

MARYVALE GRADUATION CEREMONY

As a newly ordained priest in the mid-1980s, appointed to St. Anthony's Wythenshawe, a large suburban housing estate on the south-side of Manchester, we decided to run a big parish mission, called *Come and See*. The mission lasted two weeks with special liturgies, talks, social events and parish activities, all designed to showcase the parish as genuinely open and welcoming to newcomers. Parishioners were asked to invite neighbours and friends to come along; the events were packed. However, months later, it was disappointing to note that despite all the prayer and effort, all the excitement of the mission, our overall Mass attendance had continued its slow decline, although there were now two new persons in the RCIA programme and two Catholics previously lapsed had now returned. What had gone wrong? Why did it not work? Why despite being so welcoming did our evangelising efforts seem to stall?

In his *Method in Theology*, Bernard Lonergan, the great Canadian Jesuit philosopher-theologian, differentiates the social, society, from the cultural, culture. He defines the social as the daily, practical ways we live and organise things, and culture as the sets of meanings and values that inform our way of living and drive us, such that culture stands to society as soul to body.¹ If it is true that over the last fifty years the social, that is, the way we live and organise things has changed dramatically – think of all the changes in our cities, transport, banking, the advent of computers and the internet - then even more so has our culture changed, the meanings and values that inform our attitudes, our thinking and our decisions. We see this especially in modern attitudes towards religion. We live in the early 21C, in a secular, pluralist, consumer culture, a horizontal world without, what Peter Berger calls, the “sacred canopy.”² Religion is ring-fenced even marginalised. In his book *The Death of Christian Britain*, the sociologist Callum Brown explores some of the reasons for the decline of Christianity.³ He particularly points to the 1960s with its sexual revolutions: youth-culture, the contraceptive pill, the legalisation of abortion and homosexuality (1967), the women's liberation movement (1968), easier divorce, and so on. The so-called ‘Swinging Sixties’ saw the rise of mass media-entertainment, better health-care, a growing prosperity and comfort, together with new gender roles for women. Traditional family life has subsequently changed out of all recognition.

Secularisation, of course, has been gathering pace for several centuries and Christianity in Britain, at least as defined by church attendance, has been in decline since records began.⁴ Yet, Brown argues, nothing can compare with the massive

¹ B. Lonergan *Method in Theology* (London, DLT: 1972) 300-302. See also his essay “The Absence of God in Modern Culture” in ed. R. Doran and J. Dadosky *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan Vol. 13. A Second Collection* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press: 2016) 86f.

² Cf. P. Berger *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, Doubleday: 1967).

³ C. Brown *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, Routledge: 2001).

⁴ For this ‘secularisation paradigm,’ see, for instance, S. Bruce *God is Dead* (Oxford, Blackwell: 2002).

collapse in church attendance after the 1960s. It is no surprise that today there are large numbers of ‘nones,’ that is, people who self-identify as being of no religion. In a survey published in 2017 by St Mary’s Twickenham, Dr. Stephen Bullivant suggests that nonreligious people, the nones, now constitute almost 50% of the population.⁵

These last fifty years coincide for Catholics with the tumultuous period after Vatican II. Following the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church during this time has come to a much deeper grasp of the theological meaning and value of culture: not only her own ecclesial culture but more crucially, that to proclaim the Gospel, we must truly understand the culture in which we preach in order to modulate the strategy. This principle has always been well understood, if not always practiced, by overseas missionaries, but it has been less well appropriated by the clergy and laity of the ancient Christian ‘homelands’ of Europe. How can the Gospel be effectively proclaimed today, in Western culture with its huge and impressive scientific, technological and medical advances, with its work, business and leisure, with its plurality of peoples from other religions and ways of life, in a culture that exalts the individual’s freedom of choice? Contemporary culture is full of potential for human betterment, yet the obstacles to proclamation render it religiously indifferent, and even increasingly toxic to traditional Christian faith and values.

In an address in 1983, Pope St. John Paul II spoke of the need for a ‘new evangelisation,’ an evangelisation “new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression.”⁶ The first or proximate goal of evangelisation is always the individual person, a friend, relative or neighbour who hears the Gospel and comes to faith in Jesus Christ. But the ultimate goal of the Church’s evangelising effort is to evangelise culture, to leaven culture and its various sectors with the teaching of Christ and the values of the Gospel. In a subsequent Encyclical Letter, Pope John Paul II spoke of the three situations the Church finds herself in: cultures in which Christ is still unknown, cultures in which the Gospel *has* been preached and is believed, and cultures like ours, those of countries with ancient Christian roots, “where entire groups of the baptised have lost a living sense of the faith, or no longer consider themselves members of the Church, or live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel.”⁷

In its history, the Church has had modest success with evangelisation. Christians successfully baptised, Christianised and orientated classical Roman and Greek culture into a new way of life that reached its zenith in the gothic Middle Ages. But the Church had little success in baptising modern culture and today it is largely failing to engage with, let alone baptise, postmodern culture. Consequently, unlike in mediaeval times, there is now a huge dichotomy between faith and culture, with vast sectors of everyday life from politics, business and the media to medicine, the arts and the human sciences, little touched by Gospel values and Christian influence.

⁵ S. Bullivant *Catholic Research Forum Reports 3: The No Religion Population of Britain. Recent Data from the British Social Attitudes Survey (2015) and the European Social Survey (2014)* (Twickenham, St. Mary’s University: 2017)

⁶ John Paul II *Discourse to the Assembly of CELAM* cited in Fisichella 22

⁷ John Paul II *Redemptoris Missio* (London, CTS: 1990) 33.

Contemporary culture presents a massive challenge for the Church's evangelising mission. Benedict XVI once said,

“Normally it is creative minorities [in society] that determine the future, and in this sense the Catholic Church must [now] understand herself to be a creative minority.”⁸

But the split between faith and culture was already recognised by Blessed Paul VI who called it the tragedy of our time.⁹ Later, Pope John Paul commented: “The greatest challenge of our age comes from a separation between faith and reason, between the Gospel and culture.”¹⁰

To bring all this back round, the problem in St. Anthony's, it seemed to me, was not what was going on in church or the attractive liturgies, events and talks the parish put on. It was what was going on outside church. For after an hour or so in church or an hour at a parish event, people went home, and once at home, they switched on the TV; they went off to work; they did the shopping, read the newspapers, went to the bank, booked a holiday, met friends in the pub and engaged in all the myriad activities that everyone else in today's society engages in. Individually, faith was one thing, but contemporary culture was something else. It exerts a pressure largely irresistible.

Now this is why we are all so proud of and so full of support for The Maryvale Institute, its laudable aims and the invaluable contribution it makes to the mission of the church internationally but especially in these islands. Its motto from Isaiah 49 *audite insulae* ('Islands listen to me') surely inspire and motivate its staff and students to take up the Church's call to the work of new evangelisation:

“Islands, listen to me; pay attention, remotest peoples. .. He has made my mouth a sharp sword. .. He said to me ‘You are my servant. .. I will make you the light of the nations, so that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.’”¹¹

Moreover, Maryvale – or “Sancta Maria in Valle” as he used to call it - has a very special connection with a very special man, Blessed John Henry Newman, who in his 1851 lectures on *The Present Position of Catholics in England* said:

“I want a laity who know their religion...who know just where they stand.....who know their creed so well, that they can give an account of it. I want an intelligent, well instructed laity.”¹²

As a college of higher education for philosophy, theology, catechesis and RE, Maryvale is a place of formation especially, even if not exclusively, for the laity and in today's context this is a critical purpose. For all of these reasons, I was delighted to

⁸ S. Magister ‘Interview with Pope Benedict: De-Christianized Europe. Church as a “Creative Minority”,’ *Catholic Online*, 10th February 2009: www.catholic.org/news/international/europe/story.php?id=34545 (May 2016)

⁹ DH 4578 (Paul VI: *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 20)

¹⁰ John Paul II *Inter Munera Academicarum* 2:

www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19990128_inter-munera-academicarum_en.html (May 2016)

¹¹ Isaiah 49: 1-6

¹² J. H. Newman ed. *A Nash Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics. Works of Cardinal John Henry Newman: The Birmingham Oratory Millennium Edition* (Leominster, Gracewing: 2000) 300

be invited by Fr. Eddie Clare and the Institute to lead and speak at this Graduation Ceremony today. Many, many congratulations to our graduates! Thank you for all your hard work. Thank you also to all your tutors and teachers, the lecturers and administrative staff, and all who have helped you successfully reach this day. After all your hard work, we all offer you our heartfelt prayers and congratulations.

But I end with a request. Your studies and the awards you have gained equip you not only to aspire to a deeper understanding of the Faith but also for service in the Church. See your degree as a deepening for the sake of a reaching out. My hope and prayer for you today is that you don't see your theology as somehow cutting you off from others but equipping you to engage with others, particularly with those of other disciplines, other cultural sectors and other points of view. There is a huge need to bring theology today into a critical conversation with science, psychology, medicine, economics, environmental studies, sport, the arts, media, politics, nursing and so on. Theology can often contribute to these disciplines the basic anthropological component, that is, a holistic view of the human person, an account of what is real, good, beautiful and loving, and a resolution of philosophical and ethical conflicts that could undermine an endeavour. To baptise those disciplines would be a lofty and far-off ambition, but to contribute in a small way on day to day matters would be truly invaluable.

Dear friends, thank you for listening today. Everyone on earth seeks happiness, but as St. Augustine said, the human heart is restless until it rests in God.¹³ That desire, the desire for God, as the first part of the *Catechism* reminds us, "is written in the human heart, because [we are] created by God and for God, and God never ceases to draw [us] to Himself".¹⁴ May the honours and degrees given today bring those awarded them that happiness. May they bring God's blessings and joys to the Institute. And may they assist God's Church to make progress both internationally and in the evangelisation of these islands.

¹³ Augustine *Confessions* Lib 1, 1-2, 2.5, 5 (CSEL 33, 1-5). This passage appears in the Liturgy of the Hours Office of Readings for the Ninth Sunday of the year.

¹⁴ *Catechism* 27.