

Prophets and Parishes

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Here is another of those radical-theology desacralizing books from the continent, this time translated from the French (*Structures of Christian Priesthood* by Jean Paul-Audet, Sheed & Ward, London 1967, pp. 200, 14s.). The author is a French-Canadian Dominican, a distinguished biblical scholar still at the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. The general theme is broadly similar to that of Fr Robert Adolfs' *The Grave of God*, but less challengingly expressed: namely, that the pastoral 'structures' (blessed word!) of the Church unfortunately took a wrong turning in Constantine's time or even earlier and now need de-institutionalizing back to something more like the apostolic age. Interwoven is an argument against obligatory celibacy for the priesthood, which it will be easier to leave to the end of this article for separate consideration.

The first two-thirds of the book take the form of historical evidence about Christian ecclesial organization in the first century or so. The evidence is marshalled from the New Testament and the early Fathers. What it shows (according to the author) is that our Lord's own ministry was that of a travelling prophet, heralding a message (a *kerygma*) to the general public and imparting instruction (a *didache*) to his close followers. The twelve apostles were chosen and trained to imitate this mobile ministry of the word. Thus was set the pattern for the early Church, which at first was quite flexible; small local communities of a few dozen people meeting in somebody's private house. Thus the 'base-community' (local Christians) was identical with the 'liturgical assembly,' and our author reckons that there were no 'sacral persons', nothing like the Jewish priesthood, at first. It was in the third century, as numbers grew and people like St Cyprian (p. 137) stressed the separate role of the clergy as somehow foreshadowed by the Mosaic code, that bishops and their assistants became a priestly caste. The assemblies now tended to be held in fixed places, even places built for the purpose. Then comes Constantine, freedom and sudden increase of numbers, the general adoption of basilica-style architecture (p. 161); churches become public buildings and bishops become officials recognized by the State, and there you are, the original family-style house-churches have gone; instead Christianity has become a crowd-religion with corresponding impersonal crowd-structures, and so it has disastrously been ever since. Large parishes instead of small groups, property-owning instead of hospitality-accepting, hierarchs instead of family

men, catechumenates and Catholic schools instead of the old natural family instruction, elaborate ritual at an altar instead of the simple meal round a table. Not that the author actually enumerates all these points, we are just dotting the i's and crossing the t's. Well, what are we to think of it—is it really good history?

Not *very* good, surely. It is all familiar ground in a way. Sixty-odd years ago, at the seminary where the present writer acquired his modest acquaintance with theology, our industrious professor used to supply us with endless cyclostyled sheets of quotations, scriptural and patristic, showing the germinal origins and subsequent development of such Catholic tenets as the Trinity, or the Eucharist, or Holy Orders, or even the Papacy, if I remember rightly. There were surely books too that one could consult, though one seldom did—Duchesne, Batiffol, Tixeront perhaps: the names float out of the dim past. Newman was a *magnum nomen*, even if read by few. One way or another, we did get the idea that the Church, doctrines and practice and all, was a living and growing and changing organism, adapting to an ever-changing world, with more or less success in different times and countries. No doubt we were rather triumphalistic but our good church history professor saw to it that the scandals were not overlooked. One doesn't remember phrases like the pilgrim Church, or *ecclesia semper reformanda*, but the idea was around and fully explicit to be picked up by anybody interested. So too, a little later, was the essential notion of New Testament form-criticism, at least there was Fr Vincent McNabb pointing towards it in two short articles in *Blackfriars*, surely before the second war? Did something happen to the later generations of students and professors? It is not easy to see why the idea of change in the Church should have come as such an intoxicating draught to one lot of our present contemporaries and such a soul-shattering prospect to another lot of the same vintage.

Our present author, then, may strike the reader as one of the slightly intoxicated; the breathalyser-test shows that his learning is all there, but his judgment is maybe somewhat affected, somewhat one-sided. Can we be so cocksure, for instance, that our Lord's own religious aims were so austerely Quakerish and anti-institutional? The author admits (p. 31) that his interpretation of Christ (as a sheer prophet like those of old announcing an imminent kingdom) is conjectural, but it is all he has to suggest. 'At no point' (p. 23) 'does Jesus seem to have wanted to integrate his activities into the sacral apparatus of the Palestinian Judaism of his age.' Rather, I would suggest, it was the other way round; our Lord did want to 'fulfil' the Jewish religion, in other words to integrate Palestinian Judaism at its best into the wider People which in God's will had to come, and which had been latent in the prophetic and wisdom scriptures. He used the synagogues for his message as long as he was allowed to. He was indeed very consciously in the line of the prophets

of old, but for practical purposes he offered himself as an amateur rabbi, conceivably even dressed as one, always ready for an argument with the professionals. As for the Temple, he evidently loved it, took a prophet-style line about its abuses, and did his best to win over the priests, not without some delayed-action success (Acts 6, 7). We have no reason to think he was for destroying the Temple and its worship, but rather for spiritualizing and universalizing it. The Upper Room which he chose for the beginning of the Christian community could scarcely have been a private home; it must have been some kind of meeting-room that could accommodate 120 people seemingly resident there by Pentecost. It was already a 'structure', an 'institution', a 'hierarchy' even.

A recent book in everybody's hands has re-stated the theory of Loisy and others that Jesus expected his death to be followed by a speedy Return in power and kingdom, and that therefore he could have entertained no idea of starting a permanent society, still less of turning the already world-wide Israel into the New gentile-including Israel for all mankind; for that would mean he was rising above the common apocalyptic notions of his day and region, and how could he do that? This theory may seem alright to critics who are pre-possessed against any kind of personal and active God, but those whose prepossessions include a God who interests himself in the affairs of man will be prepared for the unpredictable. A God who might become incarnate in some human nature might carry incarnation so far as to take to himself a human community, even a would-be world-wide one.

So at any rate the apostles seem to have discovered in their own experimental fashion. It was all very primitive but not bigotedly so. They too made their approach to the synagogues first and if by good fortune it had ever happened to them anywhere to convert some synagogue wholesale they would surely not have broken up its congregation into house-churches. The kind of house-church we read of in sub-apostolic times was much more likely to meet in the spacious atrium of some wealthy convert than in a 'council-house'. Jean Paul-Audet thinks that Aquila and Priscilla (who had church-assemblies in their houses both in Rome and Ephesus) must have been working-class, because Aquila was a tent-maker; but it seems just as likely that he was a well-to-do master-tent-maker of some influence with Jewish connections in various countries. Our author gives a lengthy quotation from the anonymous *Didascalia Apostolorum* (third century, Syria) describing a large Christian assembly, and it is as well-ordered and certainly as hierarchical as anything the liturgical commissions could legislate for today. The book leaves unmentioned the pagan mystery religions, but they, like the Jews, must have had their assemblies and buildings which the Christians would tend to emulate. The sudden Constantinian transition to basilicas and 'public worship' may have had regrettable results in

some respects, but was clearly the response to a real emergency, as was also the systematic catechumenate. As always, the Church was trying everything. One may fancy that our Lord would have rather enjoyed the new crowd religion with its acclamations and processions and litanies and all the rest of it. It is easy to be snooty about crowd religion, but the Founder himself cannot ultimately be acquitted of responsibility for it, in view of that strange idea (which appears in some form in all the gospels) of being lifted up to draw all things to himself.

Today, with ever-increasing urbanization combined with never-ceasing mobility of populations, the problems are again unprecedented. The solutions of our 'radicals' are not necessarily the best ones. Our present author is not as extreme as some who seem to want to abolish all territorial dioceses and parishes. But he does point out, what is true enough, that 'numbers are bound to dictate the form and content of human relationships', especially in 'that most delicate pastoral area of the word and sacraments' (p. 167). His ideal is that what he, or his translator, calls 'base-community' (? basic pastoral unit) should be identical with the 'liturgical assembly', but surely he does not mean to insist that there should be only one Sunday Mass, with everybody present at it? He seems to visualize house-churches, with a congregation of a few dozen perhaps; this would be Karl Rahner's 'diaspora' with a vengeance! Such airy notions can be understood in academic laymen or professorial members of religious orders. But a Church bearing a commission to teach all nations must use its experience to go about its task more methodically.

What is true in all this back-to-the-catacomb nonsense is that the large city parish can never be really satisfactory. A few such in a big city are unavoidable, they just have to do the best they can with their crowd-religion, as our Lord did with the milling multitudes in Galilee. In some rather fossilized baroque-minded countries it is quite conceivable that the situation is pretty desperate and needs some desperate remedies. Even in the U.S.A. there may often be a real problem of de-personalized mass-religion. One hears of dioceses in dechristianized parts of France where the bishop has more or less discontinued appointing parish priests, and the local clergy are concentrated as a team living at the deanery. In U.S.A. cities one reads of 'floating parishes' (small regular Sunday Mass congregations drawn together by common interests rather than by parish boundaries); sometimes these are allowed experimentally by some bishop, but somehow the idea seems lacking in that fundamental Christian neighbourliness which mixes all sorts at Mass and Communion. Surely the mixing is of the essence of the exercise!

In England at any rate, probably owing to the destructiveness of the Reformation, our gradually rebuilt pastoral arrangements have broadly kept abreast of the circumstances. Large city parishes and

large parish churches have been our tradition, but we realize that these are rather a mistake, and plenty of small one-priest parishes are the present ideal, with plenty of extemporizing as to buildings, so as to follow the moving population about. The school-chapel has been the spear-head of the Faith (along of course with the celibate priest, of whom more in a moment). In the small parish, town or country, the priest knows all his flock and they know him. They all know him as their eucharistic leader at the altar, and this fact alone, even in the silent-Mass days, *created* community and participation between him and them and each other, a community which every pastor can develop and use educationally according to his spiritual and personal quality.

Small parishes, then, is the right policy for the future; and small dioceses, too, since the bishop is the irreducible self-multiplying unit of the mystical Body of Christ. As for the unavoidably large and medium town-parishes, in modern conditions they should make special efforts to initiate their own style in community; not large confraternities, which now seem to belong to the past, but all kinds of small special-purpose groups of individuals or married couples, meeting in each others' houses not for Mass so much as for discussions or socially helpful activities, home catechizing and so forth. Let us hope that the training of the clergy is being re-directed along such lines, and that the new educated laity will catch the idea and take their coats off without sitting around just 'beefing' and waiting for permissions. In spite of the 'ferment' among some circles of academic clergy and laity, one cannot see much sign in this country of any crisis of faith or loyalty in the Church. Perhaps by all expectation there ought to be, but there isn't. Even the long birth-control impasse, for all its casualties and its mental agony, leaves the main column bloody but unbowed; somehow they wait, somehow they understand what is happening often better than do their priests. It is our Lord's Church (they are thinking) after all.

It is very true that the Church ought somehow to give a 'prophetic' witness, to society and nation, on such burning moral issues as world-famine, war or racial prejudice. For this there seems to be an inescapable responsibility at the top regional levels: the bishops' conferences need to have some courage and find their voice, so as to reach the faithful through pastoral letters, and the world at large through press and radio. At congregational level too there should be plenty of discussion and action, but it is best done by smaller dedicated groups, especially when they feel they have their bishop behind them. The parish priest may well feel he should give his own witness on political-moral questions from the altar; but as a rule this is not a practical proposition, partly for want of time at Sunday Mass, and partly because he might often antagonize some of his flock who will feel (not altogether without excuse) that he is taking an unfair advantage of the altar-steps or pulpit. People come to

Mass seeking prayer and unity, and anything that seems divisive is disconcerting. This is not a matter of principle, but of the best choice of teaching-method. Even prophets should try to be realistic and psychological.

So let us come to the other main issue in this book, the celibacy of the clergy. This too the author treats first historically, *pari passu* with the size of buildings and their congregations. There seems indeed to be some connexion in his mind between family-style churches and family domesticity for priests, but to the present writer this seems rather imaginary.

Not that he wants to abolish celibacy or virginity for those who feel a call to it. Although the book was written before Pope Paul's encyclical on the subject, it fully recognizes the insistence of the call to leave all things, the prospect of wife and family included, for the sake of the kingdom (p. 49); but it does not see this invitation of our Lord, or even our Lord's own style of life, as the basis for a *law* (p. 77). Whereupon we may fairly ask: is priestly celibacy properly to be called a 'law', or is it not rather a collective resolution which priests freely take on themselves when they become priests? Of course this would appear more clearly if there were another 'law' providing for an honourable exit from the priesthood for those who later found they had undertaken too much.

Our author's approach is historical, and of course he has no difficulty in showing that the apostles, the Twelve and others, were mostly married and travelled with their wives if any, or in other cases with some 'sister-wife' who no doubt did their mending and took care of female catechumens (1 Cor. 9, 5). Everything in the early Church had 'a most fruitful flexibility' (p. 79), but clearly a local bishop or elder ran a household of his own, since hospitality was one of his main functions (p. 91). The disadvantage of a married clergy tending to become hereditary was not always escaped, and a second-century case of an episcopate at Ephesus handed down for eight generations is quoted on page 5; it was perhaps even regarded as a factor conducive to stability. It was not until 200 A.D. (according to our author) that continence began to be thought desirable in the clergy for its own sake; the reason being on one hand a growing sacralization of the eucharistic assembly (p. 20) and an increasing sense of the non-holiness of sexuality (p. 120, etc). The sacraments had to be kept 'holy', and guarded from the 'impure'. The decisive change comes when St Cyprian (mid-third century), followed by St Ambrose and others, completely re-sacralized the Christian priesthood by appeals to Exodus and Leviticus (p. 138). The continence thus commended turns into a definite regulation at the council of Elvira (Spain) at the end of the persecutions, and the tendency gathers force until complete celibacy for the clergy is legislated at Lateran Council in 1059, and gradually enforced.

The author, then, finds a change of attitude in the Church as

from the second and third centuries, when he considers that the Church was so much affected by 'the tremendous dualist agony of the time' (p. 65) that the ascetic ideal gained the upper hand, helped also by primitive fears of sexuality that come up from 'archaic depths of human consciousness' or the collective unconscious (pp. 148–9), whatever all that may mean! It is not clear why the author dates all this soul-turmoil precisely around 200 A.D. Writers like Dr John Noonan seem to discern much earlier origins in stoics, gnostics, and movements further east.

What it means for us today (our author tells us) is that Christians should now return to the primitive Church with its small base-community and non-sacral family-type eucharist. All historical experience shows (he thinks) that a totally sacralized pastoral service prevents the gospel going forward (p. 176); and the law of celibacy 'harmonizes extremely well with a wholly sacralized pastoral service'.

What are we to think of all this? With every possibly respect it may well seem the kind of paper-theorizing that emerges from scholarly and professorial circles deeply engaged amongst their books and researches, especially academic laymen or members of religious orders who may well be far from any contact with pastoral realities and responsibilities.

We do know all too well that there has been this deep anti-sex prejudice, this fear of sexuality, this exaggerated ascetic or puritanical element or whatever you call it, flourishing dominantly in the Church almost from the beginning until it was implicitly rejected by Pius X's invitation of married couples to daily communion, and challenged explicitly at Second Vatican. Where it came from historians will go on discussing perhaps for ever; the one thing certain is that it did not come from Jesus Christ. Was there indeed a kind of schizophrenic tension in the Greco-Roman world between deified instinct and ordinary human sanity, and did Christianity come just in time to effect a desperate rescue? G. K. Chesterton, in his little book on St Francis, long ago suggested something like this, and explained the anti-sex prejudice as a centuries-long penitential recoil from the sub-human depths of cruelty and pleasure-worship that marked the later stages of imperial Rome. Such an explanation seems as likely as another. Anyhow the over-ascetical tendency (let us settle for that terminology for the moment) was there all through Church history, having its effect all the time on theology and devotion and ecclesiastical law and everything else. And nobody would deny that it also had at least a contributory effect towards the development of sacerdotal celibacy.

Yes, but all the time a still stronger motive was surely at work, the motive of renunciation of family life to be free for the service of the Kingdom; and this motive really did go back to our Lord himself, to his personal example and to his explicit teaching. Our author does of course discuss the two classical sayings, Mark 10, 17–22 etc., and

Matt. 19, 11–12, but he seems to want to apply them only to the mobile preacher of the gospel, not to the localized pastors who would necessarily result from the spread of the gospel. This surely seems rather arbitrary. The *episcopos* (and his modern geographical equivalent the parish priest) is surely in his own way promoting the kingdom just as much as the travelling apostle (or his modern equivalent the religious-order missionary).

De facto the Western Church has, one way or another, made the discovery that from the purely pastoral viewpoint celibacy works, and her invitation for priesthood is now made only to those who are willing to assume this renunciation and freedom. As we said before, it is not properly speaking a law, it is a collective promise. True, it is a matter only of discipline, and the Eastern churches have never gone the whole way with the West in this matter. There may be some parts of the world where for practical purposes the custom needs reconsidering as regards deacons if not also as regards priests. But if practical purposes are to be the criterion, we shall surely agree that no change is desirable in Europe, and especially not in these islands. Optional celibacy would be too lonely and self-assertive a style of life, too complicated a choice, to justify to oneself and to others; too easy for some, perhaps, too self-consciously heroic for others. Not that a spot of mild heroism is any bad thing in the world of today, a world that can certainly do with a visible reminder that this present life and its immediate fulfilments are not everything there is. But such gestures are better done in company if possible; spiritually in company, that is, not necessarily in a 'religious community'. It is precisely in the pastoral sphere, the small parish more or less as desiderated by Fr Paul-Audet, that celibacy is most valuable, liberating a man for the work of 'kingdom-come'; liberated physically, of course, from domestic responsibilities and cares, but also liberated psychologically to call on subliminal reserves of energy and interest that would otherwise not be available. He finds himself, willy nilly, conspicuously and evidently the 'man for others', as our Lord was, and he can hardly avoid some attempt at living up to it, *quantum humana fragilitas*. . . .

To the author of this and similar books an English reader would wish to offer, in all charity and confidence, our English experience: that, allowing for the ferment of the period, priestly celibacy works as well as ever (and so does a reasonably sacralized religion, if that has anything to do with it!). The celibate style of life could be made to work still better, with a few obvious adjustments in preparation. And when that unfortunate inheritance of 'tremendous dualist agony' from the third century has been finally disposed of (if it ever is) in the dustbin of history, the celibacy of the Western priesthood will come into its own as indeed a precious jewel in the diadem of the Bride of Christ.