

Aids and All Saints

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A sermon given by a London senior social worker on All Saints' Day 1986, during the Spode House conference 'The Catholic Church and Aids'.

It is a happy chance for me to preach the sermon at Mass on All Saints' Day, because twenty years ago today I became a Catholic. It is a doubly happy chance that I should do this at a conference on the Catholic Church and Aids, for when we think about the saints and sanctity we will arrive at a clearer idea of what, Aids being in our midst, we can do about it.

For twenty years, each All Saints' Day, I have heard homilies which have all had one theme in common—that today is the feast primarily of the unsung heroes of the Church—those countless men and women not singled out for special mention, through canonisation and special feast days, who are in heaven. As an antidote to the plaster statue school of piety which manages for me to make the whole idea of sanctity at once impossibly remote and unattractive, I can only applaud the general trend of All Saints' homilies. (Who is really inspired by knowing that St. Aloysius, as a baby, refused his mother's milk on Fridays?) Also it does us no harm to be reminded that we are all called to be saints, that our hallowing—so far from being some horrid obstacle course comprised solely of self-denial and martyrdom—is the great gift of life that God has in mind for all of us.

But, for a change, I want to stand against the trend on this All Saints' Day at this conference on Aids. I want us to become clearer about what we, the Church, can and must do in the light of the examples of some of the saints and with the help of their prayers. There are four marks of holiness that I want us to reflect on and to apply to ourselves. These marks are: integrity, love, courage and humility.

First, integrity. I might say honesty. I might say faith. It is surely one of the most undersung glories of the Church that it proclaims the essential reasonableness of existence, that it celebrates humanity's reasoning powers, asserts that there is no 'no-go area' for human intellectual activity. The Church celebrates reason. The Church is the

enemy of superstition. The Church gives us no entitlement to hold discreditable beliefs. The Church encourages us to think.

Do you recognise us in that? Is that how we come across?

There is now a lot known about Aids, and particularly about how it is transmitted. Nor are the essential facts particularly difficult to grasp. Because of that and because of the importance of the subject, no Catholic should be in total ignorance, and those of us whose work makes it likely that we come into contact with Aids must be especially well informed. With the exception of a well-defined list of practices, there is no danger of contracting the disease.

Yet stories of hysteria and unreason abound. Only a handful of dentists in London are prepared to treat HIV +ve patients (carriers of 'the Aids virus'). Many G.P.s have crossed them off their lists. Aids patients in 1986 have been left alone in hospitals, their food left at the door. Bodies have been sealed in polythene and rushed to crematoria to be burnt without rite or ceremony.

Where are we in all this—a sizeable body of people theoretically committed to stand against ignorance and hysteria? Is the tiny handful of dentists I mentioned composed entirely of Catholics? I have no reason to think so. Are Catholic doctors recommended to people by the Terence Higgins Trust as being particularly welcoming? I don't hear so. Do our priests press us to value and exemplify the Church's love of reason and intolerance of indiscreditable belief? Is Cardinal Ratzinger currently preparing a letter to the bishops of the world on the subject of combatting error and hysteria with particular regard to Aids? Probably not. Rather, there is a depressingly regular stream of letters in the Catholic press from obviously devout Catholics clearly drawing comfort from an idolatrous notion of a vengeful and incompetent God who, in his fundamentalist desire to wipe out homosexuals and drug addicts, seems clumsily to kill haemophiliacs, Africans and faithful wives at the same time. Such a view of God, which was already passé in the time of Job, can have no place in the New Covenant.

For throughout the history of the Church holy men and women have worshipped God with, among other things, their considerable minds; they have lived their faith most fully by not running away from reason and from knowledge. They have given us, through their doubting and questioning and recasting, an inheritance immeasurably richer because of them. That we might be worthy of their legacy—St Paul, St Augustine, St Bede, St Anselm, St Thomas Aquinas—pray for us.

The second hallmark of sanctity which it can help us to reflect on is love. There can be nothing controversial or surprising in that. Love is the very nature of God. It is in our love for one another and our love for the world that we shall be known among men. Not, of course that we have a monopoly on love. We should rejoice at the response of the gay

community in particular to the fear of those who are HIV +ve, to the plight of those who have Aids. We should be thankful that gay Catholics are playing their part in all of this. Yet we cannot take human love for granted, as if to imply that we as Catholics have nothing special to say or to exemplify. To do so would be to insult those countless men and women who have validated the claim of the Church to be the Body of Christ in their own bodies, in their own lives.

For Christians, love is not means-tested. We do not earn the right to loving care. There are in the Church no deserving poor. None of us is worthy, yet despite that, God loves us totally and we must love him and our neighbours as ourselves. That is the distinctive Christian message in one sentence. So the morality or otherwise of certain homosexual acts, or of promiscuity, or of intravenous drug abuse, is completely beside the point. Faced with people frightened, in pain, and dying, we do not start arguing the pros and cons of traditional Christian sexual morality, like Schoolmen debating the number of angels that can dance on the point of a pin. Of course, all of us who are in a position to do so must tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about the dangers of contracting Aids, but we must be very careful never to insert some moralistic and perhaps not wholly accurate point about sexual behaviour, or we run the risk, the damnable risk, of forfeiting the opportunity to show Christ's love and to let that love help and inspire hope and heal.

Then why, a year ago, when a hospice for Aids was planned in the Archdiocese of New York, was it Catholic parishioners who organised petitions and objected to the very idea? Such an attitude is not permissible in a Catholic. Nobody is undeserving of care and love and respect. There is, as a matter of fact, some dissent within the Church about the absolute morality of any homosexual act. I have no interest here in contributing to that debate, which in any case becomes less and less relevant to Aids with every month that passes. But there is no loyal opposition, no faction within the Church, that can hold that certain people are less deserving of care and love than others. We are a sizeable minority in this country and we should be saying and showing that unarguable truth to the world. What an opportunity! That we should take it—St Mary Magdalen, St Francis, St Philip Neri, St John of God—pray for us.

So far there has been no need to mention the courage which Christ calls us to when he tells us 'He who loses his life will save it.' No greater heroism is called for from us in being with, in caring for, those who have Aids than in being with, caring for, any other seriously ill people. It is, however, worth asking in passing 'What if that had not been so?' What if any form of contact with Aids sufferers brought with it a serious risk of infection? Would we then be absolved from the need to care? Of course

not; that goes without saying. And we have a rich inheritance of men and women throughout our history who have exposed themselves to just such risks. Entire religious orders have died out through caring for victims of the plague. St John Southworth risked arrest and execution, being a Catholic priest in England, as well as contagion, because he made himself conspicuous by staying with the stricken in the slums of Westminster during the plague of 1642, when most other pastors and physicians had fled to the safety of Hampstead.

But we must reflect on the saintly virtue of courage because it is going to be demanded of the great majority of us at some point. Only those who negotiate life, avoiding physical pain and moral conflict, felled without warning at the end by a massive coronary, can hope to escape the summons to courage, and I dare not pray for a life or a death like that for myself. All the rest of us will one day have to face the abandonment of everything we know and love and feel safe in. Aids sufferers face that summons now.

My own experience of being with people who are dying is that neither great age, nor great pain, great possessions whether emotional or material, or lack of them, makes that final surrender necessarily easy. Only a certain detachment and sanity stemming from a real faith makes the process of dying acceptable. And although neither the Church nor even belief in God, however defined, has a monopoly on that faith, it is a central fact in our understanding of life that death is a part of it and that a life lived with death as an ultimate horror has to be self-defeating. Many, many people do now live with a philosophy which takes no real account of death. It follows that many who now have Aids, must have lived, perhaps continue to try to live, with that philosophy. But our culture has numerous examples of men and women who have freely, even cheerfully, surrendered their lives for the sake of something even more important.

St Lawrence the deacon perpetrated what must be the funniest practical joke in the history of humanity when, being asked by the pagan Roman authorities to bring out the treasures of the Church, he assembled a crowd of dossers and amputees, of ragged orphans and demented old widows, and said 'Here are the treasures of the Church'. Of course he paid for the joke with his life. Even the hell on earth of Auschwitz—surely the most telling argument against the goodness of man if not of God—is relieved of its total darkness because one man volunteered to die in place of another.

Yet at a recent conference on Aids for doctors, where members of 'Body Positive' were present, a young G.P. admitted to me that he wouldn't go to any part of the room where they were. He acknowledged that there was no real danger involved at all, but in that banal pagan cliché he said 'You can't be too careful'. He was a Catholic.

We are a sizeable minority of people who claim to believe that death is conquered. In our Easter liturgy we sneer at death. Have we nothing to offer to the hundreds who are dying and the thousands who fear they might because of the sort of disease we all thought human ingenuity had conquered?

St Lawrence, St John Southworth, St Maximilian Kolbe—pray for us.

There remains the virtue of humility. Humility is often now defined as having an accurate view of oneself, of one's failings and of one's abilities. And that is a good definition. But humility also requires having an accurate view of others. Because of the dogma, defined primarily from revelation, that all human beings are loved equally by God, are of infinite value, and are destined for eternity, because that dogma is true, each human being has a unique and interesting story to tell—of his life, of how he views life, of why he sees things the way he does. That is true of every dossier vomiting in the gutter, it is true of the most boring bank manager Surrey has ever produced, it was true until he pulled the trigger and shot himself even of Adolf Hitler. It is surprising how easy it is, with a little imaginative effort, to see that truth in each particular instance, and I speak as one not renowned for my tolerance of humanity in general.

If what I claim is so, then it is not necessary ever to patronise anyone. If we talk to a Muslim we must want to know what makes him a Muslim, what he values in it, how he views life; to an atheist the same. Even if our one desire is to spread the faith wherever the opportunity arises, we do not do so, rather we distort the face of Christ, if we only affect to listen, merely waiting for the moment to force our beliefs on the benighted. Such evangelism is a form of indecent assault. All true evangelism requires risk, surrender, mutuality, faith.

The same is true of meeting people whose life-styles may shock us. True humility, genuine curiosity, a real desire to know, takes away the possibility of *self-righteousness and narrow-mindedness—the ugly side of religiosity* which so angered Our Lord and so repels the world today. It is not our place to mobilise and to announce to people with Aids that we, the Catholic Church, have now decided to bestow our patronage upon them—that we are going to deluge them with old convents, second collections, special wings in Catholic hospitals, a Catholic volunteer for every one of them.

This weekend is a great act of faith for me. For I have a fear that we may not be wanted at all. Some of that may come from an uncalled-for anti-clericalism in the world. Let us not be totally abject—we don't deserve the whole of our very bad press, but we can do little about that. But let us look at the bit we can do something about. If we come across, of all people, as the most shockable, the most moralistic, the most

fearful, the most censorious, why should anybody want our help? If with that catalogue of sins we have the gall to sin against humility—to be overbearing, unwilling to listen or to understand—we are not merely failing to show Christ to the world and failing to see him in the sick and the frightened, we are actually preventing him from being made known to those who need him.

It is Mary who epitomises true humility. It is a quality present wherever she occurs in the scriptures—at the Annunciation, on the journey with the child Jesus to the Temple, at Cana in Galilee, at the foot of the cross, in the Upper Room. If we cannot share that humility we shall actively keep people who need him from her son.

Mary pray for us; All Saints pray for us.

George Tyrrell and the Development of Doctrine

Aidan Nichols OP

Early last summer, when he was in Peru, Cardinal Ratzinger disclosed that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was preparing a document on the 'central issues of the Modernist crisis'. He enumerated these as the nature of doctrine, principles in the interpreting of the Bible, and the role of philosophy in theology.

If we want to get those thorny 'central issues' into historical perspective, how should we go about it? If one belongs to the English-speaking world, there is, arguably, no better way than to explore the thought of the Modernist George Tyrrell, who was born 125 years ago this year. However severe may be our final assessment of him, it is a fact that the questions Tyrrell raised were those of a theological genius, and we cannot ignore them or brush them away. To understand his thought we must trace its history—his ideas of what theology should be developed dramatically in the course of his life. And if we want to get to grips with what was really distinctive about his thought—where he was addressing himself to the 'central issues' which Cardinal Ratzinger has recently listed—then we must consider especially what he had to say about the notion of doctrinal development. His ideas of what theology should be formed, so to speak, a series of photographic lenses through which he peered at his favourite subject: the continuity and discontinuity of Christian tradition.