

# MINISTRY TO THE 'UNCHURCHED'

By MICHAEL PAUL GALLAGHER

IT SEEMS right to allow a personal note to hold together the reflections offered in these pages. Although I have been a priest for only twelve years, it will soon be twenty years since I began teaching literature at university in Dublin. And as the Marxists insist 'context conditions consciousness' I would be the first to admit that the university world is not representative, but it still presents a keen faith-watcher like myself with some special vantage points. Students are articulate about what their contemporaries may well experience but may lack the opportunity to explore or express. In some ways students can be an advance warning system of the future in any culture: not only are they the most likely leaders of that future, but they are already—or should be—its most alert perceivers. So I make no apology for rooting this article in the exciting experience of listening to students and graduates over the years.

Are they 'unchurched'? I find it wiser to assume that they are, unless they inform me to the contrary. Perhaps fifteen years ago my assumptions would have been different. Growing up with an exceptionally strong family fidelity to catholic practices in Ireland, most students would have been believing and practising and largely serene in their adherence. But things have changed. According to the surveys, up to a quarter would now describe themselves as 'ex-Catholics' or decisively alienated from the Church. But many more would be unchurched in a less total fashion: they would practise irregularly or else practise with a pervasive sense of disappointment, undernourishment or uneasy half-belonging. Of course, impressive numbers of students are now active in the shaping of new languages of the Church; these may be 'unchurched' from the more legalistic and passive ways of a previous generation (which includes the religion most familiar to many of their parents and many of their pastors), but they are 're-churching' themselves in lively forms of community, prayerfulness, and social awareness. And it should be added that a certain proportion of the

younger generation seem to follow smoothly and unquestioningly in the footsteps of their parents—far from any version of being 'unchurched'.

Even already we have stumbled on at least two possible interpretations of 'unchurched'. One can take it to mean a complete loss of contact with any form of church life. More widely, one can see it as including those infrequent in their practice and likewise those whose practice is retained as an inherited custom. In either case Church-belonging seems to have lost its fruitfulness in bringing people to God through Jesus Christ. After all the Church is only a means to that end. Therefore, no matter what kind of unchurched one has in mind, the aim is never simply to 'get them back to the Church' (as that approach is often understood). As Karl Rahner liked to insist in his later essays, for an older catholic culture (one that shaped the lives of anyone over forty) the Church itself was the 'invincible motive' and 'obvious way of access of christian faith'; but this 'faith in the Church' has generally receded to 'a relatively secondary place' in the normal genesis of faith today.<sup>1</sup> If one agrees, as I do, with this diagnosis, then it is vital to state it from the outset. There is a sense in which the Church since Vatican II has unchurched itself—in its healthy diminishing of authoritarian ways, in its search for liturgical and pastoral relevance, in its entry into the struggles of humanity today, and in its willingness to foster self-critique. All of us are unchurched in this sense of having been invited to move into a new ecclesial language. In short, a key question will be: which Church? From which Church are people unchurched? And towards which Church is any ministry to the unchurched directed?

It is time to be concrete. From time to time I find myself invited to perform a wedding ceremony for one of my ex-students, and more often than not at least one of the partners would be 'unchurched'. In the case of Susan and Tim (fictitious names, true situation) both of them had been out of contact with any church practice since their late teens and they were now in their mid-twenties. While discussing various aspects of the ceremony, it became clear that neither wished to receive communion, both because they had been 'away' for years and because they felt a mixture of unsureness about whether they believed in the eucharist and of unworthiness before a sacrament which they looked upon as too important to be approached dishonestly. Almost as if talking to myself I happened to remark that it might be much simpler if

we had no mass. Immediately they were interested in this option which they had not known. After some reluctance on my part, this was the form agreed upon, and it proved to be an excellent decision. They felt free of the awkwardness of a ritual that aroused memories of boredom and pain, and more seriously, would leave them feeling hypocritical, kneeling there very shaky in their faith. Once it was decided not to have mass, they entered into the preparing of the marriage ceremony with much more enthusiasm and indeed reverence. Why, being so unchurched, did they want a church marriage at all? How could one sacrament seem 'dishonest' and another sacrament 'honest'? Both questions might be answered from *King Lear*: 'ripeness is all'.

Susan and Tim insisted that they were not seeking a church wedding to satisfy a merely social convention of the 'done thing' or the 'nicer setting'. They claimed to have a sense of the sacred, to be religious in their own way and so they desired the blessing of God and were more than happy to pray aloud together as part of the ceremony. They were ripe for a marriage sacrament (where after all they are the ministers), but almost like catechumens of old, their faith situation did not allow them to be ready for the eucharist. And therein lurks an insight of wider application than Susan and Tim alone: many of the unchurched are far from negative about basic faith in God. Although they may be unsure of Christ and find church forms unpalatable, they are like those Athenians that St Paul addressed on the Areopagus, when the object of his ministry was to put a face on their known-unknown God. The baptized but unchurched person today is in a similar pre-christian situation—with the complication that their fragility of belief is more connected with christian rituals, dimly remembered, than with statues on the hill. Pastorally it is quite understandable that one sacrament may aid the long catechumenate of their lives more than another. The marriage celebration for Tim and Susan was indeed an occasion of spiritual depth for the couple and for many present. They had chosen the readings with care. They entered into *their* sacrament as into a garment that fitted them. My homily tried to be an evocation of honesty and of hope: their very promises were sacraments of faith and hope and love, inviting us to be honest about the other struggle to believe and hopeful about the mustard seed that expands into a sheltering tree. And strange though it seem, the absence of mass gave me also more freedom to shape a fitting celebration.

The moral of that tale would seem to be that sacraments were made for mankind, not mankind for the sacraments. To cite Rahner again, we are still emerging from 'a period of sacramental enthusiasm' which tended to think of grace as conveyed too exclusively through sacramental worship; but 'experience of the Spirit' is wider and more varied than the sacramental life.<sup>2</sup> In dealing with the unchurched the faith-helper needs to keep that horizon in mind. His primary service will be to offer to people inevitably shy of religious language some chance to voice the important values they try to live by, and to have their goodness recognized (like Nathanael's figtree). But perhaps the strongest gospel foundation for slowness in bringing people to the eucharist lies in the great Emmaus story, where the recognition of Christ in the breaking of bread came as the last minute crown of a journey of slow learners. The two disciples were unchurched in the sense that they were leaving the community behind. The whole episode, from our point of view, can be seen as falling into five acts. First comes the befriending of these unbelievers by the Risen Lord, in that he walks alongside them, opening a dialogue with them. Next there is his willingness to listen to their version of his own story, to hear out their disappointment ('what things?'). Only then are they ripe to appreciate the fuller plan of God (opening the scriptures). After this evangelization comes a moment of choice, when they are given the chance of not continuing their relationship on the road: it is their invitation ('stay with us') that leads from heart-listening into the sacrament at the table. One might add that this five-part drama has an epilogue of being sent back to the nascent Jerusalem Church as witnesses of the resurrection.

Read in this way that famous lucan episode can be seen as a precursor of the recently rediscovered stages of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Its four stages of pre-catechumenate, catechumenate, illumination and mystagogia would seem to have much to suggest for any ministry to the unchurched. Stage one of the RCIA involves a slow listening to the searchings of others—their questions, struggles, angers over religion and yet the hidden treasures of their own life-stories; this healing hearing can lead—often over months—to the threshold of hope which is the typical fruit of this first stage. Stage two begins only when a certain openness has been reached and it moves into an initial catechesis; just as Jesus on the road moved from their pained confusions to the prophets as casting light on their (and his) experience. With

the unchurched, once they have been welcomed and genuinely heard as in the first stage, this second phase can require a patient clarifying of their often false images of God and of Church. Without getting sidetracked into needless detail or argument, it should focus on the basic realization that our God is one who has said yes to us in Christ ('he loved us and sent his Son to free us from our sins' 1 Jn 4,10). If someone distant from Church or faith can even begin to glimpse this personally, they are beginning to arrive at a threshold of new faith.

Perhaps these two stages are all that can realistically be envisaged in most ministry with the unchurched. It is worth adding that in the RCIA model this journey of exploration would be communitarian rather than one-to-one and it would happily last several months to come to this preliminary decision for faith. In view of my earlier remarks on not rushing into sacraments, it is significant that the two remaining stages involve initiation into the key sacraments and into the life of the Spirit in the Church. Stage three enters into the cost of discipleship and sees baptism as *the* sharing with Christ in his death and resurrection. Thus it invites the catechumen forward through a careful evangelization to the threshold of a new love commitment. Similarly it was a long process that led the Emmaus travellers to the table. Stage four fills out the life of the newly baptized (or newly committed even if long baptized): faced with the injustices and idolatries of what is normal for 'the world', it experiences the need to belong to a community of critique and of compassion, rooted in the Spirit and courageous in active service. What is at stake here is nothing less than a new language of self-expression for the Church, one that might slowly rescue us from our complacent conventions and do justice to the hunger of many generous searchers of today.

By outlining the four RCIA stages (in my own words) I have strayed from our central topic. But perhaps the straying is significant. It underlines again the lateness of the sacraments and of a full belonging to the Church in this pastoral theology. To put it negatively, there is a temptation when confronted with the typical unchurched person, to opt for short-cuts of sacramentalizing at all costs. From my own experience, as well as from the wider wisdom of the RCIA, I fear that if the preparatory efforts of slow listening and suitable evangelizing are skimped, the outcome could be a token and short-lived conformism rather than any genuine step to conversion.

To return to our marriage example, I would hope that the preparation and the event itself would indeed prove a step to conversion. At the very least it left the door more open than closed. It healed some of their more immature judgments on the Church of their childhood and adolescence. It introduced them to scripture in a new way. If they still remain unchurched in the areas of clear personal faith in Christ and in being unable to find in Sunday Mass an authentic vehicle of their religiousness, this simply means that they are half way through the Emmaus story as re-written in their lives. Any ministry to the unchurched needs to take the long-term view and hope accordingly.

But of course there are other versions of being unchurched and other variations on ministry in this area. I would like to pause on three different examples of readiness and of response. Case one: what can one offer when someone like David asks the question, 'What am I to believe?' This broaches a level of inquiry of little interest yet to Susan and Tim. David had not been to communion for nearly ten years but on the occasion of his marriage decided to 'sort himself out' and was happy to invest some time in the business of renewing a dormant childhood faith that he had never denied outright. Case two: Margaret is a more vehemently anti-Church feminist, whose anger leads her to call herself agnostic. Again the advent of a church wedding to a seriously believing partner makes her willing to re-examine her own religious position. Case three: James is a generously committed socialist who used to be very religious in adolescence, but his political disenchantment with institutional religion has entailed non-practice for years now and he has real doubts about the kind of God most church people seem to believe. Influenced by his more religious girl-friend, he is now asking questions about what faith and Church could mean for someone of his social vision.

Three such varied examples only serve to emphasize the many faces of the unchurched and the diversity of ministry required. David needs basic evangelization and is open to it. It is here that I have learned, somewhat to my own surprise, that the evangelists had something to teach me. Faced with a David situation, one needs some plan of response, some programme of points to cover. Culling material from various evangelistic groups, I discovered a set of four steps that can be useful. Let me remark in advance that although the language may be quite different, I think this strategy has something in common with the developmental logic

of the ignatian Exercises (as well as echoing the process of Emmaus and the RCIA). The four steps of some evangelists can be phrased as follows: 1) God has a plan for your happiness; 2) you are cut off from God's plan through sin; 3) you can only return to God by recognizing Jesus as your personal saviour; 4) conversion to Jesus will mean living a new life. No more than the Spiritual Exercises, these sentences are not intended to be given to the unchurched person 'neat'; rather they need sensitive translation into the language of each situation and life. In David's case I spent some time trying to find out which God he believed in (a fairly deist and distant figure) and whether that God seemed to be his enemy or his friend (he was a spy with a telescope). So we had to establish the image of a loving God, starting very much from the hopes of David for happiness in his marriage. Moving on, I avoided the term 'sin' on the grounds that he would be allergic to it; instead we spoke of the areas of life that one would like to have been different and the conversation became a very genuine and honest facing of shadows, hurts, destructiveness, things out of tune. From that it became a natural transition to talk about Jesus and to look at some of the healing and forgiving scenes—the first time David had ever perused the gospel text. And finally, after some prayer, it was only right to look ahead to the values David would hope to opt for in his new married life. This is the summary of a long and enjoyable evening of ministry to David, and for me at least it proved the need for some such plan of faith-counselling. Faced with someone out of contact with the Church, mere jollity and mere exhortation are of little avail: the unchurched need to be taken seriously and when they are open, as in David's case, to some basic evangelization, the counsellor needs some map of his hopes.

None of this would be of immediate relevance to Margaret. If the various forms of unbelief can be divided psychologically into the thesis of the three A's: alienation, anger and apathy,<sup>3</sup> Margaret would belong within the second family. Her blockages over religion would be much more emotional than intellectual and need to be accepted as such—which is not to dismiss them as irrational or unfounded. Her difficulties will not be met even by the best of arguments; they can only be responded to by creating a contrary experience through some opportunity of being listened to and having a chance to explore the roots of her discontent. Whereas David had finished his schooling at sixteen, Margaret was a highly

educated young woman. I found it useful to offer her a 'contract', that is to say, an opportunity to accept or reject a particular form of talking through her situation. I explained to her the outline of James Fowler's 'faith development interview'<sup>4</sup> and after a day or two to think about it, she said that she would welcome it. This meant that we were both going through a structured conversation and the very professional nature of it helped to exorcise her anger and to start from a calm and less hostile mood than might otherwise have been the case. In fact Margaret made some surprising discoveries about her faith-story and about the roots of her anger much further back in a family situation. Even if this use of the Fowler set of questions had not led to such an outcome, it would have been of great help to clear the air. Once again this was an example of ministry to the unchurched that needed certain tools, some flexibility in their handling, and a generous contract of time on both sides.

No such tool would help with James. He is searching for a new experience of Church. It might prove important, as always, to listen to his unique experience and to encourage him to express his conscience over injustice; it would help him to clarify his images of God or to learn about newer liberation approaches in theology; but his deepest need is to discover as alert a social commitment among groups of believers as he finds among his political friends. Where can he experience a living community of Christians? No amount of faith-counselling will meet his hopes and hungers, and the very existence of James challenges the more settled languages of religion in a most healthy way. If many of the usual church goings-on offer little to attract him (and indeed much to alienate him further), there is a possible answer from the many smaller communities of service and of searching (Young Christian Workers, Focolare, L'Arche, Pax Christi etc). Trying to meet his needs brings into sharp focus the inadequacy of an older apologetics that placed a high value on the intellectual aspects. Because we have moved from a culture of obedience and of rationality (of a sort) into a culture of experience and of the search for community, merely giving James the social encyclicals to read would not meet his insistence on seeing these ideals in action. I must confess that it is James who leaves me with most unanswered questions about ministry in this area; I am at a loss to see how his needs can be met through any of the ordinary church structures at the moment. But of two things I am sure: his challenge asks



the Church to become what she claims to be, and James is not, in the Lord's words, far from the kingdom.

By way of summary of our three examples, one might say that they each raise important but different questions. With David it was a matter of *which God*? With Margaret what had to be faced was *which self*? In other words, out of what level of herself was her anger coming? And with James the crucial issue concerns *which Church*? I have found that these represent three of the basic issues in ministry to those alienated from the Church. But behind the different angles of questioning, certain traits seem to unite most of the unchurched. Inevitably they will tend to think of the Church along obediential and legalistic lines: the 'Church' makes the laws (primarily about Sunday practice and sexual morality) and the 'good Catholic' is meant to obey. This stereotype is still amazingly common even in younger age-groups—and well beyond the confines of Ireland. If they are to have any worthwhile change of attitude in this respect, it is likely to come from having a good experience of a 'church person' (priest, religious, catechist etc.) and hence there is nothing more likely to confirm them in their distanced state than a cold reception or a disapproving tone about their situation. As George Eliot said of the Reverend Casaubon, 'there is hardly any contact more depressing' to a young person than to meet 'a blank absence of interest or sympathy'.<sup>5</sup> The reverse of this all too possible scenario comes when the unchurched find themselves welcomed as they are. As in the headline of the Emmaus story, only when the experience is right can the message be received or understood.

Underlying this whole article is an assumption that needs to be made explicit: there are many ways of belonging to the Church. Just as Jesus stressed mercy and not sacrifices, attitudes rather than rituals, there are more ways of being a Catholic than going to mass on Sunday. Perhaps we should say that more bluntly to the unchurched—not to diminish the importance of worship, not even to deny the importance of the 'obligation' for those who have faith, but to put first things first. The parable of the last judgment will not quiz the unchurched about their non-practice; they will be judged on the generosity of their lives. Indeed it is a joyful moment in any ministry to the unchurched to surprise them by praise, by a genuine acknowledgment of the goodness that is within them and in their actions. Such a recognition coming from a Church person should never be mere strategy; it is a human truth,

spoken in friendship, and yet rooted in the trust that God's Spirit can be alive and active in people who have not yet come to fullness of christian faith or belonging. Just as in the celebrated episode of St Peter at Joppa (Acts 10), the Spirit today can be at work in many who seem to have lost their bearings in the Church. Not only has the Church something precious to offer to these victims of our cultural crisis; they too can awaken us to the fullness of faith needed today and to the reality that 'the Church is also outside the Church'.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rahner, Karl: *Theological investigations*, vol xx, 1981, p 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol xix, 1984, p 136.

<sup>3</sup> This is dealt with in chapter 5 of my own book *Help my unbelief*, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> The interview format will be found in Appendix A of Fowler, James: *Stages of faith*, 1981, pp 310-312.

<sup>5</sup> Eliot, George: *Middlemarch*, ch 20.

<sup>6</sup> Sölle, Dorothee: *The Truth is concrete*, 1969, p 107.