

Catholic Theological Association 2005 Conference Papers

De Doctrina Christiana: Hearing and Speaking the Word

Introduction

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The rapidity with which Christian beliefs and practices have become *illegible* in British culture is astonishing. It seems clear that we have on our hands a crisis *de doctrina christiana*. As the leaflet for our conference put it: ‘What is at issue is not simply a neglect of practice but a sense that our contemporary culture has become so disengaged from the language and symbols of Christianity that it is becoming impossible either to hear or to speak the Christian message in a way that makes sense’.

De Doctrina Christiana: Hearing and Speaking the Word. As Eamon Conway insists: hearing the word comes before speaking it. How do we help each other hear words well? How do we hear the words we hear as refractions of God’s Word? During a discussion of preaching, Tina Beattie lamented how rarely we hear the Bible broken open, and Robert Murray insisted that the efficacy of the Word of God in the liturgy depends upon good reading.

As Christians, we confess that we have seen God’s fleshed Word’s radiance, ‘full of grace and truth’. But what do we hear when we say this? Behind ‘grace’ and ‘truth’ lie *gratia* and *veritas*, *charis* and *aletheia* and, behind all these, in Hebrew, *hesed* and *emeth*. Yet these two terms confess God’s covenant fidelity. As Bob Murray remarked, in the same discussion, so many good big words, like ‘grace’ and ‘truth’ have, in our culture, become uncoupled from relationship. And yet, as J. R. R. Tolkien had once reminded him, ‘truth’ grew from ‘troth’. This fundamental issue, of the relational character of Christian truth, is central to the argument of Henri Gagey’s paper.

These days, talk of ‘doctrine’ makes people nervous. And yet, as Carol Harrison remarks, all it means is ‘teaching and learning’ — which we talk of all the time. Of Augustine, whose magisterial little book served as ‘set book’ for the conference, she says: ‘teaching and

learning had made him who he was'. What a splendid epitaph that would be, for any theologian — and for any bishop! Harrison argues that Augustine's text remains a good guide in our predicament because its 'subtext' was the difficult, often conflictual relations between Christian and pagan culture.

For the Christian, Augustine insists, persuasion is at the service of truth. Nevertheless, persuasion requires, now as then, the deployment of a full range of aesthetic resources, whereas we seem to have 'lost sight of the need for aesthetic delight and pleasure in teaching'. 'Singing the Word' is something we still need to do. Would it be beyond the wit of humankind to devise a musical 'digestion' of the Word proclaimed in the readings and expounded in the homily? This, as Geoffrey Turner shows, was the liturgical task performed by the cantata in Bach's day.

Enda McDonagh presents the task of reconciliation, of gathering into communion, as the "necessary complement to the differentiation intrinsic to divine creative activity". Moreover, the failure of Christians to appreciate that, in all times and circumstances, 'the Word is present already', is a betrayal of the Word in the world, a Word which 'in the world today and perhaps in all days too often takes the form of lament'.

Instead of discussing the teaching office of the bishop, Archbishop Vincent Nichols, preferring to share some general personal reflections on the work of catechesis, describes the BBC commentaries on the funeral of John Paul II and the inauguration of Benedict XVI as 'the most effective pieces of catechesis in which I have been involved'. At the other end of the spectrum (in terms of scale) Clare Watkins argues for an ecclesiology focussed, in the household, on baptismal vocation. The ecclesiological rethinking 'demanded by an emphasis on the domestic church requires that we centre our thinking about church precisely in those places which — organisationally — appear to be on the edges of the church': a case argued, perhaps paradoxically, through an examination of post-conciliar papal statements.

Henri Gagey's contention that 'Faith is definitely a matter of taste . . . the taste acquired through an ongoing process of initiation' was, at the conference, illustrated by a marvellously Gallic mime of "dégustation". If, at times, we felt that we had failed to address some of the central issues, Gagey's conclusion brought us back to the heart of the matter: Christian truth is such 'that it can only be delivered by witnesses . . . those who speak from the scars left on their bodies when they have paid the price for this truth'.

Reporting in *The Tablet* (28 September 1985) on the Association's first annual conference, Eamon Duffy wrote: 'Theology is the responsibility of the Church at large, not just of its pastors, or, for that matter, its professional theologians. When any Christian seeks to make Christian sense of the tears of things, of his or anyone's living

and dying, of the bewildering and sorrowing complexities of existence, theology is being done. Though it requires the discipline of the academy for its own health, it is too crucial to the Church to be confined there. It is the whole Church which must engage in theology'. How is it to do so? I conclude with four questions, concerning our contemporary crisis *de doctrina christiana*, which I offered for discussion during the conference. How well, and in what manner, are adult Catholics in this country taught to pray? How well, and in what manner, are adult Catholics in this country taught to read the Scriptures? Ours is a church of near one hundred per cent literacy, nearly half of whose members continue their education, beyond school age, into institutions of higher and further education. How well, and in what manner, are adult Catholics in this country equipped with a grasp of Church history and doctrine commensurate with their general knowledge and grasp of public affairs? To what extent, and in what manner, do we succeed in communicating the conviction that Catholic faith is, for every Catholic and in every context, '*fides quaerens intellectum*'?

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