

are organized and easily referred-to elements in a solid body of doctrine? Can man's request be anything other than a cry to the Unknowable, a call which springs up from the incompleteness of every system, at the very moment when religious knowledge vacillates and falls apart and when everyone should conceive and give utterance to his truest self? Can a spontaneous request reflect on itself and form itself into a coherent language and constitute itself as an authority where a community might be recognized?

These questions are too new to be articulated clearly in a few lines in the cultural and social context upon which we still depend. However, a few orientations can be indicated: a stress put first of all on the experience of the Absolute in the loss and effacement of one's own subjectivity in, for example, Claudel's sense when he says: 'Nothing seems to me more false than the Socratic maxim: know thyself. It's absurd, you don't know yourself because the deepest part of you is nothing.'¹ But this nothing experienced in finitude is called by another nothing (*Abyssus abyssum invocat!*), the 'uncreated nothing' to use the phrase of Jean Tauler of Strasbourg for describing the Absolute: something or someone who is both our night and our one thing necessary, who springs up as a disconcerting and devouring strangeness and, at the same time, as a *sine qua non* if our life and language between men and women is to have a *raison d'être*. Unnameable in Himself certainly, but sustaining every human word about Him, to the extent that such words accomplish their truth which is to create both a silence by means of the words and a 'nothing' between the words; for in itself the desire for the Absolute cannot be articulated and yet neither can it reveal itself except in request and invocation, that is, by coming within the network and law of language.

This tragic ambiguity is good and positive: we cannot remove it by ourselves but simply *respect* it, that is, allow the 'Other' to remove it 'like a thief' on the day of our death. In waiting, what does it mean to live in the Church, unless it be to practise this principle at every moment by clearing the ground so that a word can be exchanged and shared in a brotherly manner?

The 'Peasant Priesthood'

by M. Singleton, W.F.

Once again the expatriate pundits are out in force penning their solutions to the African Church's problems. Having successfully surveyed the catechists and being shortly to publish the results of marriage enquiries, they are now turning their not inconsiderable,

¹'*Mémoires improvisées.*' Gallimard, 1954, p. 198.

if at times inconsiderate, powers of persuasion to propagating alternative forms of ministry. Few would question the statistical evidence: the shortage of professional priests in Africa, both indigenous and expatriate, is becoming increasingly critical. Less evident, however, is the long-termed suitability and theological soundness of the proposed panacea, the 'peasant priesthood'. 'A priest in every village' as there used to be until recently in parts of Spain and Italy, is the experts' cry. *Prima facie* they have a case. Africa not only has been, is and will be for the foreseeable future, a pre-eminently rural society, but it is also government policy in many countries to create and centre development at the level of small-scale communities. For the moment these villages are merely mass-centres. There can be up to thirty or more of these outstations—the real parishes in sociological and theological terms—dependent upon one canonical parish. They are the occasional object of spasmodic, sacramental sorties, organized by an understaffed, overworked central mission. It seems to make sense then, pastorally speaking, that each community have a resident priest and consequently Sunday Mass. Most of these villages already have a catechist, more often than not a local man with much good will but little formal training. Their traditional role as teachers of religion, part-time sacristans and full-time watchdogs of faith and morals is changing. Even were there still many pagans willing to follow instruction or nominal Christians prepared to be updated, the fact remains that few children let alone adults now attend catechism classes. Less satisfactory still are attendances at his paraliturgical services. Most Catholics prefer to wait for the real thing, the Mass, to be had on the one or two occasions a year when the priest turns up. The catechist's authority and prestige have not been enhanced either by the introduction of parish councils. In these circumstances what neater remedy could be envisaged to the catechist's identity crisis than by upgrading him? Make him a married deacon and—Rome and God willing—eventually a proper priest and not only do you solve his problem of role identification but also yours of providing each village with a priest. At the very least, outstation parishioners who are being pressurized more and more these days into paying church dues would thus feel they were getting value for money.

The difficulties involved, it is claimed, in adopting this solution are more of a practical than theoretical nature. On the one hand one would have to overcome the African clergy's reluctance to degrade the priesthood by upgrading catechists. On the other hand, one would have to contend with an even greater reluctance on the part of the people to accept the sacred and the sacramental from the hands of men whose weaknesses they know only too well. 'Communion? Distributed by a sister, perhaps. From the catechist, never!' Thus the reactions of my parishioners when I put these possibilities to them. They would more readily welcome the priest who became a

peasant than the peasant who became a priest. However, I am not so much deterred by the obstacles to rendering the peasant priesthood palatable as by the surreptitious clericalism of the solution itself. As I experienced it, the situation demands *not an upgrading of catechists but a downgrading of priests*.

Bush missionaries, as a breed, while notoriously rather conservative theologically speaking, have often found themselves, by force of circumstances, progressives in practice. As my old P.P. said: 'It's unreasonable to go back fifty miles for a forgotten chalice, so one uses the next best equivalent, a plastic host box'. Missiologists, on the other hand, freed from the fetters of parish work to peddle their wares the length and breadth of the continent, are usually found among *avant-garde* theologians, proposing the likes of baptism for polygamists and the transformation of ancestral shades into the saints of Heaven. Their propositions tend on occasion to be a shade too academic or generations too late. Women's Lib. movements in Africa have objected strongly to legalizing polygamy and in my own parish I had to explain to some youngsters what ancestors were. Perhaps nowhere is the prevalence of 'theological' thinking over pastoral experience more apparent than in the proposed peasant priesthood. This particular way out of the vocations impasse stems in the main from two intertwined theological tenets: the centrality of the eucharist in Catholic life and its dependence on the presence of an ordained minister. Traditionally linked, though not logically, with these principles are such persuasions as: the right of each Catholic community to weekly if not daily Mass; the need, consequently, to ordain as many priests as possible; the feeling that one hasn't missed Mass by arriving just in time for the offertory collection; the conviction that if Catholics assembled on a Sunday in a priestless concentration camp, yet with bread, wine and a Roman missal, and said Mass nothing really would happen.

De facto as well as *de iure*, the Mass has for centuries been central to Catholic thought and practice. Vatican II simply put this centrality on a new footing. To a large extent the peculiar importance given to the Mass since Trent can be attributed to the reformers' depreciation of it on the one hand and pietistic appreciations of it on the other. The Mass came to be considered as the priest's special private devotion or worse still his job. Even in these enlightened post-Vatican II days the priest reluctant to perform without an audience is still likely to be asked: 'But isn't it your duty?' That it was high time the community content and context of the eucharist be reasserted, few would deny; nor would many quibble over the means chosen, namely to make the Mass more manifestly a meal. What few liturgists in the West appreciate, however, is that their reforms in this respect have complicated rather than simplified the issues when they are transposed to a traditional African setting.

I am not alluding to the world-wide rural resistance to reform—

though any curate about to take on Latin-massers here would be more than welcome to flex his muscles first in the average African outstation. Nor am I referring to the imported strangeness of the eucharistic elements; local equivalents could and have been used. (In any case it is the eating and drinking together surely which Christ intended to be symbolic, not what exactly is eaten or drunk.) The lack of tables and tablecloths, of cups and candlesticks, which make the eucharistic ritual readily understandable in Europe, is a drawback in explaining the Mass to Africans but not a disastrous one. Far more serious a consideration for the Mass as a meal theology is that the meal does not constitute the high-water mark of true human togetherness for many Africans. Men and women, let alone husband and wife, rarely eat together and an important guest is traditionally served apart. Conversation is minimal at meal-times and unwelcome; children who talk during meals are told to keep quiet and get on with it. It's a question of survival not of the fittest but the fastest! Commensality, which the Mass as a meal catechesis pre-supposes, was non-existent in the community I knew. The people could have understood the Mass as a sacrifice of sorts if it had been presented to them as such—despite the fact that the symbolism of the Mass was sacrificial only in the most superficial of senses: a double consecration corresponding to the separation of Christ's body and blood on the cross, etc., How, in fact, they did understand it is best illustrated by the counsel I received from my catechist during a spot of bother I was having with local officials. Although he'd just returned from a post-Vatican II type refresher course, he suggested I say Mass to make my detractors mad! For many Africans, the Mass is the priest's own magic; but are they very different from those Europeans who still slip money into a priest's hand and ask him to say Mass for a private intention as if he were a mercenary marksman and Mass his spiritual shotgun?

However, I have allowed myself to be distracted and to distract the reader. It is easy to be distracted by problems which until recently one considered really relevant. The real problem as I see it now is not how to bridge the gap between the theologian's understanding of the Mass and the people's, but how the missiologist came to contend that weekly Mass is a must for each African community and that without it Catholicism in Africa is bankrupt. There is a danger that the liturgical renewal will make of the Mass what the biblical renewal made of the Bible: a fetish. We have reached the point where anyone who professes to getting more out of Teilhard than the Bible or who declares himself happier during rosary, sermon and benediction than a biblical vigil, is somehow considered less than Catholic—very much in the way the logical positivist, while admitting to a multiplicity of language games, gives you the impression there's only one that really counts, his own. Similarly, a priest who pretended to encounter Christ more

often in listening to the Word than by saying Mass, would be suspected of Protestant sympathies. Far be it from me to deny the importance of the Mass. I am simply suggesting that its importance is not an absolute, that it is a factor of time and place, of individuals and of cultures. The eucharist centrality could best be compared to that of a majestic peak amidst mountains of equal moment rather than to some massive volcano standing starkly from a desolate plane. Let us not make of the Mass an exclusive or even exceptional means to the end—encounter with Christ—simply on the grounds of our own particular theology or inclinations.

But then even for the most traditional of theologians what counts is communion in love, the *res sacramenti*. The eucharist ideally enables Catholics to express their convictions in the presence of Christ and their fellow Christians and in so doing effect a renewed commitment to their faith. This: the clarification and confirmation of what a local Christian community stands for, is the basic issue. Being clear as to our aims we can be critically selective of the means. Missiologists have automatically assumed that the Mass is the best means and have devoted much attention to adapting it in view of given cultural contexts. In Africa this has amounted to not much more than sporadic dancing and the beating of drums where we would play the organ. Adaptation should mean asking the much more radical question: is the Mass, in fact, the means most suited in the modern African setting to achieving our aims?

We must not automatically foist upon another culture a sacramental setting—the meal—which Christ because of his own cultural background found most expressive or which we, because sharing in a similar culture, still consider highly convenient. Although Judaism was pre-eminently perhaps a religion of the word, some exegetes believe that pious associations of Jews would gather from time to time for a quasi-ritual and religious meal and that it is in this context that the last supper and indeed other meals of Christ with his disciples can be best understood. Yet, if we were really honest with ourselves, we could not help but be struck by how little—in view of its later importance—the eucharist figures in the New Testament and how much closer the liturgies described resemble sectarian services rather than Catholic celebrations. Moreover, it is no secret that many of the parables we now read in a sacramental sense were not meant to be so in Christ's own mouth.

Having put the Mass into its proper perspective and in so doing reduced the urgency of instigating a peasant priesthood one is in a better position to attempt a more adequate and authentic adaptation of Christianity to the African scene. This involves initially locating those settings where members of a given society especially assemble so as to assert and activate their values. In an oral and pre-scientific society such as the one I was privileged to share in, the people congregated most around the spoken word and 'spirit-ual'

healing. In a culture without newspapers, TV or cinema, and where the radio is listened to mainly for light music, community activities gravitate around the spoken word. Hence the African's delight and the European's annoyance at the interminable palavers and incessant *shauris*. People, young as well as old, spend hours in conversation, assisting at neighbourhood conciliation councils, attending meetings, listening to the elders or strangers. For us a meeting is a means to getting something done; for the Africans a meeting is a happening, an end itself.

Besides this first cluster of contexts around the spoken word, there is a second setting which drew the people together in their concern for and efforts to cope with spirit-ual disorders, i.e. disorders caused by spirits. While progress in Africa is leading to a diminishing preoccupation with ancestors, in keeping with the collapse of the extended family, it brings tensions of a new kind, especially between men and women, which tensions are often personified as spirits. Women are increasingly aware of their rights but as yet rarely find themselves in a position to claim them outright. Consciously or unconsciously these frustrated females allow themselves to be possessed by spirits who claim their rights—a new dress, a decent pair of sandals—for them from reluctant menfolk. Weekly, when it was not daily, I attended sessions when these spirits were exorcized, exhorted to leave their victims in peace. These sessions were as harmless to faith and morals as is the average U.C.M. meetings and were certainly as effective in terms of group psychotherapy. The women were able to air their grievances publicly and spread the burden over the community as a whole.

The official liturgy of the Catholic Church was completely peripheral to these two key concerns of the local community. The people find it hard to follow readings from the Bible and the setting within the church for the liturgy of the word is stilted and artificial. The Mass proper, despite concessions to lay participation, is still very much a one-man show; and the Church, at least in my part of the world, tended to act like an ostrich when faced with the problem of spirit possession or dismissed it as sheer superstition or diabolical nonsense. Yet Christ to his contemporaries was, above all, a man with power over spirits. And it is this that impressed the apostles most (Acts 10, 38). How far we, i.e. expatriates who rely on the Roman liturgical reformers to give us the lead, are out of touch with the realities of mission life is perhaps no more manifest than in our allowing the curtailing of baptismal exorcism and the actual abolishing of the order itself to pass without one note of protest. We could learn a great deal from the success of the sects. Contrary to a rather common conviction among Catholics, independent African Churches move to the left and not to the right; towards Pentecostalism and faith healing, not towards clericalism and sacramentalism. The impressive Aladura or praying church of Nigeria, for instance,

celebrates the eucharist only four times a year. Like the church of the apostles, Africa's 'apostolic churches' are concerned with prophetic witness to the Word and the bringing of His saving power to the spirit-ually sick.

Let me draw these rather random reflections to a declaratory conclusion. I am not advocating the abolition of either the eucharist or the priesthood. I am simply asking we recognize: (1) that the Mass, even as it exists in the minds of post-Vatican II missiologists, never caught on in Africa and will not for some time to come; (2) that meanwhile there might be alternative and perhaps even more effective ways of achieving our apostolic aims in Africa; (3) that married deacons, ordained women and peasant priests are compromise concessions within the context of a clericalistic ecclesiology; (4) that rather than seek to clericalise our catechists and church elders we should educate them as leaders of concrete Catholic communities; as servants of the Word in its broadest connotation, not simply in a strictly liturgical setting, though this is important too, but in the whole complex context of the spoken word: charring meetings, individual and group counselling, non-directive community development and so on; (5) that we must look again at the whole problem of exorcism or of mental health as it confronts us on the missions. At the moment Extreme Unction is administered by the priest alone and then only to those physically in danger of death. For the people I knew, a person possessed by a spirit was in mortal danger, much more than if he'd been merely afflicted with leprosy or sleeping sickness. Rome has recently modified the ruling on this, the last sacrament. Why not take the problem a step further on the missions by bringing it to bear on those 'spirit-ually' sick. 'But what you are proposing is pure Protestantism!' I am interested neither in being stuck with or sticking on labels. All I am interested in is finding an alternative ministry which fits the facts as I see them. And as I see them the peasant priesthood squares more with conventional Catholicism than with the pastoral situation in present-day rural Africa.