

Remarks at the beginning of a Sixth Form Course in Religious Instruction

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Gentlemen,

Having 'done' doctrine and apologetics in the Fourth Form, securing thereby a Schools Religious Certificate, and having secured an Ordinary Level pass in scripture in the Fifth Form, it is common to entertain the complacent question 'What else can there be to do?' and the more aggressive 'Why should I spend time on R.I. when there are three A level subjects to master if I am to get into a university?'. These questions deserve answers more complete than I can suggest this morning, but I have an obvious duty to make some attempt.

We are told by St Peter that we must be 'ever ready to give answer to every one that asks an account of the hope' that is in us. It is doubtless a common experience that the rendering or receiving of such an account presents more than one difficulty. You will remember, perhaps, that when God told Moses to speak to the Pharaoh with the imperative message 'Let my people go', the reluctant patriarch found a series of reasons why he of all men should not be employed on such an errand, and when all had been rejected Moses found one which he thought irrefutable:

All my life I have been a man of little eloquence, and now that thou my master hast spoken to me I am more faltering, more tongue-tied than ever.

Moses persisted in his protestations even when the Lord assured him: I will speak with thy mouth, telling thee what words to utter.

At last God lost patience with the prophet and agreed that Moses should stammer out to his brother what God had said and that Aaron should speak to the Pharaoh. Now it was Aaron's problem to talk about God and his will in the world, to find theological expressions adequate if not to their subject then at least to their object.

The problem of finding the words is peculiarly acute in the religion

of Israel and its fulfilment in Christianity, for in this religious ethos the supremacy of the dialogue between God and man is asserted on many different levels, words are given a peculiar importance:

God who at sundry times and in diverse manners, spoke in times past to our fathers by the prophets, last of all in these days has spoken to us by his Son.

Words differentiate Christ from all others: 'never did man speak as this man', and a concern for words differentiates Christianity.

We are not all possessed of the complacency of Humpty-Dumpty, and do not always feel that nouns and adjectives are less difficult to deal with than verbs. It is, therefore, instinct with many of us to advance crabwise, to give description rather than definition, to employ similes and models and myths. Theological expressions share this similitudinous character. The use of simile or model depends on an assumption that he to whom the description is given is familiar with the parent of the model, familiar with the corresponding real entity or situation from which the characteristics and laws of behaviour of the model are taken. And sometimes this is none too proper an assumption. There certainly are cases where the explanation is double cursed, it curses both the giver and the receiver. This is especially the case where an appeal is made either to an unrecognised authority or to an experience which has not been undergone by the recipient of the explanation.

This is not the case with theological talk, with enthusiastic proclamations of 'conversion', only; it has a part in other disciplines. More than one attempt of explaining psycho-analysis, or physics, or poetry, by means of models and similes, has led at the last to the lame conclusion that the model has meaning only for those who are familiar with the reality and do not need the model.

Catholics sometimes realise that it is possible to live in a Catholic ghetto, and sometimes they rejoice and sometimes they are sorry about this. Our joy and our sorrow are beside the point. 'How shall they be saved unless they be preached to?'. Whether we like it or not we must talk to men and help them to recognise Christ and become his friends. It is perhaps easier to see the dangers of our complacency, our refusal at times to realise that there are real questions in the world and that we have a duty to show Christ as their answer, if we look first at parallel situations in other disciplines. Our own faults are the easiest to detect in other men.

It is a common claim among psycho-analysts that unless a man has himself conducted an analysis or submitted to one he is unable to

understand anything about the subject. An independent judgment, it is asserted, depends upon the experience of an incalculable number of observations and tests having been carried through by the enquirer. The objection immediately arises that an independent judgment is exactly what one cannot arrive at once one has involved oneself—the analysis sets up a ‘trap-situation’. You will already have seen the parallel here to certain kinds of Christian proclamation and the objection which is raised against ‘If you believe then you understand’. There is something in the claim—the only way to discover what swimming is like is to enter the water—but the objection is not a silly one.

Similarly, a lecturer in engineering recently noted that ‘the demand has been made again and again that scientists should offer descriptions of their work and aims that are intelligible to non-scientists’. He suggested that his was as experiential a discipline as the poet’s or the theologian’s. The language of the scientist is like any other language, one learns it by living in the community which speaks it. Those who demand simpler and better explanations of scientific work can never be satisfied unless they are prepared to engage in laboratory work for a decade or so. He claims therefore that it is not that the vocabulary is esoteric but that there is a dimension intractable to ordinary description, which can only be appreciated from within. I doubt whether anyone today believes that if a Bible were posted to every home on the earth the world would wake up Christian next morning, so there is something in the demand for participation. On the other hand an English atheist, living in a post-Christian society, could certainly understand something of the text and its meaning if a Bible were hurled through his bedroom window. We must not take refuge in any form of gnosticism and shut men out as if there were some special men (ourselves, of course, among them) who could belong to Christianity, when really it is becoming a Christian that makes men special.

If we avoid the danger of gnosticism we may yet find ourselves erecting a ghetto by defending everything said or done by a Catholic as if everything he said or did were Catholic. We must avoid the weaknesses of Catholic reviewers of Catholic novelists, and of Catholic apologists describing political and social conditions in countries ruled by Catholics. There is no criterion for judging any question other than the truth of God. Not with the weapons of half-lie, favouritism or prejudice can we fight the Christian fight. Only with words which correspond (as well as we can frame them) to the reality we find about us can we speak as Christians.

Poetry does not make all the claims that characterise theology, it is 'not a precept for living, but an illumination of living', yet it has some affinities with our talk about God and his world. Certainly in poetry it is the words that count. If we ask for a precise definition of the relation between world and word we are like the men who question the shearer with the blue guitar. It is not that we are asking an improper question, not that wholly, but that we are asking a more than usually difficult question and if we ask it in connection with words like 'God' and 'eternity' and 'resurrection' we must be content with human words again, words which do not satisfy but help us to speak again to God. Wallace Stevens, in his poem, describes how any man must feel if asked to explain what things are and what they are about:

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, 'You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are'.

The man replied, 'Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar'.

And they said then, 'But play you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are'.

The questioners want reality straight, they want plain straight-forward truth about things, real plain things, but they also want truth to be presented through words and they are not happy about accepting the verbal conditions, they do not want to be told that putting things into words is not a neutral activity. The poet, however, like the theologian, knows that he cannot put things straight into words without at the same time submitting to the requirements of language and thus presenting things under a different mode from that they originally possessed:

If to serenade almost to man
Is to miss, by that, things as they are,

Say that it is the serenade
Of a man that plays a blue guitar.

The poet abdicates. He refuses to concern himself with the questioners, they must simply accept him and his guitar. For us there waits a less graceful task. The Christian talking about God, that is, being a theo-

logian, is barred from such a retreat. His experience and his understanding must be put into words if men are to be brought to God. His besetting danger is to regard his theology (especially in those aspects in which it differs from that of other men) as equivalent to revelation. To adapt Ruskin, theology is what you do to revelation when you speak about it.

If we are to proclaim Christ then we must speak not with the tongues of angels but with the words of men about us. We cannot give answers unless we understand the questions. We do not understand the questions unless they have been, at least for some part of our lives, our questions. We must be brave enough to ask the questions that Christ answers.

A Sixth Form Religious Instruction course must be both of a standard equivalent to that of the work done at this level in other disciplines, and genuinely adapted to those speculations in religious matters which occur to a Sixth Former. From this it follows that a severe and regimented adherence to catechism structures will not fit our requirements. It follows also that the course must be wide-ranging since it is designed to place various and very different questions in a context. The course, then, must attempt to grapple with life and action, with thought and sensibles, rather than with apologetics of however advanced a kind. Since these are evidently matters patient of a variety of opinion, discussion is the way to present some of the demanded matters. Discussion is only possible at a certain level of knowledge—discussion that is to be both interesting and rewarding, that is—and so the design of the course should be one which provides both the material and the time for discussion of a wide-ranging but centripetal set of topics. We may take as one of our mottoes the words of Donne:

On a huge hill,

Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will

Reach her, about must, and about must goe;

and as the other the words of Karl Barth:

Nothing in true human nature can be alien or irrelevant to the

Christian; nothing in true human nature can ever attack or surpass or annul the objective reality of the Christian's union with Christ.

The world may be seen as the context of Christianity and, at the same time, Christianity is to be seen as the only explanation of the world—we must realise the difference that Christianity, in its fulness in Catholicism, is. Not the capricious difference of political optimism:

Now is the winter of our discontent

Made glorious summer by this sun of York

nor the difference that Paul Johnson noted in *Conviction*:

A Catholic doctor always wins the high regard of his co-religionists, no matter how many of them he kills; but the difference proclaimed by St Paul:

You are God's chosen people, holy and well-beloved . . . the Lord's generosity to you must be the model of yours . . . Whatever you are about, in word and action alike, invoke always the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, offering your thanks to God the Father through him.

This is not a turning away from the world but a gathering up of all, seeing it in the light that is Christ, making one with our own Teilhard de Chardin's dedication 'To those who love the world'.

We, this year, Gentlemen, are concerned with the views that man has at one time or another conceived of himself and his relation with all other things—that is, our study is not simply a phenomenological one, such as that which is proper to those engaged upon natural sciences, nor simply a social one such as is that of the geographer, historian or linguist. It is both a combination of these enquiries and more than the sum of these parts. It will not neglect either the evidences of physics or the researches of historians, no study of man would be complete without reference to these, but it will try to provide a context for all other enquiries in the light of those two luminously self-evident beings 'myself and God'. This may well sound ambitious, and it is perhaps useful to remark at the beginning that we are not engaged in a study which is either easy of definition, since its prolifera are many, nor of practice, since it must require each of us to present a degree of wisdom as well as of knowledge.

Man has at all times both utilised his environment and speculated upon its meaning. He has considered both the short and the long of its terms. We might instance the relation between cosmogonies and agricultures. There are certain questions which depend for their answer almost wholly on practical application—questions about size and shape or whether one variety of apple-tree will do better than another in a particular garden. These I shall not regard as being within our compass since we have neither the ability nor the time to concentrate upon peculiar disciplines and to arrive at a necessary degree of competence within them to make much of an answer. There are other questions which are not totally unrelated to practical affairs—as those first mentioned were not without some connection with theoretics,—but whose general tendency is towards an answer unverifiable within the sensible world, not subject to experimental check, such questions as are the

general concern of theologians and metaphysicians and dealing with the nature of time or truth or God. These we also relinquish though with greater reluctance since they have an importance beyond all other questions, but relinquish them we must since our time and talents are limited as much in this sphere as in the first.

We are to deal, then, with a third category of question, and ours is a hybrid discipline, a foot-in-both-camps affair, and you think not the worse of it for that since to consider curiously that which is around us is one of the peculiar delights of the young and the educated. We deal, therefore, neither with apple-trees nor time's winged chariot, but with ourselves. What are we like? What kind of a world do we inhabit? What is the proper form of civilised government and society? What use is history? What can we know of the future? How have men come to believe in God? What can we learn of truth from scripture? What does being a Christian really entail? What are we to do with our lives? I do not expect that you, nor will you expect that I, will be able to formulate these questions precisely nor, assuredly, will be able to give much of an answer to them. But happily we are not cast upon a desert isle without a history. We have inherited a set of questions and an embarrassment of riches as to answers.

Our working method is this:

Moving steadily, but selectively, through a series of inter-related questions, I shall outline one or two answers given at different times.

This will occupy the first period (45 minutes).

After this there will be a homework which will normally be based upon a printed extract from the theorist who formed the main subject of the first period—that is, sometimes comprehension of a passage, sometimes the answering of a critical question, sometimes a deployment of ideas in an essay.

The second period will be taken up with discussion of the question delineated in the first period.

The third period will be occupied with a going-through of the essays or other work.

I shall try to conduct the first expository period in a uniform manner:

(a) An outline of the chosen author's life, since historical environment often determines not only the kind of answers given but the kind of questions asked.

(b) The general context of thought of the particular author into which question and answer should be fitted—the man's social,

political and religious environment, the method of teaching under which he laboured both in learning and in propagating his ideas.

(c) The question he asked and why it is of interest to us, how it fits into the general pattern of the course.

(d) The answer he gave and its relevance to modern conditions. It is upon this last that we shall concentrate in the written work and in the discussion.

It is in the belief that something wholly unlike the doctrinal catechism of Lower School is what you would like, and that you also consider freedom for discussion to be desirable, that I have elaborated this scheme. You have now to make it work. I have but few doubts that you will make the attempt. You by now well know that nothing is to be got out of a lesson, or indeed anything else, unless you have first been willing to put something in.

And what can we expect to get out of such a course? In two years we may well expect that lots of things will come by the way, unlooked for, but you will be properly scandalised if this is all the promise I can make to you. I am rightly expected to reveal the principles and purpose of my activities.

If we have a principle it is that every human action, every human endeavour and achievement, is to be viewed in its divine context. God is at the centre and there is nothing apart from him. Nothing will come of nothing but all things come from God and bear the mark of the maker. Learning for the sake of learning is not a Christian programme, it is incomplete. It would do for Greek or even Arab universities, it has a certain nobility but, like patriotism, it is not enough. Our learning is to discover the wonder of God's work in the world, to see how he has made a good creation and to praise him for his goodness, and to use his good work for the good of men, to make his presence known and felt in action, so that all men may come to know him and praise him in peace with one another.

If we have an immediate purpose it is to see the connections. Perhaps not quite in the fashion of Mr Forster, but at least in a way which claims some respect. We are to work with our intelligences so that we may have self-respect and present a worthwhile aspect to all who chance to look at us. And we must try to return their glance, to look at other men as they would have us see them. We must make an effort to understand why some men think only of the here and the now and others of once upon a time away. We must try to make necessary distinctions and not deal wholesale in terms of 'them' and 'us'. We

try to appreciate other answers to those questions we have answered, to see, for example, how like and how unlike are the answers made by John the Baptist and Marx to the multitude's question, 'What shall we do?'; how like and how unlike the uncertainty and worrit of Virginia Woolf and Hopkins. We must try to ask other men's questions in the way they ask them, not supposing them bereft of sense because their questions seem simple. Above all we must recognise the value of questions. Certainly questions will not suffice by themselves, answers there must be. But it is a failing of which we cannot totally acquit ourselves to suppose that answers are all we need. Authority and direction wall our city and protect us from the chaos and the desert beast, but we must learn to live in the city. Walls do not solve every problem, they provide a place in which we may discuss a problem. We must ask ourselves why others distrust our concept of authority in the Church, and in this questioning we show we enjoy the 'freedom of the sons of God', just as in the great renaissance of scriptural work we show we have full confidence in the power and truth of the word of God.

In the liturgy we discover ourselves to be the people of God, a royal priesthood without fear, a people that lives in the world of God. We must convince men—and only in our daily words and works can we convince them—that Christianity is not a department of life but a total way of life, 'the way' as the early Christians called it. We must put away our isolationist view of our life with God and men, realising we belong to the community of those who rejoice in the risen Lord and know that the darkness of history and sin is dispersed in the renewal of our acceptable sacrifice to the Father, a people that does this and every other thing in Christ. We must put away the things of a child and be men.