

"Unless You Become Like Little Children..."

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'I thought we'd grown out of all that'

During a deanery training course for catechists recently, it was suggested that one of the sessions should close with a time of prayer which would include the Rosary. One of the middle aged participants remarked, with an air of disdain, "Oh, I thought we'd grown out of that sort of thing." A brilliant riposte came quickly and sweetly from another and younger member of the group, "Well maybe it's time we grew back into it!" This little scene not only sums up the generation gap which has grown up in the Church lately, but touches on deep spiritual issues that lie behind many of the tensions and crises in the Church at this time.

A generation gap, especially between older and younger priests, is widely recognised and frequently discussed in higher ecclesial circles, where it is often portrayed as being between bright-eyed and open hearted 'liberals' formed in the revolutionary days of the nineteen sixties and a new generation of fussy young fogies who are trying to turn the clock back to the dark ages 'before the Council'. A destructive and stunningly uncharitable 'Viewpoint' article in The Tablet, lately, actually invited people to caricature and categorize their parish priests in exactly these terms.

The liberal old guard now out of touch

In fact the writer of this Tablet article revealed just how out of touch they are by speaking mockingly of conservative curates who insist on introducing incense at the 'folk mass'. Do they not know that the very term is incredibly dated and a turn off to the young? Anyway, nobody but ageing liberals worries about such polarised liturgical infighting these days. At Faith events and Youth 2000 gatherings, not to mention at pilgrimages to Lourdes and Papal Youth rallies, hymns with modern instruments are happily combined with incense, beautiful ritual and contemplative reverence. The real issues of concern are quite different nowadays. But more disturbingly the same article went to suggest that any young priest who emphasises reverence in the liturgy and doctrinal orthodoxy was likely to be effete, self indulgent and unpastoral, in contrast to his older and liberal colleague who would be frugal, approachable and, of course, socially committed.

Needless to say this is silly nonsense, but it is also a woefully shallow analysis of what is really going on in the Church. It is true that there can be a cultural difference between priests ordained in different decades, although it is not nearly as clear cut as is suggested. Even the forty-something generation - those who grew up in the immediate aftermath of the Council - is often heartily weary of being told how the pundits of the nineteen-sixties personally saved the Church and the world from its old ways of narrow mindedness and authoritarianism. Are some of them so very different?! But the Tablet article completely misses the really crucial generational divide that now exists, which is the one between this

dwindling band of modernist ideologues, both clerical and lay, and the truly young generation of teenagers and twenty-somethings for whom 'the Council', and the concerns of those who were young way back then, are simply a matter of ancient pre-history and utter indifference.

The true generation gap

This is the generation that has almost completely lapsed. However, we should take note that they did not lapse from a rigid, guilt ridden, clerically dominated Church, but from parishes and schools that have bent over backwards to make Catholicism socially 'relevant' and acceptable, with deconstructed liturgies and doctrine-lite catechesis. Those precious few who do remain are frankly turned off by priests and teachers who are still shadow boxing the demons of a failed revolution of forty years ago. These young people do not come to us full of prejudice about how things were in the 'bad old days' - they weren't even born until the nineteen eighties - rather they are just curious to find out what Catholicism really means, because no one has ever told them!

They are rather delighted by doctrine when it is explained in a lively and coherent way, and above all they want the spiritual life without gimmicks. They know that the real battle they face is with the aggressive secularism that surrounds them every day. Priests and catechists who are desperate to entertain the masses or to appease the secular conscience by apologising for Catholic tradition and softening off the Church's solemn teachings, are as embarrassing as a portly uncle who tries to impress the kids at the family party with his disco dancing and trendy clothes! The young do not want to be patronised, they want to be taken seriously as souls who are hungry for God. Two million young people who flock to see a sick and elderly Pope who always tells them God's truth lovingly but uncompromisingly, and who constantly calls them to holiness and devotion, must surely be a significant sign of the times, if only the catechetical establishment would take it to heart. Doctrinal orthodoxy with pastoral warmth is evidently a winning formula. Why ignore the facts?

Rediscovering lost devotions

Traditional devotions - such as the rosary, adoration and benediction, stations of the cross - do not appear to the young as fussy and old fashioned, but rather as buried treasures whose beauty and richness they are just discovering for themselves and wondering why their parents threw them out so dismissively. These traditional forms of prayer are also being combined with welcome post-Conciliar developments like the wider availability of the Divine Office and shared intercessory prayer. So they are not trying to 'turn the clock back', they would not know how in any case. They are simply hungry for straight talking and clear instruction, firm moral challenge and equally firm moral support, as well as solid spiritual nourishment and guidance.

The practical love of God

What lies at the heart of all these rediscovered devotions is a desire to know and love Jesus Christ in a practical and down to earth way. Devotional practices are based on the recognition that human beings are creatures of habit, that we are sacramental beings who live and grow by performing definite actions in time and space, training the heart by steeping the mind in words and thoughts that lift the spirit little by little towards God. Above all the traditional devotion works on the basic assumption that Jesus and his saints are real and personal and present to us in the here and now.

If they are honest with themselves, it is this that those who are steeped in the modernist mindset find so distasteful. It is this that makes them look down their noses at the 'peasant' mentality of reciting the rosary or 'doing the stations'. The fact that Mary is as real to someone as their own mother, and that Jesus is literally present in the Blessed Sacrament seems too crude and particular for the liberal mind, which is more at home with grand abstractions and noble aspirations – a vague fellow feeling for the rest of creation and a sweeping commitment to 'humanity'. Like Naaman, the Syrian leper, (cf. 1 Kings 5:8-14) they see simple piety as childish and undignified. Such devotion is regarded as inward looking and naively superstitious, divorced from the true Christian concerns of justice and community, out of touch with the insights and self knowledge that pop psychology can give us. But in reality, it is the challenge of actually loving God in a human and deeply personal way that is being rejected. This is because, deep down, the modernist mind has lost faith in the literal truth of all Catholic doctrine, and above all in the transcendence of God. For if 'God' is no more than an energy that is immanent within your own being, then you can seek to 'get in touch with' such higher consciousness, but you cannot love, obey and bow down in adoration of God who is a living and objective Reality in your life. Of course, devotions alone are not enough for the renewal of the Church and the re-evangelisation of the new generations. They need to go hand in hand with an integral apologetic, lively catechesis, spiritual direction and encouragement to practical Christian action. Some, although not all, of these factors were perhaps lacking in the immediately pre-Conciliar Church. It is indeed possible for a devotional exercise to be approached superstitiously, and for a devotee to recite many prayers yet still be lacking in wisdom and insight, and even charity. But this would be a character fault of particular personalities, not the fault of the devotional form as such. As ever, the old proverb about babies and bathwater applies.

The stone rejected by the builders

Certainly the widespread ditching of popular devotions in the last few decades has not opened the flood gates of deeper spirituality and Christian witness among God's people; quite the reverse in fact. And conversely, the revival and renewal which is being experienced among the new movements is always linked to a strong emphasis on personal devotion in prayer as well as to regular sacramental confession. This, combined with patient doctrinal instruction and strong bonds of mutual friendship, is already bearing much fruit, especially in

vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The very things despised and rejected by the 'experts' of yesterday, to the great sorrow and loss of three generations in the Church, are proving to be the cornerstone of a new building to the glory of God.

Exhorting people to prayer and holiness without making available practical and human ways to pursue this, such as popular devotions provide, is as vacuous and unrealistic as urging them to 'justice and peace' without providing any local structures and opportunities to contribute to it. It should go without saying, of course, that both of these - devotion and action - are needed in order to live a fully Christian life. But sadly it does need saying, because it has so often been portrayed in recent years as an either/or choice. Either you are the active, caring, sharing sort of Catholic, or you are the pious, devotional kind. Surely all the saints have been both? Did not our Lord teach us that the Law of God is summed up in two inseparable commandments: that we should love God with our whole heart, mind and strength; and that we should love our neighbour as ourselves? Neither should we forget that He laid the primary emphasis on the first of these. Without the love of God, all our good works are fruitless and worthless.

Eucharistic adoration: not an optional extra

There are many forms of devotion, and new ones can be developed according to the needs and spirit of the times. But some devotions are more than mere optional extras, since they touch on and derive from the very core of the Catholic faith. Eucharistic adoration clearly comes in this category. It is not a medieval aberration. Pious Christians of the earliest centuries used to take the Blessed Sacrament home with them after the Sunday Eucharist and keep it in their homes, converting the niche reserved for the shrine of the 'household gods' found in all Roman homes into a tabernacle for the Lord. They did this in order to be able to receive communion during the week. It was this daily devotion to and reception of the Lord in the Eucharist which they themselves recognised as the source of the courage of so many in withstanding the terrible persecutions that broke on them periodically.

The great influx of converts after Constantine made for tighter discipline concerning the reservation of the Sacrament, restricting it to Church buildings. But a gradual development of Eucharistic thinking and practice then took place which culminated in the high middle ages in the establishment of the feast of Corpus Christi and the public veneration of the Lord in Benediction. The habit of centring the life of personal prayer, as well as the public liturgy, on the abiding presence of Christ in the Eucharist has been the hallmark of all the great saints and mystics since then; think of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Thomas More, St. Jean Vianney, St. Pio of Pietrelcina, and countless others. It is one of the great ironies of history that just as the Second Vatican Council affirmed so beautifully that the Eucharist is "the source and summit" of the whole Christian life, Eucharistic devotion was swept away in the name of modernity and renewal in so many parishes. Its widespread recovery, largely at the instigation of

the young in our times, is surely a sign of the Spirit, a sign of great hope and authenticity. One could even argue that the rise of Eucharistic adoration is a prophetic and perhaps apocalyptic sign, foreshadowing the final Kingdom of God. In heaven the Mass will no longer be celebrated through signs, symbols and liturgy, but there will be eternal adoration of the Lamb of God dwelling among us in the flesh that was sacrificed for us.

The Rosary: an invaluable treasure

The Rosary too cannot be regarded as a mere medieval accretion to Catholic spirituality. It is not compulsory to say the Rosary, it is true. However, devotion to our Lady in some form is certainly not an optional extra, for she herself is not an optional extra in the history of Salvation. She is the first and most essential collaborator with the Blessed Trinity in the Mystery of Redemption. This too is affirmed clearly by Vatican II. And if this is what is meant by the title "Co-redemptrix", and it is explained as such, then it is both true and necessary to the full understanding and proclamation of Catholic Christianity.

The Rosary is not meant to be just a gabbling of prayers, but a sustained meditation on the Paschal Mystery, from Incarnation to Parousia. Ultimately it is designed to lead to a profound contemplation of Christ Himself in the company of the Mother of the Mystery. The Rosary is recommended to us by long tradition, valued by many of the saints, who witness to the effectiveness of this prayer, which also has many promises attached to it by private revelation. This is not a matter of magic and superstition, it derives, once again, from the living reality of the person of Mary in her unique place in heaven next to her Son with her ongoing role of care towards the Church on earth. She is truly a universal Lady and Mother to all ages and nations, whose intercession is powerful indeed. It is both significant and encouraging that the Holy Father has just written a new Apostolic Letter on the Rosary - *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* - which reaffirms many of these same points

Becoming like little children

There is a great yearning for spirituality in the younger generations, and we need to lead them to the deeper ways of mental and contemplative prayer too, but this does not preclude, but includes rather, the simpler devotions which have been tried and tested over the centuries. A regular return to childlike devotions prevents our prayer life from becoming a form of spiritual self indulgence; subconsciously mingling spiritual progress with self congratulation, and confusing mysticism with self adoration. You have to be humble and simple to meekly bow your head and kneel before the Lord, offering Him your devotion in words learnt in childhood. He said to us Himself: "Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of God." (Matthew 18:3) Actually these traditional devotions are full of scripture and of the deep and mature wisdom of the saints, which seeps into the subconscious with habitual use, and so keeps the eye of the mind fixed on God even in the midst of a hectic life and a world full of distractions.

What better gift can we give to our Lord this Christmas, then, than to devote ourselves to Him more frequently in his Incarnate Presence in the Holy Eucharist, and to seek the company and guidance of His Blessed Mother, through whom He was and is still given to us as Saviour and Redeemer, by praying the Rosary. If, in the arrogance of a spiritual adolescence, there are still those among us who feel that they have outgrown such childish ways, then surely it is high time we all grew up and grew back into them.