

Comment

*The Easter People** is a feat of intellectual digestion. The National Pastoral Congress only ended on 6th May and the bishops approved this text of nearly 40,000 words on 16th July. That they could absorb the mass of sometimes raw and contentious material produced by the Congress and deliver such an articulate response so soon, must indicate how congenial the spirit of the Congress is to the bishops. Seams of amendments may be detected but, for a document sponsored by forty-three bishops all of whom are staking their episcopal credibility on it, the text steers astonishingly clear of the deliberate vagueness to which drafters resort in order to contain irreducible disagreements. Most refreshing of all, however, though this may be apparent only to those who know the insecure and intimidatingly paternalist rhetoric of papal and episcopal exhortations over the past hundred years, *The Easter People* displays throughout a buoyant mood of trusting reason and fraternal candour.

The bishops speak frequently of “offering” what they call their “reflections”. They call upon us for a “loyal and respectful acceptance” of their teaching (par. 38). On the other hand, they say that they do not want “these reflections” to be “accepted unthinkingly”: “That could be irresponsible, and the abdication of responsibility can be the height of disloyalty” (par. 33). That loyalty (so long the shibboleth of the ultramontane Catholic) might mean, and must mean, something other than accepting unthinkingly what the bishops say is a thought that, like much else in this document, works against the spell of that divisive model of the Church which tends to identify “the Church” with “the hierarchy” and thus makes anti-clericals of the best of us.

The natural way in which the bishops constantly speak of “our Church”, obviously meaning the whole community, is only one of many little touches in the text which would be even more remarkable if they have been incorporated unthinkingly and not as part of the principal drafter’s wily plan to educate his readers (including the bishops). For example, the pope first appears in the text as “successor of Peter” (par. 3), the phrase preferred for him; and it is the bishops who are spoken of as “vicars of Christ” (par. 38), a

phrase never applied to the pope. The text as a whole is an important contribution to Catholic ecclesiology, with several asides that warrant discussion, e.g. "Strictly a national Church as such does not exist" (par. 113).

The text is an education in other ways too. From the outset, for example, there are phrases like "our sisters and brothers in Christ", "men and women of this land", and so on, displaying a sensitivity that culminates in the open-ended though very cautious appeal to women (par. 178):

"Traditional and unquestioned attitudes towards women and your role may have to be changed. We ourselves and our clergy may well have to be persuaded gently of our insensitivity and our assumptions of male dominance".

You can say that again.

Some delphic and even Janus-like passages occur, not surprisingly, in the pages on marriage. The assertion that *Humanae Vitae* is "the authentic teaching of the Church" (par. 104) comes in the middle of two pages that insist repeatedly on the need for "development" of the Church's teaching, without however being at all specific about why or how (unless you count the sentence lifted from Jack Dominian).

Concern for the quality of family life apparently carried the bishops off into dubious speculations about the Church "as a family" (par. 23). We are told that this "model" of the Church "has had prominence in recent years". Perhaps so, but it had no prominence at Vatican II and has no basis in Scripture. "A family is but too often a commonwealth of malignants", said Alexander Pope, himself as Roman Catholic an English poet as Hopkins, whose "rare-dear Britain" the bishops cite as their motto. But the Bishops' Message is a worthy response to the Congress.

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- *The Easter People: A Message from the Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales in light of the National Pastoral Congress, Liverpool 1980*, St Paul Publications, Slough, 1980. pp 73 £1.25