

# Comment

No Catholic under the age of thirty can have any real idea of what it was like to be a Catholic before the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Those who were already ten years old in 1962 no doubt have memories of their confirmation day. In particular, those who served as altar boys could, if they would, recall the intricate convolutions of the pre-conciliar liturgy. It is easy for them to bring the old sanctuary back: the awe at something hardly understood, the fear of putting a foot wrong, the row of blind open mouths along the altar rail. A well-drilled altar boy received an understanding of the pre-conciliar Church that was instinctive and almost physical. For how the liturgy is celebrated shapes and shows the experience of being a Catholic, subjectively as well as objectively. The public structure of the ceremony embodies a whole doctrine of the relationship between clergy and congregation. It was a surprise at the time, but the fact that the Council began in October 1962 with the question of reforming the liturgy seems in retrospect to go to the heart of the matter.

But, in Britain at least, most practising Catholics must be over thirty years of age. In particular, most of the clergy now active were ordained before 1962. Having to turn round and face the congregation was for them only one tiny manifestation of the deep and wide-reaching reorientation of Catholic consciousness that the Council inaugurated.

It takes a considerable effort of memory and imagination to realize just how radical the change has been. In fact, it really needs the skills of a novelist to register the emotional as well as the intellectual implications of this radical reorientation. David Lodge, in *How Far Can You Go?*, published two years ago and already reprinted in paperback (Penguin Books, £1.50), recaptures with hilarious brilliance the university student Catholic Society ethos of

pre-conciliar days. That offers a slice of the life of only a tiny minority. The subsequent adventures of his characters as they abandon their fear of hell and begin to explore the permissive society becomes less and less representative of how middle-class Catholics have accommodated the change in consciousness since 1962. (The book should nevertheless be obligatory reading for confessors.)

It is the change in feelings, rather than the overtly theological developments, that are marked by strain. It was the celebrant's back that the congregation saw for most of the Mass, not his face. When his face did appear it was kept in a conventionally devout mask: eyes cast down, *gravitas* incarnate. The gestures were prescribed to be as impersonal and unspontaneous as possible. Everybody's voice is characteristic, so the celebrant's voice was distorted out of all recognition. If he wasn't inaudibly muttering then he was emitting a high-pitched screeching chant. If you knew the code the experience could be as powerfully significant as classical ballet or Japanese Noh theatre.

The psychological wrench for a priest trained for years to take part in that rite must often have been extremely painful. The surprising thing is that so many priests, and so many in the congregation, have negotiated the change gracefully and convincingly.

But that particular reorientation is only one tiny manifestation of the wider process. New forms of ministry and prayer, ecumenism, concern for justice and peace, argument about family planning and Catholic schools – the list is endless when you come to consider the problems and opportunities acknowledged by Vatican II. Twenty years, after all, are not much in the history of the Catholic Church. But it is difficult to think of another twenty years during which such radical changes have ever been attempted. On the other hand, Pope John XXIII did ask the bishops to re-read the Acts of the Apostles before they came to Rome in 1962.