

THE PATRICIANS

Catholics never speak about religion to those outside the Church, and seldom to those inside it. A term has been devised in France to describe this Christian disorientation: Mutisme. In his book on the Church, Mgr. Suenens expresses this poignant thought: "It is said that those outside the Church will not listen. But the real truth is that the Catholics will not speak." Our two Envoys, journeying out to Brazil last year, were the only people on the great liner who talked to others on religion. Two Catholic members of the crew told them that on their voyages a constant barrage of questions and objections poured in on them which they were not equipped to answer. This is grimly tragic. We must charitably suppose that the bulk of those questions proceeded from people who were seeking truth. They were not going to learn it from those Catholics.

Recently some of us stayed in a little town with a population one-third Catholic. We were informed that in the one and only public-house the Protestants had of late been asking questions about Catholicism. We inquired if they got the answers. No. Grim again!

And readers will remember the case, described in a "Cameo" in this Journal (*Maria Legionis*) some years ago, of the very distinguished old lady who had mixed all her life with "good Catholics," and who declared in her 96th year that not one of them had ever tried to convert her. She regarded this as odd from people who appeared to believe. But can the word "odd" be appropriately applied to what is universal?

"Mutisme" is the Prevalent Evil

It seems to be the startling fact that the average Catholic will not help another in the domain of religious knowledge! "Mutisme" is the prevalent evil.

Is it that we have not got the Faith? No, we have it, and have it abundantly. Is it that we are indifferent about the soul of our neighbour? No, because we do feel for him and pray for him. Is it that we repudiate the idea of conversion? No, for our hearts glow in us at the very mention of someone entering the Church.

Then what is the explanation of the anomaly? Here it is in the words of one who had just attended his first Patrician meeting; was stirred by what he had seen; and was pouring out his mind to Father Aedan McGrath on the subject: "Why have they not got this everywhere? I have been through all my schooling and have learned my catechism as well as the next. But I could not have answered one of those questions which I have heard discussed. And yet I realise that they are all simple questions. I feel I don't know how to say anything."

It would seem that the majority of our people are unaccustomed to argue, or even to think coherently, about religion, or to explain any less-simple point in connection with it. Many could repeat those words: "I don't know how to say anything." Obviously such persons will hide their ignorance by an unapostolic silence, and will wither under assault.

The Remedy is the Patricians

The remedy? Here again I quote Father Aedan McGrath: "The Priests here are thrilled at the possibilities offered by the Patricians." So I discuss with you the Patricians.

It is a society controlled by the Legion of Mary. Each branch must be run by a Praesidium, and the Chairman must be an active Legionary. A Praesidium could have charge of more than one branch of the Patricians. The name is in the tradition of Legionary Latinity. It is derived from the Patricians of ancient Rome, who were the upper of the three grades of society, i.e., the Patricians, the Plebs, the Slaves. Our Patricians would hope to combine all social grades into one spiritual nobility. But let us carry the idea of the name a little further. Each old-time Patrician had as his clients some families of the Plebs to whom he was to be guide, protector, counsellor. Our Patricians are bidden to aspire to be a like relation to the general body of the people.

Moreover, the Patricians were supposed to be specially full of love of their country and of responsibility for its welfare. And so, our Patricians must be supporters of their spiritual fatherland, the Church. Catholics who cannot be broadly inserted into that category, may not be members of our Patricians. Similarly, non-Catholics cannot attend its meetings, though they may be friendly to the Church and even journeying towards it.

The wider aim of the Patricians is a mass-mobilising of the Catholics. For this, one branch in a parish would not be enough. Each section of the people would need to have one.

To Inform Catholics

The immediate object is the equipping of those like the two seamen on that liner, or like the shrinking Catholics in that village pub, or like the thousands who never attempted to convert the 95-year-old lady! It will seek to give the answers: to teach the people to explain themselves: to cure Mutisme: to solve the doubts of the multitude: to supply a reasonable basis to the faith that is in us.

But the cautious school may wonder: "Is it right to raise doubts in people's minds?" The doubts are already in minds. But without the answers. Every objection to religion is there, spontaneously generated or suggested from outside. And even if the objections were not there, it might be necessary to inject them on the principle of inoculation. These are no days for Catholic Babes in the Wood!

The Patrician Meeting

The rules of the Patricians prescribe a monthly meeting. Each meeting begins with prayers. Then a talk or paper by a lay person, not to last longer than 15 minutes; followed by general discussion. Then, one hour after the opening time, the discussion is suspended for 15 minutes, during which a cup of tea or other light refreshment is served. Then follows a talk by a priest, of duration 15 minutes. This need not necessarily adhere to the theme proposed by the first talk, but it should be in line with the aims of the Patricians as stated above. Then follows further discussion lasting nearly half-an-hour, that is till five minutes before the end. Then announcements and final prayer, which is the Apostles' Creed. The blessing of the priest concludes the meeting.

The total length of the meeting is to be two hours. Proper time-keeping is essential. It has been found that those giving the principal talks tend to go beyond their allotted time. This is serious, in view of the fact that the discussion time is correspondingly lessened.

It is not obligatory that a member shall attend every meeting. As the meetings are only monthly, a system of reminding members will be necessary. The meetings should possess the elements of attractiveness, including those of light, temperature, etc. Smoking is permitted.

Expenses are to be met by a Secret Bag collection. A statement of accounts should be read out to the meeting.

The subject of discussion should be determined in advance and notice of it given.

The best number for a branch is 50 or 60. A larger number becomes difficult to handle, especially in regard to the tea or refreshment session which is important. The idea here is not at all that of coming to the rescue of exhausted persons. It is a striking of the social note—important for a gathering of the Patrician type. Incidentally it loosens tongues. It has been suggested that the cup of tea be omitted but the “free-and-easy” interlude retained. In practice it would be found difficult to justify that break without specific reason. The tea, etc., supplies an adequate reason, but it should be ultra-simple, just a cup of tea with biscuits or bread. The tea interval is one of the features that give “personality” to the Patricians.

Setting. The theatre effect, i.e., players and audience, is to be avoided. In a hall, face sideways, not lengthways. Behind the table, have two rows of seats. Among those seated in the front row are the principals, e.g., the priest and the Chairman. In front of the table arrange the remainder of the seats in semi-circular rows. This means that those in them are not looking at a mere platform group but at a family circle; one addresses the family.

On the table is the Legion altar, including the Vexillum, the Standard of the Legion.

Parliamentary Procedure

The role of the Chairman is similar to that of the “Speaker” in a Parliament, that is, of minimum intervention. The discussion follows the method of a Parliament, that is, by successive comments from different persons. It is not to

be a class-room. Lecturing people teaches them little. In one description of the Patricians, I have seen the phrase "controlled discussion." This sounds a false note, as suggesting that people are being dexterously steered along a pre-arranged path. It would be destructive of the Patrician idea if that impression were conveyed. So let naturalness and freedom be the atmosphere, though of course some regulation is necessary. The Chairman should not be officious in regard to irrelevancy, provided it does not harden into a wrong road. Beware of descending on persons with rebukes, corrections or calls to order, which would only have the effect of shutting up those whose participation is the most desired. Silence would be the Patrician poison. Individuals should not be grilled for "heresy."

Contributions are to be brief, and the Chairman must see to this. But members are not limited to one intervention. There are to be no votes of thanks.

Throughout the series of meetings, there should be a quiet insistence on the Catholic duty of apostleship, but there should be no pressing of people into the Catholic Societies. The opposite extreme is likewise to be avoided, that is, of refraining from attempts to recruit in incidental conversations.

There is no work-obligation.

Not a Lecture System

Real problems should be dealt with—not academic topics. The true objective should be kept in view. One programme recently submitted showed how the latter can be lost sight of. The whole series concerned itself with the family. At succeeding sessions, a Doctor, Nurse, Solicitor, Policeman, etc., treated the subject from his own professional aspect. That and the resulting discussion would be useful, but it

would not be the Patricians as will be seen from a reading of this article.

The purpose of the Patricians is not that of duplicating the ordinary methods of religious instruction, that is the sermon, the lecture, the catechism class. These provide for one expert person doing most of the work. They furnish a ready-made and admirable solution which is received with varying degrees of inertness and of assimilation.

Definitely there is not in the mind of the ordinary Catholic a competent understanding of religion. He has a lot of knowledge, but it is not sufficiently built together. It is a little like the case of a builder's yard in which lie in separate heaps all the materials for a house, but which are not the house and have no proportion to a house. It is not knowledge which the owner is comfortable or convinced about to the extent of going out to talk about it, to do battle for it. That is the problem. The Patricians must try to adapt itself to it. It must not be the lecture system or an approximation to it. In a sense the two ideas are at opposite poles.

The Patrician method postpones authoritative solution and throws the problem on to the shoulders of the average man. How does this work out?

The Building-up Process

Suppose the first contributor to the discussion is the comparatively unfitted person who would never have thought of defending his faith except with his fists. And let us further suppose that his remarks are typical of him, that is to say, inadequate from every point of view—subject-matter and presentation. Let us assign it as low a value as five per cent. But that five per cent stirs up a ferment in minds. Each one present feels correctly that he could do as well—or rather better. Because that first five per cent has

taught the others something. Raised to that five per cent level, they see things a little more clearly, and at once a second speaker enters the lists with another five per cent. Therein he accepts as his own the first contribution and builds on it. A third speaker interposes in the same spirit, and a fourth, and so on. Each, so to speak, stands on the shoulders of his predecessors but gives them little credit; his own has been the significant contribution! Note that things have become quite complicated psychologically. Not only is there idea-building, but each step is done in such slow-motion, and indeed painfully by simple mental processes, that all keep in line with it, including those who have not actually spoken. If the building goes too fast, or is too compressed, many will be left behind.

Secondly, by virtue of the fact that each speaker is inclined to minimise the part played by others and to exaggerate the worth of his own share, he will have an "ownership interest" in the final result. As a consequence he would be enthusiastic and propagandist about it.

Thirdly, there has been the ideal preparation for the propagating of what has been learned. There has been a battle, blow and counter-blow, suggestion, criticism, contradiction, one idea working on another, item added to item, until the total knowledge of the body has been pooled—and that is necessarily considerable. Then, on account of having been through that battle, everyone has the confidence to go outside the meeting and reproduce it at the corner, in the pub, and elsewhere. That is the Patrician idea.

Fourthly, the mode of expression of most of those who speak is attuned to the comprehension of those who listen. This is a vital factor. It is odd how penetration into each higher stratum of education puts us mentally out of touch with those below it. Even when one is trying to talk most

simply, it is possible to be out of reach of some. Recently I was given a list of words which would not be understood by a whole section of the population, and yet I think that most of us would be found using those words in the delusion that they were conveying our ideas! This points to the need for a "milling" or interpreting process which will make sure that the "loftier" ideas and words will be ground down and made intelligible to all. In the Patricians we are already able to see this digestive process at work. Difficult ideas are proposed, and then "milled" by successive speakers into the simplicity that all necessary religious ideas are supposed to possess.

Minimum Platform Intervention

From all that has been said, it will be seen that it is vital that there should not be any "short-circuiting" from the "platform." If what I may call a "cellophaned" solution is provided right away by authority, the roots of further discussion are struck at; that elaborate psychological process is eliminated; the Patrician system has been perverted. Gone also is the attractiveness of the whole procedure; nobody will want to attend a penny-in-the-slot performance.

Even when something very incorrect is stated, it should not at once be challenged by the Platform. It should be left sailing on the sea of discussion. It is certain that before the end it will have met its due fate at the hands of the audience. If it should survive as real error, the priest can deal with it in his remarks, but as gently as possible, avoiding a personal pointing. No one will talk if he has the consciousness that someone in authority is lying in wait to denounce him.

Freedom of Speech

The special characteristic must be freedom of speech—

compatible of course with our definition of the word "Patricians," i.e., *supporters* of the Church, not hostile elements. If awkward things are being taught and said in ordinary life, it is essential that they be brought up and dealt with. Otherwise they will only fester and destroy.

There is no need for worry if some important issue remained in unsatisfactory unsettlement at a meeting; or if many points arose which were not dealt with. Remember that the Patricians is a series; there will be a next meeting! In fact it is a good thing that each meeting should not be self-contained, complete in itself. Thereby interest will be enhanced. It may be desirable to continue a discussion to the next meeting.

The meetings of the Patricians which I have attended were impressive. So much was got home, so much interest created, that each single meeting would have justified itself. I could sense its beneficial impulses going out and circulating in the community. It seems to me that the force of a series of such meetings would be irresistible—like the battering-ram against the wall. If the Catholic people could be mobilised into such a battering-ram the energy would be prodigious, even to the converting of the world. For it is not the grace of God which is lacking but our co-operation.

AGENDA OF MEETING

- 0.00 PATRICIAN PRAYER. (Recited in unison, all standing.)
ADDRESS BY LAY SPEAKER. (Limited to 15 minutes.)
- 0.15 DISCUSSION.
- 1.00 TEA INTERVAL.
- 1.15 TALK BY PRIEST. (Ordinarily to follow the same theme as the first Talk, and limited to 15 minutes.)
- 1.30 DISCUSSION.

- 1.55 ANNOUNCEMENTS. (Financial statement, date of next meeting, etc.)
- 2.00 THE CREED. (Recited by all in unison, standing.)
BLESSING OF PRIEST. (To be received standing.)

THE PATRICIAN PRAYER

Beloved Lord,
bless the Society of the Patricians
into which we have entered
for the purpose of drawing closer to Thee
and to Mary, Thy Mother, who is our Mother also.
Aid us to the knowing of our Catholic Faith,
so that its transforming truths may be operative in our lives.
Help us also to an understanding of Thy intimate union
with men,
by which they not only live in Thee, but also depend upon
each other,
in such manner that if some relax, others suffer and may
perish.
Enable us to glimpse the weighty but glorious burden
which is thereby laid upon us,
and to yearn to bear it for Thee.
We realise the stamp of men we are:
the reluctance of our nature:
how unfitted we are to offer our shoulders to Thee.
Yet we have confidence that Thou wilt regard our faith
rather than our frailty,
and the necessities of Thy work
rather than the inadequacy of the instruments.
So, uniting our voice with the maternal pleadings of Mary,
we beg from Thy Heavenly Father and from Thee
the gift of the Holy Spirit:
to abide with us:
to teach us Thy life-giving doctrine:
to supply all things that are needful to us.
Grant, too, that having been bounteously endowed,
we may generously give;
for otherwise the world may not receive the fruits
of Thy Incarnation and most cruel Death.
Oh, do not let labour and suffering so great be wasted. Amen.