# Homily at Herbert McCabe's Funeral

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Readings : *Daniel 12 1-3* *I Jn 3. 14-16* *Jn 6. 37-40*

This is the story of one Dominican's following the Gospel with faith, hope and above all charity.

There was a restlessness about Herbert. All his life he was in some ways an adolescent. He had the virtues of an adolescent, and sometimes an adolescent's infuriating ways. But our weaknesses, under God's grace become our strengths. Immensely loyal to his friends, he liked to shock. Questing, critical, radical, ever seeking for the meaning of life, and for 'meaning' *tout court*, he could be quite arrogant in his own convictions. It did not mean that he could not brook disagreement. Intolerant he could be of what he called 'playing games', but he delighted in argument. He could not resist being outrageous at the expense of pompous authority. His Catholic orthodoxy, expressed in contemporary idiom, was unshakeable; his Dominican, questioning, obedience was absolute. Like adolescents, when asked questions which they find intrusive, he was economical in speech; this he honed into a fine precision, admirably editing out superfluous words. The adolescent's unsureness of himself he turned into the humility of loving himself not for his own achievements, but for God's gift of being God's lover, able to speak with, and thank God. Still he hated going into print and agonised over sermons. Leaving instructions to any literary executor he talked about the "the bits of paper I leave behind. ... If I hear you have burnt the lot I shall merely add this to the eternal (no! perpetual) sufferings I shall be undergoing"[1] — the sense of sinfulness never left him, though balanced with unbounded hope in God's mercy. Convivial all his life he loved to share his mind with others (surely a form of poverty). He had the adolescent's facility for making friends, which matured into a rare capacity for love of all kinds and conditions of men and women — the presence here of so large and so varied a company is proof of that.

After studies at Manchester University he joined the Dominican Order. The moment was in many ways a turning point in history — the world and the Church were changing fast, a "time (in the prophet



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Daniel's phrase) of great distress, unparalleled since nations came into existence".[2] In the Dominican Order life went tranquilly on with apparently little change but seeds were being sown of a quite radical transformation. The relatively monastic and parochial ways of the Province were being challenged by the arrival in numbers never before experienced of candidates with degrees from British Universities. not the safe ecclesiastical doctorates of Pontifical Academies. Today, 50 years later, the great majority of our novices come with strings of degrees round their necks, and go on to add further postgraduate beads as they proceed on their way. The Province is greatly enriched academically; it may be questioned whether there is a risk of a diminution in its missionary and apostolic outreach.

It has to be said, I think, that at the time of Herbert's arrival there was a certain *malaise* in the intellectual framework of the formative studies to which he and his fellow students were subjected. His first studies in the Order were at Hawkesyard dominated by the old guard of scholastic Thomists, as indeed the Province at large was. It was at Hawkesyard that I — my only excuse for appearing as preacher today — that I under a kind of religious compliance, was required to teach him a strange scholastic psychology in dog Latin. I hang my head in shame at the remembrance. The book of Daniel says "Of those sleeping in the Land of Dust (a land of intellectual dust Hawkesyard truly was) many will awaken, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace".[3] I pray that my shame may at least not be everlasting. But students learn as much or more from their fellow students as from their teachers, especially when they belong to a group as gifted as Herbert's generation. Even now I recall the excitement of teaching him and his colleagues.

There was better to come when he moved to Oxford. There he learned from Victor White a love, always critical but none the less sincere, for Aquinas, and also the conviction that, in Herbert's words, "when we speak of God we do not know what we are talking about. We are simply using language from the familiar context in which we understand it and using it to point, beyond what we understand, into the mystery that surrounds and sustains he world we do partially understand"[4] — the *via negativa* which was the bedrock of Herbert's theological thought. No doubt too it was from Victor and the companionship of Cornelius Ernst, who had studied under Wittgenstein, that he derived his abiding concern with the theory of meaning. It was no accident that Herbert's volume in the Blackfriars translation of the *Summa Theologiae* covered the all-important questions 12 and 13 of the Prima Pars concerned with how God is



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known by his creatures and how we can use words to refer to God.

I have referred to the *malaise* which I believe afflicted the academic life of the Province at that time, the suspicion in which the authorities of the Province held any departure from the prevailing scholastic Thomism. It is a curious fact that for the ten years after the completion of his studies, Herbert, brilliant as he was, was relegated to purely parish and pastoral activities, first in Newcastle, then in Manchester. My guess is that he was not trusted as an intellectual influence on our students. I spoke earlier of the risk that with the academic direction in which the Province was going there might be a certain diminution of our apostolic preaching. That was never so with Herbert. He was always able to combine intense philosophical and theological acumen with being a preacher. Perhaps it was the religious obedience of those early years which under Providence helped him avoid the risk. When I heard of his death these words occurred to me "The time has come for me to depart, I have fought the good fight to the end; I have run the race to the finish; I have kept the faith. .. The Lord stood by me and gave me power, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed for all the Gentiles to hear".[5] The proof of Herbert's preaching 'to all the Gentiles' may be found in the little catechism he published towards the end of his life, which passes on his childhood faith expressed in a language as simple and lucid as it is orthodox and profound.

It was only after those ten perhaps stultifying years that he was sent to Cambridge to be Editor of *New Blackfriars*. There he joined a community of outstanding scholars and writers. It was not to be for long. In 1967 during the heady days immediately after Vatican II, and on occasion of Charles Davis' departure from the Church, Herbert wrote in an Editorial[6] that that "the church is quite plainly corrupt", and that "there seem to be men" [Bishops and others] "playing a private game among themselves in which the moves are directives and prohibitions and the players score points for formally going through the motions of docility or of repeating the orders correctly". The need of authority Herbert never questioned, but its then exercise seemed to him doctrinaire and irrelevant. He asked that authority should see itself "not in terms of power but as a service to the community". There was nothing here which had not been said in almost as many words by the documents of Vatican II. But Herbert's words were, it must be said, outrageous, and he compounded the offence by attending Charles Davis' marriage, loyal as always to his friends. The re-action was instantaneous. The Master of the Order at once took away the editorship of Blackfriars; worse still Herbert was suspended in his



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priestly office.This is not the place to go into the ins-and-outs of "the McCabe Affair".[7] Enough to mention it; it was the test of his obedience and fidelity through which Herbert had to pass to achieve spiritual maturity. I know that it was for him a searing experience, but, faced with pretty rough ecclesiastical justice, his obedience was heroic. The suspension lasted only a few days, and three years later he was re-instated as editor of *New Blackfriars*. Even then he could not resist opening his first Editorial "As I was saying before I was so oddly interrupted, ecclesiastical authorities can behave in some fairly bizarre ways". I imagine that by then the perfervid rhetoric (it has to be read to be believed) of both sides of three years before had quietened down. The episode did not dampen Herbert's espousal of radical causes.

Not that his championing of post-Vatican II movements was uncritical. In an article of 1986 he had argued that in a pre-Vatican II restoration of the Easter Vigil, in 1956, the Vigil was not tagged on as a third episode (Easter Sunday) to a sequence of Passion (Good Friday), Death (Holy Saturday), but actually, being more primitive, gave the whole meaning of all the events, and "related the Christian mystery to very deep human things in a visual and almost tactile way, to strange things lurking in the depths of human consciousness. ... The old Easter Vigil was a very sexy affair" not one that "looks as if Mary Whitehouse has been getting at it".[9] Confronted with a new Vatican II rite he regretted "the cut-price ceremony tailored to the imagination, or lack of imagination, of some Euro-theologians, and filtered down to us by a committee dedicated to putting the whole thing into the kind of suburban English guaranteed not to offend anybody by violence or sex or mystery".[10]

In the same article he spoke of Resurrection. "The resurrection of Christ means first of all that we are in his presence, and this is what we celebrate and symbolise in the sacraments of the church. ... We are only in contact with Christ through a *special depth in our intercommunion with each other*. Christ is present but ambiguously present; what we *see* ... is *the presence of each other*. Our resurrection at the end of time will mean that we are no longer sacramentally present but unambiguously present to Christ."[11] So as always with him his theology turns on the loving communication with one another.

What happens then when we die? He had said "Because our body is primarily our way of being present, our fundamental form of communication, absence always or nearly always means bodily absence. That is why death is the most extreme form of absence. Love, friendship, requires bodily presence."[12] I do not entirely understand, and alas Herbert is no longer here to explain it to me.



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(Perhaps it has something to do with Thomist difficulties over the status of a disembodied soul). If contact with Christ must be mediated as a "special depth in our intercommunion with each other" it is difficult to see what kind of contact with Christ we may have after death. Herbert took the matter of death very seriously. "Death, which is the punishment of fallen man, has become, because of the Cross, the way to resurrection and new life.[13] "The whole of life is a preparation for death because it is only from death that eternal life can spring".[14] For the humanist death is an irrelevant end-moment; for the Christian it is the beginning of true life, but only if it is accepted in total self-abandonment. Of course, most deaths (as with Herbert's) make no room for some final conscious act of acceptance. "We must become 'obedient unto death' in charity, and this like any other divine act, is only possible through the divine life we share in grace. ... The act of death that I do, is first of all an act of God in me; it is only secondarily my own. It is first of all a result of the fact that I am in Christ. ...To share the life of Christ involves expressing divine love in our actions". We come back to that central theme in Herbert's thinking — love of the brethren as the means of being with Christ. We heard in today's passage from John's epistle "We have passed over from death to life because we love our brethren" and in our Gospel "It is my Father's will that whoever sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life".

May Herbert, with his love, faith and hope, rest in peace.

1 private letter.
2 *Daniel* 12, 1
3 *Daniel* 12, 2
4 *Religion and Philosophy*, ed Martin Warner, Cambridge
5 2 *Tim.* 5, 6-7, 17
6 *New Blackfriars,* Feb. 1967)
7 Simon Clements and Monica Lawlor, *The McCabe Affair*, Sheed and Ward, 1967.
8 *New Blackfriars,* Oct. 1970.
9 *God Matters*. The Easter Vigil, p.103.
10 *ibid.* p. 104.
11 *ibid.* p. 112.
12 *ibid.* p. 111.
13 *The New Creation*, p. 173.
14 *ibid.* p. 172.
15 ibid. pp.183, 184.



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