

DEVELOPING APOSTOLIC POTENTIAL

By KATHLEEN McGHEE

MOST OF US have mixed feelings about our own talents. When the sun is shining in our lives we feel all kinds of creative urges within ourselves and long for the means of giving them their rein. Then, with the approach of darkening clouds we begin to doubt our own potential and reflect, in our misery, that when the Almighty distributed the talents, we must have been at the end of the line. All the means in the world would not succeed in calling forth the mite of creativity from our impoverished treasury. Between these two extremes there are other moods: less optimistic, less pessimistic, but more wistful. We look longingly at the opportunities afforded by modern education and think, 'if only I had had those chances. . . . ' Or we see the encouragement given to young religious and imagine what life would have been like if, in our generation, we too had been encouraged and not squashed, allowed to flourish uniquely and not poured into a mould. What would it have been like, we ponder, to have lived one's whole life bearing only the stamp of one's own individuality instead of the trademark of uniformity — mass produced.

All is not lost, however; rambling among the 'what-might-have-beens' of our past, we find too, the talents that have been developed and the potential that has been realized. And we live in a time of second, third and fourth careers, in which we are told that no age is too great at which to begin to liberate the creativity that lies within us. Put the past behind you, our benign society tells us, and start afresh. There are evening and extra-mural classes, courses of all kinds, to fit all potential opportunities. Take advantage of these and your life will be transformed. Well, it might be; and for some it certainly helps. But lurking at the back of the mind is the diffident query: 'Is this how I become an effective apostle?'

If, however, we set aside longings and regrets, and try to measure up to the realities of religious life, it becomes immediately clear that no one of us is going to develop all his or her potential in one lifetime. We do not live in a Utopia, and the economic, social and psychological pressures of life leave us neither the time nor the energy to follow every opening that presents itself. We cannot be

artist, poet, musician, engineer, cook and so on, all at the same time. Moreover, not all of our talents can be realized, all or even some of the time, in apostolic terms. I make this point with some emphasis, because the cult that suggests — or seems to suggest — that every facet of my being must be fulfilled is as false as the one which does not allow for any development at all. How I develop, what I become, is conditioned by many factors, under Providence itself: people, places, circumstances; and these, with respect to formative experience, are often far more valuable than any calculated and planned formation programme. Further, it is within the experience of us all that the most creative programmes, the most enlightened courses, fail for want of creative, enlightened people to carry them out. In the end, people are more important to our formation than programmes.

That said, I should now like to put the question that often arises in religious communities today: Why is it that in this country there are thousands of mature religious men and women who seem unable to use what must be a vast store of human talent in any very real apostolic sense? Or, to put it in another way, what impact is this numerous band of apostles making on our society?

Crucial here is the further and much larger question of the nature of apostolic community itself. It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss the problems which such communities face in today's world. I simply offer a few reflections that may seem to have some bearing on the present topic. They deal with the fact that in our generation, perhaps more than in those of the immediate past, we have no satisfactory model for what is, after all, a post-Resurrection community of apostles.

We live in the post-Resurrection era in which a ripe old age has become the rule rather than the exception. Jesus died as a comparatively young man, even for his time, and certainly was younger at the time of his death than most of the religious in this country today. He gathered around him a group of energetic, vital men who could roam freely around the hills and towns of Palestine, unencumbered, it would seem, with the vicissitudes of old age and failing strength. Neither did they have many institutions for which they were responsible, nor sick and ageing relatives who were dependent on them. This hardly corresponds to the situation in which most religious communities find themselves today. There is no real model for the modern apostolic community in the gospels: Jesus's community was youthful, not tied to places, and small.

This leads me to my next reflection: size. The religious in this country might be ageing, but they are still numerous. Many of them still live in fairly large groups. This is due to the historical fact that in this country, until recently, the best service religious could provide was to build hospitals, schools, homes and other such institutions, the upkeep of which demanded the presence of a large community. The only previous model for the large community was the monastery. The mission of the apostolic religious is different from that of the monk, whose 'chief work is to offer to the divine Majesty within the monastery walls a service which is at once humble and exalted'.¹ This clearly demands a different lifestyle from those communities in which 'apostolic and charitable activity is of the essence of religious life'.² Yet, because it was the only previous model, the influence of monasticism has been particularly dominant in the formation of apostolic communities. Monasticism is essentially unchanging: the monk is cut off from the world for a set purpose. And this concept has affected not only our life-style but also, significantly, our whole apostolic spirituality.

I do not wish to suggest that any of these influences were in themselves deleterious, but all too often authentic monasticism became totally distorted when transposed into the apostolic situation. As a result of such influences, together with pressure from society, philosophical movements and church Law, we arrived at a situation in the not too distant past where religious communities of apostles were tight, enclosed and contained in a very rigid structure.

This life-style was not of its nature creative. It was static and had endured the test of many years; nor were the individuals who joined invited to create anything new. Often creative hobbies were encouraged, following the monastic tradition: music, painting, needlework and the like, flourished within the convent walls. As to apostolic creativity, however, not only was it not encouraged, it was simply not required. It was not necessary to take initiatives except within the strict limits of one's office. It might be possible to be a creative teacher, for example, or, although obviously more difficult, to be a creative cook; but that was as far as it went. Once one's apostolate had been decided, it was expected that one should become very good at that, whether it were cooking, sewing, gardening, teaching, nursing; and to meddle in other things was to go beyond

¹ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 9.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

the call of obedience. This made for an efficient and, in a restricted sense, highly productive organization: everyone doing his or her own job well, and no one 'interfering in the office of another'. But it did not make for apostles who were ready to go anywhere for the sake of preaching the gospel.

Indeed, to all intents and purposes, the 'highways and byways' featured very little in the day-to-day life of the average apostolic religious. Heavily influenced by the kind of dualism referred to by Fr Laishley in the first paper of this conference, the 'world out there' was deemed to be unsuitable: if it was not actually bad, it was certainly not good, and the structure was there to protect the religious from it. On the whole, the apostle stayed within the confines, went out only with set purpose and within carefully defined limits, returning to the cloister as quickly as possible. Zeal for souls was a highly prized virtue, but the souls for which one was to be zealous were contained within these limits.

All this may appear to be a caricature — and it is. I exaggerate in an attempt to understand where all this history leaves us today. Much pioneering work was done in education, in medicine, in social work in the early years of this century by extremely apostolic religious men and women. But since then many of us have been resting on the laurels of our predecessors. In the recent past, we were not challenged to respond to new apostolic needs; we were not put into situations that would liberate us for our mission as apostles to spread the word of God; we were not inspired to muster all the talents and energies which God had given us in order to use them in response to the demands of his world. Above all we were not allowed to take risks. The questions we asked had answers: to ask a question that had no answer would have been unthinkable.

Now we find ourselves in a society that is constantly changing, constantly taking risks, constantly asking questions for which there is no answer. Within this society we are faced with a great number of religious men and women — apostles — whose formation was anti-freedom, anti-creative, anti-risk, anti-change: and this in a bright new dispensation which tells us that overnight we have to be free, creative, unprotected and constantly changing. This is a caricature, too; but it must seem much worse than that to those numerous men and women who, for years, have been trying to knuckle under to the blueprint called 'the good religious' — at great cost. They were given an excellent formation for the life they were expected to lead; they were taught a spirituality that seemed

appropriate for its time. Many of them have been given no further formation to help them live the totally new kind of life that is demanded of them today, with an apostolic spirituality that speaks to the final quarter of the twentieth century. The scandal is that we blame them for being unwilling; or worse, we write them off and stop taking them seriously. Let us beware of a new dogmatism which looks modern but is every bit as rigid as any in the past in its insistence that everyone must do this or must do that. Wherever the solution lies, it is certainly not here. Nor does it primarily lie in sending people to evening classes, however helpful these undoubtedly can be. You cannot tell people what talents they have, but you can try to create the kind of loving, supportive atmosphere in which they can dare to discover these qualities for themselves. It is from the strength that comes from recognizing in the words of the prophet a personal message, and one that is borne out in the day-to-day experience of community life, that the apostle can find his or her own worth:

You are precious in my eyes,
You are honoured and I love you.³

Nowadays there is much discussion about freedom and confidence. You cannot make people free; you cannot give people confidence. But you can love them if you choose to do so. If they feel loved, if they feel that they are precious and honoured, then they will be confident and begin to feel the kind of freedom to which the apostles of Jesus are called.

In saying this, I realize that I am, in a sense, throwing up yet more questions and answering none. I am not at all sure that there are clear answers: for apostleship is a call that comes from the Lord and not from us. It is given to each one uniquely, since he loves each one uniquely. It is pure gift. All the apostle can do is to try to respond to the gift, and all that religious superiors can do is to encourage this response or, at least, put no obstacle in the way. What is extremely important is that the apostle wants to be an apostle. In his paper on 'Formation for Freedom', Fr Hughes makes the point that a vowed life of commitment can only be lived truly if it is desired. The same is true of apostleship: the response to apostleship must be desired. And that desire, I believe, is born of love.

³ Isai 43, 4.

This is the love I mean:
not our love for God,
but God's love for us when he sent his Son.⁴

It is the experience of feeling the love of the Lord for me personally; it is the realization of being accepted as I am and of being loved for what I am; it is this force which draws me out of myself and compels me to respond.

The problem is that we do not know where or to what that love will lead. It cannot be contained and there is no blueprint for it. When the apostles asked Jesus, 'where do you live?', he merely answered, 'come and see'. They did go and they saw; and they continued to follow him on the roads of Palestine. The invitation to walk with Jesus is still being made. But you need a lot of courage to walk with Jesus; you need a lot of freedom and, above all, you need a lot of love. It is a very risky business: there is no knowing what direction the road will take, or what the conditions will be. It might demand very little creativity; or it might demand very much. We may have to take many initiatives on this road, or we may have to take none at all. It might take us along the road we have always longed to travel; or it might take us to places where we never wanted to go. Of one thing only we can be certain: our fellow traveller will not leave us to travel the road alone, and if we are convinced of his love, his strength, then we need have no fear of our own weakness.

That day, when the apostles responded to the call to follow Jesus on his road, he took them home. That is all we know. We have no idea where that home was or what manner of place it was. These facts are irrelevant. Where he was was where he wanted them to be. That was to be their home. Apostolic activity, and the talents that are required for it, is called forth from the love relationship between the apostle and his Lord. The apostle is invited to walk with the Lord and make his home in him. For each of us, home is the place where we feel we belong, where we feel secure, unafraid and where we go for refreshment. It is the place where the limits of behaviour are dictated only by the extent of our love. In a good home, one experiences great support, but there is challenge as well. We are challenged out of our own selfishness, so that we can live not for ourselves alone but primarily for the others; and because of these others, home is also where we feel most pain. In the end, it has little or

⁴ 1 Jn 4, 10.

nothing to do with bricks and mortar, and everything to do with loving relationships. It is home precisely because it is where our heart is.

So, for the apostle, home is where he or she finds the Lord. If it is not, then we are in danger of creating for ourselves and for others false homes, for we need security and we need to find the protectiveness of belonging. If, as apostolic religious, we put our security in buildings and institutions and find that our protection is given by structures and not discovered in our relationship with the Lord and with others, we are depriving one another not only of joy and happiness, but also of the pain and anguish of concern. If we put limits on our own love as well as on the love that is allowed to others, we will not take risks and we will not allow others to take them. Effectively we are preventing ourselves and others from 'abiding' with him, and hence from being apostles. And whether the end-product looks old-fashioned or modern, we will have created efficient, tidy places that will produce efficient, tidy people, but not necessarily apostles.

It is a very long time since 'what is good' was first explained to us, and it is as true for today's apostle as it was for the Israelite all those centuries ago:

This is what Yahweh asks of you:
only this, to act justly,
to love tenderly,
and to walk humbly with your God.⁵

We have read these words of the prophet very often: nowadays we even sing them. But somehow we do not seem to believe that they actually apply to us and to our community life, and that it is in the living of them that apostles are formed. This is how the spark is set alight in the heart, and gives the apostle a burning zeal for the kingdom. This is how talents are discovered and apostolic potential is developed.

We owe it to those thousands of religious, men and women of the past, who spent years being the kind of person they thought they should be, doing the kind of things they were told they ought to do, often whether they believed in them or not, to be as enterprising and creative in our generation as they were faithful in theirs. We have opportunities that they never had: let us respond to them, not for our own sakes or our own fulfilment, but for the love of one another and for the sake of his Kingdom.

⁵ Mic 6, 8.