

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Seven Men of Good Repute

It's one of the paradoxes of the Diaconate, whose development we are said to find described in the first reading today, that a holy order is discerned in the Church's need for practical administration – in this case, the overseeing of charity towards widows; yet within a couple of pages we shall see Stephen – specially noted for his faith and his share of the Holy Spirit – excelling not in administration, but in the proclamation of the Word; his speech in the hearing of the Sanhedrin is one of the four great set-piece sermons in the Acts of the Apostles. From this we can see something more in the Diaconate than the answering of needs within the community. We can see a great ministry of encounter.

Giving Out Food

Who gives out food in the Christian community? Well, all of us do. We feed one another with our work and what we earn from it, by our love and care, by our sharing of ourselves in friendship and loyal service. If we're lucky we also get to peel the potatoes, roast the legga lamb, skin the broccoli-stems, and make some nice onion sauce to go with it, and welcome others to our table. Remembering that we don't live by bread alone, we can feed one another with the occasional sharing of the word that comes from the mouth of God. Some of us are privileged to do this on a daily basis, as preachers of the word. I guess you'd get a reputation if you did it spontaneously in the workplace or the supermarket, but in Church we manage to do it without open derision or embarrassment – it's what people expect! That's a great privilege.

Stephen

Stephen, chosen to see that no-one went without what the community had to share, didn't limit himself to giving out food, but "began to work miracles and great signs in people's sight", and became an evangelist, a preacher. He found himself defending the Gospel, and denounced, as "a blasphemer against Moses and against God". This recalls what happened to Jesus himself: a teacher in the Temple, who found himself arguing in the Sanhedrin. Stephen follows the same path, to a similar end.

Encountering Unbelief

Whose job is it to engage with unbelief? It's the job of everyone in the Church. We will do this

when we confront despair, mistrust, depression, negativity of every kind: when we meet engrained hardness of heart, shut ears, folded arms, the refusal to live and to enjoy living, the refusal to share, to invest in others. This work is never restricted, or delegated only to a few. Yet there are *great* encounters that *are* given to a few: every great heresy has had a great champion who took it on; every great crisis of faith has found a great Christian who seemed raised up by God to find a way through; and every so often we find a crying need being answered by a man or woman of heroic sanctity who arises to do the will of God.

Holy Orders

Those of us who wear vestments and stand up in Church aren't under any illusion that ordination ranks us in that race of giants. We feel all too powerfully the weakness of our gifts, and our unfitness to accomplish the work of redemption. But we can bear witness to the work of God precisely in weakness and unfitness. Because in the end, who feeds the world? *God himself does* in Christ. Who encounters and vanquishes unbelief? *God does* in the Easter mystery. Deacons, priests and bishops don't think of their rôle as a personal possession. Rather, we must try to make our lives into a space God can use; we must grow smaller so that he can grow greater. Human giants we aren't, and aren't required to be. Yet in our inadequacy, God finds an empty space of which he makes use for the good of the Church.
Fr Philip