

Lost Ideals

One of the important pastoral responsibilities of the Church today is to those who have, in one way or another, misused God's gift of sex. I wish to suggest that many young people leave the church, not for intellectual reasons, but because they have seen the contrast between their present behaviour and their earlier religious aspirations and ideals. The teaching of Christian moral principles is no reason for young people abandoning their faith and parting company with their Church.

Open Channels

Surely the Church must seek to keep such offenders within her fold, so that the ideals they reject may be still held up to them; that they may never be allowed to lose touch with the Church; that we need to keep open the channels of communication between God and human beings, of which the Church is the appointed agent. If this is truly one of the reasons for lapses, it makes one wonder how far it is the fault of an excessive emphasis upon the flesh as the main, in fact the only, source of sin, and to long for a constructive approach.

Communication

It raises the problem of communication, for the idea, we would probably all agree, in most peoples' minds is not that Christ died for sinners, nor that the Church's prime concern, care and love, is for the sinner who time and time again fails, and needs so desperately to know that he or she can start again with us and with our help. This vital Christian doctrine we failed to communicate meaningfully. We have too often given the impression that the Church is a 'closed club' with a membership limited to the elite who never sin.

Guilt

Perhaps we have encouraged guilt, with all that that implies in terms of fear, petrification and the vicious suggestion that to live with the fearful evil we know is better than to break away from it to face the even more fearful penalties of sin.

Repentance

What a travesty of the Gospel of Love we think we preach! We seek to engender not fear, but repentance - a turning again in hope and confidence. Shame - and young people know what this means - needs the encouragement of compassion in order that it may bear fruit in a new start.

Condemnation

We must never abrogate our prophetic task, which impels us to speak forth boldly and convincingly. But today we are surrounded by people who indignantly point to the modern woman taken in adultery and watch to see our reaction. Like the Jews St. John tells us about, they desire condemnation - a categorical judgement, not merely individual, but more often general - concerning a whole generation. St. John wisely records that in the case of Jesus, this was an attempt to test our Lord. They, like many people today, were quite willing to hold up hands in horror, but when challenged, if themselves without sin, to accuse the woman,, melted away stricken by their own conscience. Our Lord's words to the woman were simple enough, "Neither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more."

Its Harm

What incalculable harm we do to Christ's children when we given the impression of condemnation. It may be due to disappointment, frustration, shock, a plain failure to understand why John or Joan has so behaved. It matters not what is the reason, only that this is the impression so often given.

Love evokes love

The result is a withdrawal by the sinner who feels and thinks that the love he expected and had been taught to expect has itself been withdrawn. What bad psychology! What a travesty of the Gospel! This may not be true of us individually, but it is true even if unintentional of many Christians, and the task of many is to help Christians to see the uselessness of this and its unworthiness. We may think, alongside the woman taken in adultery, of the 'Woman who was a sinner in the city'. Again our Lord was surrounded by an indignant crowd demanding excommunication. At once he obtained their agreement that it is the power of love to give and forgive

which itself evokes love. So her sins, which were many, were forgiven.

Cost

Notice that in this dominical compassion, which the Church claims to follow and represent, there is the cost of freely and frankly giving and forgiving - the sacrificing love which, it seems, sometimes, is preventive. And reflecting on this, one longs for this to be made more apparent to the thousands of young people who are being tragically exploited and encouraged to sin, despite their better selves given them by God.

God understands

And then note also that the motive and circumstances are taken into account "for she hath loved much". Young people who are adults' responsibility, like us all, long to be loved and to love. In seeking this goal, they fall into sin more often in ignorance than in wilfulness. God understands and knows this. Do Christians communicate this great truth to them? Or do they more often, by their bearing and approach, suggest that excommunication is the only decent thing a young person can accept in this situation?

Personal Experience

Much more often, it is a personal experience which has led individuals to unchurch themselves and to believe that this is the desire of the Church. Intellectual difficulties per se are seldom the real stumbling block.

Compassion

No amount of compassionate pastoral care can in the least relieve Christians of the duty constantly to proclaim the moral ideals and principles of the New Testament. Proclaim we must - loudly and persistently - but proclamation is not the same as condemnation of an individual or a generation. The point is that the two are often associated and confused in the public's image of the Church. That this is so today is due more than anything else to Christians' failure to balance proclamation with compassion. Failure to express compassion and to let it be seen does lead to voluntary excommunication. The compassion of the body of Christ is then hidden, and the glory and peace found in response to it denied and rejected. This, perhaps more than techniques or teaching, is the challenge today, for it is the compassion and friendship which is at the heart of the love which all people want and need. It is this which itself shows that there is a way back and encourages repentance. Christians have a dual task: constantly to proclaim the ideal that the true way forward may be seen and known; and constantly to extend compassion that the way back may be seen and known, with equal assurance, when the ideal has not been achieved.