

RECALL TO THE SCRIPTURES

By JOHN BLIGH

ALTHOUGH the Catholic population grows larger, the number of recruits to religious orders and congregations grows smaller. Bishops and religious superiors watch with regret the contraction of religious families and of their activities. How far this regret is shared by the laity, is not altogether clear. In recent years, laymen have been encouraged to think more and more highly of their own role in the Church; and it is widely recognised that the opportunities for apostolic activity open to laymen are now often greater than those open to priests and religious. Inevitably the role of religious has, by comparison, been less highly esteemed. For in a structured society it is impossible to enhance the status of one group without affecting the status of the other component groups. (An obvious example: Vatican I enhanced the position of the pope to the detriment of the bishops; Vatican II has enhanced the position of the bishops – which cannot but affect the relative status of the papacy). Religious themselves have undoubtedly been affected by the enhancement of the status and opportunities of laymen. Some religious who have sought and obtained dispensation from their vows have done so on the plea that they expected to do more good in the world as laymen. And among those who have not taken this drastic step there has been a growing mood of self-disparagement. This is laudable in so far as it represents a swing away from triumphalism and self-complacency; but obviously, a religious who is much affected by it will become less enthusiastic about encouraging the young to enter religious life. The drop in vocations is probably due in part to a flagging of morale among those who are religious already. The appearance of official vocation promoters in some religious institutes is a sign of the times. What all religious should do in some measure, and to a large extent unconsciously, now tends to be left to one professional ad-man.¹ Triumphalism and self-disparagement are the extremes;

¹ This is an office which requires great tact and prudence. A distinguished professor, who joined the Society of Jesus after his studies at Oxford, once said to the present writer:

virtue lies in the mean – and we have not yet found it, either in the Church at large or in religious communities. If religious are to have a proper self-respect and sufficient self-confidence to say to others, as St Paul did, ‘Become like me’, they must first convince themselves that the religious life is a good way, and for certain people (though perhaps not for many¹) the best and most generous way, of following Christ.

The conciliar Decree, which is neither triumphalist nor defeatist in tone, but serene and confident, will, if studied carefully and taken seriously, help religious to attain a proper evaluation of their way of life, to correct what is amiss, and to recapture the evangelical inspiration which alone can create and sustain a congregation. The serene tone of the document is matched by its smooth latinity; but underneath the smooth exterior are some rugged ideas, which could revolutionize the thinking of many a religious.

The first of these ideas, and the most important, is given in section 2a: ‘The following of Christ as it is proposed in the gospel is the ultimate norm of the religious life, and should therefore be regarded as the supreme rule by all institutes’. There is a tacit contrast here between the following of Christ as proposed in the gospel and the following of Christ as proposed in the rule of a religious institute. Religious must not too easily suppose that because their rules and customs were once upon a time approved by ecclesiastical authorities, they have only to ‘keep the rule’ and thereby they will be following Christ in the manner set forth in the gospel. No, says the Council, the gospel remains the supreme rule (or canon), and the constitutions of a religious institute must not be canonized in its place. The holy rule of every congregation is, to some extent, a reflection of the social setting in which it was written; it may embody the limited conceptions of charity which were current in christian society at that time; and after a century or two it may have become quite out of date. The gospels, on the other hand, are for all times: they contain a challenge which is ever fresh and never fully met. The rules and customs of some congregations are as antiquated as the queer dress they wear; and the religious who wear these rules and customs may be following Christ in a very imperfect manner, if judged by the supreme norm of the gospel. Such religious may be living a comfortable and socially useless life, going through the same

‘If any vocation-promoter had gone after me when I was an undergraduate, I should have run a mile’.

¹ Cf Mt 19, 11.

motions and exercises as their predecessors in a bygone age, and congratulating themselves on following the way of the counsels, when in fact they are a living anachronism – as the pharisees were in Christ's time. Their passionate devotion to the law (as they understood it) saved Israel in the maccabean crisis; but when Christ presented Israel with a new crisis, namely the presence of the Messiah, they clung to the ways which had proved useful in the last crisis and therefore failed to meet the present crisis. This pattern is constantly repeated in human history, both secular and religious, as Arnold Toynbee has shown.

The whole purpose of the Council was to bring the Church up to date. Since religious institutes are about the most conservative part of the Church (with the possible exception of the roman curia!), they are probably more in need of reform than any other part of the Church. The Council would evidently like to see less conservatism in religious communities, a keener social conscience, more labour and hard work, greater fluidity and adaptability, and possibilities of experiment built into the system itself, so that each new generation of religious can have the invigorating experience of making a fresh start, of reading the gospel for itself to hear what Christ is saying, of discerning the challenges of its own day, and of thinking out afresh 'What does the following of Christ mean in our time?'. It is an important duty of all religious superiors, and particularly of the younger superiors, to keep checking their rules and customs against the gospel itself, to see whether they and their communities are still following Christ, still responding to the challenge of the gospel, and still accepting the risks involved in following the way of the counsels.

That already is an important idea. But what is perhaps more important is that the obligation of direct recourse to the gospels is placed not on superiors alone, but on all religious. Henceforth no religious can say in his heart: 'I'm keeping the rule; I'm all right; leave me alone'! He must confront himself with the question: 'Is this way of life, which I call "keeping the rule", recognizable to myself and to others as the following of Christ? How does my way of life, and how does our way of life, show up when examined in the light of the gospel?' The Epistle of St James¹ compares the law of Christ, which is the law of love, to a mirror: it helps us to see ourselves as we really are and to spot our defects. When a religious looks into the mirror of the gospel, he may see that in spite of his

¹ Jas 1, 23-24.

religious profession, he is following Christ not very well – perhaps less well than his own brothers and sisters who remained in the world. His comparative failure may be due to personal laziness, but it may also be due to the collective inertia, conservatism and isolationism of the institute to which he belongs, or to the diffusion of worldly ideas – for example, by television – in his own community. Before founding a new religious order of his own, St Ignatius Loyola considered whether he would join an old one and reform it. Some of those who have joined old ones may feel that the Council is thrusting upon them, all unwanted, the obligation to attempt to reform their brethren! Since the Decree urges more communication between superiors and their brethren, it seems that a religious who feels that all is not well must try to convince the superior of the need of reform. To do so may be extremely difficult, especially in those congregations where the relationship between the superior and the others is still modelled on the social pattern of seventeenth century France. The Decree requires, among other things, a radical reconsideration of the relationship between superiors and their brethren (the word subjects is now out; yet neither comrades nor companions nor friends will do. The impossibility of finding a suitable word to describe the relationship arises from our uncertainty about the nature of the relationship itself).

Let us now follow the path pointed out by the Decree and compare the three evangelical counsels as found in the gospels with the same counsels as institutionalized in religious congregations. The comparison is not easy, because the gospels were written at a time when there were no religious congregations in the Church (for, of course, neither Christ nor any of his disciples founded a religious institute with vows). In the narratives of the public ministry there are certain passages which adumbrate the later development of religious institutes. And in the early years after Pentecost, the church of Jerusalem attempted to make itself into an economic as well as a religious community; but this experiment was not a success and was not repeated in the gentile churches founded by St Paul. On the contrary, one reason why St Paul had to collect alms in his gentile churches to send to Jerusalem was, no doubt, that the Jerusalem community, having liquidated its assets, could no longer help itself. However, although there were no religious institutes in the apostolic age, there were a few men who followed the way of the counsels – notably Paul and Barnabas.¹ These two were, like Christ

¹ Cf 1 Cor 9, 3-6.

himself, poor, homeless, and celibate for the sake of the kingdom which they preached. They dressed like others, worked like others, and took no vows. It is salutary for religious to recognise that there are still such people in the Church, following the way of the counsels almost unnoticed. Take, for example, the case (not imaginary) of a young executive earning £ 3000 a year, unmarried, giving about £ 1000 a year to various charities, and devoting his spare time to local government (care of schools, hospitals, parks and other social services) and the religious instruction of Borstal boys: such a man is following the way of the counsels even though he takes no vows. If religious means one who follows the way of the counsels, some excellent religious are not members of religious institutes.

Another source of difficulty is that one cannot study the gospels for long without recognizing that following Christ does not mean exactly the same as imitating him. As he was a divine person, and in this respect unlike us, poverty, chastity and obedience did not mean quite the same thing in his life as they mean in ours. He did not take three vows: but there are other significant differences too, as will be pointed out below.

In St Matthew's gospel, the call to follow Christ comes just after Caesarea Philippi: 'If any man wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me'.¹ What this means in the concrete is explained a little later in the section describing the way of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem.² A discussion;³ of the mosaic law on divorce leads up to the call to celibacy and the encounter with the rich young man leads from a discussion of the mosaic law of charity to the call to poverty.⁴ Between the two passages occurs the exhortation to become like children⁵ – which may perhaps be connected with the call to obedience.

Evangelical poverty means perfect fulfilment of the law of charity. Selling all and giving the money to the poor is not proposed as a work of supererogation which still remains to be done after the demands of charity have been fully met; it is the perfect fulfilment of these demands – as can be seen most clearly from the non-canonical version of the story of the rich young man preserved by Origen:

¹ Mt 16, 24.

² Mt 19, 1.

³ Mt 19, 3–12.

⁴ Mt 19, 16–22.

⁵ Mt 19, 13–15.

Another rich man said to him, Master, what good work must I do in order that I may have life? Jesus said to him: Man, obey the law and the prophets. He replied: I have done that. Jesus said to him: Go and sell all that you possess, distribute the money to the poor, then come and follow me. The rich man, however, began to scratch his head, and did not like it. Then the Lord said to him: How can you say, I have obeyed the law and the prophets, when it is written in the law that you shall love your neighbour as yourself, and how many of your brothers, sons of Abraham, are clothed in filth, and dying of hunger, yet from your house, which is full of good things, nothing whatever goes out to them. Then he turned to his disciple Simon who was sitting beside him and said: Simon, son of Jonah, it is easier for a camel to enter through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.¹

The point is that the rich man who really loves his neighbour as himself will refuse to be rich when his neighbour is poor, will refuse to keep more when his neighbour has less, and therefore will make himself as poor as the poorest of his neighbours by sharing his property among them.² The counsel of poverty, as put by Christ to the rich young man, involves first, costly self-sacrifice, secondly, real concern for the poor, and thirdly, readiness to trust God's providence for one's daily bread in the future. Poverty as institutionalized in a religious congregation may involve none of these three things. The novice may have no property to renounce, and may find that the standard of living of the community he joins is higher than that of the family he leaves. The institute may have no real concern for the poor; its work may consist almost entirely in educating the children of the wealthy. And the community as a community may be so well endowed with this world's goods that its members, far from being cast on God's providence, find themselves in a super-welfare-state with a hundred percent social security.

A religious community established within a welfare-state is not unfairly called a super-welfare-state, since on top of the social security enjoyed by all members of the state it adds the further security of common life. The resemblance between these two social

¹ Mt 15, 14.

² Cf Lk 3, 11.

organizations deserves some attention. The spirit of charity which finds expression in evangelical poverty and in the community of property described in Acts is also at work in the modern welfare-state, where the relief of poverty, the education of children, the care of the sick, of the mentally handicapped, and so on, are accepted as community obligations, and the financial burden is shared out as equitably as possible. Within such a state (e.g. in Britain today) a religious community whose members pay no income tax shares in the benefits (e.g., free hospital treatment) without bearing a normal share in the financial burden. This places on its members an additional obligation to contribute to the common good in some form or another. Otherwise, judged by the criterion of charity, their way of life might actually fall below the standard of contemporary secular society. They must not be content to contract out of the common efforts of society both in war and in peace, and yet to enjoy the security which is the fruit of these common efforts. In general, religious institutes should seek to co-ordinate their charitable works with those of secular society and show that they care more for the common good than for their own prestige.

In some ways, the story of the rich young man is not a fully satisfactory scriptural basis for religious poverty. The young man is told to sell all he has before he starts to follow Christ; but religious poverty is a feature of the actual following. After the young man has sold his property and become a follower of Christ, he is required to put his time and energies, hence his capacity to earn, at the disposal of Christ and of the community of his followers. That is what every religious does – he renounces, not so much actual wealth, but the potential wealth, the economic power of his active life, by putting his time and energy at the disposal of the community – but not (like the member of an israeli *qibbuz*) to enrich the community. A religious community should accumulate only such wealth as it needs to support its members and their works of charity.

But here great difficulties arise: a large community of men or women cannot have stability, and hence its good works cannot have permanence, unless it possess a very substantial accumulation of wealth. A seminary housing a hundred people (staff and students) costs about £50,000 a year to run. The capital required to float such an institution is enormous – at five percent, a million pounds. It would be very hard to show that Christ himself envisaged the foundation of such establishments by his future disciples; there was hardly room for them within his eschatological perspective. But

this does not mean that the development is illegitimate; the holy Spirit has gradually taught the Church to accommodate herself to a longer perspective. We must follow the Spirit and not allow the letter even of the gospel to constrict all development. But still, there are obvious dangers here.

Without entering into much detail, the Council utters a warning against the dangers of collective wealth and of collective selfishness. Here are a few of the questions which its general norm may raise: Are religious congregations justified in spending the huge sums of money they do spend on the education of their members? Are we sure that Christ our Lord now intends that those who respond to his call to poverty should be put through a course of training as expensive as that of any worldly profession? (Indeed, if the gospel is so simple that it can be understood by a child, should theology ever have become an academic discipline leading all the way up to the doctorate?) Can it be right for congregations to engage in prestige building, so that the cost of housing a religious turns out to be far in excess, per unit, of what any local authority would permit in a council housing project? In the past, either these questions have not been asked, or it has been quickly assumed that any development which seems inevitable must be the will of the Lord.

Religious must not only be poor, but must also be seen to be poor – which they are not, if they live like the landed gentry of the previous century.¹ The incongruity of religious wealth is often plainer to the laity than it is to the religious themselves. (Indeed, many of the reforms now being urged by the Council are simply concessions to common sense, which in the past has tended to take second place to traditional wisdom in religious institutes). In the matter of collective wealth, if religious will not learn from the pages of the gospel, they may have to be taught by socialist governments. The first fund-raising tycoon was of course St Paul,² but he did not build a basilica at Corinth or a *casa generalizia* on the Via Egnatia; he took the money to Jerusalem, for the relief of poverty. On this score, most religious congregations could learn a lesson from the

¹ The present writer once encountered a Catholic layman whose daughter had become a lay sister in a religious congregation. He was so annoyed over the inferior status assigned to her that he abandoned the practice of his religion. He said he once went to see her and was shown into a parlour to wait for her. His comment: 'The furniture in that parlour was worth £ 500 if it was worth a penny'. The Decree fully vindicates this man's common sense reaction – though not of course his abandonment of religious practice.

² Cf 2 Cor 8-9.

Errata

SUPPLEMENT TO THE WAY NO. 2 MAY 1966

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Owing to a mistake made in the printing office, the last six lines of page 73 ('Recall to the Scriptures', by John Bligh) are not correct.

PLEASE READ THESE LINES AS FOLLOWS:

Unfortunately, religious life can be organized in such a way that celibacy does not liberate, but merely creates a vacuum. A religious can find himself wedded into a religious family which is more selfish and exclusive than an ordinary human family – one which is always consolidating its material assets, spends its best energies in the education of its own members, fills its houses with good things,

Salvation Army. Has not something gone radically wrong with the practice of poverty?

Christ's words to the rich young man are not obscure. But two difficulties arise, if one asks whether Christ was calling upon the young man to imitate him. First, so far as we know, Jesus did not sell his property and give it to the poor – probably because he had very little to sell. The Council meets this difficulty by quoting: Christ who was rich (before the incarnation), became poor (in the incarnation), that through his poverty we might become rich.¹ Secondly, if religious are to imitate the poverty of Christ in his earthly life as well, should they imitate him in his hidden life, when he supported himself by the work of his hands, or in his public ministry, when, for a time at least, he was supported by the alms of pious women?² The example of St Paul favours the view that it is best, even in the midst of apostolic activity, to support oneself by the work of one's hands.

Celibacy can be regarded as a particular form of poverty. The man who makes a eunuch of himself for the sake of the kingdom of heaven³ does not possess a wife and can therefore manage without a multitude of material things which possession of a wife entails. The married man must devote by far the greatest part of his time and income to the building up of his own household: he must provide for his wife and for the education of his children. The family is to this extent an exclusive community which by its nature tends to create and maintain economic and social differences and inequalities of wealth and opportunity. The celibate is obviously far more free to care for others who are not his kith and kin; he is able to promote the kingdom not only by preaching but also by devoting to the poor, the weak, the imprisoned, the handicapped, and so on, the time and money which, if married, he would have had to spend on his own flesh and blood.

Unfortunately, religious life can be organized in such a way that celibacy does not liberate, but merely creates a vacuum. A religious can find himself wedded into a religious family which is more selfish and exclusive than an ordinary human family – one which is always consolidating its material assets, spends its best energies in the education of its own members, fills its houses with good things,

¹ 2 Cor 8, 9.

² Cf Lk 8, 3.

³ Mt 19, 12.

and sends out little to the poor. In such circumstances, the liberating effect of celibacy is brought to nothing, and the development of a balanced personality may be thwarted. If the celibate person is not free to devote his time, energies and resources to the poor and needy, but simply remains inactive in a prison without bars, there is great danger that he will become idle, selfish and introverted – he may easily develop into a psychological case. The Council alludes to this danger when it says that suitable instruction must be given to ensure that celibacy does contribute to a well-balanced personality. It suggests the consoling thought that religious present to the faithful an image of the virginal marriage between Christ and his Church. Unfortunately, however, few of the faithful, and few even among religious, are able to see things in this way. More commonly, they regard religious celibacy as a costly sacrifice which can be justified only by its fruits; if there are no fruits, their common sense can find no delight in it. The structure of Matthew chapter nineteen suggests that perhaps the solution lies in linking chastity more closely to poverty: if religious are pioneers, as poor as Christ was, ready to take risks and to make new beginnings, celibacy is meaningful. But once a religious family develops into a welfare-state, where all risks are avoided and all man power is consumed in works started a century before, common sense will find good reasons for admitting every kind of recreation (as a help to work, of course) other than those concerned with sexual relationships, until at length celibacy will have no meaningful context, and common sense will begin to say that it is absurd and inhuman.

One can see very clearly the liberating effects of celibacy in the life of Christ himself. Having no wife and children, he could regard all his disciples as his brothers and sisters; he could travel freely hither and thither; and he could risk his life by fierce denunciations of the scribes and pharisees in the temple. But here again, the 'imitation' of Christ presents certain difficulties. As there was no concupiscence in him, he could permit himself certain liberties which a religious cannot take. He had a favourite among the twelve – the disciple whom he 'loved' in a special degree; he was at home in the house of Martha and Mary; and he could put his arm round a child. But if a professor in a seminary of religious showed special affection for one of his students, or established a close friendship with two unmarried sisters, no one would say: 'How like Christ he is!' Just as Christ demanded of the rich young man a sacrifice of material wealth which exceeded his own, so too in the matter of

celibacy he calls upon religious to make greater sacrifices than his own. For most nuns, if I am not mistaken, the greatest sacrifices come in their late thirties, when they have reached full emotional maturity and appreciate the beauty of motherhood far more deeply than they did on the day in their youth when they so cheerfully renounced it. But, according to the normal chronology of Christ's life, he was only thirty-three when he died; he did not pass through the spiritual trials of a celibate middle age.

A fully adequate scriptural foundation for religious obedience is not easy to find. The decree draws attention to certain texts which speak of Christ's obedience to his Father.¹ During his public ministry, Jesus constantly looked to his Father and did his Father's will; but he did not look to a human superior to be told what was his Father's will. Nor did he urge his disciples to place themselves under such obedience: St Peter was given primacy of jurisdiction, but this did not mean that the other disciples were to obey him in all things, still less that they were to take a vow to obey him in all things. Religious obedience is best understood as an ecclesiastical institution which helps men and women to find and do the will of God: a religious abandons his autonomy (denies himself) by accepting the guidance of a superior who has received jurisdiction or 'dominative power' from the holy See. But hitherto the practice of obedience has been too deeply affected by some non-scriptural images. St Ignatius cannot escape all blame here: a passage in his *Letter on Obedience* gives the impression that among the heavenly bodies all movement proceeds from the higher to the lower, and the same should happen in religious life. But in fact there is no action without reaction in the heavenly bodies; and human superiors should not expect the inferior orbs to be purely passive. They too are moved by the holy Spirit, and the superior orbs should listen to what they have to say.²

The Decree does not explicitly advocate 'dialogue' between

¹ Jn 4, 34; 5, 3; Heb 10, 7.

² Of course St Ignatius also emphasized the duties of representation and manifestation, to ensure communication and understanding between superiors and subjects. But this part of his teaching did not find expression in vivid images comparable to the 'dead body', the 'old man's stick', and the higher and lower orbs. He tells the story about the man who at his superior's command brought a lioness to him, but unfortunately he does not add the conclusion – doubtless as apocryphal as the story itself – that the lioness ate the superior.

superiors and their lower orbs (what can one call them?). This is perhaps just as well. There is a common misconception that dialogue is easy, and that if only people can be 'got round a table', all problems can be solved and disputes settled. But anyone who has read a few platonic dialogues will know that a dialogue must be conducted according to set rules, or it will degenerate into an exchange of abuse. For one thing, it must be decided who asks the questions and who answers them. The Decree requires a reconsideration of the relationship between superiors and their *whatsisnames*. There is to be more communication; superiors are to listen. But this will call for new rules of self-discipline. In every kind of discussion it is easier to tear down than to build up; and in public discussion there is a great temptation to show off.

Here again, one cannot resolve all the difficulties by arguing 'imitation' of Christ. The conduct of Christ towards his disciples, as it is presented in the gospels, does not provide a pattern for the conduct of superiors towards their *whatsisnames*. Christ possessed a fulness of the Spirit which is not given to superiors; he did not need to listen to his disciples' ideas – he could read their secret thoughts. There was very little dialogue between him and them. After the first prophecy of the passion, St Peter ventured to protest.¹ He was rebuked so severely that after the second and third prophecies the disciples did not venture to ask for an explanation, though they did not understand. It is true that Christ washed the feet of his disciples in order to set them an example; but there is a difficulty here too: if the disciples were to imitate his example, should they not have imitated his ordinary, everyday conduct rather than something which he did on only one occasion, and then specifically to set an example? The theory and practice of religious obedience are both in need of revision, and the solutions to our difficulties will no doubt be found through careful attention to what the holy Spirit says to us through the scriptures. But there is no one text which provides a simple answer.

The Decree does not attempt to provide more than general guiding-lines for religious in search of renewal. But all who sincerely desire such renewal will be profoundly grateful to the bishops for their timely and courageous recall to evangelical principles. Popular writers who regard our bishops as timid conservatives do them a great injustice.

¹ Cf Mt 16, 22.