

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

I Know The Son, But Where's The Father?

I was once asked to write an article about the parable of the Prodigal Son for this country's largest religious newspaper. When they printed it I discovered that they had, without any consultation, doctored the whole end (and purpose) of my piece. I wrote a tart letter refusing to write for *The Universe* ever again. What had I written that had so upset the editor of that publication? Reader, I will tell you.

The Clergy and Forgiveness

I dared to suggest that, for the most part, the Catholic clergy in this country (and further afield as well) have largely ignored and betrayed the famous story in precisely that place for which it ought to provide the agenda: *the confessional*. Who can say that they have learned to come freely and frequently to the confessional with anything except *negative feelings* towards the experience? How often do people come out of the encounter feeling *better* than they did before it happened? Maybe the boy in the story didn't arrive at the father's house in the right frame of mind. He certainly didn't deserve, or ask for, a good reception. But his father taught him how wrongly he had read the situation; his crawling arrival is transfigured with a piercing cry of joy which comes from the paternal heart he had never understood. This could, and should, happen each and every time a child of God arrives in search of forgiveness. But I don't think it does. Instead, I think the clergy are precisely concerned to ascertain that the right dispositions are all in place, that the full measure of iniquity has been understood, that the proud spirit that has led to sin is appropriately cringing in its corner. There is much talk about *judgment* amongst theoreticians of the confessional, and I wish they would forget their preoccupations and read today's Gospel instead. This was the Bolshevik principle which seemed so dangerous to *The Universe*, and I can't help thinking that they were protecting their good name with the clergy, on whose favour they depend for their sales, and who would denounce, and stop selling, the paper if ever it began to question the customs of (us) clergy.

What's Your Point, Father?

Well, I appreciate the opportunity to publish the point I had quite carefully made without fear of censorship. I think that it is a serious point. The Sacrament of Forgiveness is the ordinary and most focused place for the Catholic Church to celebrate

its reconciliation with the Father in the aftermath of failure and sin. I *know* where the failure and the sin are to be found. What I am missing is that wonderful transfiguring of them in the love of the Father. What I see is crowds of good Catholics who are *afraid* of sin, filled with hatred for evil, aware of its power, its anatomy, its workings. We want to be rid of it and to have power against it. But we are starved of the real awareness that would give us what we need. I am part of the clerical church which has participated in this awful ungenerosity. We priests have done much to muffle the joy and celebration of forgiveness, in our all-too-human urge to make people pay for what they have done, to flavour the sacraments with guilt and humiliation instead of the robe and ring and sandals which dignify the return of the boy in the story. It's as if we had packed the Father off to bed, and delivered the younger son into the hands of his elder brother instead. All that brooding self-righteousness, that concern for the pound of flesh, that refusal to rejoice - it is providentially parodied in the Lukan story. It will take a huge effort on the part of priests and people alike if we are to rescue the divine gift of forgiveness from the morass into which we have allowed it to fall. Without this, I am afraid, we may find ourselves a sort of community; but it will be a mean and unblest community, a dysfunctional family of dwellers in the pigsties of a far country.

Fr Philip