

ON BEING AN ADULT IN TODAY'S CHURCH

By GERARD W. HUGHES

JESUS SAID, 'Unless you become as little children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven', so one essential characteristic of adults in the Church is that they should be like little children!

If you feel uneasy at this opening sentence, I share your unease, for the Church, as we experience it in Britain today, is still too paternalistic, a 'Father Church' rather than the 'Mother Church' of which liturgy speaks, very protective of his little ones, ensuring they are provided with a good catholic education and reserving a large part of his slender income for this purpose. Father does quite well with his infants, but cannot cope with his stropky adolescent sons and daughters and is no longer on speaking terms with many of his grown-up children. He is desperately anxious to have them back and is pained and baffled by their refusal to return. He is convinced, however, that the home must be kept in order and the rules of the family, which he lays down, must be observed, lest the little ones and those grown-up members who are still at home and have remained little ones, whom he fondly refers to as 'the simple faithful', should be scandalized.

David, who was three years old at the time, handed me a book, pointed to a story and asked me to read it to him at bedtime. It was a long story including, as I thought, ideas and words too complex for an infant, so I omitted the occasional sentence and simplified some words. Every slightest deviation from the text was corrected by the illiterate David lying back on his pillow. When I reached 'happily ever after', he was quite huffy and critical of my performance.

Infants are naturally conservative and lovers of set ritual, rarely tiring of doing and saying the same thing again and again. They take great delight in long words, in nonsensical rhymes, loving the sounds, but not yet interested in the meaning. Perhaps the reason is that familiar sounds, sights and gestures answer a deep need, the need to feel safe, secure and protected. Infants are still recovering from the traumatic experience of birth when they were expelled

from the warmth and security of the womb into a completely new world of sights, sounds and pains from which they are no longer so protected, therefore they cling to whatever gives security, whether it be mother, father, a rag doll or, like Linus, a piece of blanket. The process of growing up is a learning not to cling, a gradual letting go of those securities which, if I continue to cling to them, stifle my life.

The growing process can be pictured in a series of concentric circles, beginning with the first circle, life in the womb. After a nine-month period we are ready to emerge into the next circle of home, where we need another incubation period of care, protection and affection to build up strength to face the wider circle of life at school and in the immediate neighbourhood. Readers can describe these circles for themselves—home, locality, job, perhaps university, county, country, nationality, religious affiliation, ideology etc., and each stage of growth requires a shorter or longer period of incubation before we are ready and strong enough to move into a wider circle of life and experience.

It is not wrong to cling to our securities: self preservation is our most basic and strongest instinct and without it we should perish at birth. We need to cling to our securities in order to build up our inner strength to face the next circle of life and experience. The danger is that we become so attached to the security provided in any one circle that we dare not proceed any further. We can become like fat caterpillars safely clinging to our cabbage leaf. We see our caterpillar friends behaving oddly and beginning to disintegrate. We resolve to keep our many feet firmly on the cabbage leaf and begin to develop a hard carapace to ensure that nothing odd happens to us. We die without knowing our real identity, our freedom and our glory.

As human beings, what is our real identity, our freedom and our glory? The pagan poet Terence, who lived before Christ, was groping for an answer when he wrote '*Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto*', 'I am a human being: I consider nothing that is human to be foreign to me'. Terence, if his poetry was a self-expression, had reached adulthood, was no longer parochial, narrowly nationalist, racist, sexist, militarist. The sky was the roof of his home and the earth his hearth: he was at home in creation.

St Paul reveals the answer for which Terence was searching. 'Life to me, of course, is Christ, but then death would bring me something more' (Phil 1,21). 'In him (Christ) were created all

things in heaven and on earth—all things were created through him and for him—because God wanted all perfection to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, when he made peace by his death on the cross' (Col 1). 'You must live your whole life according to the Christ you have received—Jesus the Lord; you must be rooted in him and built on him—make sure that no one traps you and deprives you of your freedom by some secondhand, empty, rational philosophy based on the principles of this world instead of on Christ' (Col 2, 6-8). Our true identity is in Christ with the Father, in whom all creation has its being. Our glory is in having the strength 'to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth, until knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, we are filled with the utter fulness of God—whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can think or imagine' (Eph 3). Becoming an adult in the Church is to learn to be at home, not just within my own family, circle, region, country, nation, or within my own stereotypes, but to be at home in God, who is in all things. Christian teaching about the need for detachment is teaching about being adult in the Church and in the world, is about being at home and free in both, so that we can find our true identity, to be at one with Christ.

We cannot be at home in the Church and in the world unless we feel safe and secure in them, for both Church and world are very frightening. Our ability to let go our familiar securities and grow into ever-widening circles of life depends upon our ability to trust. That is why a childlike trust in the all-pervading goodness and protection of God is essential if we are to become adult in the Church and in society. If we trust in God's loving care in all things and in all circumstances, then we can afford to explore life, take risks. Being liberated from fear, we have no need to be constantly defensive and no desire to live our lives within the confines of a narrow cocoon, whether it be of our own or of someone else's making.

It is childlike trust which enables us to become adult. Being intelligent and academically well qualified does not necessarily save us from remaining infantile. In fact, intellectual gifts may enable us to build a narrower and tougher cocoon around ourselves than a less intelligent person could construct, for intelligent people can argue more convincingly in favour of their prejudices, hiding their

timidity behind awesome phrases about standing by their principles and having the courage of their convictions, quoting selectively from the writings of the famous in support of their position, disguising their cowardice with the name of prudence and claiming their inability to say or do anything authentic to be evidence of their humility and obedience. Illiterate, uneducated, simple people, who have faith in God present in all things, can be very adult members of the Church and of society, because they move through the complexity and pain of life with a peace and serenity which no one can take from them, are interested in all they encounter, are not at all ashamed of their poverty or ignorance but are always open and ready to learn.

Our growth through infancy to adulthood may be compared to a mountain climb. Adulthood does not represent the summit, but rather the final stage of the climb, which may be much steeper, more arduous and dangerous than anything we encountered in earlier stages. On the lower slopes, in infancy and adolescence, we need to be given precise instruction and sometimes have to be carried, supported with rails and ladders. In the adult stage of the climb we become responsible for our own route and direction. It would be very odd behaviour in climbers who had reached the adult stage if they were continually grumbling that instructors are still shouting precise instructions to the infants and adolescents on the lower slopes. When we complain about paternalism and clericalism in the Church, it can be a sign of our own failure to reach adulthood. More justified are the complaints of those adults who find that their guides will not allow them to begin the adult stage of their climb, but insist on still treating them as though they were infants. Such complaints are widespread and suggest that the guides themselves may never have experienced the adult stage, do not know how to proceed there, and prefer to keep all climbers on the lower slopes, securely roped and limited to familiar, well-trod routes, assuring any who deviate from their instructions that they will certainly fall to their death.

A current indication of the Church's failure to reach adulthood is the present Fleet Street newspapers' reaction to the Bishop of Durham's habit of emphasizing neglected aspects of christian doctrine by his use of startling phrases, 'the Resurrection is not a conjuring trick with old bones' etc., causing indignation and anger in a nation not normally interested in theology, and causing still fiercer anger when he dares to apply christian teaching to some of

the political and social structures in which we choose to live. The public reaction to Bishop Jenkins is like the three-year old David's reaction to my abridged and amended account of his favourite fairy story. The meaning of these doctrines is of no great interest: what is essential is that they should sound right.

Christian doctrine is given to us as a light for our darkness. A child, terrified of the dark and with no intention of exploring it, may become very attached to a particular torch, its taste, texture, shape, and will enjoy turning it on and off in a well-lit room. The child may become so attached to the torch that it becomes his constant companion, an attachment which may continue even when the torch is broken beyond repair. It has become a symbol of security for the child. If anyone should try to take it away, or substitute another, there will be hell to pay and the evil-doer will be delated to mother or father.

In the Church we can be like this fretful child in our attitude to doctrine, no longer using it to shed light on the darkness of our world, but cherishing its textual form as though it were a good in itself, creating a rumpus if anyone should question the form in which we learned the doctrine as children and reporting to ecclesiastical authorities anyone who seems to tamper with it. We may also find an additional security in the doctrine in that we hold it, while most people do not. This attitude can masquerade as orthodoxy: in fact it is infantilism, a cocooning of our minds against the risk of uncertainty.

Our church vocabulary reflects this childish attitude. We talk of 'the deposit of faith' as though it were an object best kept in a bank vault, so we speak of 'preserving the faith', 'defending the faith'. In popular understanding, faith comes to mean asserting as true a series of propositions which, being mysteries, are beyond our understanding and therefore best left alone. Such an understanding of faith can become an effectively narrow cocoon protecting us from truth, a Christless attitude which may have nothing to do with a love relationship with the Lord of all creation.

The most serious indication of our failure to be adult in the Church can be seen in our misunderstanding and misuse of authority. The latin root of the word 'obedience' is *obaudire*, which means 'to listen to attentively'. The object of our listening is God. The latin root of the word 'authority' is *augeo* meaning 'I increase, I grow'. The function of authority in the Church is to help us to grow, to become adult, so that we may become more perceptive

and responsive to the mysterious action of God in every detail of our lives, and the action of God is unique to each individual. Any exercise of authority in the Church which is so rigid that it undermines peoples' confidence in their own experience, making them afraid to listen to the promptings of the Spirit within their own hearts, is a serious misuse of authority alienating people from their inner selves and so cutting them off from the Spirit of God at work in their spirit. There can be no greater danger than this in the Church, because misunderstanding and misuse of authority can lead us into idolatry, the substitution of a creature for the Creator.

One indication of infantilism in those in authority is their rigidity. Because they are afraid and cannot face their own darkness and weakness, they become very intolerant of those weaknesses in their subjects and so punish them severely. Children learn through their mistakes and wise parents are tolerant. If a child learning to walk is scolded every time it falls, the child will never learn to walk. If, in the Church, the adult laity, deprived of responsibility, are suddenly given it, they are bound to make many mistakes at first. Adult authority will be able to bear this chaos and uncertainty and will trust people's learning ability. Infants in authority are tyrants, and cannot endure any deviation from what is familiar to them.

Immaturity, both in the exercise of authority and in unquestioning subjection to it, is widespread in the Church in my experience. Recently I wrote an article for Pax Christi's periodical *Justpeace*, in which I expressed my interest in working on spirituality with lay people who are active in peace and justice work. I have had many replies welcoming this initiative, but adding that little or no encouragement is given to active peace work in the local parish and that it is unlikely that a peace group would be allowed to use the local parish for a retreat on peace spirituality! Why this nervousness about the peace issue? The Catholic Church is easily roused to action on matters of sexual morality while remaining apathetic on wider issues, e.g. human rights, violence, nuclear war, in spite of excellent social encyclicals of recent popes. It is good that the Church does speak on the abortion issue, but strange that the underlying principle, namely the sacredness of human life, is not so vigorously applied to life outside the womb. Could it be that this preoccupation with contraception and abortion, an obsession with the womb, is reflecting the truth that we are still in

our infancy and have not yet broken through to adolescence and adulthood?

One group of people who suffer today from the immaturity of the Church are those men and women who marry across the religious denominations. God brings them together in love, but his priests and ministers usually become very nervous at this divine action and so they, sometimes together with the families of such a couple, try to persuade them to avoid taking such a risk. Fortunately, many couples persist. In loving one another, they are doing God's will, and when they marry they live out an ecumenism which, the Catholic Church says, should be a priority in all our ministry. The clergy, however, become very nervous when the couple want to attend one another's services, to bring up their children to be familiar with both Churches, to celebrate the baptism of their children into Christ's Church in a joint service for both denominations, to receive the Eucharist together in both Churches. Immature exercise of authority will always try to make things as difficult as possible for such couples, and they may be brow-beaten with what is presented as theological argument in which they feel lost and incompetent. Because the couple's own understanding of authority is probably also immature, therefore they feel confused, hurt and scandalized. In a more adult Church, such couples would be encouraged to live in unity across their denominations, assured that such harmony is God's will for them and that their experience is of value to the Church. Similarly, too, the divorced and separated should be listened to carefully, for they have much to teach the Church about marriage, its nature, how to prepare for it etc., rather than be treated as though they were delinquent children who can only cause mischief in the Church.

Today there is such nervousness in church authorities over those Christians who, while believing in law and committed to its observance, have a more adult understanding of the meaning and purpose of law than their pastors, and therefore feel bound in conscience deliberately to break those laws of the land which are unjust. To insist that all the laws of the land are sacrosanct is infantile, idolatrous and highly dangerous. To have damaged the gas chambers in which Jews were to be murdered in Nazi Germany would have been considered a criminal offence at the time; today we would look on such an offence as heroism. To chain oneself to the Ministry of Defence buildings, or to cut the barbed wire at Greenham or Molesworth is to break the law of the land, yet

Greenham at present, and Molesworth shortly, contain flying ovens for the incineration of unknown citizens and we, as a nation, do not have control over their use. The Church must uphold law and order and her members are bound to render to Caesar what is Caesar's. But the Church must be equally clear about rendering to God what is God's, otherwise she is colluding in idolatry.

I hope these examples of immaturity in the Church have not depressed the reader! Restlessness and opposition to domineering parents, however well intentioned the parents may be, is a sign of healthy growth in adolescents. It is only when we begin to grow up that we also begin to recognize our own immaturity, so the examples given of immaturity in the Church are also examples of growth. If the process of growth is to continue, what is most needed?

I think that the first requirement is that more responsibility should be given to the laity. Any one person's experience is very limited, but I have met many other people who share my experience, especially through individual retreat-giving, that there is a wealth of wisdom and spiritual experience among the laity in the Church, but no effective means of communicating it. A few years ago there was a National Pastoral Congress held in Liverpool, and attended by two thousand lay delegates from England and Wales. The Congress showed that the catholic family is very alive, healthy and kicking responsibly, but the parents got cold feet, muffled the laity reports in their response 'The Easter People' and the most committed members of the Church became the most disheartened. The bishops and clergy must be more adult in their exercise of authority, showing more trust in the action of the Holy Spirit, bond of our unity, and less in regulations.

The second requirement is prayer, because it is in prayer principally, although not exclusively, that we come to know, with an inner knowing, the love of God operating in every detail of our lives and in every particle of creation. It is in the strength of this inner knowing that we can dare to break through the barriers of selfish self-preservation. If we do not break through our fear barriers, for example, currently projected onto the Soviet Union, our barriers, expressed in nuclear arms, will destroy the world, sacrament of God's presence. Help in prayer and spiritual guidance is the most urgent need in the Church today. Without it we shall remain infantile and dangerous.