

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Power To Say Yes, Or No

Religion, like education and human maturing, uses two great powers of choice: the capacity of acceptance, which is affirmative, and the power to reject, which can be very negative indeed.

We like affirmation...

It feels good to receive happily: there is the delight of the birthday-present, the exquisite pleasure of the connoisseur, the joy of lovers accepting each other. The happiness of a family or a friendship can only flow from this basic readiness to accept and enjoy; without it, there is only misery in a family, only disappointment in friendship. Knowing that fact builds up in us a positive attitude to others: we like to be welcoming and, at the very least, tolerant of those we meet.

...as refusal often offends

The reverse is also true: we dislike being rejected ourselves, and so, if we are mature individuals, we usually have an unease about our negating power: we say no regretfully. Still, I find that we can fall into a narrow attitude to this great world. We can live, like the Israel of Isaiah, "trapped in a forest, with meadows within reach on every side". We are *offered* so much, and the narrowness of the world we *want* to accept is very clear. I often hear refusal: refusal to speak, refusal to share, refusal to try something new, refusal to accompany, refusal to listen, refusal to play, refusal to eat, refusal to be pleased, refusal to be gathered. There is always something wrong with everything. Heavy, man!

A Time To Refuse

Yet there is a real value at stake here: we *must* acquire the power to refuse, if we are to avoid what is wrong. There's a great difference between having a negative, narrow outlook on life, and knowing right from wrong, better from worse. The preservation of *value* in our lives depends on forming good judgments and making good choices: this must involve the power sometimes to say *no* with determination. The Gospel of Luke, so often perceived as gentle and humane, is suddenly sharp in this regard. His Jesus takes the closest, dearest relationships, and detonates them in favour of the Cross. We have plenty of evidence that this is no more than a doctrinal statement of what *actually happened* in the life of Jesus himself. The twelve-year-old who ran away in Jerusalem with such sublime indifference to the feelings of Mary and Joseph, who responds to their haggard and exhausted faces with his talk of *my Father's business*, is the same son who will ask *Who are my mother and my brothers?* and who now demands of his disciples *hatred* of father, mother,

wife, children, brothers, sisters, and their own life too! Priestly celibacy looks a pretty tame demand beside this. I've consulted Fr Rush's dictionary, and there is no mistake: the verb is *miseo*, and it means *hate*. Now, consistency demands that we rule out the possibility that Jesus only wants misfits who have broken up with their families (though perhaps, if he did, he would find plenty of takers). The Bible consistently reserves hatred for what is evil, and forbids psychological hatred as the opposite of love. We have to interpret the meaning of the demand by reading it in the gospel of Matthew, who speaks of *preference*, and demands that Jesus be *preferred* to all family ties. But it would be wrong to turn our backs on the first impression given by Luke: this preference is to be a reality engaging the whole personality - a total commitment, easily head and shoulders above everything else, however dear, however sanctioned. (Incidentally, it is Luke alone who adds the word *wife* to the list.)

With All My Heart

Real Christianity can't grow gently to its full term by any easy process. Some have mistaken the gentleness of Jesus for an invitation to be effete, languid, weak. Christianity isn't like that. It demands a crisis, a conversion. It is called a new *birth* - by eruptive, convulsive movements involving pain, labour, sweat and tears, in a word, agony. This is no casual deed for divided hearts, but a total transformation of the whole person. The following of Christ, the carrying of the Cross, takes all our strength; and no distraction, however worthy, is thinkable or possible.
Fr Philip