

# THE WORD FOR THE WORLD

By JOHN SULLIVAN

**I**F WE ARE to become all things to all men so that all can be won for God, this is not a matter of words but of life-style. It is not a case of so tailoring our message that it attracts all and offends none. Being rather than saying has priority; embodiment precedes proclamation. This is the order of incarnation, and, so too, of mission. A far more urgent task than the re-expression or reformulation of doctrine, to make it understandable or credible for modern thinkers, is the need for serious attention to be given to building a life in Christ and sharing that life with others. It is not inappropriate communication that prevents 'the word' getting to the world, but our impoverished christian existence.

The hidden curriculum so powerfully and blatantly contradicts and undermines what is in the syllabus that what we want to say cannot receive a hearing because the would-be recipients are deafened by what we are doing. This applies to life in the family, school and in the Church at large. What impression do we give our children in our attitude to materialism, to the importance of possessions, the place of money in life? How far are the acquisition and distribution of wealth in keeping with christian values? How automatic is the increased banker's order for CAFOD or Christian Aid when we receive a pay rise? What kinds of generosity are experienced overtly or overheard in our homes? 'Character assassination', continual griping about apparent impediments to progress, unwillingness to share, relentless competition with the neighbours — are these features of family life?

In school do we cut individuals down to size when they step out of line? How forgiving are we? How genuine is our concern for truth, even when it appears to offer inconvenient answers to impertinent questions? Are all pupils obviously valued equally, or do some merit far more of our resources of time, expertise and money? Are co-operation and mutual concern promoted or is the order of the day keen competition at all times and virtual hostility? Are all our childrens' talents praised and fostered or only those displaying skills

(primarily cognitive and intellectual) which bring overt credit to the school in our examination-conscious society? How clearly does the school value aesthetic, moral and spiritual sensitivities? To what extent is the school a community? How does it relate to the wider community from which the pupils have come and to which they will return?

Then there is the life-style of our Church. If we are to have a valid word for the world there are prerequisite qualities. To what extent are we a listening Church? Broadcasting that is likely to 'home in' on its intended audience will be better prepared for if the lengthy, careful and serious listening process is going on all the time and at all levels of the Church's activities. Are families consulted before pronouncements are made about the morality or theology of marriage? Are teachers and pupils listened to before statements about the role and responsibilities of schools are drawn up? Are clergy listened to about their own or their parishioners' needs before they are deployed? In my experience some of the man-management exhibited by those in official positions in the Church veers awkwardly between the lucky, the lamentable and the downright atrocious.

Underlying some of the apparent paternalism within the Church, and perhaps the root cause for transmission failure as far as having a word for the world is concerned, we meet fear — rarely naked fear, for it is usually clothed or disguised by an exaggerated emphasis on prudence or consistency. This fear can also be covered up by a certain blind complacency with regard to our having the fulness of answers, even if we have deaf congregations. The appeal to authority to get us out of difficult dilemmas can also be an expression of yearning for a return to former certainties and an avoidance of real responsibility. As a result of fear we find much evidence of manipulation of people in our Church, rather than genuinely open loving treatment. Are we creative or cramping with regard to local initiatives? Are we fearful of diversity, in case it should get 'out of control'? The Holy Spirit has an alarming tendency to ensure that the best laid plans go awry, often leading away from security and transcending our intentions. A truly faithful Church will be prepared to take risks and not always adopt a safety-first policy: it will trust God and his people, rather than in the curia, or the consistent application of universal canon law. A truly faithful Church too will, because it believes in the doctrine of creation and the sacramental principal, thoroughly involve itself in the world, and

fully identify with those in desperate situations, without fearing contamination or loss of purity. *We* may not be in control in messy, dangerous and apparently hopeless situations; then we really have to let go and let God.

Admitting that there are many blurred areas in morality, many aspects of God's ways which are beyond our understanding; that the future is not clearly marked out; that we do not have an authoritative blueprint — all this does not mean that we are relativists, or that we accept no certainties, that we have nothing to rely upon. Rather it illustrates that faith is rough-edged and not smooth, that its role is to carry us into the dark as often as into the light, and that, as Teilhard de Chardin claimed, we are called to be creative collaborators with God, rather than to service a machine already operating so that it can reach a clearly marked destination. If we are to have a word for the world, it will be as fellow-travellers on a journey, exposed to the rigours of the route. We must not seek as if we had already arrived, nor from the safety of any protected harbours.

I have begun by calling into question the quality of our Christian existence, and emphasized the importance of being before saying. At this point it is necessary to mention leadership within the Church. For in seeking to find out what the Church has to proclaim there is a tendency to turn too quickly to leaders, as if theirs was the sole responsibility for articulation of the Church's message. However, if we ask the question: '*who* has a word for the world?' The answer should surely be that we all do, though it will not be the same word from all. I like to think that we are called to be consenting amplifiers of God's voice, which is to be expressed in all the variety of our individual tones. The glory of God is to be magnified in the harmony rather than by co-ordinated singing in unison. If we are all called to embody and proclaim Christianity, some are particularly called to assist as facilitators. These people help things to happen; they are not the only centres where they happen. To keep the musical image, our religious leaders, in some of their capacities at least, will function as conductors of the ecclesial orchestra. Now musicians realize that conductors are a good thing, but they would resent it if we implied that talent was restricted only to the conductors. What, indirectly, I am asking about is the quality of our leadership in the Church. Is it imaginative, animating, inspiring? Is there a real sharing of responsibility? Can we admit errors openly without loss of credibility? In everyday life we know that the admission of error is essential if we are to overcome mistakes and

begin to make amends. Open admission of our Church's sinfulness is essential if we are to be reconciled to those we have wounded. It is God's tune we are called to play and the conductor is as likely as the rest of the orchestra to miss a beat. To admit this does not lead us to abandon our need for the services that leaders offer. It is service that their leadership is about; their task is to bring cohesion into our diverse contributions and ensure that, by their attention to the value of all, the sound is comprehensive, without being over-constrictive for any particular participant.

The underlying acceptance, as gift, of the wonderful variety of individual contributions to God's work, presupposes that we are not aiming for a passive obedience to Church authority for its own sake or as the path to salvation, but that our word for the world will bring about, not dependence, but liberation. The road to theonomous personhood must pass through the byways of freedom and autonomy in human relations. We cannot give ourselves entirely over to God if we do not belong to ourselves. In our pluralist society, with its emphasis on our need to choose all kinds of aspects of our lives, propaganda is no longer enough; education in faith is required. In such an education truth cannot be imposed, nor does it need much protection. Milton pointed out centuries ago that cloistered and fugitive virtues are scarcely praiseworthy, and that the truth is quite capable of surviving and, in fact, of being strengthened, in the cut and thrust of open combat, criticism and debate. Challenge and invitation must be the keynotes of our word for the world. Searching questions, arresting insights, sturdy resolution suffused with joy, gentle companionship — these are some of the features of an integral spirituality that would lead us to have our heads in the clouds, our feet on the floor, our hand in the Lord's, ready to share our disappointments and delights. Such an education in faith would, if it is to serve the word, be simultaneously liberating and life-enhancing. If the word is to witness to faith then it needs to rest upon confidence, a confidence which results from constant experience of affirmation, approval, support, acceptance: in short, of love. A mere propagating of 'the faith' may encourage us to switch our allegiance to a new set of propositions and rubrics, but it fails to alter us radically enough, because it does not give priority to being over saying, or to sharing a new life in Christ over mere intellectual adherence. Furthermore, education in faith, unlike propaganda, does not forget that by fostering true union in the family of the Church we are differentiated as individuals, not com-

pressed into the same mould. Our word for the world must invite us to belong without becoming identical; it will enrich rather than diminish us.

I have stressed the importance of a certain life-style and quality of leadership within the Church which promote the Word that is Christ and which enable us to accept this Word as our way to real life. We can now turn our attention to the notion of levels or dimensions. The problem of communicating faith in an increasingly plural world and from an increasingly plural Church is perhaps alleviated a little when we realize that human beings are naturally plural beings, even as individuals. They have always been faced with the task of deriving some unity out of the diversity of their own nature. As persons we know that we exist simultaneously at several levels or in several dimensions. After all, we have been and continue to be thoroughly physical creatures, never free from the demands and limitations of our bodily nature. We are capable of an aesthetic appreciation which goes beyond finding value in things or people just because they gratify us, but rather is attracted to the appropriateness of forms, shapes, features, in themselves. Through the aesthetic we begin to move away from life as manipulative and crudely utilitarian. At other levels of our being we are conscious of the distinguishing quality of our personal relationships, with all their intricate sensitivities, roles and responsibilities. If personal relations receive sufficient attention, the socializing involved can lead to an appreciation of a moral dimension. The sense of 'ought', duty, and the concepts of right and wrong now enter on to the stage of one's existence and supplant the merely pleasing, the appropriate, the prudential, of other dimensions. Responding to the call of the moral level requires submission to what is beyond the self, even a subordination of the self, not just an accommodation with reality. The use of the outside world diminishes as commitment to its call mounts.

Full indwelling in the moral dimension leads to the raising of fundamental questions. Why be moral? What is real, in the light of which one can see more clearly what one should really do? Why does failure occur? What can help success? We move towards a religious level, with an increasing commitment that is expressed in an active receptivity, waiting and stillness. In the final analysis we find that life is more about receiving than achieving and that what can bind us together into one person has to be accepted as a gift, neither demanded nor deserved.

Talking about life in this way, as being made up of several levels, including others besides those I have already mentioned such as the psychological and the political, seems to fit in with our experience of persons, including ourselves. For we are not transparent or unidimensional, but rather a veiled unity-in-plurality. We express ourselves at different times through all the dimensions, and they are all truly expressions of what we are. Only by taking all together do we show the full person, and even then this seems to elude total clarity or transparency to others. Each level interacts upon the rest so that we are always in a state of development, at best in a temporary, unsteady equilibrium.

Let us attempt to apply this kind of thinking about our lives as inchoate centres seeking unity out of diversity to two areas, to test our approach for its fruitfulness and its relevance to the problem of finding a way of presenting the word for the world. First, let us take one apparently purely secular aspect of human existence — sexuality — and seek the possible relevance of the sacred or spiritual to this sphere of experience. Then, secondly, let us take one apparently specifically 'religious' action — the celebration of the Eucharist, and attempt to relate the spiritual dimensions to other, more basic dimensions that it presupposes.

Clearly, although sexual behaviour may be limited to an imposition or exchange of physical gratification, and will be affected by bodily attraction, health, hygiene and the sexual drive of those who engage in it, nevertheless it is open to the influence of other dimensions of our nature, whose contributions, if we interpret them appropriately, may be said to interpenetrate the merely physical, and thus significantly to alter the various 'meanings' of the activity. One can engage in sexual relations to release tension, as a means of relaxation, with a view to developing 'skill' in this sphere, or as a communication of intimate commitment and personal self-donation and availability — expressing affirmation, confidence, trust, affection and so on. In this personal dimension there are, too, the possibilities of further interpretations of the significance of sexual relations — the expression of approval or forgiveness, the experience of reconciliation, the healing of wounded emotions. At this level we can see that the moral dimension is also present, if merely selfish considerations are to be restricted, and if the interests and happiness of others are to be promoted, and if the whole process is to be undergirded and safeguarded through integrity, fidelity and responsibility. If these features are present it will be obvious that

they have repercussions on our spiritual growth, on the integration of the personality, on the steady transformation and re-creation of our lives — and will give birth to the fruits of the Spirit, if not always to children. Thus from the christian perspective the sexual encounter is pregnant with salvific potential, and God's action on us can be accepted as operating here in sexual partners' treatment of each other.

Thus far we have argued that a sexual relationship can be open to religious interpretation. One can also argue, however, that certain religious beliefs are more conducive than others to an integration of wholeness and holiness in sexuality, as for instance the doctrine of creation, man in the image and likeness of God, the equality of worth of men and women, the God-given need of men and women for one another, the biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply, the Church's teaching on matrimony as a sacrament administered by the partners upon and for one another throughout their married life. These too have repercussions upon and implications for the moral, personal and other dimensions of sexuality. Our word for the world here would have to bring out the multi-dimensional character of sexuality and aim for an enhancement and fuller expression of the significance and value of sexual relations.

Much more briefly we can claim that the dimensional model of reality suggested earlier contributes helpfully to our understanding of the religious activity of the Eucharist, which also presupposes, and partly depends upon, and transcends, our less obviously religious dimensions and experiences. If we have not developed personal relationships of depth and quality, if we have not participated in and enjoyed the benefits and borne the burdens and responsibilities of community life, if we have no appreciation of symbolism and affect-laden imagery and gesture, then our individual identification with the person of Christ, our readiness to develop a close relationship with him, our incorporation into the Body of Christ — the community of believers — our openness to the transforming possibilities of indwelling the Eucharistic 'particulars' and of hearing the message of the Gospel, and so on, will be severely diminished. The soil of our daily human existence will not be of such a grade as to nourish the divine seed implanted in us. This is not to restrict God's action entirely to what is made possible by human preparation, for the efficacy of God's word can bring about radical changes in us at the various levels of our living; but it is to point out the need for some corresponding development on our side if we are to

appreciate more fully the many dimensions of the eucharistic mystery. Finding a word for the world here then would mean seeking to provide experiences that are conducive to satisfactory participation in the celebration of the Eucharist, and secondly, relating the spiritual heart and doctrinal summary of supernatural action to our personal, social and natural elements, in order to bring out the implications of the (sacred) Eucharist for (secular) living.

What I hope to have hinted at indirectly through this focusing on the dimensional nature of our lives is that although there are fresh features in our present pluralist situation, the experience of pluralism itself is part and parcel of our existence as humans anyway, and we should not exaggerate the novelty of our current dilemmas, nor their apparent complexity. Mothers and fathers have always had to be all things to all their children; teachers have had for a long time to be all things to their pupils; the Church has always had to be all things to all men since its very inauguration. (I do not suggest that any of these agencies have been notably more successful in the past than today). Drawing unity out of diversity is the common lot of all of us, whenever and wherever we live. We have been doing it, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, ever since we can remember, and even before that. And so it must be possible. Fear, over-anxiety and lack of confidence are the great barriers, the major enemies to be overcome. We must not let our honest reappraisal of our pluralist situation so inhibit us that we freeze through lack of faith. Perhaps in the apparent cacophony of the voices of the world God is telling us to let go a little, to control others less, to allow him to fertilize our world and to excite our lives. Perhaps the clamour around us will nudge us into silence long enough to hear his whispers; in our disorientation we may find again our true centre.

Much of what I have written here lacks philosophical and theological precision. Yet the danger of a theology which has become estranged from christian life is all too clear: it restricts itself to an increasingly narrow audience the more technical and specialized it is. I have written as a layman, moved by a concern for promoting a catholic reflection on human experience, believing that where we are, God is present, and therefore that somehow such a reflection cannot all be out of harmony with his word for the world.