

APOSTOLIC PRESENCE

By JOHN HARRIOTT

SUNDAY BLOODY SUNDAY', John Schlesinger's latest film, may seem an odd starting-point for an article on apostolic presence. Its story, after all, is not the kind that finds its way into spiritual anthologies, indeed there is very little story. The film simply tells how a homosexual doctor and a divorced woman fall in love and sleep with a cool, self-contained young man who eventually leaves them to pursue business interests abroad. The interest lies in the characters and the background of a modish, prosperous, free-thinking inner-London suburb. Its inhabitants are self-conscious, self-analysing sophisticates caught up in emotions they can label but cannot control, desperate for a 'simple' life but ravelled in psychological and material complexities which are part and parcel of a modern urban society. They know too much to be bound by old-fashioned conventions and too little for peace of mind.

I mention this film because it faithfully depicts a world familiar to a substantial and influential minority of the english middle-class, dwellers in Chelsea and Kensington and the furthest reaches of Holland Park. And it is a world in which the Church does not feature. From it the tide of institutional religion has receded as surely as from the working-class *arrondissements* of Paris or Marseilles. It is a world in which the priest or the nun or the committed lay person is hardly ever met. Its inhabitants think of the priest as they might of an african witch-doctor: bizarre, anachronistic, slightly ominous but of no serious importance to themselves. And Schlesinger's film forces one to ask what the priest could say or do if he did stray into such a world. Would he not be bewildered by these religionless primitives: would they not label him as 'sweet' or 'boring' and place him in the same category as the little man round the corner who sells macro-biotic foods? Could either take the other seriously?

Defining the problem as crudely as this may seem to be loading the dice: Schlesinger's sophisticates are, it is true, only a minority group. But then society is made up of minority groups. The general public is not a kind of porridge. It is more like a chinese puzzle, group existing within group, though with tangential overlaps. The

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worlds of businessmen, artists, politicians, of hippies, sportsmen, coloured immigrants, dockers and communicators are all remarkably self-contained – and the claim I wish to make is that in most of them the institutional Church, especially through its official representatives, is no longer present. Not merely without prophetic or moral influence, but physically absent. As for the men of power who set the goals of society and steer it towards them, the politician, the trade unionist, the financier, they can go for years without meeting anyone who represents the Church. It has become a side-show, occasionally putting on a firework display which catches the eye but without any direct bearing on the shaping of society.

It is hard for the believer to grasp this cruel truth. Although catholic ghettos may have ceased to exist in the physical sense, the world of the believer is still a very small one. Priests, nuns, committed laity tend, and are sometimes officially encouraged, to associate only with their own kind. It is difficult for them to see themselves through the eyes of the agnostic majority from whom they are psychologically disassociated and with whom they have little physical contact. Very few can stand in the shoes of the non-believer or those who have suspended belief, and observe from outside the inconsequence of 'The Church'. Few can bear to look the problem full in the face. The truth is that the agnostic's attitude to the Church is rather like the old-fashioned novice's attitude to the world: something remote and mysterious and to be fought shy of. But whereas the novice thought of the world as a possible source of contamination, the agnostic thinks of the Church as a museum piece which has no practical importance for life. And this indifference is a greater obstacle to the communication of the gospel than any overt hostility. The lesson has not been lost in certain Iron Curtain countries where few obstacles are placed in the way of celebration of latin masses or ceremonial processions, but there is strong opposition to the vernacular or the use of such things as cylostyling machines. Anything, in short, which makes the Church seem archaic or purely theatrical can be tolerated: whatever smacks of modernity cannot, for it may induce people to think of the Church as having to do with life here and now and to give it their serious attention.

Of course it would be unjust to lay the entire blame on the Church for the breakdown of communication with the non-christian world. But for present purposes I simply wish to draw attention to the weaknesses which can be repaired from the inside. There is a world

of difference between casting one's lines and finding the fish won't bite, and never finding the lake and putting out one's boat.

The first of these remedial handicaps is certainly physical isolationism. Though it chiefly affects clerical office-holders it is also true in some degree of the laity as well. Clerical isolation begins with buildings which encourage isolationism. Too many presbyteries, colleges and convents are fortresses which repel visitors instead of attracting them: they savour of Securicor and guard-dogs. Even priests often think twice before calling at an unfamiliar presbytery or religious house, and *a fortiori* lay-people are even more likely to restrict their visits to occasions of urgent necessity. It is not surprising that the average clientele is made up of tramps, con-men, a handful of personal friends, people who are forced to call about a baptism or marriage, and only the very occasional person in real distress. Even then, those who brave the dog, the housekeeper and the gothic portals may find themselves turned away because they have called at an inconvenient time: sometimes by the same priest who complains about the lukewarm reception he receives when he goes visiting. As for the non-believer in search of the word, he needs heroic fortitude even to get within earshot.

But both priests and laity can as easily carry their fortress with them. The priest often makes his friends, and is so encouraged, only among his fellow clergy or devout and congenial believers. Lay-people, separated from their non-catholic contemporaries by years in catholic schools, grow up to make their friends almost exclusively among their co-religionists. Many catholic societies give their time and help to exclusively parochial issues or simply to fellow-catholics. Of course catholics need catholic friends, and there is a place for catholic societies which primarily serve their own community. But the Church is a missionary Church, and it is a strange situation when most of the missionaries shelter within a prickly zareba and rarely if ever venture into the bush. The gospel is to be carried to every creature. That can only be done by communicating. The normal means of communication is for people to meet. If catholics simply huddle together, it is hardly surprising that the non-believers, and the political and social institutions which fashion society, are virtually untouched.

I would argue, therefore, that to overcome this basic physical isolation there is a need for reform of both institutions and personal attitudes. Where the Church's traditional bases, its institutions, are to be retained, they should be made attractive and welcoming to

the unchurched as well as the churchied. This means going well beyond an occasional lecture on the Didache or the showing of lantern slides on Compostella. As premises vary in size and adaptability it would be impossible to generalize, but where the buildings allow, a group of clergy and laypeople could provide a wide range of services, including entertainments, which are suited to local needs and interests. It would sometimes be a step forward simply to make the premises available for groups who had no particular connection with the church. Even where there is only a small presbytery, an occasional party might be a possibility. The primary need is to provide occasions for the churchied and the unchurched to meet. It is too much to expect the domestic christian event to be a starting point. St Ignatius's principle of going in by the other man's door so that he will come out by one's own is open to plenty of inventive interpretation. If non-believers are not interested in our special concerns then let us be first interested in theirs. There is a middle way between losing all sense of christian identity in an unbelieving world and cutting all ties with it.

All this is to suppose a missionary activity which is carried on entirely on home ground. But even if its walls are made of gold and there is singing within, not everyone will be willing to go up to Jerusalem. If the clergy and laity are to reach every area of human life, then both must be prepared to venture as christians into unfamiliar situations. For the laity this may simply mean intensifying the sense of being an apostle in the ordinary circumstances of daily life. For the priest or nun it means multiplying the number of priests already working in universities, colleges and schools: enlarging the range of roving chaplains to distinct professions like actors, doctors and soldiers. And it seems unavoidable that the day must come when priests and nuns enter trades and professions and exercise secular skills as part of their apostolic mission. This is said in no doctrinaire spirit. The sole criterion should be the needs and the wishes of the people. If the people are reached, and given the word and the body of the Lord, by a priest who engages in traditional kinds of pastoral activity then that is what he should be doing. If other people can only be contacted and evangelized by a priest who farms or works at a factory bench or designs buildings alongside them, then that is what he should be doing. Conditions vary from country to country and even within the same country. The objective must simply be to reach every human being, and no *a priori* restrictions should be imposed which would prevent the Church reaching

certain groups or individuals within society. It is difficult to understand why it should be praiseworthy for a Walter Czisnek to become a lorry-driver in order to be with the Poles transported to the Ural Mountains, but wrong for a priest to become a lorry-driver in order to be among the non-christian hauliers along the M 1.

All depends on how high one sets one's sights. If the mission field is identified with the regular mass-goers and the fringe catholics, it is easy to conclude that a priest who divides his time between his presbytery and door-to-door visiting of parishioners is doing well enough. Once identify it with the whole of human society and it becomes apparent that new and imaginative kinds of apostolate are necessary. This is truer still if the objective is seen as the transformation of human society and not merely running first-aid stations for its casualties. Sometimes the Church seems content to run schools where children will hopefully be inoculated against the evils of society, or hospitals and refuges for the sick, the elderly, orphans, unmarried mothers and other damaged people. But this is only one half of its work. The positive half is to work for radical changes in society which will produce fewer casualties. In short, it must be present in the corridors of power, where it can bring its vision, its faith, hope and charity to the influencing of those critical decisions which form the character of society. This political role is nothing to be ashamed of. If the word is to become incarnate, then the abstract doctrines must be translatable into the realm of practical choices and practical action: for this, representatives of the Church must be capable of sitting alongside the politicians, the businessmen, the social reformers and bring among them a vision of human life which is persuasive and effective. Similarly, if christian communities are to be built up, this can only be done in the thick of life. If it cannot be done from the moated rectory, then the apostles must gather, clergy and laity alike, in the heart of the desolate urban estates and by living cheek by jowl with the dechristianized, bring among them a visible and attractive example of what christian community means. True, it is possible to be present to others by prayer and imaginative sympathy, and to be so is the special vocation of the contemplative and the chronically sick. But the Church is a visible as well as an invisible community, and the ordinary vocation of the christian requires visible presence among those who are to be evangelized.

There are however other kinds of isolationism than the physical. Psychological and emotional isolationism can be just as great an

obstacle to evangelization as physical absence. Returning to Schlesinger's film for the moment – if a priest had appeared upon the scene, what help might have been expected from him, and what help would he in fact have been able to offer? Plainly, just to say that homosexual relationships and fornication are unchristian hardly meets the case. The problem is not how to prevent people doing certain things, but how to cope once they have done them. The answer would seem to lie along the lines of singling out, learning from, and building on the positive elements in relationships and experiences which, taken as a whole, are destructive. For this more is required than a handbook of moral theology. It requires an ability to enter imaginatively into the experience of other people, to understand how they experience their own feelings and behaviour, to appreciate the context of their lives, and the tensions, pressures, attractions which propel them into certain courses of action. This kind of sympathetic and empathetic understanding is a long way removed from the clear-cut strictures and pious nostrums which are the sole armoury of many 'apostles'.

This is not, of course, to advocate that the priest should sign up for an encyclopaedic course in wickedness. But he does need a sound grasp of human psychology, and how people do actually live as opposed to how they ought to live. He requires an avid curiosity about the quirks and oddities of human behaviour, and this cannot be acquired by inhabiting either a physical or a mental ghetto. To understand and help people whose marriages are breaking up, forlorn lovers, alcoholics, drug-takers, truculent youngsters, social crusaders, he must have some knowledge of the world they inhabit, their feelings and the way in which their minds work. His theology, in short, should be a reflection on actual experience. The pedagogical principle 'proceed from the known to the unknown' applies just as much to the pastor among adults and adolescents as it does to the school-teacher among young children.

To acquire such accurate knowledge, he should whenever possible mix with all kinds and conditions of men. He must explore their world, even when it is distasteful and disagreeable. If such direct experience is impossible – though it is difficult to believe that he cannot spend an occasional day with families of different sorts to see how life looks from the inside – then he can pick up a good deal from the stream of novels and films which are currently available to him, as well as the academic studies of psychology and social behaviour. He can also come to understand through such means

what kind of help is needed and how it is to be given. I stress the priest because to the outsider he still represents the nature and mission of the Church in a special way, and because his work of forming lay apostles will stand or fall by the example he gives and his conception of his own mission.

There are also other practical consequences of this line of thought. The more the apostle moves into the market place, the wider his knowledge of the kinds and conditions of men, the more vulnerable he becomes, and the more his received ideas are challenged. To pretend otherwise would be dishonest. He may find that his own faith is put to the test, or become unsure of the grounds of his own beliefs; he may be so overwhelmed by some social problem that he is tempted to narrow his vision and activities and throw in his lot with a particular pressure group or ideological party; he may fall in love. Once he has crept out from the trenches, he is sure to be shot at from all sides.

For some this is a frightening prospect, and anyone with some shreds of humility left is unlikely to sally out boldly, convinced of his own strength. The only confidence he has is that if he goes forward in the name of Christ, the power of Christ will also be his. In fact it may be a salutary discovery to learn the difference between his own natural resources and those of Christ. The apostle cannot hope or wish to be set in some protective aspic on his ordination or vow day. He too must grow in grace and wisdom, and crises are likely to be his growth points. If through them he does not discover his strengths and weaknesses he will have little understanding or remedy to offer the strengths and weaknesses of others. He must first discover himself before he can discover others. He must be troubled, shattered, torn, strained before he becomes another Christ. And, as with a piece of broken pottery, his strongest points may eventually be exactly those at which he has been broken and mended. If he is to follow his Lord he cannot hope to ride smoothly over the bitter waters of pain and suffering and humiliation. And it is not enough for him to be sprinkled with them from the outside like a novice going through the motions of asceticism, but learn to plunge in of his own volition.

For those among whom he works, this true experience of and growth in reality must be suffered. It is common enough to hear people complain of the naïveté and superficiality of the word that is broken to them by the Church's official representatives. It is all too easy to deal in second-hand pieties that do not have the ring

of truth, and to handle as the coin of an easy rhetoric words which are and are meant to be highly explosive. All too easy, when one has no experience of them, to speak of poverty and suffering and love and self-denial and faith in a way that rings hollow and taxes the faith of the listener. Easy to speak in the abstractions of a theological Noddyland without coming to grips with the real experience of ordinary people in their homes, their offices, their factories, their farms and their places of entertainment. Easy, and useless, to bypass the real emotions, agonies, fears, longings, despairs and joys that make up everyday experience. Easy to generalize, as if every man and woman came out of the same mould, instead of appreciating the rich variety of human beings, each individual and unique, who inhabit the earth.

The apostle who has caught fleas from tramps is more likely to speak to them and for them with real effectiveness. The man who has seen his own hopes dashed, fallen under his burden, and risen from failure to walk in new hope, will speak with new conviction to the anguished. The man who has come to terms with his own poverty, and seen the world through the eyes of the poor, alone can speak in their name. The man who has tasted God's forgiveness alone can offer it. And the man who has experienced the deep affection of others, or found at least one person he believes it is worth dying for, alone can speak of God's love with the kind of truth that brings it alive and makes it illuminate all human love.

The fact is that the apostle is not sent out to bear a dry, lifeless gnosis to folk who are already brimming with vitality, but new life to those who feel bewildered and cheated because they cannot find any point to their existence, and feel that there are dead areas in themselves which need some kind of living water to come alive. The apostle is meant to be a lamplighter, not an undertaker suddenly appearing in the doorway at the height of the revels.

What then, when the apostle has pitched his tent among men, listened to them, shared their life, and come to some understanding of them, is his message to be? At risk of misunderstanding, I believe that as with Christ our Lord, his gospel must be first of all himself. Not in the sense of forcefully projecting or advertising himself, talking about himself, or trying to dominate others by force of personality, which would simply be egotism, but by being the kind of person who embodies the gospel. To quote a slogan much used by the Jesus Freaks, people look for a sample not a sermon. It is the apostle's own evident sensitivity to others, respect for them, tranquillity, delight in

living, enthusiasm and joy, unconsciously expressed in his activities, his interests, his behaviour, his judgements, which attract and persuade far better than any theoretical statements about the meaning of life. The teacher soon discovers that children forget everything he has said, but they do not forget the kind of person that he is. The same is true for the apostle. If the people he mixes with come to believe that the apostle possesses some secret which has made sense of his life, they may seriously consider that it is one which could make sense of theirs. The proof is in the pudding, the evidence in the apostle's own personality and attitude to life.

The distinction frequently made by catholics, and true enough where the validity of sacraments is in question between the office and the man, can be a dangerous one. A grey man suggests a grey gospel. If a man has spirit, even if he is chronically sick, his talents few and his work all dull routine, then there is at least the intriguing possibility that the Spirit is within him.

The gospel is about vision and meaning, not rules and regulations. Rules and regulations are simply a technique for achieving some purpose, and anyone can pass them on, as they can pass on the rules of football. But to communicate the vision and meaning, one must first possess the vision, and see the meaning oneself. This I believe is where the work of evangelization repeatedly falls down. Human beings want to make sense of their humanity. The politicians, labour leaders, businessmen, parents, students, communicators, want a vision which will give some point to their activities. And this they do not get. Sometimes, unfortunately, they are left feeling that their activities are simply a snare and delusion, a distraction from the contemplation and making of their souls in which they should be engaged. But the apostle's task is not to pour cold water on the building up of the kingdom in this world. It is to survey every area of human activity, analyse it, and bring to it that illumination which comes only from God's revealing. He does not, or should not, stand outside and above human activity, as one speaking from on high; nor be so immersed in secular concerns that he loses all sense of God's presence and activity. He is to know as much as he can of what the world knows, and yet know what the world does not know. He is to be among men as one full of the spirit of wisdom and understanding; and, through the breaking of the word among men, to lead them to the breaking of bread through which they become a community and ultimately a communion, one with each other and one with the God who is the light of the world.