CAMPUS MINISTRY

By GERARD W. HUGHES

THE TELEPHONE rang at the Samaritans' office when I was on duty. It was a woman's voice, distressed at her eight-year-old son's refusal to do his homework. We discussed schools and eight year olds. 'You seem to be interested in education. Are you a teacher?' she asked.

In this article I shall describe chaplaincy work as I experience it, and leave the reader to answer the worried lady's question.

What is the role of a university chaplain? The question brings back memories of interdenominational chaplains' conferences, where the questions, and the answers, recur with monotonous regularity. One answer, which I shall always remember, came from a hearty english chaplain, 'to get to know the chaps'. 'But how?', asked a timid newcomer. 'In the student bar, old man, where else?', was the reply. Then the discussion develops with quotations from Bonhoeffer, Harvey Cox and John T. Robinson, the catholics throwing in bits of Rahner, Küng and Schillebeeckx. If the beer flows freely enough, we move on to every aspect not only of university life, or even national life, but of cosmic existence. Then we return to the earthy reality of our own chaplaincies and get on with the real work of emptying ash trays and clearing up the mess after last night's party, hearing for the thousandth time that the Vatican is far too wealthy, being asked why dessicated celibates should tell the laity how to think about sex, and what is the point of going to Mass anyhow? The questions may bore us, but at least the questioners are interested enough to come and ask. In my experience, the vast majority of students coming up to university from their catholic schools arrive with the firm determination to keep as much distance between themselves and things catholic as is compatible with their eternal salvation. In simpler language, they come to fulfil their Mass obligation but have little interest in studying the implications of the action they perform. They were given all the answers at school before they could formulate the questions, and they were not impressed. If some do begin to show interest, there is always the danger that they form an élite, which becomes an effective deterrent to the rest of the student body. And if the chaplain does succeed in keeping the chaplaincy out of the hands of a clique and makes it a welcoming place, an area of freedom within the university where students are encouraged to think

through their faith, express their own opinions without fear of condemnation, are allowed to exercize initiative, to enjoy the liturgy and contribute to it, is he not then liable to fall into the greatest danger of all? If the centre answers the needs of today's students, does it not inevitably intensify their irritation with the institutional church as they know it, and unfit them for a return to their own parishes, thereby annoying the local clergy, including, possibly, the bishop, and cause the unfortunate chaplain to be branded a dissident and rebellious priest? Students, of course, will love this, and will give enthusiastic support to the chaplain to lead the revolution. This is the situation in which many chaplains find themselves; many excellent men have hurled themselves against the ecclesiastical barricades, ending up bruised, battered and disillusioned with the Church, eventually resigning to become married social workers. When the storm is over, those catholic students who never came near the chaplaincy survey the wreckage and are confirmed in their apathy; and the enthusiastic students, who were helped by the chaplain and supported him, share his disillusionment and withdraw from the institutional church, while the more conservative clergy and bishops congratulate themselves on their unyielding defence of the faith.

If a university is doing its job, it should be encouraging its students to sharpen their powers of observation and criticism, and teaching them to think for themselves. If the chaplaincy is doing its job, it should be helping the students and staff to apply those same powers of observation and criticism to their faith which, if it is genuine, must seek understanding. A student who has benefited from this kind of education is disinclined to accept any authority, whether sacred or secular, merely because it bears the label 'authority'. This is not the same as rejecting authority. He respects and will accept the authority of competence. Unless a university chaplain can share this attitude, he will be pastorally ineffective: if he does share it, he is almost certain to be suspect by ecclesiastical authority, because the spirit of questioning has not been encouraged in recent centuries in the Church. The local church often panics in the face of criticism. One catholic journalist headed an article, largely devoted to an attack on a university chaplain, 'Satan's Smoke Curls through Cracks in Peter's Barque'.

The university chaplain in this situation is liable to get hurt. He may be the type who thirsts for martyrdom, but if so, he should suspect his motives. There is a false thirst for martyrdom which may spring from a masochistic streak in character, or from simple vain-glory. I think that martyrdom for today's university chaplains is slow, painful and inglorious. It consists in listening and entering into the minds of the

university community and trying to communicate their thoughts patiently, clearly and persistently to the hierarchy. If the chaplain cannot listen, he cannot teach either.

For most chaplains I do not think it is a question of deliberately rocking the boat: the boat rocks. Almost daily one meets the same problems, perhaps best illustrated by quotations from students themselves. Recently the student president of the Glasgow University Union told me, 'to me and most of my contemporaries, christianity means nothing'. Subsequent conversation revealed, as it so often does, that by christianity he meant pharisaism in the Church. There are so many engaged couples who say, 'we don't intend bringing up our children as catholics, but as christians. We don't want them to suffer the indoctrination we had'. Then there are the students, full of idealism, who say, 'Yes, I thought about the priesthood when I was younger, but I see it as totally irrelevant in today's world'. 'What do you really want to do?', I asked one student, who gave the shattering reply, 'to burn down churches': an extreme example of so many worried, scrupulous, catholic students for whom religion is a code of morals to be observed under pain of mortal sin and eternal damnation, which they have the sensitivity to imagine but feel helpless to avoid. In general, I find that the more intelligent and religiously committed students are, the more critical they are of the Church as they experience it.

It is against this background that I want to laugh, or cry, or just groan when I hear the pronouncements of some of our bishops and read the catholic press. 'Reassertion of Infallibility Doctrine'. 'Reassertion of *Humanae Vitae*'. 'No Communion before Confession'. Yes, these questions have their importance, but in the present state of the Church, fussing about them is like rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. I used to be very interested in dogma: I am even more interested in it now, but in a different way, having spent some years listening to people talk of their understanding of doctrinal and moral teaching, and observing the huge gulf between the theologians' world and that of the people of God. For most catholics whom I meet, infallibility, for example, is of no importance whatever; or, if it is important to them, it has stifled any spirit of inquiry and verges on idolatry. As for the confession before communion question, the present student generation, which was introduced to confession before communion, is no longer interested in either; and I have met more people who have lapsed because of their confessional experiences than from any other single cause.

University chaplains must try to communicate this experience, not only to inform the bishops, but also to correct distortions in their own

perception of what is happening. Every university chaplain, whether he likes it or not, is a theologian, because his theology is expressed in his behaviour, in his priorities. If he is a bad theologian his action will be heretical, an 'unorthopraxis', and tear the local church apart. As chaplains we tend to seize upon the social dimension of the gospel and emphasize the active pursuit of social justice as a primary duty of every christian. The danger is that we emphasize it to the exclusion of another equally important truth, unity within the local church. Enthusiasm for social justice can so easily degenerate into a glowing love of humanity and a contempt for anyone who does not share our vision and indignation at the world's and the Church's injustices. I heard this thought crudely expressed at a very crowded midnight mass, where the congregation was mostly students. At the Prayer of the Faithful one youth, leaning nonchalantly against the back wall, broke into spontaneous prayer. 'Lord', he said, 'Some of us can't stand the bums who hang around George Square (where there was a soup-kitchen for the homeless) and others of us can't stand the archbishop. Lord, help us to love both'.

How are chaplains to communicate their experience to the Church, and in particular to the hierarchy? I think this is an important part of the chaplain's role as teacher — giving expression to the mind of the Church within the university. It is important, because university people do not speak simply for themselves. They also express, but usually more articulately, thoughts and attitudes which are widespread in the Church. University chaplaincies are useful listening posts within the Church for learning the mind of the Church. That is why bishops should be particularly interested in them if they are to learn of the pastoral needs of their people.

One level of communication is through chaplains' conferences. In Britain I think that our annual conferences fail through inadequate preparation. Tired men gather. A few theologians may be brought along to give us the latest on christology or theology of the eucharist. Gentle snores. We want to relax, not anguish over problems or attempt to articulate our experiences and present them clearly to the Church. There is a final business session, usually about money. I long to attend a well-prepared meeting in which one or two aspects of chaplaincy work are carefully written and circulated well beforehand, so that discussion in small groups can begin at once, draft proposals be produced, prayed about in common, and brief recommendations demanding answers sent, together with background documents, to the hierarchy.

There are eight universities in Scotland, and the catholic chaplains have a one day meeting every term. In the last five meetings we have invited the bishop, in whose diocese we meet, to join us. They have all accepted the invitation, attending for at least half the day, and have shown interest. Although some have found the experience depressing and others bewildering, I think these meetings have helped towards a better mutual understanding.

In Glasgow, as a result of a dismissal by the archbishop followed by a reprieve, I now have a group, rather grandly called 'The Chaplaincy Commision', chaired by the auxiliary bishop of Glasgow and including two university professors, two lecturers, a catholic headmaster, a parish priest and a student. The function of this commission is to help and advise the chaplain in his relations with other public bodies in the university and city, especially in relations with the local church. The commission is a most useful body with which I can discuss chaplaincy questions openly, and I am helped by their advice and supported with their co-operation. I think the bishop also finds it a useful experience, exposing him to the university's ways of thinking, which are often so different from the hierarchy's, and showing him aspects of chaplaincy work which may not have occurred to him before. I also have the equivalent of a parish council, composed largely of students, but with two members of staff, and two other members who do not belong to the university, but attend the chaplaincy regularly.

Another area in which the chaplain can learn and teach is in relations between parents and students. This is obviously easier in a university like Glasgow, which draws the majority of the students from the immediate area and where seventy per cent of the students live at home. With many of these students one of the most common sources of strain is not study, finance, sex or drugs, but conflict with parents. Every year I invite the parents of first year students in batches of 150 at a time to a social evening. It begins with Mass, with the students preparing the liturgy, followed by a buffet supper, which students prepare and serve. In the course of the evening I tell parents about the work of the university and chaplaincy, and leave them plenty of time to ask questions and discuss among themselves. These evenings can sometimes dispel the fears of parents, especially those who have not attended university themselves, and can lessen conflict at home. Later in the year I put on a special course of lectures, specifically designed to bring the generations together and inviting outside speakers. This year the course of four lectures had an average attendance of 140 at each lectur

Another example of the teaching role of the chaplain, in which the chaplain does not do the teaching, is the Glasgow Medical Group. Since 1968 I have been organizing a course in medical ethics for catholic students in fourth and fifth year medicine. In the first year I gave the course on my own. It was very inadequate. Thereafter, I brought in a team of catholic doctors and consultants to speak on ethical questions in their own field, limiting myself to a brief introduction. In the last two years I have advertized the course more widely and invited some non-catholic consultants. Attendance has increased among the other denominations and interested agnostics, but catholic students still tend to keep away. I then heard about the London Medical Group and saw its annual programme, an impressive list of weekly lectures and seminars given by well-known medical consultants, lawyers, philosophers and theologians on some of the ethical questions which arise from the practice of medicine. Average attendance at the London lectures was a hundred. I wrote to the director, Fr Edward Shotter, an anglican priest, and invited him up to Glasgow. We now have a Glasgow Medical Group, which drew over two hundred to its last meeting, held in a lecture hall which normally holds one hundred and forty. I found that watching Edward Shotter operating was a most useful lesson in chaplaincy work. He took great care in explaining the project to students, emphasizing that its success was in their hands. He took even greater care in approaching members of the medical faculty, to ensure that the organization did not fall into the hands of any particular christian denomination or any particular medical school. Very shortly, the students will meet to draw up a list of lecture and seminar topics for 1974-75. This will be submitted a few weeks later to a panel of medical and other university faculties (law, philosophy, theology, sociology), who will advise on lecturers. I am acting as secretary until the organization is under way. I can see possibilities for work of this kind in other areas — education, law, the social sciences, in which the chaplain is not so much a teacher as a catalyst for teaching.

What about formal teaching? The main opportunity I have for formal teaching is through the liturgy. I am uncertain about many aspects of chaplaincy work, but on one point I am very certain. Attractive presentation of the liturgy is the top priority. The homily at Mass, one or two minutes on week-days and ten to fifteen minutes on sundays and holy-days, is the only regular opportunity for teaching students in large numbers. In preparing homilies I try to study biblical commentaries, but I consider listening to students is just as important, so that the homily speaks to the questions they are asking.

In the chaplaincy I try to put on a course of seven theology lectures on a week-day evening in the first term, giving some myself and also inviting other speakers. Attendance varies from forty to twenty. On most sunday evenings during term, when attendance varies between seventy and twenty, we have a speaker on some theological topic. We also have discussion groups. During term we have six groups, with about eight in each group, meeting on week-day evenings for an hour. Sometimes these groups are successful and continue for the first two terms, often they fizzle out before the end of the first term. So much depends on the subject they choose, but above all on the composition of the group. If the members of the group can listen to each other, they do learn quickly, because they learn to see with another person's mind truths which had never occurred to them before. In universities, so many students suffer from mental indigestion, their minds sated with information which they have no desire to assimilate. This stifles their curiosity and leaves them in a state of mental apathy. In such a state there is little point in offering them more theology lectures, but if they can be inveigled into a discussion group and persuaded to take an active part in it, they sometimes recover their appetite for learning. I have come to think that religious teaching at university for the average student should not be primarily to provide information but to enable them to develop attitudes and ways of seeing life, which help them to understand what religious language is talking about. I think I teach as a chaplain not by providing information, but by helping to create the conditions in which they can learn. Every year I take away a group of thirty-five students, mostly first year, for five days in the Highlands. Living conditions are austere, they cook for themselves, have two formal discussion sessions in the day, but no lectures. They prepare the liturgy each day. Thrown together in these conditions, they learn quickly from each other, experience the joy of living for a short period in a community which worships and works and enjoys itself together.

Most chaplains do not have the time to give formal teaching themselves, but I think all chaplains must be teachers in so far as they try to help in creating the conditions in which the university community can learn.