditions of their existence while being subject to contingency. Societies can be true agents just as surely as they can be acted on from within and without. When christians tackle social injustice they are asked to live within the same structure of love that animates their personal life, and with the same obedience to the concrete

demands of the situation. The christian response is determined by the character of the cross at all levels.

Of course, this says everything and nothing. Once it is agreed that the 'fallenness' of society presents the christian with the cross in all its starkness, the question of how christian love is to be worked out in this situation remains. The violence of the individual, magnified in power and indifference, is institutionalized and technicized in the modern world. What is to be the balance between the acceptance of the will of God and the transforming fire that swept the money lenders from the temple?

Unfortunately it is at this point that the impossibility of gaining a position of objectivity becomes crucial. The great heroes of this age, our Christ-figures, Martin Luther King and Che Guevara, represent the two faces of our pre-occupation with social violence, its total rejection and its consecration as a tool of change. The generation that grew out of the horror of the nazi and russian concentration camps, with the mushroom cloud as its archetypal subconscious symbol, is naturally obsessed by human violence and evil. In this climate of both revolutionary rhetoric and an equal dedication to the ideology of non-violence, the christian response to the demand for 'social love' is less and less clear.

This pre-occupation may not exorcize the evil of war and social oppression, but it does clearly break down age-old forms of pretence. The fact that the third world suffers under neo-imperialism is now recognized by the national hierarchies of the underdeveloped countries. When the poor are asked to engage in peaceful protest, they are being asked to behave in a more elevated manner than those that keep them poor. No-one can go into America's ghettos without realizing the degree to which the black man has been violated in this country's rush for progress. At last, the relationships within inequitable societies can be called by the correct name - violence. This clears the air considerably. There is no further justification for presenting issues in terms of violence versus peace; rather it is a choice between the continuance of the current violence and the unknown violence of revolution.

There is no way to measure the magnitude of the violence wrought by a particular social structure, or by a revolution to change it. Often it seems, as with Cuba, that the revolutionary is doing no more than any parent would for his child, fighting to stop him being crushed, freeing him for a decent life where the primary goal will not be finding the next meal. Another time the revolution seems to

amplify the already existing violence until its resonances destroy even the tenuous values that the poor had striven to build up under oppression. Even legitimate wars of national liberation, as in Vietnam, can meet with opposition so ruthless and so mechanized that the revolutionary faces the genocide of the national he hopes to free. Faced with capitulation or mass starvation, as in Biafra, can the decision of the christian be in doubt?

Also on the side of the oppressed there can be a false subservience, carefully tended by the state, a dreadful passivity of fear that forbids the active side of love. The risk of harbouring the revolutionary is never taken. Then the violence is turned inward as self-hatred; its reverberations break up the community of the poor into feuds and internecine struggles that lead to killings. When the distribution of wealth is such that children die regularly of malnutrition, while the national oligarchies preside over the removal of their countries' natural resources by the great powers, is it the pious proponent of the status quo or the revolutionary who is collaborating with the force of violence? By leaving the exploitative and destructive relationships of the status quo to oppose the evil at all costs, it may be the revolutionary alone who has got to the heart of the matter. His alone may be the christian response. The life and death of Fr Camillo Torres poses this question in a poignant manner.

Once this possibility is erected into a revolutionary ideology, though, the christian must surely opt out. In its activism Che Guevara's death and life, despite all its religious dedication to the poor and oppressed, was something other than christian social love. For his life was squeezed through the ideology of peasant revolution. The cult of action and agitation progressively reduced his ability to maintain an openness to the realities of the situation. Without the balance of christian love it was inevitable that he would misjudge both events and people. Bolivia was not Cuba. His girl-friend was a spy and his death was heralded by the great student middle-class, not by peasants. His death was an accident. Far from adding to the revolutionary consciousness of those people able to revolt effectively, it alerted the american government to the need for 'pacification' i.e. the control and subtle oppression of the poor of South America and the third world. Dedication to violence is a dedication to blindness.

Neither were the money lenders spirited out of the temple. To preclude the use of force by christians would swing us rapidly into a quietism and social irresponsibility from which the Church is just

escaping. The cross held high to break the picket line and keep the black man praying happily in his shack is thankfully past history. Non-violence is far too weak and negative a word to use for the force of love that overcame the world in Christ's death. The veil of the temple did not part gently after the high priest received a signed petition from all the leading rabbis. It was rent, moved by a force of total personal selfgiving, a force that Gandhi and Martin Luther King came closest to capturing in their lives. That both these men lived within the dynamic structure of the cross cannot be denied. For a brief moment in history they quieted the waves of violence, soaking them up in their own bodies and the bodies of their followers, refusing to allow their actions to add to the disintegration around them. Their deaths expressed the same calm acceptance of the world that marked their lives. But they might as well have tried to blot up the sea. Once dead the entropy that had piled up in them was released. Religious and racial feuds broke out with unparalleled bitterness.

It is quite meaningful to state that the kingdom which these men tried to inaugurate was not of this world. This world had already decided on the inefficacy of non-violence. No matter how much christian love strives to be successful and effective in bringing a new order into being, we have to acknowledge that Christ's own death did not inaugurate the kingdom of heaven in a tangible way for us. A belief in the redemptive power of suffering, if we are not to deny the evidence of our senses, is a belief involving another world. It is only reasonable once we admit a dimension of heaven that cannot be identified with any order that is, or will be, on earth. For redemptive suffering has, at the very most, only partial 'success' in terms of this world. Bunuel and the rest are right. As a general rule it is ridiculous to take up the cross. It does not work. Whether as the basis for an evolutionary christology, or in more static terms, the cross is a hoping against hope. Both the intense suffering of the martyr and the life-time of service to God of most committed christians – which has in duration what the martyr gives in intensity – are misguided in the world's eyes. They are fundamentally acts of faith.