

The Case of Father Duffy

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Summary: Commentary on a case where a priest is silenced for his work with the poor. Expresses the tension of obedience and love of the Church with the demands of serving the poor and Church shortcomings. Affirms her acceptance of Church authority but notes the demands of conscience have caused Saints to be critical of even the Pope in the past. Reaffirms their lay mission to enlighten, arouse the conscience, and lead from the bottom up. (DDLW #497).

How thankful we would be if we could get out of writing about this, could just keep a discreet silence and wait for things to blow over. On the other two sides, we wish **they** would keep that holy silence. As a philosopher said, keep quiet for three years, and the problem will solve itself. Maybe this particular problem would, but not the problems which gave rise to it. But we have to write about it because great principles are involved.

On the one hand there is the question of obedience. On the other hand there is neglect of the poor, a lack of understanding concerning the needy and the poor. Which sin is the greater? Practically everyone would say the second, because everybody gives lip service to the poor when they don't give hand or foot service. But the question of obedience goes back still further, "to man's first disobedience," and to that great obedience, the folly of the cross, "He was obedient unto death." And on just such obedience, such a folly of love, stands the very life of the Church, and the Church is the Body of Christ, which we love. Though the members rend each other in wars and dissensions, still there is no separation of the head from the members, and to love the one is to love the other.

Americans hate the word obedience, and the only way to look at it is from the supernatural point of view, not from the natural, because it is often folly. This is not to deny that conscience comes first: one must obey the voice of conscience, one must obey God rather than men, as St. Peter himself was the first to say.

And here is one of those delicate problems that drive the rest of the world crazy when they observe the Catholic in his relations to Holy Mother the Church. They point out the scandals in the Church, the mistakes in history, the bad Popes. the Inquisition, the lining up of the Church with temporal power, the concordats, the expediency, the diplomacy, and so on and so on.

Right under one's nose there is always plenty to complain of. Churches, schools, monasteries being built while the municipal lodging house is packed with mothers and children separated from husbands and fathers because of lack of housing; a spreading unemployment; race prejudice amongst Catholics, and priests and sisters, too; anti-Semitism—oh, yes, there is plenty of scandal.

“The just will be judged first,” and the “just” is made up of the lame, the halt and the blind because Christ came to call sinners, and the Church is full of them, in high and low places.

The Church Is the Cross

Guardini said that the Church was the Cross and one could not separate Christ from his Cross. He said, too, that we must learn to live in a state of permanent dissatisfaction and impatience with the Church. We have to suffer and hang our heads at all the accusations made against us. We are all guilty, we all make up the Body of Christ. And we must suffer with bitterness, the Little Flower said, if need be, and without courage, and that is what makes the suffering especially keen.

And that is what Fr. Clarence Duffy is doing, he is suffering in a great and terrible anguish, living with the poor as he has always done, and he is not patient with his suffering, because as I explained in the last issue of the paper he is not a patient man, and he is trying to preach from any platform where he will be heard, and in this last month, that was a platform up in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where a plain clothes man, off duty, threw an egg at him, this priest who was speaking of very real problems of war and peace, of unemployment and housing, of race prejudice, and of the need of all men to work together.

Father Duffy is acting in good conscience. He has a leave of absence from his Bishop in Ireland, he has a “celebret” from him which states that he is a priest in good standing and that he has permission to leave his diocese. He cannot be termed a “runaway priest” or one who is “out of his diocese” in a bad sense.

But the situation is more complicated in that Fr. Duffy's Bishop is dead these last few months and no new one has been appointed. He cannot be reached to rescind his permission to Fr. Duffy, nor to take from him his “celebret.” No other Bishop has the authority to do that. On the other hand, a priest cannot continue to say Mass according to the usages of the Church without the permission of the Bishop in whose diocese he is staying. At other freer times in the history of the Church priests and friars could wander around from diocese to diocese and preach to the populace.

Fr. Duffy has never been a priest of the diocese of New York, nor is he listed in the official directory of priests. But he has been given “faculties to say Mass,” and has been saying Mass in our own neighboring Church and of late years in a Church up town. In order not to embarrass the pastor in whose Church he has been saying Mass he is now saying it privately.

How technically right Fr. Duffy may be, we do not know. We do know how in the history of the Church, a St. John of the Cross, a St. Teresa of Avila, were always getting around their superiors in one way or another in order to do or effect what they considered necessary for the times. Over and over again in the history of the Church in the lives of the saints there have been these struggles within the Church. We hate to see them used against her.

At the same time we have seen, to our grief and shame, priests and prelates sitting on the platform with a Mayor Hague, and other politicians and receiving no rebuke from the Chancery offices of their diocese.

There is nothing wrong in what Fr. Duffy had to say. We have been saying those things for the past seventeen years. We would add more, and that is that no political party, no political action, but only revolutionary personalist direct action on the part of the workers (and non-violent action which entails the most discipline and suffering) is going to get anywhere. But fundamentally Fr. Duffy knows that.

He knows all the factions that exist and have always existed in radical circles. He knows that his brand of agrarian socialism is a kind always fought and hated by the Marxists with their dictatorship of the proletariat. He knows that he is being used, as the agrarian socialists were used by Lenin to help him into power, when the radical trade unions of the cities worked against him.

But as he likes to point out with Abbe Boulier who was rebuked for being on the platform with communists, "Your Eminence, the Communists are on the platform with me, not I with them." There is a clerical touch to this little joke, not an arrogance, but a realization of the dignity of the priesthood.

Fr. Duffy epitomizes the hunger of many young priests throughout the country, for freedom to throw themselves into active work with the poor, and with organized Labor. They would like to live with the poor, not in the magnificent rectories that have gone up in these last few generations in our great cities. In the mission sections the priests are still living in poverty and trying to build churches. Fr. Duffy highlights the widespread neglect of social problems because in spite of labor schools and the few labor Bishops we point to with pride, every beginning of recognition of the problems of the day is met with opposition. We could cite instance after instance of young priests trying to work with labor and being clamped down upon, sent away, silenced, sneered at. They also have been suppressed by being put in positions of greater authority and responsibilities so that in order to accomplish their duties they have had to neglect the interests closer to their hearts.

Our Own Guilt

E. I. Watkin's essay on clerical materialism in **The Catholic Center** is a good illustration of the trouble of the day. And it is a trouble indeed. Believing

as we do in the Mystical Body of Christ, for every expensive, convent and monastery and school and rectory being built in this country, for every luxury which has come to be considered a necessity by our people in America, we may hold ourselves responsible for the persecution of priests and nuns in other parts of the world. And I do know that the great mass of priests and seminarians and nuns look upon them as the lucky ones who are counted worthy to shed their blood for Christ.

Persecution is deserved and undeserved. "And it must needs be that scandals come but woe to those by whom they come." "Woe to the shepherds that feed themselves and not their sheep."

Yes, God is making a point no doubt, and using Father Duffy with all his faults to do it. But in saying this we do recognize that besides this problem there is that other. We recognize and accept the authority of the Church as we do that of Christ himself. Our Holy Father the Pope is our dear sweet Christ on earth, as St. Catherine called him, even when she was pointing out with the liberty of a saint, how wrong he was at the time, in his conduct of temporal affairs.

We accept the authority of the Church but we wonder why it shows itself in such strange ways. At the same time that Fr. Duffy is corrected (after the Lawrence incident through the columns of the Daily News and the World Telegram in New York) other priests and sisters, in another state, also engaged in political activity, handing out posters and leaflets to school children and parishioners, to vote for a candidate that favors bingo, are actually directed to that activity by authority rather than corrected for it.

We respect the agony of frustration of Fr. Duffy, but at the same time, we remember with St. Paul, "how can they preach unless they be sent." And Fr. Duffy has not been sent. We are obliged to conform to Christ even in Christ's folly. He submitted to the injustices, the mistakes, the crimes committed against Him, and against St. John the Baptist. He submitted even to be termed a lamb led to the slaughter, and He was King of the whole world.

Fr. Duffy is a priest, and at his ordination, he placed his hands in the hands of his bishop as a serf does with his liege lord, and promises obedience. It is a symbol of something. It is seeing Christ in the Church. Just as a wife is obliged to see Christ in her husband. We write these things for the instruction of our communist brothers, though they cannot understand the faith which alone makes it possible to hold this view.

We, on the other hand, are the laity. We have a freedom not granted to priests who are under orders. If Fr. Duffy is plunging ahead and making mistakes now, it is because we, as lay people have not gone ahead and led the way, working from the bottom up, expressing the longings and aspirations and yes, rebellion, of all the people. He is paying for our sins of omission.

Bishop O'Hara once said to Peter Maurin, "Peter, you lead the way, we will follow." The work that we must do, in addition to all the other works of mercy,

is to enlighten the laity, to educate, to call attention to the conditions that exist, to arouse the conscience, to start the personalist and communitarian revolution, as Peter used to call it, or the pacifist-distributist-anarchist movement as Bob Ludlow terms it.

(The word anarchist is deliberately and repeatedly used in order to awaken our readers to the necessity of combating the “all encroaching” state, as our Bishops have termed it, and to shock serious students into looking into the possibility of another society, an order, made up of associations, guilds, unions, communes, parishes—voluntary associations of men, on regional or national lines, where there is a possibility of liberty and responsibility for all men.).

Those are ideas which can be shouted from any platform, and we are hoping that Fr. Duffy will be allowed, by some strange freak of Providence, to go on doing it.

And then, strangely enough, he will find—exemplifying the liberty of the Church as he would be doing, that he will no longer have the chance to do so. Given permission by his own bishop, making no split between people and the hierarchy, no longer held up as a martyr, emphasizing as he must do, and does do at all times, that he cannot approve of Marxist materialism and centralization, he will soon perforce go back to cultivating his garden, a piece of land given him by one of his Irish seamen friends, and so remain in quiet until some other opportunity is given him to play a part, as he probably always will do, in the history of our times.