

Comment

Crisis What Crisis?

Catholics have been living for so long with the vocabulary of crisis that they can be forgiven for not getting too excited when the future of their Church and its institutions are described in apocalyptic terms. It should come as some relief then that Father Neil Horan has been disciplined by the area bishop in the Southwark diocese on the grounds that his views are incompatible with Catholic teaching. It is reported that the bishop will allow him to return to parochial ministry, but only if he agrees not to promote apocalyptic beliefs. Would that this injunction were laid on other ecclesiastics further up the ladder of preferment. A weariness with this vocabulary of crisis was recently displayed by one of the English Catholic newspapers which headlined its piece on the Synod: *The Identity Crisis — Again!*

Interestingly, the British episcopal delegates to the Synod have all referred to this 'crisis'. The *Instrumentum Laboris* also took up this point, although veiling it in suitably abstract language. The period in which we now live is described as one of 'profound transformation or of profound change in the consecrated life'. Another way of seeing this time, so the document tells us, is as one of 'renewal, revitalization and refoundation'. There was no reference to those who see it as a complete disaster during which pressures which have led to the virtual annihilation of religious life in some congregations have not been resisted. This last constituency may not be very large in communities of religious men and women, but it may find more significant representation in certain ecclesiastical circles. The possible demise of many contemporary manifestations of religious life would be greeted with something akin to relief by many members of this lobby. The dramatic fall in the number of those offering themselves, especially amongst women, to the vowed life may be applauded by some, if it leads to a consequent decrease in vocal opposition to certain Church teachings on the part of predominantly American religious sisters. In this context the plea of the Master of the Order of Preachers for the 'confrontation of moments of tension through dialogue' was timely. But, what is there to talk about?

It has been suggested that this Synod has come too late to deal with the agenda; the crisis is too deep-rooted. However, there is no general agreement as to the nature of this crisis: is it merely a mid-life crisis or is it terminal? Many religious congregations are experiencing severe shortages of personnel. The desperate attempts by some to swell their

numbers and safeguard their institutions by 'nun-running' recruits from the Far East and elsewhere will not avert the crisis. Simply getting people to do 'the job' is not enough. Perhaps the time has come to accept positively that many religious congregations will die out. This does not mean that their witness over the past century has been valueless, neither does it mean that those who faithfully keep their vows until death have nothing to offer the world in which we live. In the West we live in a society which tries to defy death and which uses all the resources it can to fend it off and to hide it away. The example of religious facing death in the joyful hope of the resurrection is by no means a negligible witness.

What else is there on the agenda? The Synod has also turned its mind to questions of power and representation. The Scottish religious, through the Bishop of Galloway, asked that the experience of women religious be clearly reflected in any attempt at a renewed theology of the religious life that the Synod might promote. Clearly, there is some sense of dismay, a dismay that was very politely expressed by sister Pia Buxton the president of the British association of Religious, that decisions about how religious ought to live are being taken by a predominantly male group who have no direct experience of, and perhaps little sympathy with, religious life. There have been many instances in the past where genuine religious impulses have been frustrated and even suppressed by a determination to fit them into inappropriate categories. An examination of the history of religious congregations of women suggests that many of them were indeed forced to adopt adapted features of classical monasticism which were sustainable as long as particular communities maintained particular works in which all of the members of the community were involved, but which are no longer sustainable in these days of professional diversification amongst religious. In many ways the model of apostolic and evangelical life desired by nineteenth century founders and foundresses might have been more easily accommodated within the framework offered by the modern secular institute. This may be one strand of development emerging during this time of 'transformation'. Perhaps, there is a general realignment of religious Orders and congregations going on; this time of stress and change offers each one the opportunity to become more itself.

One of the more ominous developments in the discussion about religious life has been an increased adoption of the language of power. Why is it that a meeting which is really concerned with witness should immediately be taken up with power? It seems odd too, that some people should be looking for a greater role in ecclesiastical decision making when there has been a general flight from responsibility in many religious congregations. A recent survey conducted amongst the major superiors of

American religious congregations found that there was a widespread reluctance amongst members of the congregations to assume positions of leadership designed to manage the pressing issues of church life within their own religious communities. It is difficult to find people to occupy leadership roles, firstly because of the simple scarcity of persons, secondly because there is a lack of qualified persons and thirdly many of those approached experience what is described as 'a scarcity of meaning'. As one religious said when she refused office, "I cannot find a satisfying response to the question: "Who are we and what does our life together mean?" It is often from the congregations which have experienced the greatest breakdown in meaning that the keenest calls for a greater degree of power in the decision-making structures of the Church come. In that context we might be better saying that this Synod is not too late but too early. No religious Order can be designed by committee. Doubtless the document that emerges from this Synod will have some wisdom to impart, but in the end the creative force is the Holy Spirit of God and the Spirit does not always work to rule.

AJW

The Quarrel over Morals in the Catholic Church

Fergus Kerr OP

More than half of this book¹ is taken up with the complete text of Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter on 'certain fundamental questions of the Church's moral teaching', *Veritatis Splendor*, dated 6 August 1993. The rest reprints the set of eleven comments published in *The Tablet*, together with a brief introduction by the editor, John Wilkins.

According to John Wilkins, 'people feel that something is wrong'—'there is a widespread moral unease'—but 'the task of establishing a pluralist society which yet acknowledges shared values as the condition of that pluralism is proving beyond the capacities *at present* being brought to it' (page ix, my italics). In the judgment of