

From Piety to Criticism and Back

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Since the Second Vatican Council many developments have taken place which the Council itself did not and could not have anticipated. The Council did not foresee, for example, that the reform of the liturgy would cause the disintegration of popular Catholic piety and leave a fearful vacuum, providing nothing to put in its place. Neither did the Council anticipate that an increasingly educated Catholic laity would, in some way, radically alter its attitude to the clergy and to their ascendancy in the Church, demanding for themselves a place and authority of their own as 'the People of God'. 'From piety to criticism and back' literally means looking back; it is a very difficult exercise. There are many reasons for this. We often absorb and integrate change in a semi-conscious way and, once we have integrated it, there is a tendency to look back at the past in a hypercritical way through the lens of contemporary experience. Thus, we sometimes reach a distorted evaluation riddled with anachronisms, because we now live, move and breath in the air of a different world. However, despite the dangers, it is useful to look back, to engage in a process of recapitulation of the past, just as we do in old age, so that we can better understand the present.

What is piety? A working definition might be: the dutiful observance of religious practice. Within the Catholic Church that I knew, I consider it to have been a concentration of devotional worship at the expense of systematic theology and the study of scripture. However, this understanding of piety needs to be placed in a particular context. Such a contextualisation can only be the Catholic Church of my youth, that is of the Irish/Lancashire variety. The first point to be noted is that the notion of an educated Catholic middle class is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is true that a lot of Catholics went to grammar schools run by priests, religious brothers and sisters, but comparatively few went on to university. The vast majority of working class children went to the local primary school, where the headteacher was often a religious sister to whom the lay staff were subservient. The leaving age in these schools was 14 years. With hindsight it is easy to see how badly educated some of these teachers, both religious and lay, were themselves. Certainly they had received some form of teacher training and could provide children with a basic education, usually reading, writing, arithmetic and needlework, to satisfy the demands of the curriculum and as useful preparation for the factory floor. The catechism was strictly taught and

had to be learnt by rote. 'What are the four sins crying to heaven for vengeance?', I was once asked by a teacher. The answer was 'Wilful murder, oppression of the poor, defrauding a labourer of his wages and sodomy'¹. I was seven years old at the time !

In all Catholic schools and educational establishments, as well as amongst the ordinary people, there was a deep practical piety; this was especially true when these institutions were run by religious men and women. This piety seeped into your very bones, it was part of the air you breathed and was the measure of your commitment. Confraternities and sodalities, to which the devout might belong and of which the priest was in charge, proliferated and thrived. Indeed, the spiritual health and strength of the parish could be gauged by the vigour of these forms of pious association. There were the Knights of the Blessed Sacrament, divided into three classes: daily, weekly, and monthly Holy Communion. A different coloured badge in the form of a cross was worn to distinguish the members of each class. Popular with girls and older women were the Children of Mary , the Guild of St Agnes and the Legion of Mary for parish, missionary and social work. Meetings of these groups were rarely mixed, and men and women were not allowed to visit houses in the parish together. There was also a multiplicity of Third Orders, scapulars, medals and holy pictures. Catholic life, as it was lived daily, was bound together by all of this. The sodalities became valuable social groups through which people got to know each other and made friends. People went to confession frequently, and to Holy Communion afterwards. Holy Communion was given at all the Masses save the Sung Mass, anyone who was not 'in a state of grace' could fulfil their obligation there, so it was said, without attracting notice.

What underpinned this form of piety? What were its basic theological and biblical assumptions? It is very difficult today to understand the absolute control on teaching and preaching exercised by the clergy, a control which stemmed from the understanding that scripture and theology belonged exclusively to them. The deep suspicion of Protestantism, with its assumed emphasis on 'private interpretation' of scripture and a consequent relegation of the authority of the Church to an inferior position, intensified that control. The laity received piety largely because it was presumed that they would not understand theology and would misunderstand the scriptures. They needed the Church to tell them what the scriptures meant.

The complexity of the situation is shown by Raymond Brown in his *Biblical reflections on Crises facing the Church*.² Brown points to a deep conservatism that permeated the understanding of scripture in the Church. This conservatism had a marked effect on piety and often flowed from it; instead of exegesis a form of biblical piety that had little relation to the reality of the sacred books was both preached and taught. It might be claimed that this kind of conservatism, in various forms, is still with us today. Brown detects it most clearly in Christology. Even

though the gospels were written thirty years after the death of Jesus, in pre-critical understanding the Christology of the gospels is identified with the Christology of Jesus. Brown gives the example of Jesus accepting Matthew's confession of his Messiahship and claims that this acceptance reflects a self-evaluation on the part of the historical Jesus, despite the fact that the reaction of Jesus in an earlier gospel, that of Mark, is different. In Brown's view, many Catholics were and still are unaware that there is any view other than that the gospels literally reproduce the ministry of Jesus. For many years the real view of biblical criticism in Catholic universities and seminaries was that the gospels were lives of Jesus.

I would suggest that, as a consequence of this, a certain kind of biblical piety grew up in sermons and discussion. Admittedly, the trajectory of this piety will depend upon where you begin. A beginning was made from the 'top downwards', as it were, with dogmatic definitions about Jesus being brought to the reading of scripture. If Jesus is truly God and truly man, hypostatically united with the Father, and if the gospels are literal accounts of his life and ministry, then the scriptures become proof texts. Jesus is seen as having an explicit knowledge and understanding of his divinity. A certain kind of biblical piety would concentrate entirely on his divinity and although, in a theoretical sense, the humanity of Jesus was never denied, nevertheless in our perceptions, we were in danger of drifting into a kind of docetism or into 'monophysite' sensibilities. It would be possible, for example, to reply to the question as to whether or not Jesus was ignorant of anything that, in view of the fact that he was a divine person, he would have infused knowledge and therefore nothing would be hidden from him. In this case there would be little emphasis on his knowing in a merely human way. However, from a dogmatic point of view this answer would be inadequate. St Thomas Aquinas remarks: 'If there had not been in the soul of Christ other knowledge besides his divine knowledge, he would not have known anything. Divine knowledge cannot be an act of the human soul of Christ, it belongs to another nature.'³ Formerly, there were devotions to the humanity of Jesus: devotion to the Holy Face, to the five sacred wounds, to his passion, to His Holy Name and to his sufferings, but although these devotions appeared to be focussed on his humanity they were, in fact, about the horrendous consequences of our sins and wickedness stemming from our infliction of this on a divine Person.

Another popular devotion in former years, and one that has undergone something of a reassessment, is that to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Pius XI advocated this devotion in his encyclical *Haurietis Aquas*. Theologians of the time defended this encyclical on the grounds that since Jesus was hypostatically united with the Word of God then his humanity must be paid the worship of *latria*, the fullness of Divine worship which may be paid to God alone. It is certain that the humanity

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of Jesus must be revered because the body of Jesus is, quite literally, the temple of the Holy Spirit, but a devotion like that of the Sacred Heart must have its symbolic meaning clearly stated and taught if it is not to be misunderstood and open to ridicule. The devotion was often inadequately preached and imperfectly understood. Another contribution to a particular kind of piety was the use, both preached and taught, of Anselmian ideas about the nature of our redemption. God, who is so beyond us in goodness and majesty, could not be appeased by any mere human offering, so in order to be 'satisfied' reparation had to be made by someone equal to both, to Himself and to the enormity of the offence committed. Thus the Jesus of the gospels is subsumed into the role of willing victim of the Father's anger, a victim freely given and offered for us.

If Jesus occasionally appeared a remote figure His mother, Mary, was not. She was undoubtedly human, as we argued against Protestants who accused us of treating her as a 'goddess'. Mary was seen as the one who, being a mother herself, would have compassion on her erring children and save them from the fires of hell. Indeed, in some of the more extreme forms of this kind of Marian piety there was to be found the plain statement that somehow Mary's prayers could 'change the mind of Jesus'. She was understood as pleading for sinners with her son in order to save them from damnation. Much of this piety flowed from the lack of adequate biographical material about Mary in the gospels. It was, therefore, possible to speculate about her through a vast literature of traditional piety. Even today there is some pressure to declare her Mediatrix of all Graces. Popular piety was underpinned by Mary and Jesus, supported by the activities of confraternities and sodalities. Consequently, the gap between ourselves and God was bridged, sin avoided and a keen sense of our own unworthiness promoted. It would never have occurred to the majority of teachers and clergy at that time to change things since it was understood that it was in this way that simple people showed their love of God and their loyalty to the Church.

Since the Second Vatican Council the situation has changed out of all recognition. It remains to be asked: is there another form of biblical piety that is the fruit of literary criticism and historical method? I would suggest that there is and that we might begin to look for it in chapter four of Saint Mark's gospel. Here we are told the story of the calming of the storm; a story that might be seen as the very embodiment of piety by Mark. Jesus and his disciples embarked on a boat on the Sea of Galilee, which is given to sudden and unexpected storms and squalls. Suddenly a terrible gale began to blow and the waves started to break over the boat, so that Jesus and the disciples were in danger of drowning. Jesus, we are told, was asleep in the stern with his head on a cushion; the storm did not seem to have bothered him at all. The tempest did not awaken him. The disciples, however, panicked and, rousing him, spoke rudely to him. In Matthew's account of the same incident they ask 'Lord save us or we

perish'. The detail in Mark's description is slightly different. A down-to-earth translation of what the disciples ask might be 'Do you not give a damn about whether we sink or not?' They were full of fear for their lives and forgot, or did not understand, with whom they were. Jesus then, quite serenely, rebuked the waves and calmed the sea. He then asked his disciples why they were afraid and why they had no faith. What is of interest here is that faith is not contrasted with unbelief but with fear. In this way we come to the point of piety. In this story Mark seems to understand faith as overcoming cowardice, a challenge to put our trust in God even when 'he appears to sleep'. This trust comes from reflecting on the mighty deeds that Jesus has done, and believing in him. We are told in the story that 'they were filled with awe and they said to one another "Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him"?' It would be very misleading indeed if we were to think the point of the story was simply to instil awe in us. It is not. It is to remind us that faith is about belief and trust in God in the face of fear. This is Christian piety at its deepest.

The Jesus of an older form of biblical piety will certainly not be found through the historical method. Criticism makes us aware that we are not reading a biography or an eye-witness account of Jesus but a gospel, a pronouncement of good news. A faith that overcomes fear seems to be at the heart of the gospel message and necessarily so. The centre of our belief is a Jesus who reveals God's plan to establish His kingdom in power. Jesus himself leads the way through death and resurrection. As E.P. Sanders puts it when writing of Mark's Jesus: 'The story of Mark's Jesus is not a tragedy of innocent martyrdom but a theodicy of creation and fall and re-creation through suffering and death'.³

The death of Jesus enacted before us is at the very heart of the Christian life. In baptism we are condemned to death in order to rise. What Mark's Jesus does is not to ask us to contemplate in horror, as we were wont to do in an earlier type of biblical piety, but, through belief in this Jesus, to accept that dying and rising are at the very root of the Christian life. 'If anyone wishes to be my disciple he must take up his cross and follow me'. There is scope here for another understanding of piety amongst the People of God. It will be a kind of piety more ascetic, rooted in theology and the study of the scriptures, and a piety that we shall be challenged to preach.

1 *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine* (London 1985) p. 57. (First published in 1889).

2 Raymond Brown, *Crises Facing the Church* (London, 1975) p. 24.

3 St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIIa Q.9 Art 1. 1 ad 1.

4 E.P. Sanders and M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London, 1989) p. 275.