

THE APOSTOLATE OF WITNESS

By JOAN BLAND

NOWADAYS, it is generally accepted that the witness of apostolic religious, like their mission, is a double one – the building up of the community of believers and the evangelization of the whole world, as either non-christian or de-christianized. A generation ago, however, this second aspect of mission and witness in Europe and the United States was hardly considered as a practical proposition: it would have created too many problems. In practice, most congregations settled for a witness to the converted. The life-style of religious, their manners and dress, even their vocabulary, was not only unappealing to non-believers, it was also unintelligible. In fact, even for catholics who were not clerically orientated, religious often seemed to constitute a world apart, remote and largely irrelevant.

Vatican II has not only freed apostolic congregations to adapt according to apostolic need; it has also reduced to some extent the difference between catholics and persons of other background concerning what is expected of religious. Wherever the influence of the council has penetrated, there is a diminishing tolerance for the quaint, the obsolete and the obsolescent. The insistence on adaptation to the needs of the times has made it possible for religious to witness outside as well as inside the visible Church.

The community as witness

The inner life of the religious congregation was generally regarded, until quite recently, as its own concern, and often as its own secret. The community's witness consisted largely in the personal sacrifices which its members evidently made, especially as these contributed to the excellence of its works: 'by their fruits ye shall know them'. The idea that the structures of a religious congregation should provide models for society at large is, in modern times at least, quite a new one. Yet the 'communes' now rather numerous in the United States do suggest that some form of common life, or at least of fraternal sharing, appeals to our con-

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temporaries. And evangelical poverty is still a valid form of witness, in spite of its complexity in today's world.¹ The elimination of social distinctions, where they formerly existed, within religious communities has removed one example of counter-witness, and the democratization of religious government is generally regarded as a step forward by such outsiders as interest themselves in the style of modern religious life.

In their corporate relationship with other human communities, some religious communities have found a new and enriching apostolic opportunity. More and more convents, for example, enjoy happy and fruitful ecumenical friendships with protestant church groups. The 'open community', which enables individual religious to bring friends and associates to the community table, is already providing significant opportunities for fresh witness.

The most conspicuous witness of religious congregations, however, still remains their corporate works. It is true that the great institutions they have created and maintained are now under attack as sources of counter-witness; but it is still unclear whether the strong case to be made against them rather concerns the abuses likely to develop in every institutional situation than the institution as such. In fact, the most frequently repeated argument is that the institution depersonalizes its religious staff rather than that it is apostolically ineffectual. Some have obviously outlived their usefulness, others now demand resources which most congregations do not possess. However, lack of resources in terms of personnel may be an argument not so much for abandoning institutions as for seeking new forms of apostolic association between congregations, and with external bodies engaged in the same work.

The personal witness

Whether or not corporate works remain as the chief witness of religious congregations, the duty of the community to help its members provide a credible christian witness in their own life and work is certainly a constant. Whether they make their contribution in institutions operated by their congregations, in small 'fraternities' or in 'personal' assignments, the quality of the apostolate of each religious will continue to depend on his own personal quality.

How can the community improve this quality, and therefore the christian witness of its members? Most especially by the day-to-day

¹ Cf. Clarke, T. E., S.J.; 'Witness and Involvement', in *Supplement to the Way*, 9 - *Poverty* (Spring, 1970), pp 47-56.

support of their religious consecration. This is why shared prayer, the communication of spiritual insights and of every type of depth communication among religious is so essential. For persons of anglo-saxon background, such sharing requires a painful adjustment; but it is difficult any longer to deny that we have an obligation to give this kind of encouragement and inspiration to one another.

Formation, obviously, in its every phase and aspect is the most important means of developing the response to consecration for mission and witness. Apostolic emphasis in initial formation is being increased almost everywhere, but it is not clear that its most essential prerequisite, the appreciation in depth of the personal relationship with the Lord, is receiving equal emphasis. In areas like the United States there is already a reaction against the neglect of essential spiritual formation, especially from young people themselves. They have a way of reminding their mentors that they need not have entered religious life to develop a merely professional ideal of service, that such an achievement is quite compatible with marriage and constitutes no justification at all for renouncing this fundamental human right. Nothing but the development of a profound personal intimacy with the Lord will motivate the sacrifices which religious life demands of normal men and women.

But effective apostolic witness does require professional competence, and the community's obligation in this regard is a matter of simple justice to society. Most especially for the competent, however, as the years roll on, professional demands tend to escalate. Gradually, they become all-absorbing, because human energy is limited. And so many religious need spiritual sabbaticals, periods of renewal, sometimes long ones, if their witness is to continue to be effective. In many cases, also, especially in lay communities, the religious need time and opportunity to bring the level of their theological understanding nearer to that of their often excellent secular education.

The congregation's responsibility is serious also in the matter of 'sending'. In more and more cases, religious are exercising with the consent of the competent superior 'choice of ministry', expressing their preferences, or even arranging for their own employment. Doubtless there is an obediential element in this pattern of freedom and consent; but it leaves questions unanswered about the quality of evangelical obedience, and about the long term consequences of the trend. On the other hand, it is a terrible waste of apostolic potential to fasten a square peg firmly into a round hole and leave

him there year after year. The choice of ministry diminishes this danger, but without eliminating it, because not every square peg, suspended irrelevantly over a round hole, is aware of his squareness. Personnel boards, where the personnel who constitute them are adequate, can be of help.

A focus for today

In view of the diminishing numbers of apostolic religious, the contemporary apostolate of witness needs focus. We are not sent to all the people all the time, and certain priorities seem clear. There are those who have most serious needs, and these needs are not being met. There are those who have the power to meet the needs of others, whether these are spiritual, mental or physical, and might possibly be motivated to do so. But if one studies the human panorama of the seventies, one central apostolic challenge seems to emerge: *to restore the judaeo-christian social ethic to its pristine evangelical force.*

Our response to this challenge is fundamentally a question of witness. The world has all but forgotten that social concern is an integral part of the christian phenomenon, because christians have been so little concerned in the past; and we who are among the world's most conspicuous christians have too often seemed to be among the most conspicuously unconcerned. An attitude of indifference to human needs can hardly be defined as a christian stance. The good samaritan recognized his responsibility to the wounded man because he was aware of his plight. Today we are all aware of the plight of two thirds of humanity; and, being aware, we are responsible. The Lord is hungry and thirsty and inadequately sheltered in more than a billion human beings. Though men have always suffered deprivation, an entirely new moral situation exists now, which arises from the fact that material deprivation is no longer inevitable. Technology can eliminate or at least radically diminish it. What is involved is a very serious and determined effort on the part of developed nations. Further, the intolerable injustices responsible for the misery of most human beings continue to exist simply because we fail to care enough. If we did so care, governments would be forced to address themselves seriously to the problem. It seems eminently clear that the question is a moral, spiritual and religious one. The details of economic and social organization required for its solution are technical; but the question of giving priority to the problem is not. It is hard to imagine a

situation where the gospel imperatives apply more clearly. It is because western civilization has inherited the judaeo-christian ethic, and because the implications of that ethic are becoming progressively clearer, that the situation of the third world becomes to us more and more intolerable and unthinkable. And yet, much of the impetus toward the improvement of the conditions of human life in this world has developed, for the past two hundred years, in a state of continual hostility to the official Church. The enlightenment is certainly a child of christianity, but in this family there has been more than the usual tension between the generations.

On the theoretical level, the necessary reconciliation was provided for in Vatican II, in *Gaudium et Spes* particularly. As with the other aspects of the conciliar revolution, however, implementation will not be automatic and, in spite of continued papal insistence, is slow in coming. In this implementation the witness of religious congregations is a matter of paramount importance, both because of their close relationship to the institutional church and also because of their enormous influence. Clearly, then, apostolic religious communities should be in the forefront of those contemporary movements which promote christian social ideals (however little their secular promoters may recognize them as such): personalism, social justice, greater social, political and economic equality of peoples, internationalism, and the outlawing of war. It is especially important also, and yet can no longer be taken for granted, that they should participate above all as christian witnesses, striving to place and keep these movements in the context of an integral and living christianity.

Social amelioration versus social change

What does an effective involvement of this kind require from a religious congregation? Our post-conciliar experience, much of it rather abortive, demonstrates the need for the utmost care, depth and sophistication in the preparation of those who are to undertake the work of social reform. Social action operates on two very distinct levels: on the level of amelioration, or the effort to improve the concrete situation of those victimized by social injustice; and on the level of social change, the effort to alter the social structures which have victimized these persons. The traditional services of religious communities have been almost entirely in the first category. The growing preoccupation of the more socially conscious religious of today with the other prong of social action has created

both new possibilities of service and new threats of disaster. Existentially, these two forms of social charity easily clash with one another. The social reformer fears that putting band-aids on social ills will simply delay the necessary surgery; whilst the man who is devoting himself to the immediate assistance of specific persons fears that if his religious brethren rock the social boat he will be denied his apostolic opportunity. Neither fear is groundless. Both are more than justified by contemporary events, at least in some cities in the United States and in some developing areas. The close identification in the public mind of the members of the same religious order produces problems even for members attempting different methods of social reform. If some members of a congregation or a province seek to bring peace to the world through strong public protests, and others of the same religious group seek to promote it through their influence on the students in a private college which depends for its maintenance on the support of wealthy conservatives, the congregation may have to accept the necessity of making a difficult choice. In practice however, as more and more individual apostolates develop, the public may tend to accept the fact of pluralism within religious congregations, and may cease to hold a whole community responsible for the activities of individuals with whom they disagree. On a deeper level, the delicate question of the relationship between individual and community charisms needs further exploration.

Actually, much of the apostolic effectiveness of religious communities has been and still is the result of their capacity for common action. Over-concentration on the individual apostolate could destroy that effectiveness, making common effort less and less possible by a gradual attrition. In the english-speaking world, at least, it is more than clear that the influence of catholic institutions has been enormous. Where it has failed, as, most notably, to produce an adequate social conscience in the catholic population, this is because of lack of insight rather than of effectiveness. Teachers, for example, cannot communicate a vision which was never communicated to them. Already, a generation ago in the United States, this situation began to change, and the leaders of catholic social thought today, especially the most radical of them, are, almost without exception, graduates of catholic schools and colleges.

Inner-City apostolate

But whatever the future of the institutional apostolate, many of

our most socially concerned religious are much more interested in the newer approaches. What of the experiments with life in inner city apartments, and similar efforts to witness by a certain identification with the life-style of the poor? Our brief, post-conciliar experience will not support very firm conclusions. In the United States, at least, there are in progress a number of experiments in new forms of community life orientated at least in theory to this kind of witness. But the validity of a high proportion of these experiments is open to serious question. They are really viable only when undertaken by essentially well-adjusted religious, motivated by rather exclusively apostolic considerations, and not for the relief of intolerably polarized communities.²

Certainly a legitimate personal apostolate, or that of a small group whose life and work differs notably from what is usual in their congregation, ought to develop under conditions of warm support, trust and understanding from the congregation at large. Such conditions are by no means always present, partly because of the narrowness that still afflicts at least some members of the great majority of our communities and partly because of the inconsiderate attitude of those involved in the experiment. Certainly those chosen, or permitted to choose themselves, for such an undertaking ought to be among the best religious by any reasonable standard. They should be motivated by an apostolic concern which is not merely a synonym for philanthropy. Above all they should be men and women of prayer, and not merely of prayer defined as high level human communication. Their call is to show that God is good, not merely that they are. This is not to say that they should not be engaged in whatever fight for social justice the situation may demand, or that they will not sometimes find themselves allied, on a given local issue, with communists against a nominally christian bourgeois interest of one kind or another. What must always come through is that they care about justice *because* of their christianity, not merely that they are religious who, by some improbable accident, happen to be interested in justice.

Even given all these happy and not always predominating attitudes towards inner-city work, the perils remain considerable. Understandably, the constant evidence that life with the poor provides of the inequities which our society produces and our laws

² The reference here is to the specifically inner city apartment, not to apartment-living simply as an experiment in community life.

protect, tends to develop a distrust of all authority, of every element in any status quo. The sense of urgency that daily encounters with human misery of a highly visible type engender makes all those whose minds are occupied with other matters seem heartless or at least absurdly unaware. The bureaucratic structures of state and Church seem alike intolerable in the face of human suffering. Not everyone can keep the balance necessary to see that the breakdown of existing social order, however inadequate, will produce greater suffering still.

Whatever the hazards, the fact remains that service to the destitute while sharing their life has been precisely the life and work of great saints in every era. Why did it lead to sanctity for them when today it seems often to lead to apostasy instead? Because however practical and realistic they were, and even aggressive, the saints were also, every one of them, contemplative as well. They never supposed that we have here a lasting city, however much they wished to improve it for the duration. They were, far more than others, ready to spend themselves for God's children, but they were always sustained by the knowledge that the poor are God's children, that their ultimate salvation would be from him, not from them. They did not see themselves as the Messiah. They knew that he had already come, however outrageously human society was failing to accept his revelation in practice.

The seamless garment

It is the shortage of saints that has produced the unnatural divorce in western culture between those who wish to improve the conditions of life in this world and those who look to the Lord. It is because they are God's children that men are worthy of a better world, and he who says to the Lord, 'I love you', and does not feed his lambs, deceives himself. He does not deceive the Lord, however, or society, and he deepens the terrible cleavage which delays the world's conversion as much as does the messianic humanist who mistakes himself for the Lord.

No christian can be unconcerned about human suffering. It takes only a brief experience of a traditionally non-christian society to see how deep the christian impact on our world has been. Yet western culture has lived for two hundred years with the anomaly of a humanism too often dissociated and even alienated from the christianity which is its source. Vatican II made it possible to restore the seamless garment. We have nothing more important to do.

Yet many religious still do not even see the christian relevance of modern movements to improve the quality of human life. Others become deeply involved in these movements, but, over-reacting against the individualistic attitudes of some pious people and strongly influenced by secular humanism, gradually abandon fundamental elements in their faith. One even hears religious remark that the real meaning of the resurrection is that the spirit of Christ lives on, like the spirit of Martin Luther King or of John F. Kennedy! Christ becomes merely a noble historic figure to whom some religious wish to relate as to a leader whose admirable social vision they hope to see established. It is inevitable that, of those who adopt such a stance, most will eventually leave a life which has become altogether pointless for them; but there are others who stay, motivated by the conviction that religious could help to bring justice to the world if only they would devote themselves to secular concerns more completely, and in the hope of bringing about this happy consummation. However sincere their intention to serve mankind at a great cost to themselves, the presence in religious life of persons who do not accept its most fundamental premises cannot be justified objectively, even in terms of a purely human authenticity of life.

Authentic christian witness requires a constant rhythm of contemplation and involvement. Only that mode and intensity of prayer which illuminates every situation and motivates every conscious decision can adequately undergird the kind of apostolate to which today's religious are called. Only intense experience of the Lord will maintain the kind of burning faith which the contemporary situation requires. Only the intense involvement of those who possess such faith can bridge the unnatural chasm which has been deepening for two hundred years between secular humanism and the ultimate source of its values, between the Church and the enlightenment.

The strength, the quality, the effectiveness of such a witness ultimately depends on consecration. The degree of authenticity in the personal commitment to the Lord is always the determining factor. The work of the community is to support this commitment. The love of Christ has gathered us together, and our togetherness is valuable above all to the extent that it helps us to grow in his love and to proclaim that love to the world. If it does, our witness will be effective and our service relevant. If it does not, our religious community has no reason for being. It ought to dissolve; and, to that end, history will cooperate inexorably.