

# Reflections on the February Editorial

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Cornelius Ernst, O.P.

For an order of Preachers the written word is as essential a means of communication as the spoken word. The monthly editorial comment in *New Blackfriars* is one of a considerable variety of styles of literary communication practised by the English Dominican Province, and one which is closer to oral preaching than other styles since it must make its impact on the immediacies of a rapidly changing historical life. If such contemporary comment is to be effective, it must try to stimulate and provoke consciences, and so to inform them in a personal life of faith. A monthly comment which merely pronounced 'timeless truths' would be irrelevant. It is plain that a concern for the significance of the present moment is exposed to dangers very similar to those of pulpit preaching; audacity may slide into rashness. An editor must have a discriminating awareness of his audience, for the Comment is part of a two-way communication taking place over a period of time with an audience free to enter into discussion with the editor or to abandon it. It would be surprising if remarks made within a context of discussion built up in this way were not to appear eccentric or outrageous when presented in selective quotation with sensational headlining to a quite different audience; and it would be improper to assess these remarks in isolation from a total context which includes not merely a single month's comment but a whole continuing debate conducted over months and years in the pages of a monthly periodical.

Behind the disturbances provoked by the Comment in a single issue of *New Blackfriars*, behind even the anxieties arising out of the public renunciation of the Church by one of her prominent theologians, there have to be acknowledged and endured the pains and problems of growth in a Church set on renewal by the Holy Spirit. (It was the conviction of John XXIII that the idea of a second Vatican Council came to him as a distinct inspiration by the Holy Ghost.) One of these problems is the differential growth of the Catholic community. It is the permanent temptation of any intelligentsia to become isolated from the wider community to which it belongs, and secure in the sense of superior insights to resent the claims of ordinariness vocally or tacitly urged by the wider community. In the Catholic Church of the post-conciliar epoch the tensions have become acute, especially as ordinariness can be given the sanction of an evangelical tradition revealed by Jesus Christ. In such a situation the task of theologians and theological

journalists becomes one of urgent importance and grave responsibility. On the one hand the theologian must be faithful to the evangelical tradition and to its authentic witnesses and guardians, the episcopal college and its head, the Pope; and on the other he must be sensitive to those charismatic manifestations of the spirit of prophecy in the whole People of God to which the dogmatic constitution on the Church of Vatican II drew attention (*Lumen Gentium*, 12.). Neither function can be performed in isolation from the other: there can be no service of the episcopate which does not assist the bishops to recognise the one Spirit active in the tradition and in the charismatic gifts distributed in the Church (Cf. LG, 4: 'diversis donis hierarchicis et charismaticis instruit ac dirigit (Spiritus Sanctus Ecclesiam)'); and there can be no service of the People of God which does not unite them to the authentic witnesses to the tradition. The two functions are in reality aspects of a single function of mediation.

It cannot be doubted that the urgent and painful questioning which is taking place in the post-conciliar Church is in the last resort the work of the Spirit which is renewing the Church, and that the true response to this questioning must be a cooperative endeavour to clarify the questions and to work for their solution in the light of the Gospel. The second Vatican Council recognises the questionings of the whole of mankind today and gives proof of its 'solidarity with the entire human family by engaging with it in conversation about those various problems' (Pastoral constitution on the Church in the world today, *Gaudium et Spes*, 3). The theologian's service to the episcopate must include an urging upon them of those questions and problems, and an offer to assist the bishops in their pastoral office by the theological exploration of the evangelical tradition so as to interpret it in response to contemporary needs. Every such theological interpretation remains subject to the ultimate judgment of the episcopal college; yet the pastoral functions of the bishops would be seriously hindered if they did not sympathetically encourage theological exploration conducted as a single service to the episcopate and the whole People of God. The theologian can only render his proper service if his role in the Church is allowed its limited but genuine autonomy. The conversation of the Church and the modern world requires for its success a variety of conversations in the Church itself; and theologians can only welcome with gratitude the recent initiative of the Theological and Doctrinal Commission of the English bishops under Archbishop Dwyer and Bishop Butler in inviting theologians to discuss with them the problems of the post-conciliar Church.

Now institutions whether of this kind, initiated by authority in the Church, or arising by a spontaneous desire for association among members of the Church, are or can be evidence of the life-giving Spirit in the Church. It would however be mistaken to confine the notion of institution either to these new institutions in the Church, or to the structure of government proper to the Church, resting on the

mission of Jesus Christ to the Apostles and their successors. This latter restriction of the notion is an often unconscious reminiscence of the ecclesiology common in the epoch before Vatican II, where a major concern was to establish the Church's independence, as a *societas perfecta*, from the State and its structure of government. In the light of Vatican II, especially of chapter 2 of the Constitution on the Church as the People of God, we may see the whole Church as Institution, instituted by Jesus Christ in its founding and defining institutions – baptism, the eucharistic assembly presided over by an ordained minister, the canonized Scriptures themselves. This use of the word 'institution', familiar to sociologists and anthropologists, is a better instrument of ecclesiological analysis than the narrower sense of 'institution' which would seem to derive rather from political theory and the theory of government: 'institution' should be used in a wider sense than 'constitution'. Every Roman Catholic must grant that the pastoral office of the episcopate with its head the Pope, is an integral part of the Church as Institution, an essential institution among its institutions (LG, 3, 'On the hierarchical constitution of the Church'). It is unfortunate that the narrower, governmental sense of 'institution' has made it possible to set up a systematic opposition between the 'institutional Church' and 'persons', though it cannot be denied and must indeed be resolutely affirmed that the actual practice of government in the Church, together with an unduly restricted theology of the institution of the Church, has provided ample occasion for this damaging over-simplification. Especially as Catholic Christians we have to recognise that our Catholic Christianity is essentially structured in its very humanity by the institutions of Jesus Christ, so that our coming together as the People of God in the name of Jesus Christ is only made possible by those institutions (Cf. LG, 9, on the New Israel, the Church of Christ, which Christ 'has acquired by his blood, filled with his spirit, provided with appropriate means of visible and social union').

Yet we can never allow ourselves to forget that the very fact of human association carries with it not only the promise of personal fulfilment and liberation in communion but also the threat of constriction in a solidarity of evil. 'Institutions', for instance, by an interior inclination of the human beings in whom and for whom they are established, may form the setting for 'institutionalism' and 'institutionalization'. It would be difficult to hold that this tendency in human beings to defeat the purposes of their own institutions was not operative in the institution of the Church as well. The problem of sin in the Church is real and serious, and not to be evaded simply because it is theologically difficult or because it requires us to face uncomfortable facts. The Church is *indefectibiliter sancta* (LG, 39), and yet always in need of being purified, *sancta simul et semper purificanda*, including sinners in its own breast, unceasingly practising penance and renewal (LG, 8). The Church is wounded by sinners (LG, 11);

strengthened by the grace of God she does not fall away from perfect fidelity in spite of the weakness of the flesh, but remains a bride worthy of her Lord, renewing herself until she reaches unfailing light by the way of the cross (LG, 9). Although the Catholic Church is endowed with all revealed truth and every means of grace, its members do not always allow the radiance of the Church's face to shine brightly, and the growth of God's kingdom is retarded. Every Catholic must play his part, so that the Church, bearing in her body the humility and the dying of Jesus, may daily be more purified and renewed until Christ will present her to himself in all her glory, without spot or wrinkle (Decree on Ecumenism, 4).

In these texts from Vatican II we may notice that, although the Church itself is never called sinful, it is the Church itself which is said to be in constant need of purification and renewal. The Church has always been accused of the sins of her members; she is not without spot or wrinkle, since in the interpretation of Eph. 5, 27 adopted in the last of the conciliar texts quoted above, it is only in her final glory that she will be entirely purified. As the change of personal pronouns suggests ('it' or 'she') the Church is at once the heavenly bride, the virgin Mother, in the attained perfection (without spot or wrinkle) of the Virgin Mary (LG, 65), and also the historical pilgrim Church of the faithful People of God striving to overcome sin, needing to pray daily 'Forgive us our trespasses' (LG, 40). We cannot separate the transcendent from the historical Church and say that either alone is *the* Church. We must be able to say that the Church is sinful in its members and yet unfailing holy in the victorious grace of Christ. And we must ask ourselves whether the sinfulness of the members is merely an individual sinfulness or whether by the simple association with other sinful members of the Church we do not all as members of the Church share in a collective guilt of the Church, a guilt which is never capable of totally corrupting the Church as the real presence of the victorious grace of Christ in his abiding Spirit. In the normal senses of the English word ('rotten', 'depraved', 'venal') the Church cannot be described as 'corrupt'; the Church is unfailingly holy, though always in need of purification. Nor would any number of examples, even authentic examples, taken exclusively from the conduct of members of the hierarchy, show that the Church is corrupt: the Church is not simply its hierarchical constitution, though its pastors, governing it in the name of Christ, have a representative function in the Church. Yet the problem, and the scandal, of sin in the Church remains.

The question becomes all the more acute as Catholics become more and more aware of the responsibility of the Church for the whole human race (GS, 1), of whose union in Jesus it is the sacrament (LG, 9). The horizons of the moral responsibility of the Catholic have been pushed back in a way which none of us is yet able fully to appreciate and which has involved a shift in the whole accustomed system of

moral priorities (Cf. GS, 30; no one is to content himself with a merely individualistic morality). The Church now explicitly accepts collective responsibilities which carry with them possibilities of collective guilt. It is one of the pressing tasks of theologians today to bring back to the whole People of God, bishops and laity, its shared responsibility for the destiny of man in Jesus Christ.

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