

Homily for the First Sunday of Lent 2010 (Year C)

In the last few years it has become very fashionable to criticise the Catholic Church. In fact bashing Catholics has been a favourite British pastime for centuries, and an irrational anti-Catholicism has been buried within the British psyche since the Reformation, but in recent times it has taken on a new intensity, and this is likely to get stronger this year as we prepare for the Pope's visit to the United Kingdom. It seems to me that it is important that we are prepared for this, and that we have some answers ready for the issues that are raised. When people catch us unawares and challenge us about some issue, if we have not had a chance to think about it in advance we stumble, we feel foolish, and we may even begin to doubt our own faith. We are left feeling demoralised and depressed. The point of the homilies this Lent is to try and address some of these issues, and to provide at least the beginning of an answer to some of the questions people raise, so that instead of feeling confused and demoralised we feel confident and upbeat. People may not agree with what we say, but we can make sure they are in no doubt about the sincerity and depth of our faith.

A few years ago the Chief Rabbi wrote an article for The Times, which began with this story.

*"Do you believe," the disciple asked the rabbi, "that God created everything for a purpose?"
"I do," replied the rabbi.*

"Well, then," continued the disciple, "why did God create atheists?"

The rabbi paused before giving an answer, and when he spoke his voice was soft and intense.

"Sometimes we who believe, believe too much. We see the cruelty, the suffering, the injustice in the world and we say: This is the will of God. We accept what we should not accept. That is when God sends us atheists to remind us that what passes for religion is not always religion. Sometimes what we accept in the name of God is what we should be fighting against in the name of God."

This is an important point. When we hear people attacking religious faith in general, or The Catholic Faith in particular, it is very easy to become defensive, especially if we have perhaps not had the chance to think about the issue ourselves, so we launch our own offensive strike which is designed to defend all religion. This is a big mistake. Of course, I believe that Catholicism is good and true; it is the only way, I believe, to a fulfilled and authentically human life. I will defend it without compromise. But that does not mean that all religious faith is good, and I will gladly accept that some examples of religious faith, or of actions that people justify for religious reasons, is not just misguided, it is actually destructive and even evil. In fact, we must be prepared to go further. While the essential elements of our Catholic faith are fundamental to human flourishing, there are some beliefs that some Catholics adopt, and even some actions which they do, which are not only outside the bounds of what is truly Catholic, they are just plain wrong. I've said before that I have no intention of defending religion in general, because I do not believe in religion in general. I am a

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Catholic, I believe the Catholic faith, and it is that alone which I will defend. We must be prepared to accept that some religion is bad; we might like to challenge an atheist to accept the same, that some atheism is also bad. I will return to this in another week.

It is easy to get a bit depressed about attacks on the Church, but we shouldn't let this get to us. The Church has always been at its most creative when it has been challenged. People oppose us, and so we must be able to find answers to their arguments, we must think, and work out the right answers to their questions. It may be that in our generation will need to come up with some original new ideas that will serve the Church well for centuries to come.

We might ask why it is that there seem to be renewed attacks on religious faith in our generation. What has changed. I think it would be fair to say that this has a lot to do with the increased influence of militant Islam. People are scared about it. Often they are reluctant to criticise Islam, partly because they are scared of what might happen, and partly because of some fear that it might be perceived as racist, so they go for a softer target, and the one they usually pick on is the Catholic Church. It may not feel very comfortable to be criticised and attacked, but it shouldn't surprise us too much. In last Sunday's gospel Jesus said "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for their ancestors treated the false prophets in this way" (Luke 6.26). All human beings have an extraordinary capacity to deceive themselves, to persuade themselves that all is well when it is not, and that they are right to do what they please when this is not so; one of the roles of the Church is to unmask all this, to keep insistently calling out from the sidelines. We are to be like the annoying dog that repeatedly keeps digging up the bone every time it is buried; when everyone turns a blind eye to the truth, we are to keep bringing it back into the limelight so that nobody can ignore it. The Church's prophetic role is to unmask and to expose. That is hardly likely to make us many friends.

One consistent reaction to the Church's prophetic voice is to try and sideline it. Again and again we are told that what we do in private is our own affair, but we should keep religion out of public life. It should be purely a private matter, a kind of hobby that appeals to some people, like stamp-collecting or plane-spotting. Well I would not even agree that what we do in private is our own affair, but I certainly don't think religion should be kept out of public life. That is what people said in the nineteenth century to the Christians campaigning to abolish slavery; it is what was said to Archbishop Tutu and others when they campaigned against apartheid. It should always ring big alarm bells, because we should always be asking 'what are they frightened of'. Someone is scared that we might unmask what they are really doing. Whenever we are told that religion should be kept

Fr Peter Newsam – Petworth – West Sussex

out of public life we should smell a rat, because it is pretty certain that someone somewhere is trying to exercise power over others, and they don't want us to come to the help of the weaker party. Furthermore, when people say religion should be kept out of public life they are undermining our democracy. They are saying that the only view which is legitimate is the secular view; but that is exclusive. Why should people of faith not have the right to put their view too? Why should I be silenced and told I have no part to play in public life?

There is no doubt that, since the Emperor Theodosius definitively made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the Church has been compromised by being allied with secular power. This has allowed its critics to find stories about complicity in violence which they can use as ammunition. They choose to rewrite history in a way that paints Christianity as backward, repressive and restrictive. Many people think that they know what Christianity is all about; and they do not like it. In fact, they have fundamentally misunderstood the nature of our faith. It is hard for us to understand just how radical a new force Christianity was when it burst upon the ancient world, and just how radical a force it still is. Perhaps only one atheist has ever really 'got' Christianity, and that was Nietzsche, who despised it because it made a virtue of protecting the weak, and the vulnerable – all the people who would hold humanity back and prevent it from becoming a race of super-men. If we are asked what is the point of Christianity, we can point to a figure on the cross. At the heart of our faith is a victim of ferocious anger and violence. It is identifying with that victim that marks out the Christian faith as different, and that gives it a radical edge. Quite what that has meant in practice, we will look at next week.

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Some questions to consider/discuss

Have you been challenged by people about the Catholic faith? What were the issues they raised? How did you respond?

Can we distinguish between 'bad' religion and 'good' religion? What might be the difference?

If someone asked you to explain in a sentence what Christianity is all about, what would you say?

When people say to us that religion has no place in public life, how might we respond?

Russian-born sociologist Pitirim Sorokin formed a theory, based on historical observation, of how societies decline. In the last phase, the society turns its back on religious faith, and on moral absolutes, and seeks fulfilment in material things here and now. In the end, conflicts over possession of material goods bring the society down, and if it is unable to reform itself it is swept away by another society. Is a Western civilisation that turns its back on Christianity doomed?