

# The Christian as Counsellor

## by Michael Hollings

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It was not until a fairly recent visit to the United States that I came across and wondered at the emphasis put on counselling by the clergy over there. It struck me at first hearing that this must be something for which specially selected clergy were specially trained, put through courses, taught techniques—something for which I had never been qualified. A closer appraisal made it clear that though some may indeed have been on courses, most were more likely to be doing not much more than what I have always summed up as ‘being available’—available for what? Well, almost anything—meal, bed, tea, sympathy, cash, a ready ear, a shoulder to be wept on, a sponge to absorb, a tap to turn on, a man to pray with, a person who can be silent, a pillar of strength, a place of peace, a warm area of concern, a vehicle of love, a man of God, a secular human being who will be interested.

What I am trying to say is that a counsellor is one who is available to God and to his or her fellow men and women to put at the service of both all that he or she is—and has to give. How much there is depends initially on God, secondarily on heredity, background, education, etc., and thirdly and continually upon the individual’s openness to the Spirit, as the Spirit moves in the world and in him.

The Spirit scatters his gifts: none of us possess all. God is God—too great for us—how wonderful that we can and should go on growing in wisdom and grace before God and man, till we meet each other and Him—face to face—and know what we are now ‘seeing in a glass darkly’.

So, what I have to say is very simple, though perhaps not easy: it is given not as a specialist—as Amos said, ‘I am not a prophet or the son of a prophet: I am a common herdsman, who plucks wild figs from the side of the way’. The only value there may be in what I say is that it is real and comes from living with God and man in this world. It may be dismissed as dangerously subjective, frowned upon as jejune, ignored as superficial, but it is as far as I have got. And this gives me a good opportunity for inserting what is to me a basic principle of counselling. There are others who can help—I can send you to them; they are learned, they are skilled, they are wise—let me give you their names; you can only have from me what I have got. My use of language is probably loose: please make allowance for that.

The root from which everything stems is Christ—God: from him we must come, to him we must return—and, here and now most importantly, in him we must live. But we are also living in an age of vast and rapid expansion in many fields: an age of re-assessment in faith, in morals, in education: there are new discoveries in science,

new theories on community, on relationship: in an age of growing doubt there is being bred an almost primitive credulity—horoscopes, fundamentalist sects and pop idols: in the great age of communication it is often superficial, not infrequently breaks down altogether. It is an age when voices are raised and given publicity because they are off-key or seem exciting—and through mass media they can gain a false note of authority and truth in the minds of the semi-captive audience which looks and listens by the million.

In this maze, to whom does the ordinary Christian, or human being for that matter, turn for advice, comfort, real authority, counsel, or for whatever he or she feels the need? It used to be comparatively simple, when communication was less immediate and far flung, to get a simpler lead either from priest or politician or doctor—the local shepherd spoke with considerable authority, was backed by a bishop—and, at the back, Rome.

Now, I cannot go into history at length—and so by over-simplification I am going to say that for the people of God in general the 1960's which we have just left were a watershed. Vatican II showed plainly to the world that the Roman Church was made up of intense diversity. Bishops contradicted each other in public—or should I say more properly, put opposing views. Of course, if one had read history, one knew theoretically that this had always happened—Paul and Peter, Athanasius and the Church, and so on. But *now* it was happening to *us*. It was a heady experience: it gave some the elation of champagne and others vertigo: some cried forwards, others back: a theologian might find his way—but perhaps many ordinary folk and not a few bishops found themselves clutching to various bits of Peter's bark not sure whether they would be washed away.

Bishops discussed, theologians discussed, journalists discussed. An assortment of material filtered down to the common herdsman—the priest or teacher—and a further filtering took place between them and the common people. Alas—naturally—there developed some confusion and even some over-excitement which—I use the word advisedly—led to repression: a repression perhaps especially felt by the middle and lower echelon clergy, but some in different spheres of religious community, by not a few teachers and among some of the more thinking ordinary people.

There has resulted a considerable loss of confidence over a wide area—often for opposing reasons. Superficially and immediately this can have very worrying effects, and allowed to continue could cause considerable havoc—especially if any who have a more specific teaching rôle allow themselves to be undermined.

I take as an example the case of the priesthood—though I would hazard the guess that comparable things apply elsewhere. It appears that a number of priests feel themselves between the upper and nether millstones—the bishops and the laity. The former largely do not expect initiative, intellectual probing, experiment, development:

if it happens that this occurs in a priest, a sense can emerge of lack of confidence from above, suspicion, and sometimes condemnation without hearing. To say this is to lay myself open to charges of unfairness and an anti-authority position. Very well—I lay myself open to that and do so in full awareness, because I know it occurs, not only in my own case but because part of the counselling about which this paper is written involves seemingly endless sessions with a variety of clergy whose sad lament cannot be wholly unjustified.

Unfortunately, there is an apparent lack of trust, lack of encouragement, fear of deviation and lack of guidance which leaves many with a feeling of frustration, in which they find it difficult to speak with conviction or much hope of being listened to in a constructive way.

At the same time, the tensions and demands from the nether millstone are insistent. People really seek and want and need counsel. They often want it in the wrong way—tell us! They vary quite intensely in their requirements, and the priest, in trying to be all things to all men, has to include in this loyalty and obedience to his bishop and a sympathetic understanding relationship with those of the flock who need his leadership and guidance. They will come to him—or will they? A great deal depends upon the reception which he can give them—the straightness with which he can speak; the trust he can place in them; the trust they can place in him. It does not seem at all surprising that some should feel the urgent need to opt out of a situation where their own difficulties are accentuated by the difficulties proposed by the people nearest and dearest to them, their parishioners, those they advise, people they know intimately, whose lives they share, when somehow there does not seem to exist that bond of fellowship, understanding, concern and love with those in authority which yet is so very necessary if the priest is to be strong enough to help carrying the Cross—with and for Christ and his people.

Now, in this dilemma it is much easier to pass the buck—or may seem to be so. I mean to take the line: 'I am the servant of the bishop; he speaks for the Church and says so and so; it is only for me to be a mouthpiece.' I have come across this in priests and laity. I fear it occurs with some frequency, and I cannot find in this attitude anything sufficiently fitting the role and dignity of priesthood, or of the human being. It would leave me with a very uneasy conscience.

I would like then to put one or two lines of thinking which can be used possibly for discussion.

### *Faith and the Faith*

In the near past, there has been much emphasis and teaching of *The Faith*—a series of propositions set out credally by the Church on her authority for the acceptance of those widely called 'the faithful'. It was as though the test of *Faith* was in taking and swallowing

a whole rather indigestible mass of doctrine through which the person grew and waxed strong in *Faith*. But the present reassessing, together with the question of approach to words, etc., means that this indigestible wodge is now more than ever liable to give individuals an intellectual headache. On the one hand, a person may say 'I can only believe this if I understand it': and on the other, he or she may be faced with the fact that this whole area seems to be up for discussion among scholars more learned than themselves, or that much of what is currently written raises objections to older treatments; or that in practice it seems that only scholars can penetrate meaning without the likelihood of error. The single phrase 'I believe in one God' can certainly take the philosophers, and no doubt the theologians too, almost a lifetime of discussion. But the average person can get bogged down in all this and the relevance to belief or to faith escapes him—as, indeed, faith may escape him if he equates it with a comprehensive understanding and acceptance of *the faith*.

I may be very jejune in my approach. But over and over again it is brought home to me that Faith is lacking because not put forward as basic in proper terms. I would like to see Faith proposed and as it were exposed. We are so busy taking out, dusting and scrutinizing bits of *the faith* that we give up living by *Faith*. What do I mean by that? I do not know whether this is acceptable, but the order of belief seems to need to be from God and Christ outwards rather than from the Church inwards. In other words, by the aid of the Spirit the Church is here to teach Christ, to inspire belief in and the following of him in the Spirit, but the way it comes across is more complicated than this because of worry. In the Church, re-structuring, general upheaval, confusion leads to doubt. It is thus possible to lose the true emphasis on faith in Christ, adherence to him and living in him, because the Church seems at odds with herself. 'Let that mind be in you which is in Christ Jesus', says Paul. This is basic, but just how much do we counsel people to cling to Christ, to grow into his mind through his growing in our minds by prayer and living? Are we in fact asking too much sometimes of the faithful by demoting the rôle of Faith and emphasizing authority of teaching in too great detail?—especially in children, expecting them to find answers too soon. By forgetting in practice to underline the paradox of Faith: that it is sure and strong and deep and unshakeable in so far as it is tenuous, untrappable, lived beyond understanding in the Spirit, bound up with the acceptance of God as immense and incomprehensible—so that we are, in a sense, somewhat agnostic for the reason that we live by faith. What is the old saying?—'the more we know of God, the more we know how little we know of him'. Because we have to some extent lost the mystical element, soft-pedalled the idea of mystery beyond our grasp, we may in practice produce a quite wrong sense of what faith is, so that many—young people especially—come along and say they have 'lost faith', when

in a sense they may never have had it once they began to be taught the faith. What they have lost is any incentive to live by a code which seems meaningless and irrelevant and perhaps intellectually unacceptable because it is this that they have earlier been attached to and not to Christ—real, living, a person, God, intimately related to the very core of their being—so near and yet so intangible, so real and yet so indefinable, so deeply loving and lovable as to be too close to be scrutinized but only to be realized or lived.

It is a terrible accusation to make, but it is strongly in me to say that despite putting the universal call to holiness at the centre of the Vatican II document on the Church, the teaching and exhortation of this chapter has been largely by-passed in the wealth of documentation and application and exposition of other areas. It is, perhaps, easier to tidy up the periphery and to be deeply learned in this than it is to live a holy life. But the danger which is involved in such an approach is the danger of limiting the spirit of Christ and in fact closing in and suffocating much of the hope and promise which is based on faith.

Some of the misconception arises from the—to my mind—wrong sense that what is to be offered to the people of God is a safe way of life on a guaranteed through ticket; whereas I conceive the following of Christ as a highly dangerous and exciting adventure. Far from knowing what is coming next or what will be asked of me by God, there is the true nature of faith which is a walking with God into the unknown—a scary and courage-demanding relationship, which is lived in faith and hope and made possible in love and which implies considerable humility, simply because the assurance is in God and not in comforting, man-made structures. Even revelation in a sense only becomes real in experience.

Is it possible that the demands of obedience too minutely reasoned, the dotting of i's and crossing of t's, the very real fear which seems to find expression in so many utterances as they are reported by the Press—that all these things which are meant to be helping and safeguarding are in fact curtailing the freedom of the sons of God?

Over and over again, it is the sense of constriction and even oppression which is poured out by those who come for advice. And this combined with a feeling of failure to live to a state of grace or perfection which is itself wrongly conceived. I personally live with my eyes and ears open but in the expectation of going wrong and making mistakes and being a fool and failing to be much use in counselling. God alone knows why he lets this go on. But he does, and it seems he is interested in my trying and not so much in my succeeding, and at least it is possible to face the reality of my own sinfulness and incapacity, trusting that he will use this 'worthless servant'. So, in a way, we are demanding too little and demanding too much in the same breath. All of us are to some extent groping and feeling our way forward. Mistakes will be made and there should be plenty

of room for improvement and development. I would much rather begin with the realization that an individual may have 'faith as small as a mustard seed' and still be acceptable to God, because that is as far as he or she can get at the moment—and the use of prayer, the sacraments and an attempt at Christian living is the positive road to growth in the central relationship with Christ. This, in time, if it goes on, will gradually permeate the individual so that the problems of *the faith* take on a new perspective as faith itself grows. If the attachment to Christ is sufficiently strong the acceptance becomes more possible, if not easier, and the issue is better realized. But this living has to be at a spiritually deeper level before I can say: Who will separate me from the love of Christ?

### *Morals and Moral Behaviour*

The near twenty years of life that I have lived in the priesthood have all been pastorally orientated. The period has seen a phenomenal development in the world of man, in God's world. Now I am part of that world—I have not been taken out. I am happy to be able to hope truthfully that there has also been a change and development in me and my way of thought and life. It would be best summed up by saying that in my own estimation I have learnt more about mankind and I truly believe that I know God better too. Both these movements have led me to devote what time and energy I have to God first in a deepening prayer life, and almost in corresponding ratio to my fellow men. The resultant effect is not one which I can judge. I have to examine my conscience with regularity, to remain open, a listener to God, to the Church and the world. But it would be fair to say that, rightly or wrongly, I have not always seen eye to eye with authority, I have not always kept the rules and I have, therefore, to some extent jeopardized my credibility in the eyes of my superiors. This has not been done inadvertently but quite deliberately in the course of working for God and souls. The decision is not just simple or egotistical. I was told recently by a much respected friend that when he was speaking to a certain bishop about me, the bishop had said that I lacked prudence. I can well believe that this is said of me, and I often wish I had the courage to be even less 'prudent' at times when it seems as though only an atom bomb or the Holy Spirit will produce any effect at all—and neither is visibly exploding.

This is a preamble to saying that the pastoral breadth and depth of a counsellor have to be vast and profound and real—not merely academic. At the same time he has to be in the mind of Christ, of the Church, from the authorities to the common man. He has to be credible in his own living, setting a high standard, yet human and readily approachable. He has to be at the same time clear and one speaking with authority, yet still feeling his way, living by faith, caught up in the frailty of his own nature. He has to be balanced,



though liable to fall; confident in man's perfectibility by God's grace, though unworried by the constant failure of individual man; he has to be a listener who understands the value of sponging up the overflow of man's problems, yet can speak when it is useful. He has to grasp the variety of human nature and experience, dealing with the individual as an individual as well as a member of a community, and not as a pawn which has broken the rules of the game.

It is spread about today that the priest no longer knows what his rôle is and needs to find something real to do to supplement his presidency of the assembly. Without entering into this subject deeply, let it be said that the amount of full-time living which is involved in the priesthood can more than occupy any single individual, provided that he has the generosity to open himself to the needs of mankind, and is allowed and encouraged to dig profoundly into the basic problems of Godly living, rather than being confined and made superficial by being trained with a wrong emphasis and prevented from growing by unnecessary lack of trust and responsibility.

This whole area of counselling is a very delicate one. I doubt whether sufficient attention is paid to it or, in a way, whether we take into account the need for closeness to Christ and his sensitivity in this work, rather than reliance on rule-of-thumb application of coded law. But it is delicate and it takes time and patience and calls from a man a deep sense of his own inadequacy in the face of another person's man-God, man-man, man-woman, and finally self-relationships. In my opinion—which may today be widely challenged—it is essential, if we are to be other than a mere humanist or superficial purveyors of a shallow faith and narrow morality, to live lives of prayer and givenness to God well beyond what is normally preached. There are many men and women today who are longing for the guidance and the insight and the freedom to go forward; so often in the Church we are holding them back, being mediocre and prudent and limited—and so failing to convey the depths of the riches of the knowledge and love of God.

No Christian counsellor must be afraid to lay himself open to both God and man. It is a demanding way of living: it brings danger and dread and intense suffering along with joy and love and peace and a sense of wonder at God's creation. Unpleasantly, it can bring hatred and persecution as well as deep loving and gratitude. But in this, there is a beginning of knowing what it may mean to have the privilege of filling up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ.

I fully realize that this may sound whimsy and airy-fairy. In a sense it is, because it is speaking in the strange area of living where the Spirit is chained yet begins to feel its freedom. And to give a balance, it must be stressed that, to me, the validity of what I am saying and trying to do is safeguarded all the way by adherence to the Church and membership of it. Do not let anyone suppose that I am, even in my criticism, wanting to step outside. Rather I would want a

further awakening within so that we do not miss the 'many splendoured thing'. And this naturally leads on to the assertion of the need to work in with so many others, learning from them, supported by them. By this I mean not only the Church—bishops, theologians, fellow priests, fellow Christians—but also the wide-ranging insights of psychology and medicine, sociology and so on. These are at hand and should be used for the benefit of God's people in God's world.

One final word. To me, this new decade is a time of immense possibility and hope. I cannot subscribe to the depression and fear and loss of confidence which is shown so often now within the Church. Let us cheer up and be glad to live dangerously, going ahead with faith and hope, not confused and scared of putting a foot wrong. The more depressed and unconfident we are, the more we will reflect this in our counselling—and the less we shall attract old or young or middling to Christ. In the long run, whether our counsel is accepted or not, it will be of value in itself, in so far as it witnesses to Christ—and him crucified.

## **Crisis in the Foreign Aid Industry** by Jonathan Power

Last year the largest aid budget in the world was steered through the American Congress—yet it was the smallest budget since America began giving aid twenty-three years ago. But perhaps this is no cause for alarm. Consider the following vignettes.

- Washington. December 18th, 1969 (U.P.I.). 'Senate Democratic leader Mike Mansfield said that the foreign aid programme had lost its original purpose and he would oppose it. "Foreign Aid is no longer an aid programme. It's a programme for the benefit of American business"', Senator Mansfield said at a news conference. He added, it was no longer being used for the humanitarian precepts (*sic*) for which it was established.'
- Washington. June 7th, 1970 (A.P.). 'U.S. Foreign Aid Chief John Hannah acknowledged today that the U.S. aid programme is being used as a cover for C.I.A. operations in Laos.'
- A Board of Trade spokesman, in 1968, told the Estimates Committee of the British House of Commons: 'I think it would be wrong to suggest that aid has been given without regard to British commercial interests. What I think is probably a fairer way of putting it is that at the present time, and as things have moved since the