



The Christian And The Desert

Monsignor John M. Oesterreicher

The much contested but overwhelmingly favored conciliar "Declaration on the Church's Relationship Toward Non-Christian Religions," of which the statement on the Jews is an important part, simple though it is, challenges the smugness of Christians. Men outside the pale of the Church, Jews in particular, are a test: The way a Catholic looks upon them, and what he finds in them, tells the kind of man he is, indeed, it tells the measure of his faith.

Hilaire Belloc is reported to have said of the Jews: "Poor darlings, it must be terrible to be born with the knowledge that you belong to the enemies of the human race . . . because of the Crucifixion."¹ I think the remark outrageous, still, it is in keeping with Belloc's unabashed self-sufficiency. The Apostle warns: "Work out your salvation in fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12). Belloc, however, can

¹ As quoted by W. H. Audew in the introduction to *The Portable Greek Reader* (New York: Viking, 1948), p. 15.

say: "When a man, though maligned of the world, says to himself of himself, 'My purpose was just,' he has hold of reality. He knows himself, for he is himself."²

"Poor Darlings . . ."

The words I have just quoted are part of Belloc's introduction to his book, *Europe and the Faith*. There, he coined the unfortunate phrase: "The Faith is Europe. And Europe is the Faith."³ Its primary meaning is fair enough: Europe will lose her soul and cease to be what she is, unless she clings to, in fact, regains her Christian heritage. In Belloc's own words: "Europe must return to the Faith, or she will perish."⁴ But this basic meaning is accompanied by disturbing overtones. All that seems to matter is the future of the Old World, nothing else. The rest of the earth seems but an appendix to Christian Europe which, for Belloc, is the Roman Empire renewed and glorified. But this is too small a world for Christ's gospel, addressed as it is to every creature, preached as it must be to all men, to all nations.

The faith is not just Roman, European, or Western. It is not Irish, Italian, French, or German. It is neither American nor African. From its very inception, even when it was held only by the small band of Christ's followers, faith in Him has been Catholic. True, the gospel has been the leaven of Western culture, but the former neither stands nor falls with the latter. If I may refer to myself: of my own accord, I would never seek to live elsewhere. My heart is bound to the West. My way of life, my way of looking at things, are Western ways. But I must not impose my preferences on the entire Church. Still, it is my fervent hope that what is good, true, and beautiful, what is genuine in Western civilization will be carried into the new age.

For let us not deceive ourselves. The narrow world of yesterday, in which the Occident—and with it, these United States—held the unchallenged lead, has come to an end. A new, wider world is rising, a world full of promise, a world full of danger. We do not yet know

² *Europe and the Faith* (2nd ed.; New York: Paulist Press, 1920), p. viii.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

what it will be like. But this we do know, the arm of God is not shortened (Is 59:1). And this, too, we know, the image of the world-to-come, its inner being, depends in no mean part, on us and on Christians everywhere.

Belloc was the advocate of a world now dead, a world that treated Christianity as if it were its own property or prerogative. But no one can claim the gospel as his dominion. When Christ was born, He was born a Jew. His stature, His garments, His manners, His speech were those of His people, in short, His humanity was Jewish. Indeed, He cannot be fully understood unless He is seen against this background, unless He, the Lord, is acknowledged as the Son of the people chosen by God. Still, He is not their captive, or anyone's. His arms, tied to the Cross though they are, stretch out to all, and so must ours.

Belloc's way, not his alone, was that of outrage and militancy. The way of the Church today differs. The Council's decree on ecumenism has this to say: "Christ summons the pilgrim Church to that perpetual reform of which she always stands in need, insofar as she is an institution of men here on earth" (II, 6). And again: "All Catholics . . . , each according to his station, must strive that the Church, carrying in her own body the humiliation and death of Jesus, be cleansed and renewed, day by day, till Christ presents her to Himself all glorious, without stain or wrinkle" (1, 4).

To return to Belloc's comment on the Jews: "Poor darlings, it must be terrible to be born with the knowledge that you belong to the enemies of the human race . . . because of the Crucifixion." For all its absurdity, the remark is interesting: A rugged individualist, Belloc nevertheless believed in this instance in the collective guilt of the Jewish people. Was it to ease his conscience that he added a few sentimental touches? Be that as it may, his pity is false, his theology flimsy, even to the point of obscuring the significance of the Passion. Mankind was not the poorer for Christ's death, quite the contrary. Whatever the hostility that put Him to the cross, men have no case against Christ's executioners, least of all against the Jewish people.

Belloc's remark, like others of the same kind, ill conceals a pride utterly at odds with the fact that the Christian existence is one of gracious mercy. This unhappy phenomenon is not new. It is as old

as the Church, not because it is rooted in the gospel, rather because it is deeply ingrained in human nature. Even St. Paul had to warn the Christians of Rome, not to make themselves superior to the "branches lopped off," that is, the Jews severed from the community of Jesus (Rom 11:17-18).

The Christian and the Jew

The conciliar declaration on non-Christians—which over 1700 bishops approved in a preliminary vote last November and which will again be before the Council at the fourth session, this fall—is, as it were, the Church's version of the poet's line: *Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto*, "I am a man, no human concern finds me indifferent. What affects another man, affects me."⁵ Applied to the Church, we might rephrase it like this: "I was made for men and I am placed among them. None of their religious aspirations is foreign to my heart, none leaves me unmoved." The Church rejoices in all that God's love has done in places that, to us, seem far off. For whenever man is able to lift his heart to heaven, the grace of God is not wanting nor His light altogether missing.

But the declaration is not in praise of man; it hymns the one Christ, the Redeemer of all men, in whom God reconciles all things to Himself (2 Cor 5:19). It is thus a declaration of peace, of the wholeness of God's salvific plan. As such, however, it is also a declaration of war. Throughout, but particularly in the section on the Jewish people, it wars against the triumphalist state of mind which acts as though the Church, and we with her, had triumphed or could triumph at any given moment. As a matter of fact, her calling and ours are to serve, not to dominate. No one can be a bridgebuilder unless he has the spirit of service and of poverty. Of course, I do not mean the lame protest exemplified by unkempt beatniks or sloppy coeds, still less the emptiness of those who drift without conviction, without commitment, without certainty, who even abhor them. I mean a sense of service, coming from a stout and generous heart, a heart one with Christ.

When I say "one with Christ," I also mean one with the ancient

⁵ Terence, *The Self-Tormentor*, trans. John Sargeant ("Loeb Classical Library"; London: Heinemann, 1930), I, 77.

Israel. The declaration acknowledges the Church's indebtedness to all that the grace of God accomplished in the community of Yahweh. With the Church, then, we, her sons and daughters, have our roots in that people of old. "Spiritually," to use the words of Pius XI, "we are Semites."⁶

There is no better way of illustrating the Pope's statement, I think, than to point to Israel's beginnings. They are far from impressive. For some time, the descendants of Jacob had been slaves in Egypt. When Moses led them—together with a motley assortment of other oppressed (Ex 12:38)—out of the land of their servitude, they were not yet a real people. That they might become one, indeed a people before the Lord, His own community, Moses took them into the wilderness. There, and nowhere else, they were to meet God.

Need I say that the untracked desert was a place of want and danger? Water was scarce, food far from plentiful. Hostile tribes made the march unsafe. No wonder that this band of runaway slaves longed for the security of their former days, for the routine of bondage. No wonder they quarreled among themselves, rose against their leader, even murmured against God. "Is the Lord in our midst—or not?" they even asked (Ex 17:7). Christians have sometimes indulged in the cozy feeling: "O Lord, we thank you that we are not like the Israelites in the desert, fickle, wavering, and stiff-necked." But we are. And quite often. Still, in our frailty, we need not despair.

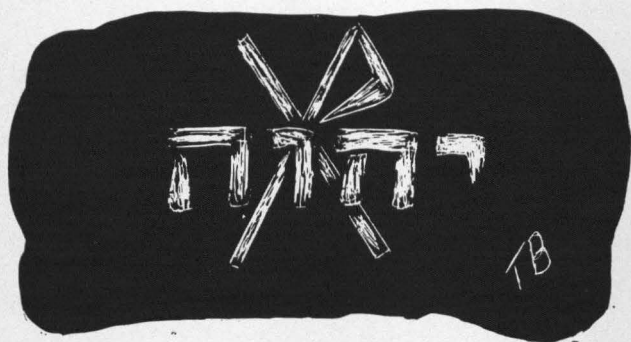
We need not despair for it was precisely in the desert, in their misery that our spiritual forebears, the pilgrims from the land of serfdom to that of promise, experienced the Lord's arm; it was in their misery that they found Him, or rather He, them. It was in the desert that He bound Israel to Himself in a covenant of love (Dt 7:6-10); that He disclosed Himself as the One mighty and merciful, the One just and holy. It was in the desert that the wayfarers learned of His demand to "walk in His ways" (Dt 26:17), to imitate His holiness (Ex 19:6).

The desert is a place of decision, for or against the Lord. There, man either abandons himself to God, the Source and Creator of all being, or is left to himself. Its solitude prepares him for the voice

⁶ *La Documentation Catholique*, xxxix, 1460.

of the Lord, while its aridity may tempt him to give heed to the adversary. From the days of the exodus, the theme of the desert—in both its aspects—never disappears from Israel's history. The wilderness is the land from which salvation springs. Alas, it often is the opposite, the area where everything is buried in sand, where all is lost, where man perishes.

Christ is Israel's Sum and Summit. Thus sojourn in the barren, comfortless desert lies at the beginning of His public ministry, as it did at the beginning of His people's history. He is tested there by



the devil, filling the empty place with His determination to live His messianic mission to the end; to do the will of the Father; to run the errand of mercy on which He has been sent; that men may not perish but be saved.

The Christian and the Desert

The Christian, too, knows the desert with its two faces. Lent, retreats, monasticism are all ways to make the desert and its blessings real: With the rushing of the market place gone, with the noise of the world stilled a man can concentrate, that is, center his life in Him, the Beginning, the End, and the Middle of all there is. Yet there is the other wilderness in which the Christian is placed, the stretch of fear, the terrain that seems to bear God's curse, the expense that flirts with nothingness.

Some months ago, *Time* magazine wrote: "The twentieth century's sexual revolution directly challenges Christianity's basic teachings

against fornication and adultery.”⁷ Here the order of things is reversed. Even if the vast majority of men threw themselves into sexual chaos, even if only a few abided by the decalogue, it is never man who really challenges or questions the word of God, it is always the word of God that questions him. It is he who stands under its judgment.

Yet, *Time* goes on to report that some “progressive” Christian thinkers advocate a new morality: “What they propose is an ethic based on love rather than law, in which the ultimate criterion for right and wrong is not divine command but the individual’s subjective perception of what is good for himself and his neighbor in each given situation.”⁸ What am I to say of the simplest equation between desire, urge, instinct on the one hand and love on the other, an equation hardly worthy of a Christian thinker? I am dumbfounded. No doubt, situations have a bearing on the morality of an act but, at no time, can man’s desire be the sole or uppermost criterion of what is good and what wrong.

A few days after this story appeared in *Time*, *The New York Times* carried another about a psychoanalytic symposium on marriage. One of its speakers is said to have pointed out that marital infidelity is now deeply rooted in the American cultural pattern; that American culture leaves “little middle ground between continuous attention to other people’s wishes . . . and feelings, and complete indifference to anything except one’s own desires”; that the sexual promiscuity of today among adolescents and adults is “but their despairing protest against and escape from a society they find wanting.”⁹

If all this is true, and I have no doubt that it is to a large extent, then the Christian of today lives in a moral desert. Again, indeed more than ever, the world has become for him a place of temptation, test, and decision. He may be tempted to lose heart, to yield, and join the crowd. But—O wonder of grace!—in his loneliness he may also hear God’s voice and draw closer to Him. Even if that voice is the merest whisper, he may still have the stamina to bear witness to the lordship of the Lord. He will bear witness, horrified

⁷ March 5, 1965, p. 42.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ March 8, 1965.

by the doom he foresees, but not in horror alone, rather out of love for men bewildered or even gone wild.

I have singled out sins that pervert the order of sex, not because I think they are the only ones or the worst but because here is one of the signs of our times, because those sins jeopardize man's dignity as much as do the denials of the basic rights of men to people of different shade, of different skin. Do we not live in a wilderness when men can be murdered because they come to the aid of their fellows, when men are beaten and hunted because they demand the right to vote, to have a voice in government? The segregationist denies that every man is made in the image of God and that mankind is one. He thus denies the good news of creation as well as the good news of redemption. What have we done, what will we do so that God's voice be heard in human affairs? In the desert, it is dangerous to sleep at the wrong time and in the wrong spot.

Historical Faith

Though I have mentioned the conciliar declaration on non-Christians only now and then, my thoughts have always revolved around it. In pointing to Hilaire Belloc as one of the best known exponents of triumphalism and to the Council as conducting the burial of a haughty and domineering spirit on the part of Christians toward their neighbors; in pointing to the desert experience as one common to Christians and the Israelites of old, I have only expounded meanings inherent in the declaration.

In its section on the Jews, the declaration stresses our indebtedness to the Israel of old. Now, what makes Israel's and, following hers, the Church's faith unique? Before I answer the question, let me take a brief glance at Israel's neighbors who rejoiced in nature-rites. Nothing impresses natural man as much as the wondrous cycle of the seasons: the apparently endless rotation from spring to summer, to fall, to winter, and to spring again. Not only does he depend on it for his livelihood, he feels himself caught up in the process of growth and decay that surrounds him everywhere; in the sowing, budding, ripening, and harvesting; the rising and setting; the birth and death of all living things and of all the things that to him seem alive. The mythologies and festivals of Israel's neighbors but celebrated this rhythm of nature.

Israel's elite, however, never tired of battling these celebrations. It called the pagan gods "nothings." To worship them, to worship cosmic forces it thought abhorrent. Though the One God Israel adored was to her the ruler of nature, she did not deduce His existence from the movements of the stars, the sun, or the wind, from the flow of ebb and tide but from the events of men, that is, the events that gave direction to her life. Israel's God is more than the Prime Mover, He is the Lord of history.

In contrast to all other beliefs, then, biblical faith is based on events and their interpretation. (You must not be astounded when I say "and their interpretation"; mere facts are naked, as it were; they are separate, isolated from one another; they require eyes that truly see, ears that hear, men who respond so that they may be bound together and fashioned into history.) Israel's faith thus rests upon her deliverance from Egypt, her march through the desert, her covenant with God at Sinai, and on what has been called the "recital" of these sacred events by narrators and writers, by priests, psalmists, and prophets. With their help, the people could see these events as *chasidei Yahweh*, the gracious manifestations of the Lord. The Church's faith rests, in addition to those happenings of old, on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the proclamation of the good news of these even greater events, of the *magnalia Dei*, by the apostles.

Ours is, then, a historical faith. It is fettered, and it is free. Not only does it spring from the sacred history of the past, it also bids us to help in shaping history-to-come. The Council—not only by its documents but by its very existence—brings home to us that man is, above all, a historical being. And so is the Church. She is not a marble statue, beautifully sculptured but without life, standing on a pedestal, motionless; no, she is an organism that grows, that assimilates what is good and rejects what is harmful, that is deeply rooted in the past but hopefully stretches forward into the future. She is open to the movements of history, she wishes to steer the world to a deeper tomorrow. And so must we.

The task is tremendous, indeed, frightening: to free for untold millions of bewildered, anguished men access to the bridge between heaven and earth; to build a bridge between believers and unbelievers, between believers and not-yet-believers; to build a bridge be-

tween East and West, between various ways of life, various economic and political systems; to build a bridge between theology and science, between faith and the arts—so one could go on.

What the world, what the Church needs are neither pessimists nor optimists, neither utopians nor defeatists, neither dreamers nor busybodies but bridgebuilders. What Church and world need are men and women who do not shy away from the slow, the hard, the wearisome but richly rewarding mission of being one of the masons of history. Even the least is a helper of its great Architect.

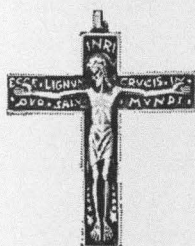
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