

Beginning the RCIA

This exercise is a way of trying to share our faith, trying to help people to believe in God. The shape of the enterprise is difficult to predict, because we don't know how we can help people's faith unless we know whom we're trying to help. People are at different stages of development, are dealing with very different life-situations, and the needs will determine the method we use.

I thought I might offer a little overview of the field as I see it just now. We have three situations to survey.

The first is the state of our parish community, of the people who come to mass each Sunday, and sometimes in the week as well. They form the backbone of the body of Christ in this part of the world, and their stability and reliability is what makes us able to keep a priest and deacons here, keep the Church open, well-lit, warm, repaired, decorated, supplied, and used. They make it possible for us to provide the schools, and pay our increasing share in the massive bills for running the Diocese, training the clergy, supporting them in old age and infirmity, administering the schools and the churches, and supplying the many services the Government require from those who educate the young, run an adoption agency, look after communications and the press, and supply the needs for financial accounts and covenants, planning, and care of artistic patrimony. This is the parish.

The faithful people who bear these burdens still have their own needs to develop and deepen their faith. There are no professionals or finished models or experts when it comes to God; he may unhorse Pope Benedict tomorrow, and remind him that he does not know all the mystery of God. The Pope is just as open to being devastated in his faith as you are, or I am. Humility isn't a little decoration for those with mitres on their heads or reputations of being great theologians. Rather it's the indispensable sign that they might deserve to be listened-to. So the difference between a faithful parishioner and a lapsed Catholic is not that the faithful parishioner has "got faith", but that they have chosen to practice it and keep it, despite all the doubts and uncertainties into which faith may run them. We all need to be evangelised - hear the Gospel anew, hear it as news. When we do hear it like that, the next change will come upon us, and we'll move a little further into the mystery of God.

The second situation we need to think about is that of the lapsed Catholic or Christian, who has given up the practice of faith or religion. Many of these people suffer from lack of that evangelisation, that receiving of the Gospel as a live gift, which would get them on their feet to move nearer to the Church of Christ. Some of them are smarting from injuries inflicted by others, or bad example, or the discovery of some shattering hypocrisy in other Christians. Some can honestly not find their way intellectually: they might like to believe in a Creator of the world, but they are too full of questions to trust the *idea* of a God, let alone any being that might apply for the post.

We shouldn't forget the words of Jesus: *No-one can come to me except through the Father's drawing them.* It's a great day when we discover that prayer is less what we do, than what God does when we shut up and keep still and let him. In the same way, if we open our lives to the mysterious and the unknown, and call into it, and wait to see what will happen, it will be God who cancels the distance, and comes to our side. We can't go in search of him; but he comes to find us when we are lost. The question is, how can we bring those who have lost the practice of their faith to revisit the scene, and to search for what was lost? Only, I sometimes

feel, by abandoning false certainties, and joining them in their questions and doubts, bring to the table our honesty, and our decision to trust God and wait for him to come.

The third situation we need to bear in mind is that of the vast number of people for whom religion is a fond story for children, or a poison-cupboard of hatred and division: the victims of the Reformation, which began the story of division of churches and so confused the decision about God and about Christ. They can see little except fanaticism and battles of which they want no part. At the same time they are deeply anxious about their religious confusion and loneliness, anxious to find somewhere safe to stand, and perhaps find their way into the dark spaces in their own personality, where faith is founded and the heart is given. Religion is the choosing of the value that will bind your whole life into one, and give it integrity. Everyone has this. There is good religion, and indifferent religion, and bad religion; but no-one has yet been born who has no religious space in their being.

As Catholics we want to say that we are already related to the One who is the source of our integrity and the harmony of our nature. In the end, it will be the Father of Jesus Christ who does this, because it is his creation, and that is its final destiny. But there are a lot of other ways of looking at the mystery, and many other ways into it. If we believe that in the end they will all lead to Christ and the Father, and that the work of drawing along this path all who search with a sincere heart is the work of the Holy Spirit, people who come from other directions and hold other traditions must humour us. But all paths are of interest, and all sincere inquiry will surely be favoured by the Holy Spirit, as he guides all things into one.

What I would like to establish for anyone who comes sincerely seeking the truth, is that it is possible to believe in God without kicking your brain into touch, and that the Christian Gospel actually confounds us with the majesty and glory of what it proposes for us; that Christ is the inspirer of the highest ideals we have known, and that there is here a comprehensive way forward, which pays us the compliment of respecting us where we are, and answering us as we think and question.