

The Sign-Language of Faith

God is holding everything – including people – in existence at each individual moment: and in a spirit of infinite love. It is unreasonable therefore to suppose that all the time he is giving us indications as to what he wants us to do both in our personal life and in relation to others? As to our private lives, he has not so much need to put things specially to us, for they are always before us in the duties of our state in life. But as regards other people, he has to do some special pointing out and arranging because it is our weak nature to act selfishly, to keep away from interfering in the lives of others in a spiritual way. So in regard to other people he has to do more than just leave things to ourselves. He has to intervene a little, to provide openings, to speak to us in what I might call the Sign-Language of Faith. If we are attentive, and if we have some knowledge of that sign-language, we will find that invitations to action will present themselves as we go jog, jog, jogging along the high road of life.

An accentuation is imparted to this process of divine signposting by the deliberate bringing of Mary on the

scene. But remember, of course, that really she is always on the scene. She is part of the plan of God. She is the mother of every soul, of those who do not know her and of those who know her only to dishonour her. Every spiritual operation in every soul from the first breath of birth to the last one of death is subject to her maternal care. Unfortunately that care can be rejected whereas it is the law that it has to be invoked. If the mother is not allowed her way, there is loss, perhaps infinite loss.

So we must bring her to those who feel they have no need for her. If we do, it may by virtue of the union of the Mystical Body amount to the same thing as if the soul itself invoked Mary's aid.

Note these princely words of Chesterton: 'Whom has she greeted and not graced in greeting? Whom did she touch and touch not to his peace.' So it is primary and vital that we bring about that life-giving encounter between Mary and each one of her blind and negligent children. So whenever any one of those odd indications meets your eye, deliberately summon Mary to give guidance.

Talking to a group of you some time ago on this same topic, I presented some impressive selections from what I call the Legion case book. Lest some of you here may have heard those particular instances, I am now turning over additional pages of that book in order to exhibit a different array of episodes, for happily we are not harnessed in number. The trouble lies not in the finding but in the selecting.

Case No. 1: The year before the opening of the Morning Star, a Brother came from England to take part in that work. He was English and a convert. He was anxious to get the feel of the work, so I brought him to the St Vincent de

Paul Night Shelter off Bride Street. After we had inspected it, he asked if there was a common lodging-house nearby. He was insistent in his wish to see it. I said that there was but that it formed part of the proselytising system; that the lodgers were subject to solicitation, and that free lodging was offered to men who attended a daily religious service. I added that a visit of inspection by us would not be welcomed there. But then the thought occurred to me that if I kept quiet, his glorious Oxford accent might open the door. So we walked the short distance to the place. The hour was about 4 p.m. and the customers had not yet begun to arrive. We met one of the staff and my companion told him that he was from Oxford (which was a fact) and that he was interested in this work. Could he look through the place?

This approach was successful and our tour of inspection began. In the very first dormitory which we entered, there was a man in bed and our escort explained that he was sick. Knowing that sick men were not detained there but at once sent to hospital, I asked why he had been kept there. The answer was that they regarded him as too sick to move. This stirred up thoughts in me. I did not argue that they should get the priest for one so sick, for the contrary was then their grim practice. I went over to him. He was definitely very sick. I enquired his name; it was a distinctively Catholic one. I asked if he were a Catholic and he told me he was. I said: 'You are very sick, would you not like to see the priest?' He replied that he would.

After that, our tour was resumed but my thoughts were elsewhere, and I greatly curtailed our visit. On leaving we proceeded straight to Francis Street and placed the case in Fr Creedon's hands. He did not tarry. Armed with the Great Mysteries, he presented himself at the Hostel where he was

denied admission. Those of you who remember Fr Creedon will not need to be told how he reacted to that refusal. If it were persisted in, he would have appealed to the passers-by in the street – which would automatically put an end to resistance. He went to the poor man and brought him comfort and healing, certainly needed by anyone who had been living in that Hostel. The next day the man died.

This episode took place before the idea of pattern forced itself on me. But when one now examines it, the pattern becomes evident in the insistence of that Brother on visiting the place, and secondly in his English status being able to win him entry. We did go without realising the pattern but we might not have gone. But if we saw a pattern, it would be reasonably probable that we would follow it up.

Case No. 2: Many years ago a friend repeated to me a conversation which he had with a certain doctor. The latter was a Protestant, married to one, mixing in that set and deriving most of his income from it. He told my friend that he very much desired to be a Catholic but that those social and other circumstances prohibited it. However, should he be stricken with illness my friend was to secure attendance by a priest. That conversation struck like glue in my mind. Indeed you will agree that it was unforgettable.

Time went on. The doctor retired and moved with his family to England, going clean out of our orbit. Several years later at Christmas, my friend received a letter of greeting from the doctor's wife. It told that her husband had passed into helplessness and was in hospital.

My friend read that letter to me on the verge of midnight on Christmas Day. We discussed the matter and agreed

that having regard to the doctor's previous instructions, this intimation of his illness looked startlingly like a divine reminder of the old trust imposed by the doctor on my friend.

So with a map before us, we debated how that trust was to be fulfilled. Fr Aedan McGrath was spending that Christmas with his brother in Deal. So we rang up and got him at once, although the operator had promised us a long wait. Fr McGrath agreed to go in the next few days and did. On arrival at the hospital, he found the man in a coma and his daughter by his side. She was a Protestant and her presence created an obstacle. He asked her if she would object to his giving her father a blessing. She welcomed it and knelt down to share in it. In addition to the blessing, Fr McGrath gave him absolution, relying on his valid baptism and on that declared desire of his to be a Catholic. More did not seem to be possible in the circumstances. Within a few days the doctor died without recovering consciousness.

I emphasise that the drastic midnight call on Fr McGrath and the sending him half over England would not have taken place but for that conviction of Divine Pattern. And note how completely the pattern worked itself out. That old trust imposed by the doctor on his friend to place a priest with him if he were dying, was faithfully and successfully fulfilled.

Case No. 3: In the early days of his priesthood, Fr James Robinson was Chaplain to St Vincent's Hospital, but lived in his own home. In the a.m. hours of one night, the hospital summoned him to a man, 'a black-and-tan' who had been shot and was dying. Fr Robinson did not delay a moment – which was fortunate, because when he reached

the hospital, he was met with apologies – the man was not a Catholic. They had phoned again a few minutes after the first call to cancel Fr Robinson's coming, but he had left.

Moved by the peculiarity of this transaction, Fr Robinson decided to see the man. He explained to him that he had been brought in error but that perhaps he might be able to help him in some way. The man's reply was electrifying: 'You are the one person I want to see, Father. I wish to be received into the Church. I have been here in Ireland for nearly two years. Sometime after I came, I made up my mind to become a Catholic and I went under instruction. Through waywardness I did not persevere in that, but my intention was never altered. I know my time is short, and I know, too, that God has sent you to me.' Not long after his reception, God took him to himself.

Most people, on being informed that the man was a Protestant and that their services were not required, would have turned away. Fr Robinson discerned the pattern and was attracted by it, with consequences that were mighty.

Case No. 4: The next entry in our case book bears the name of Henry O'Mahony. After Biddy Slicker lost all her girls to Sancta Maria, she converted her premises into a men's lodging house. One day Fr Creedon got a sick call to that place. Mrs Slicker met him on the doorstep and insisted that the sick man was very special and that Fr Creedon must do a good job with him. Fr Creedon was puzzled. That was a peculiar phraseology, but he did not stop to probe it.

The sick man was of venerable age with a flowing white beard. When Fr Creedon mentioned the sacraments, he declared that he was not a Catholic. This unexpected

announcement took Fr Creedon aback but not for long. He had seen a pattern and he had to test it.

He apologised for intruding, explaining that Mrs Slicker had summoned him on an ordinary sick call. Then he elicited the man's name and enquired if he felt strong enough for a little chat. The man replied that he would appreciate it, and soon the two were on a familiar footing, especially when it transpired that they were both from the same southern county! So Henry (as he was styled from the first moment) described his own life. He was a goldsmith who had worked almost exclusively on the making of the sacred vessels. He knew every detail about them and much in regard to Catholic practice generally.

Eventually Fr Creedon put the question that it was strange that one who knew so much about the Church had never thought of entering it. Whereupon, the old man said emphatically that there were several things about Catholicism which he could not stomach. Fr Creedon asked what these were and Henry specified a couple. They represented total fallacies, indeed the opposite to Catholic belief. Fr Creedon assured him to that effect and patiently set to work to define the correct position.

Henry was incredulous. Fr Creedon had almost to take an oath that he was rendering things truly, but at last the dying man was satisfied. The sequel was the utterly astounding one that Henry O'Mahony demanded to be received into the Church. Fr Creedon went to the phone; obtained the necessary permissions, and added a new soul to the Catholic Church. Among those present at the ceremony was Biddy Slicker who had been such a distinctive element in the pattern of the whole thing.

Case No. 5 concerns a well-known Dublin medical man. He was brought into a case close to him. He found a man in serious plight. He strongly urged transfer to hospital, but the lady of the house most determinedly said no. So the doctor required that there would be two nurses and gave the name of an agency who would supply them. It was a time when nurses were hard to get.

A little later, the matron of that agency rang him to say that the lady had demanded two Protestant nurses, and that only one could be obtained. The doctor told her to send a Catholic. The two girls presented themselves and were interrogated as to their religion. The Catholic nurse was sent away and the search was renewed. Eventually the lady agreed to accept a Protestant maternity nurse in lieu of a completely trained Catholic one. The doctor was infinitely mystified by this apparently unnecessary perversity, having regard to the fact that the husband's life was at stake. Without realising it, he was inspecting the fringe of a pattern.

After some days, the doctor was going away from a visit to that house, when a big man, considerably the worse for wear, blocked his way on the pavement and demanded: 'How is my old friend, Smith, getting on?' 'Not very well,' the doctor rejoined. 'What are his chances?' 'Rather slender, I fear,' the doctor replied. But actually the chances were nil. 'Well, then,' said the man, 'he should have the priest'. 'The priest,' exclaimed the doctor, 'why he is a Protestant.' 'He is nothing of the kind,' said the man. 'He is a fallen-away Catholic. I am his next-door neighbour. I am a Protestant, but I know all about him. And so does his wife who won't have Catholics in to nurse him for fear they would influence him. He was educated at X College and was a full Catholic until his marriage. Once a Catholic

always a Catholic. So that is where he belongs. Just you go off and get the priest for him.'

The doctor did not understand *our* sign-language of faith but he acted according to it. He said 'It would get me off the Medical Register if I interfered in that way. But what about you? Will you bring in the priest?' 'Of course, I will. How do you go about it?' 'This way' – and the doctor steered him towards the Presbytery which was one hundred yards away.

The priest made ready and went off along with his somewhat unsteady guide. The doctor waited anxiously at the Presbytery until he saw the two enter the patient's house. Then he went home wondering.

The next day he paid an early morning visit to the case. The maid who opened the door told him that his patient had died during the night and she supplemented this as follows: 'Oh, doctor, there was terrible goings on soon after you left yesterday. That drunken old reprobate from next door – and he a Protestant too – arrived with the priest in tow, and they forced their way in, and the end was that the master died a Catholic'.

Rather wonderful is it not?

The natural reaction to this idea of signs or patterns is to tell ourselves that it is only being fanciful; and that this would soon lead us on to barking up every blind alley. My first answer is that we see so little and not too much. Secondly, our sense of faith is so feeble that we discern those signs in few enough cases, and therefore that even if we are receptive we will not have to bark up many alleys. Thirdly, the proportion of cases where we thought we saw a pattern and where we did follow it up, and where a supreme success was won – has been immense. Fourthly,

I am not suggesting that we should force ourselves to imagine a pattern. But certainly we should permit ourselves to see it when definite peculiarities attract our notice.

Surely the fact that the ex-owner of a street girls' lodging house forces a priest in on a dying Protestant should pull us up? Or where you are brought to a hospital at dead of night on a fool's errand and yet find a dying Protestant waiting there for you? Or where a Christmas greeting bridges the span of many years and in that sign-language of faith calls out for help for a soul. Or where an English visitor with an Oxford accent is the path-finder to a Catholic who is dying forlorn? Or where an alleged drunken reprobate of a Protestant is made the instrument of a divine manoeuvre which pierces all the careful defences of an insane bigotry, and rescues an imprisoned soul?

Unquestionably we should feel a thrill down our spine at the very first indication of such spiritual peculiarities, so that then we are all attention for a possible second providential step.