

An excellent article by the wise Fr Brian Green, a Parish Priest in South Yorkshire, written nearly 20 years ago but still relevant today.

## White Hot Centres

PRE Editorial by Fr Brian Green in December 1998



I read a reference the other day to the term anonymous Christian - it has become, the article said, a "tired notion". The article went on to suggest that we stand firmly by the principle that getting people to church is basically the best way to get them to heaven and stop giving too much attention to Matthew 25 where the king welcomes many good people into his kingdom who never explicitly knew him on earth.

Now admittedly the phrase "anonymous Christian" can sound somewhat patronising. But for people like myself it has become the only way of making sense of the world as I know it.

In days gone by, when we imagined humans had been around for just a few thousand years before Christ, the problem of the unchurched masses was not so severe: they were awaiting the redeeming work of Christ and the wait would not be too long. But nowadays we know that the waiting probably lasted over two and a half million years. In that time-scale the coming of the Christian Church seems almost like an after-thought.

It's a problem of geography too, not just of history. I spent a summer in Russia in the early 1970's, and contemplated the fact that 250 million people clearly regarded the Church I belonged to as quite irrelevant to their existence. Moreover, at the back door was China with another 750 million non-Christians. Coming to church seems very much a minority option for most of the people God creates.

But most telling for me has been the experience here in South Yorkshire over the last 20 years, where a mere 2 per cent of the population are practising Christians — less than one in a hundred come to the Catholic Church. "You have problems," my friends keep telling me. Yes, but the problem is not the obvious one. What is puzzling is that the folks who never go to church seem to get on so very well without it.

"We're as good as those who do go to church," they will claim. Whether that is true or not, I must admit to being constantly amazed by the goodness of so many who are no longer interested in formal religion. They show great dedication to their families and loyalty to their friends. They give generously of time and money to good causes of every kind. The commitment in the local caring professions is often outstanding. Who could fail to be impressed by the MacMillan nurses, or by those who bring to the victims of Aids what is surely the compassion of Christ - even though they themselves often feel rejected by the Churches?

It would be arrogant to assert that the Kingdom of God is not being realised in so many of these people: surely here we have "anonymous Christians". Maybe the real reason the phrase is losing favour is because the love it signals is so often shaming the loyal church-goers among us.

We argue that there must surely be more to being a Christian than just loving other people - otherwise these folks could indeed be better Christians than we are!



Of course there is some point to our argument. If there can be so much apparent goodness in the world independently of the Christian Church we have to ask ourselves very seriously what was God's purpose in sending his Son, allowing him to die on the cross, and set up the Church to continue his work. Somehow God must have intended that far greater goodness and happiness would come into the world through the unfolding of the Christian story. If that is not happening then there must be something seriously wrong somewhere. Maybe the problem is not with the anonymous Christians but with ourselves.

Admittedly we are a Church of sinners. and Christ warned us against judging one another. But at least one would expect the Church to be offering a radical alternative to the people of today. And the difference should not be confined simply to the fact that we give an hour to worship at a weekend or even that we are continually saying Lord, Lord. It should surely be a living witness of goodness, justice, truth, and love. Somewhere, at least, this should be happening if the Church is not to be irrelevant to the unchurched masses among whom we live.

It is this train of thought which leads me to believe that our great pastoral priority today is not so much to rebuild our Christian ghettos, repopulate our seminaries, draw in the crowds and fill our churches, but simply to allow Christ, especially through the Eucharist, to establish in our society white hot centres of Christian commitment. Everything else seems subordinate to this. It is not quantity but quality that we need, at the heart of every Catholic community. Without this our parishes, our schools, all our religious endeavours, are going to be ineffective. It is from such centres that the power of God's Kingdom will be able to radiate effectively into the Church itself and so permeate the society around us. Whether they remain anonymous Christians or not, many others, at their own level of faith and interest and intelligence, will at least be offered the challenge of undiluted Christian values and principles.

This seems to me to be the core of Christian evangelisation. Shouting about our Christian faith, trying to attract others by adopting the techniques of modern advertising, by door-knocking techniques or the latest new project from America, all these could be a distraction from the one thing that is necessary in our materialistic world: the need to intensify the commitment of those who have heard the calling of Christ.

After all, this was the policy of Christ himself preach to all, yes, but concentrate on the deep formation of the few - even though those first apostles, like us, were to prove far from perfect. It is from a small but strongly spiritual base that the power of Christ will be released in our society - as a city set on a hill, a light to the world which cannot be ignored. Ordinary people - the daily Mass attenders, the Ministers of Reading and of the Eucharist, the dedicated teachers in our schools - anyone who has in whatever way discovered the meaning of discipleship through a personal encounter with Christ - these are the ones who can become truly a leaven to transform our world. And transform they can - in God's way, and in God's good time.

## **The Womb of Silence**

(extract)

*'I do not require of you to form great and curious considerations in your understanding. I require of you no more than to look.'* (St Teresa)

Not in the whirlwind, not in the lightning, not in the strife of tongues or in the jangling of subtle reasoning is He to be found, but in the still, small voice speaking in the Silence. Therefore, be silent.

*And all shall be well;  
And all manner of things shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.*