

Comment

The Principle of Fruitfulness

'The original meaning of holiness was this: being transferred to God's sphere. Anyone who has been dispossessed in this way is no longer subject purely to the laws of human cause and effect but - because God can do with him what he will - to the laws of divine fruitfulness. The principle of fruitfulness of a mission imparted by God is no longer primarily a human principle but a divine one.'

Hans Urs von Balthasar

At a meeting of Scottish priests one of their number was complaining about a letter issued by one of the Scottish bishops. In it the bishop claimed that the Catholic Church in Scotland had never been in as good a state as it is today. The priest who told the story thought this was manifestly untrue and misleading. It was 'obvious' that things were much worse now than they had been in the past. Similar claims and counter-claims are often made in England and other parts of Europe. Much of what passes for theological discussion these days is couched in these terms. It is either the "best of times" or the "worst of times", "the age of wisdom" or "the age of foolishness", it is the "epoch of belief" or the "epoch of incredulity". Now, to a theologian none of this makes sense at all. Within the providence of God there is no space for measuring the effectiveness of grace in terms of productivity and human advancement. Full seminaries, obedient faithful, priests in clerical dress and tuneful congregations are not necessarily signs of religious vitality. After all we preach Christ and him crucified, folly and a stumbling block, hardly a triumph for humanity. So, are things better or worse than they were in previous years? Are these the best of times or the worst of times? Does such a discussion make sense?

Were things better when there were more priests about and people had more sense of reverence and regard for the holy? Perhaps not in Aberdeen in the thirteenth century, since the bishop had explicitly to forbid wrestling bouts and lasciviousness in churches. In 1516, when the archbishop of St Andrews summoned his clergy to meet him, he had to warn them to turn up in clean clerical dress with their hair properly cut short. They were ordered to crop their dangling hair, to give up their fashionable clothes and to get rid of their full beards.

Perhaps things were slightly better when regional attitudes were not so pronounced and bishops were able to agree on common policies. However, they do not seem to have been that much better in 1545 when

the Archbishop of Glasgow and the Archbishop of St Andrews were attending the liturgy in St Mungo's Cathedral in Glasgow. Interdiocesan rivalries led to a riot between the clergy of both dioceses when the Archbishops' processions met at the entrance to the choir. Their processional crosses were used as jousting poles and several of their respective canons were seriously injured. Were things any better in Glasgow in the nineteenth century when an obstinate auxiliary bishop, believing that the only authentic expression of Catholicism was the Irish variety, caused his own ordinary to crack under the strain inducing premature senility and amnesia? The resulting chaos produced two parties amongst the clergy, neither of whom would speak to the other. So, not even the Irish can be trusted. But we knew that anyway since St Patrick himself had trouble with the Irish clergy. Way back in the fifth century he was telling them off for not wearing clerical dress and behaving themselves. "Any cleric who is seen without a long tunic, and does not cover the shameful parts beneath his belly, whose hair is not cut in the Roman fashion, and whose wife goes about with her hair unveiled" is to be severely disciplined. Given all of that maybe we are not too badly off these days and perhaps the worst enemy we have to face is discouragement and the extinguishing of joy.

St Mark sets great store by the following of Christ, great exertion is demanded of the apostles when they hear his call and answer it. St Luke presents a gentler picture. His characters wait, patiently and humbly, for the Lord to visit, to come to call on them. There are two possible responses to God's call. You can stand to and be ready, or you can stand aside. The heroes and heroines of Luke's Gospel: Mary, the mother of God, Elizabeth, Zachary, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna all stood ready waiting. Out of their endurance came joy. That joy which exults in God's keeping of his promises. The joy which belongs to the one who accepts that he is part of a story whose author is God. In that context, theories about progress and decline in religion are redundant. As Newman once wrote:

"Each receives and transmits the sacred flame, trimming it in rivalry of his predecessor, and fully purposed to send it on as bright as it has reached him; and thus, the self-same fire, . . . though seeming at intervals to fail, has at length reached us in safety, and will in like manner as we trust, be carried forward even to the end . . . Often religion seems to be failing when it is only changing its form."

As Mary, John, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna and eventually the apostles discovered, the door into Christ's sorrow is the door into his joy.

AJW