

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

There Are Some Of You Who Do Not Believe

It has always troubled the Church to decide what its boundaries are. Every parish priest has this pointed up sharply when someone turns up out of the blue, displaying no earthly sign of Catholic faith or practice, asking for the baptism of a baby or the solemnization of a marriage. Such interviews are seldom happy occasions. The priest may feel he is being “used”, and that all the people want is a ceremonial element in a party. He may bristle when the first telephone approach says: *I want to book your church for a wedding.* He may feel that the promise to bring up a newly-baptised child in the practice of the faith is highly unlikely to be fulfilled, and that the wedding-promises are not likely to be understood in the context of faith they imply.

Various Answers

Some priests humbly acknowledge that no-one is worthy of the sacraments, and they are prepared to celebrate them for anyone, leaving the fulfilment of promises to the grace of God. Others set up enormous obstacle-courses, demanding attendance at Church every Sunday for months, and a big course of preparation in the parish hall. I wonder if these aren't merely ways of discouraging those whose “seriousness” is questionable. In my experience such people will usually knock on a different door to find a more positive attitude. My own approach has been to point out the words people have to say in the liturgies, and ask them to consider whether they feel able to say them. (They usually simply say “yes”, and that is pretty disarming.)

The Bishop Of Hippo Regius

St Augustine grew up belonging to a rather evil sect, the Manichees, who believed that only utter holiness would do for its adherents. They rivalled each other in devising ever-more-devastating forms of religious purity, hatred of the body and all physical things, and negative ideas about the world. The result of this unlovely faith was that most people found themselves left behind by it altogether. You could only belong if you were a total fanatic. It dawned on Augustine that if God had created such variety of people, it was probably because he wanted to save a great number of them; and

that any religion which cut the human race down to a tiny élite could not possibly represent the mind of so generous a God. So he came to believe that there is a way of belonging to God for everyone. This kindly thought enabled Augustine to become one of the greatest pastoral bishops in the history of the Church: sharp as a lancet in detecting falsehood and pursuing it, but firmly compassionate to human weaknesses (finally, even his own).

Christ's Compassion

I believe we should see the words of Jesus, not as a judgment on his listeners, but as a cry of pain on their behalf. Jesus knew that the hope of the world lies in knowing the true God, and the Christ he had sent. When he found unbelief he was filled with pain for the unbeliever. One of the puzzling things about Jesus for church members is his carelessness about setting up structures. Jesus didn't primarily want to recruit the people he met into a movement; he only wanted them to recognise him as the hand of God stretched out to them. He gave them huge proofs of his goodness and power, in the words he spoke and the deeds he did. The Scriptural record shows Pentecost as the moment when people are first incorporated by Baptism into a growing faith-community, and the Church begins to regulate itself as a human group. If we read through the apostolic letters in the New Testament, we can watch the concerns of the first Christian leaders as they experience anxiety for the purity of the faith and the full message of the Gospel. This must never rob us of the open hospitality for all Jesus showed. *Fr Philip*