

# THE PRIEST AS PRESENCE

By HUGH LAVERY

A SEMINARY rector, ailing and gone in years, was anxious to retire. His staff was dismayed and sought to dissuade him. He agreed that his deputy should seek advice from the Curé of Ars. Having listened to the story, the Curé advised the rector should remain. And the reason. *Sa présence serait un bien infini.*

Presence is the first influence and precedes doing. The primary verb is 'to be' and the schoolmen set this insight in an aphorism: *agere sequitur esse.* In a feverish age it is common to reverse this axiom and the first temptation is to award priority to action. People are defined by their jobs and assessed by their wage. This is an unhappy reversal. The person is devalued and presence has no power. It does nothing; therefore it is nothing. Yet personality speaks first through presence and the real presence of the real person is what the world seeks, for he or she may be the saviour. Willy-nilly, people want the presence of the Holy. And the Holy does not need a function. It may have a function but presence is enough and is experienced as warmth in a room though we can see no fire or furnace. The disciples were distressed when Jesus spoke of his imminent departure. They were consoled by his promise: 'I will be with you all days even to the end of the world'. The Spirit is not a proxy Christ but Christ present himself through the animation of his person.

The pastoral priest animates by his presence. What he does is secondary. Power is in personality, like fire in flint, and simply goes out from him. But the secular priest is in the world and open to its persuasions. The world has its own theology and it is wonderfully seductive. It promises salvation which it calls success; it can turn stones into bread. That is its promise.

The christian vocabulary cannot accommodate the word 'success'. It is the word of the market, of banks, of business. But the secular priest, wanting the discipline of a rule and the corrective of a community, can be seduced by this serpent. A rising bank-balance, bigger buildings, new gadgetry may suggest that he is making the grade. But there is no graph, no grade. The pastor cannot measure his achievement for he is always sowing, never reaping. No harvest moon ever shines for him. He lives in the night with only one star to guide.

The star is the lamp of God and he is called to relay its light. And,

first, by his presence. And the presence which attracts the people and kindles their hope is the presence of a free man. A man free from idolatry. Idolatry is the first sin and there is always a pantheon of gods competing for possession of the heart. In a sense, all television is religious television preaching a counter-gospel of salvation by bread alone. This temptation assails the affluent as well as the deprived. The created supplants the Creator and, unknown to themselves, people find themselves in bondage to alien gods and burdened by secular sorrows. They wonder why. How often a parishioner will come to the priest and say 'I don't know what is happening to me'. This is stark fact. People cannot read their own experience and, when the gale blows and the waves rise, they think God asleep and uncaring. It is the seeming absence of God that deters, his remoteness. They need his presence as they need bread. And they come to the priest for light and liberation. For return to the truth. Christ reveals the function of the truth. 'The truth will make you free'. The priest is the free man and the agent of liberation. They may remember nothing he says, nothing he does. Only what he is. Christ's 'I am' is the indicative which precedes his imperatives. And his great equation is 'I am the Truth'. The truth is not a theorem. It is a person, a four-square man, made of the same clay as ourselves. Yet free.

The calling of the priest in the secular city is to re-present God in the strongest sense. Yet God is not a proper noun like John or Kathleen. God is a predicate. 'Money is his god' makes sense. It does not make freedom. Freedom is the test, for God alone is totally free. Free to do good only, for there lies beatitude, there is the Holy. And the Holy is the Really Real and all people seek the Holy, no matter what name they call it. And the holy person is recognized first by presence which makes people say 'This is a true man, a real woman'. The Holy carries an authority which does not oppress but kindles the failing heart and makes the world exclaim that it is good to be alive. Life is our Lord's dear donation, and its fire is freedom. His accusation against the priesthood of his time is that they made religion a burden too heavy to be borne and people went away to seek something less onerous, someone with a kinder authority.

In Christ they recognized a man who spoke with authority, not as the scribes. The Truth needs no credentials and Christ stood free from the need of titles or honorifics. His person was his proof; his presence the attraction. 'Lord, had you been here my brother would not have died'. Martha's tearful line makes a timeless lament and touches us all. People need the presence of the priest as sign and sacrament of God with us and for us. But if he is a burdened man, preoccupied, anxious, afraid, he will no longer be a sign but a

countersign, one who has been overcome by the world. The busy priest is a menace. There is no virtue in overwork. The free man has time and the great giving is time and the first sacrifice. For we need the eternal; it speaks only through time. Mary chose the better part and listened to the Word, the eternal in time. This would never be taken from her. Martha was busy about other things.

The secular priest must be a man of his time. And times change. The priest must be present in this time and know the pressures that assail his people. For God is apprehended differently in succeeding epochs. In Victorian times the *paterfamilias* was the presiding figure. He was stern, exacting, addressed as 'Sir', and demanding instant obedience. One notices even now how people speaking of some domineering person will say 'he thinks he's God'. A revealing aberration. A priest asked some schoolchildren to draw God. Each presented him as a soldier or a policeman. It seems each person carries in their subconscious an image of God, sometimes benign, often a stern and stony god of endless demand and infinite reprisal. One hears 'I hope God will be good to me'. Again, a revelation of the hidden heresies that intimidate even the pious.

The Victorian god seems to have been male, white and authoritarian. The Victorians laid the accent on order and order is indispensable. But order is for freedom. The law of driving on the left or the right is not to inhibit freedom of the road but to make it possible. Order is easy. There is order behind the Iron Curtain, order in an army, but Christian law is not martial law. In every age there is a minority report and in the nineteenth century it became vocal in Marx. 'You have nothing to lose but your chains' was the manifesto of the oppressed. The original appeal of the Communist was to freedom and Marx disowned the title of Marxist. Victorian order was oppressive and therefore it was doomed. It died in August 1914 when the guns spoke on the fields of France. In 1918, three great dynasties, Romanoff, Habsburg, Hohenzollern, which had seemed as eternal as the Alps, died never to return.

The priest must have some sense of history, for the present is not an orphan but has its parentage in the past. Since the sixties the accent is no longer on order but on freedom. God is seen as the freedom that creates other freedoms. And people both want freedom and they fear it. They want freedom because it will give them space. They fear it because it entails responsibility. Hence, many prefer law, regulation, routine; man is made for the sabbath and the system. The young want freedom yet are often unaware that it imposes obligation. Heavy obligation. The obligation to do good only. Freedom without order is licence. Order without freedom is oppression.

The priest of the eighties is a priest under tension. People ask for

his credentials for he can no longer appeal to his office as mandate for all he does. Like Mary, he is greater in his person than in his office. He is a man before he is a priest; a person before he is a pastor. Christ is present to his people through his personality and belongs to no sect, and carries no certificate. People warm to the true, for it alone relays authority which liberates and enlarges. Semantically, authority derives from the verb *augere*, to broaden, to increase, to widen the horizon and heighten consciousness. Christian truth is experienced as liberation from the unreal, from the phobias and falsehoods which corrupt the consciousness and make each day a drag. The worst illness is illusion; the worst corruption, the corruption of consciousness. Many good parishioners are not happy people and often walk too near the margin of despair. Freedom is freedom from compulsions and pervasive fears. And the deep fear is not the fear of death but the fear of life. Yet they want life but life enlarged and enlightened. They want the real, but labour under the illusory. And the Really Real is the person, and the priest is called to make him present through a life which rhymes with the life of Christ. There lies his authority. It needs no assertion. Presence suffices.

Hearing Christ, simple peasant and fisher-folk remarked 'This man speaks with authority'. How were they capable of this critique? Simply because, made in the impress of God, all have an instinct for the true. They say, simply, 'That's it'. It is not cognition but recognition. Christ does not employ argument or syllogism. Logic is a human instrument and its categories are too narrow to handle the Truth that makes the heart beat and burn. Christ's proof is his presence and people sought to touch the hem of his garment to receive the electricity of the charge strong in him. 'Who are you?' They asked. They sensed he was more than the carpenter, a prophet perhaps the Christ. Some holy and healing Spirit made his presence mirror and magnify a power that liberated and enlightened. It was power within. Within personality.

Christ is the grown man, grown in wisdom and stature. He was a man of his time for the eternal can be mediated only through the idiom of the time. He knew what went on. The price of two sparrows, the wage of a labourer in the vineyard, the money-changing fraud, the Corbona racket. He was not a cloistered figure but immensely gregarious, his life, like the priest's, a tension between solitude and society. He loved the world to distraction, saw it as battered but beautiful, well worth redeeming. He venerated the past but did not see it as normative of the present. Now is the acceptable time. We must learn from the past yet be free of it. 'Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it', wrote a philosopher. Custom must not be canonized. Tertullian noted that Christ did not

declare he was custom. Only that he was the Truth. The Truth is always contemporary.

After forty years in the priesthood one comes under the accusation of being out of touch. Not with it. Valid or not, this charge must be considered. Many parishioners blame the priest for not knowing what goes on. Certainly, the seminary of fifty years ago gave little guidance to the aspiring priest. It opted for seclusion as a kind of vaccine against the contaminants of the world. No radio, no newspapers, no excursions to the secular city. Over thirteen years one became acclimatized to this limbo and had poor regard for the world and its folly. Naïve and presumptuous, we believed we had all the answers. We were to learn in urban slums that we answered questions the people were not asking. One sympathized with the old lady, after hearing a sermon on marriage, who sighed, 'I wish I knew as little about marriage as that young priest'.

The priest is most present to his parish in his preaching. Preaching is the truth conveyed through personality. A dreary personality will preach a dreary sermon. Christ spent much of his time simply preaching, on hill-sides, on boats, in villages, in the desert, in the temple. His command to his disciples is crisp. 'Go and preach'. The seminary of old did not esteem this command. It assumed you would pick up the know-how as you grew older, like arthritis. This was a sad deprivation, for the Sunday homily may be the only time the people hear Christ spoken of except in blasphemy. Most of our preaching is to the converted. And the converted are the half-converted. Their faith gives them standing but it lives under daily assault. It needs understanding, reinforcement, to release them from the idolatries which promise an easier path which avoids the slopes of Calvary. And people are easily persuaded by this false prospectus. Often they move into despair. The gospel is given not for the pious but for the desperate.

A common complaint of the parishioner in the eighties is that priests no longer preach on sin. Perhaps we never did. We preached on sins and there is a difference. For sin is singular and must often be preached as singular. It is a condition before it is an act. We do not know what sin is antecedently of revelation. Indeed, Christ was to offend many by his revelation of the gravity of sin and who were the sinners. All of us. This revelation was bitter wine on the palate of the proud. For every religious system has its original sin which it sees as the root infection. For the Marxist, it is property. For the Methodist it was drink. For the Catholic it tends to be sex. For the Jew it was legal transgression. All this trivializes sin and makes for a false divide between sinners and the elect. Christ preaches the universality of sin and reveals it as more than committed sins. These

are the symptoms, not the real cancer. Real sin is deep, hostility to God, manifest in resentment against people and circumstance. It is total, a stance in face of all reality. And it is not easily diagnosed, and many sins suppurate unseen. Sin blears the eye and we cannot be our own analysts. We need revelation and so preaching often wounds. For sin requires deep surgery and a new light and laser. We go to confession to discover what our sin is.

The opposite of sin is not virtue but faith. The good live by faith and faith is a green and growing thing and flowers in the fields of affliction. People come to Mass to have their faith fortified and we pray that our faith may not fail. If sin is trivialized by convention then preaching will extol morality above holiness and prefer human effort to divine grace. But religion conditions morality; morality does not condition religion. 'Without me, you can do nothing' is a hard but salutary assertion. And 'with God all things are possible'. Even faith. It is faith which liberates us all from the sheer heaviness of sin. From its weight.

Much of a priest's work is in the pulpit. There he can be most present to his people. Here he reveals both himself and his God. Here he cannot dissemble; he gives himself away. The people have sensitive antennae and read the message through the man. Indeed, the message is the messenger. The free man will preach freely; the listeners will inhale the oxygen of his faith and his freedom. It is faith that is the ignition, what the people call 'sincerity'.

Sincerity is the elocution of the true. A good brain is not necessary. It is the heart that communicates. *Cor ad cor loquitur*. The Word received by the mind will move the heart and energize the will. The mind does not preach. It is the whole person; divided people get little done. And sin is divide, experienced as unease, alienation from self, people, and God. This is the sour soil of self-contempt and can end in neurosis. Pills palliate but do not reach the real distemper. People long to be made whole, and ask for the Word that heals, the Word of the Holy. 'Say but the Word'; that is the imperative to the preacher. The Word spoken moves to the Word broken. The real presence of the priest is prelude for the real presence of Christ. Word and sacrament are as inseparable as convex and concave, pulpit and altar, circumference and centre of the same locale. Communication is call to communion. The catholic word is communion.

Untruth is experienced as boredom. It is seldom untruth of content; more often untruth of presentation. Words are given to convey the Word and tired language will dim the presence of the priest. The good news must stay news; dead words will make the message stale, not bread but stone. The right word is appropriate and surprising. A reverence for words as holy things given to consecrate, fired to

forgive, is reverence for the Word spoken and speaking. Christ is always the present tense.

Two languages are available for discourse. One employs the concept; one the image. The aim of the concept is accuracy; its achievement dead accuracy. This deadness makes it unpreachable. Christ employs the alphabet of the image. 'The kingdom of heaven is like . . . ' and each noun is evocative of the land or the home, all within the experience of the little people. Unlettered people may not have good minds. They have vivid imaginations and imagination gives access to the Truth as readily as reason. The weakness of much preaching is abstraction and reliance on the concept. But the concept is at one remove from reality and has no purchase on the imagination. It is the real that the people seek, the illusory that occludes the light. The sermon disillusiones and that is a healing incision. The one who hurts is the one who heals.

Christianity is not a revealed metaphysic but a story and a story with a plot. A love-story. It is an event not a theory. And the event is a person. It is the work of the priest to represent the event and the person, for Christ is for real. He prefers metaphor to metaphysics and sees creation, bird and blossom, fruit and flower as a chorus to the beauty and beneficence of the Father. And people need beauty as they need bread. Beauty is not addition but essence. It is truth speaking to the ear and eye. Indeed, the test of the true is beauty. *Quod visum, placet*, says Aquinas. No one can live their lives without pleasure, and the genius of beauty is to please. Poetry pleases and is more evocative of the Truth than prose. Good preaching is near to poetry for its language is the image. Indeed, the priest himself is called to be an image of the God he preaches and personifies. People seek a sign and a sacrament. The presence of the priest can be that sign and the assurance that this world is not God-forsaken.

In Christ, the eternal intersects with time. The Truth is the eternal; it speaks through time. Its genius is to make free and the priest must be the man free from illusion and the tyranny of the trivial. He must order his priorities, seek first the kingdom. Then he will free his people from persuasive idolatries, from the burden of false obligations, from tautness of mind, tenseness of heart. Finally, he must free them from dependence on himself. He must let his people be. Be themselves, each an *alter Christus*, calling no man their father. God is Father; human paternity is provisional. Only under the Father can freedom fruit and flower, though many presume to replace him. The priest, present in faith and freedom, need not be anxious about his work. Presence is primary and will relay the fragrance of the free. Like the lily, he will be sign and sacrament of God earthed among us.