

the 'armed struggle' has gained it. British officials may claim that Sinn Fein represents a minority in a minority. However, this minority is not negligible. It has secured a hearing with the Vice-President of the United States and it is only a matter of time before the President himself will meet Mr Adams (Mr Clinton seems to be in the business of collecting islands at the moment). Sinn Fein may publicly proclaim its distance from the IRA, and the British Government may assert that it never gives in to terror, but things are looking a little different now.

In the midst of all of this where are the Unionists? The official Unionists have been keeping very quiet. They realise that they have very few cards to play. They have few if any powerful allies abroad and not many more on the mainland of Britain. They realise that the economy of Northern Ireland is devastated and, without a settlement, can only decline into oblivion, with all that entails for social disorder. They cannot in any way publicly associate with Loyalist paramilitaries, they are forced to rely on whatever the British Government can secure for them. In the end economic and political realities will weigh much more with British Governments than any concerns for a minority within a minority in the British Isles. The Ceasefire gives some cause for hope, but not everybody will be satisfied. Some compromises will have to be made. A new story will be written, but it is a story which must include three-year old Jonathan Ball and twelve year-old Jonathan Parry, as well as Ian Gow, Lady Tebbit, the victims of the Enniskillen bombing and many thousands of others. It is not only Republican patriots who have suffered and died for Ireland. If Ireland is to have peace that should not be forgotten.

AJW

## The Profession of Conversion

*A Sermon preached at the Solemn Profession of Brendan Slevin OP by Fr. Malcolm McMahon OP, Prior Provincial, at Blackfriars, Oxford, 10 September 1994*

Brendan,

I am sure that you are here only because of God's mercy. It is what you seek but it is also that which motivates you and has brought you to this point in your life, and our lives. What you are about to do is to make public your conversion. That which in most of us is a slow process of becoming aware of the God who is at work in each us. Making

profession is making others aware of what has happened within you. Not for us a private, personal drawing closer to God, but today we all want the outward sign of the inward grace which has been nibbling away in you for some time. On your personal journey of faith you want to take others with you. You want to tell others the good news that you experience. So in a few moments you will make profession and vow obedience — two things.

Dominican profession is more than just making a vow, though it includes it. What is actually going on is more than the simple act of placing your hands in mine and taking an oath. In making profession you are taking steps in your conversion. These public steps are preaching. You are publicly stating that you are converting away from at least three aspects of life to show the world that there is more to life than that which our senses perceive.

By making profession you turn once again to face God and will turn away from the age in which we live and seek out eternal truths, leaving behind the ephemeral and fashionable. You will leave behind the place in which you have had your existence and become some one who will be moved around in the service of God's people and you will lose yourself. Not for you the heresy of self-fulfilment, as Fr. McNabb often said. And why you? Why this Order? Well, we all hope that by our profession others will turn their face to God and away from those things which fill our lives and lead us nowhere. We all believe that by our lives we will transform this world. A belief which is a bit idealistic and far-fetched but not unrealistic.

Dominican profession is characterised not simply by what you give up but also by what you get back. It is a two-way process. You are not stepping off the edge of the cliff, falling into the abyss of self-abandonment and renunciation of God's created world. Dominican profession may feel like that but it is not actually what happens. When you place your hands in mine you are not simply giving up your life to God. I grasp your hands and place in them great gifts on behalf of the brethren. This is symbolised in the *Book of Constitutions* which contains the wisdom of our way of life. Our part of the profession is that we give you the values of our life. Riches beyond measure.

Obedience in our tradition is about hearing and listening. We hear what each other has to say; that is how our Constitutions allow the *Holy Spirit* voice in our meetings. But there is more than that. We also hear the cry of the weak and poor. And we are obedient to their pleading. Just as a mother is obedient to the cries of a hungry and wet but powerless child lying in its cot so too we have been given that gift of hearing the pleas of the weak in our midst. And first and foremost

our preaching starts with listening and hearing. Obedience is the source of preaching because it enables us to listen.

Patience is a rather unlikely value which you will be given. Not in the sense of being long-suffering, though many of your brethren may see that as a part of their vocation. But certainly in the sense of learning the meaning of suffering. Your life of study and prayer and chastity all require great patience. They all require a certain amount of pain; none of these comes easy. They are activities which you will undertake largely on your own. You will experience the loneliness of study. Sitting before that blank sheet of paper waiting for the first word to come into your mind is an experience of being alone which we all encounter time and time again. Being alone with God as you pray in your cell can be frightening and lonely. The celibate life, sleeping on your own, being chaste in your relationships can also be solitary and threatening. Your asceticism as a Dominican is located in these three things: study, prayer and chastity. But in their pursuit you will not just understand life and people and feel what they feel, but the God who gave His Son to suffer with and for us will reveal Himself to you.

It is a strange paradox that you have joined a religious order to become closer to the world which you left. But it is in humility that we have a most precious gift. Not a false humility which is at best a posture or at worse self-destruction but a real understanding that our place is close to the ground, in the humus, not on a flight of fantasy to the stars or escaping to other unreal worlds. The Community, another of these values, will see that you remain humble as you learn that oneness of spirit and purpose and end does not crush diversity and freedom.

When a young Frenchman last century offered himself to Père Lacordaire, he was asked why he wanted to be a Dominican. And his answer was that when he read the gospels he did not see there a black monk or a white monk but a poor preacher. And it is in your poverty that you will find, and others will see in you, the poor preacher that Christ was.

Making profession then as a Dominican is more like bungee jumping than suicide. You have to place your faith in the elastic band which will not only save you but also make you bounce back. The values of our life, the strands of the rope (obedience, patience, humility, community, poverty) are our gift to you this day, not a safety net or a lifeline but the sources of your power as a preaching friar. In exchange for your vow you will get a vote and a voice. Never use that voice to crush the weak but use it to tell of God's mercy which you seek today.