

# Anglican Orders: Re-assessing the Debate

by John Coventry, S.J.

After doing much to discredit in *Absolutely Null and Utterly Void*<sup>1</sup> the historical build-up to *Apostolicae Curae*, Fr Hughes has now tackled the theological questions involved in Anglican Orders.<sup>2</sup> In doing so he pursues his attack on Dr Francis Clark's two books. This does not make entirely happy theological reading. One is left with the impression that both authors were first quite convinced *a priori* of the truth of their thesis, and then set out to prove it.

## *Were the English Reformers heretical?*

The basic argument of Clark's *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation* was surely not, as Hughes writes (p. 41), 'that it was not abuses or errors that caused the Reformers to reject eucharistic sacrifice, but their own new conception of grace, justification . . .'; rather was the basic argument that the Reformers did not merely reject current late medieval superstitions about the Mass, but the Catholic doctrine of eucharistic sacrifice itself. In so far as Clark has maintained that a perfectly clear and orthodox doctrine of eucharistic sacrifice was currently taught (and as clearly rejected by the Reformers), and that the prevailing superstitions have been greatly exaggerated, Hughes makes many inroads on his position: Biel's theology was extremely unsound, even if orthodox by the skin of its teeth; how threadbare Catholic thought was on the point came out in post-Reformation apologetic, when it was clear from their twisting and turning that Catholic theologians, though insistent that the Eucharist is a sacrifice, were quite unable to give either a coherent or an acceptable account of why or how it is (and remained so till yesterday or even today); what theological thought there was, lay buried under a mass of devotional and allegorical comment on rubrics; the elevation was wrongly thought of as the moment of offering, Cajetan's lone voice, that the whole of the Mass was a sacrifice in a sacramental sort of way, going unheeded; above all, theological thought does not exist in isolation, and in this period was embedded in a shocking system of buying the effects of Calvary piecemeal for personal use. Theology is implicit in practices, not just explicit in books (scripture and traditions!). But inroads or no inroads, Clark's basic thesis appears still to stand: viz. however many fully understandable reasons there may have been for the Reformers' rejection of the doctrine that the Mass is a sacrifice, reject it they did. Hughes clearly accepts this conclusion, though he does not come out boldly and say so.

<sup>1</sup>Sheed and Ward, London, 1969.

<sup>2</sup>*Stewards of the Lord: a reappraisal of Anglican Orders*, by John Jay Hughes; Sheed and Ward, London and Sydney, 1970; pp. 352; 84s.

The relation of faith to theology is tricky. You cannot state the faith you hold without descending to the level of theological expression, however simple. Once you have done that, you become involved in variations, modifications, explanations, of the simple formula—in the whole maze of conceptual refinement and uncertainty of meaning, of which eucharistic controversy is a good example. It has happened repeatedly in the history of theology, from the question of the divinity of Christ onwards, that orthodoxy felt convinced that an essential of faith was being denied, and yet was unable adequately to formulate or defend that essential. Indeed, the sometimes long process of adequate theological formulation only begins, and falteringly, with the initial challenge. Fr Hughes must know this, and so is perhaps somewhat caught up into controversy when he derides the Catholic eucharistic theology of the period.

*And is their orthodoxy relevant?*

It has proved notoriously difficult to state exactly the argument of *Apostolicae Curae* against Anglican Orders. Fr Hughes has little difficulty in showing that the Edwardine Ordinal cannot be called objectively defective, i.e. an invalid form whoever uses it. There is, first, the historical absurdity of supposing, without evidence, that all ordination forms used from the time of the apostles must have contained certain elements. Then, the criteria suggested by the Bull would not only rule as invalid many ordinals from the early Church known now, but not known in 1896; they would put out of court the essential form recognized in the Catholic Church since 1947, which contains no reference to sacerdotal powers of any kind.

Any defectiveness of the Edwardine Ordinal, then, must be taken in conjunction with the intention of its framers and users. And such a line of argument at once lands one in the morass of uncertainties presented by the theology of intention. Whatever one's view of sacramental intention (on the part of the minister), it has first to be stated that, to declare Anglican Orders null and void on the grounds of some highly sophisticated theological technicality, which can with difficulty be grasped or explained by theologians themselves, and can only be advanced as a probability, totally lacks all credibility in the eyes of the Church and the world at large. The man in the street or in the pew, for whom Anglican Orders are a massive fact of experience and of national life, needs more solid reasons for not believing his eyes.

One thing is clear. Anglican Orders cannot be held invalid on the grounds that the ordaining bishops held (or hold) heretical views about the ministry they are conferring. The validity of a sacrament does not depend on the faith of the minister, but on his intention to do what the Church does or what Christ willed for his Church. Clark argues<sup>1</sup> that the Edwardine Ordinal indicates clearly the

<sup>1</sup>*Anglican Orders and Defect of Intention*, London, 1956.

intention of its framers and users positively to exclude the conferring of sacerdotal priesthood, so that the one intention to do what the Church does is nullified by the second intention not to. Hughes counters that, even if this line of argument were in principle sound, it would be no more than a theological opinion about sacramental intention and about the obscure meaning of *Apostolicae Curae*; but that in any case it is not sound, as Clark has substantially misrepresented the traditional Catholic doctrine of conflicting intentions; and, finally and most substantially, that the sacrificial nature of the priesthood has moved out of the central limelight since Vatican II, so that the Edwardine Ordinal can no longer be said to be excluding by implication the very essence of the ministry it purports to confer. On the contrary, the quite clear intention of the Reformers to continue the apostolic ministry founded by Christ is a more than sufficient intention for validity.

#### *Valid?*

And so the argument goes on. But is it the right argument? In view of the fact that those engaged in it have nowhere examined or stated clearly what they mean by validity, one is inclined to put this part of the discussion in brackets.

One element in the idea of a sacrament is the assurance it gives. One reason for going to Confession, if not the central one, is to be assured that my sins are forgiven. If the Church recognizes a priest's Orders, she is at the same time stating that, when he celebrates the Eucharist, our Lord becomes truly and objectively present under the appearances of bread and wine to be sacramental food and drink for his Body the Church. One could say that she guarantees the effectiveness of the sacramental action; or, to use more scriptural language, that she conveys God's assurance that he is faithful to his promises.

There could be many reasons for not recognizing Orders. For instance, some Anglicans do not consider non-episcopal Orders as adequately expressing the ministry Christ willed and wills for his Church. Orders may be seen as a sign of schism, or as a sign and focus of an official Church doctrine regarded as heretical or inadequate. For this sort of reason some Anglicans are unable in conscience to receive the Eucharist from ministers of other Churches, including the Roman Catholic Church. But they do not therefore say that these Orders are ineffective for the purposes for which they are consciously, and in profound faith, exercised.

The Catholic Church might have some of these reasons for not being able to give full recognition to Anglican Orders, or indeed to the Orders of *episcopi vagantes* whose mechanical pedigree was impeccable. The kind of theology that regards the sole test of the adequacy of Orders to be a matter of maintaining some tactual relay race (Professor Mascall) or hidden electric circuit, is surely on the

way out. In its *Decree on Ecumenism* (n. 22) Vatican II, when speaking in general of the separated communities of the West, said:

'We believe that especially *propter Sacramenti Ordinis defectum* they have not preserved the genuine and total reality of the eucharistic mystery.'

This implies that they have preserved some or a good deal of the reality of that mystery ('they profess that it signifies life in communion with Christ'). And *defectus* does not mean 'absence': it means deficiency or weakness; it means that these Orders are not seen to be all that Orders ought to be, are not seen as the Orders of the universal Church. Are we not led to the idea that, instead of thinking of Orders as either wholly present or wholly absent, we should consider the possibility that the Sacrament of Orders may be fully or partially conferred? If so, it would not follow from a judgment that Orders were deficient that they were eucharistically ineffective. The Eucharist celebrated by such ministers could be thought in various ways to lack the 'total and genuine reality of the eucharistic mystery' without our being able to conclude that our Lord was 'really absent': e.g. it could be thought to be a defective sign of the true and full nature of the Church, in view of the context of belief and churchmanship in which it took place.

In any case, *can* the Church *guarantee the ineffectiveness* of Orders? Let there be no misunderstanding. Catholic theologians have traditionally thought that when the Church declared Orders invalid she was declaring them incapable of sacramental effectiveness. But can the Church in fact do this? Is it a legitimate deduction from a verdict of deficiency? It is one thing to withhold a guarantee of effectiveness. It is quite another to give a guarantee of ineffectiveness. To give a guarantee of effectiveness, as we have said, is to give an assurance that Christ here acts in his people. To give a guarantee of ineffectiveness would be to give an assurance that he does not act. This is surely *ultra vires*. It would assume that all the action of Christ's Spirit is, as it were, piped through and confined to the visible structures of the (true) Church: nobody now believes this, and it is formally contradicted in the case of sacramental effectiveness by the orthodox doctrine of baptism. It would be, in the case in point, to assert that, when a people baptized into the Body of Christ gather with their minister to celebrate the Eucharist, and devoutly believe they are receiving his body and blood, they are in fact not doing so because of some break in transmission several hundred years ago, of which they are unaware, or which they deny. The most the Church can do is, in withholding recognition, to withhold her guarantee (the word is unlovely, but it makes the point clear). The most she can do is to leave me as an individual in doubt, but she does not prevent me from doing my best to resolve the doubt for myself.

The argument, then, is that the only theologically intelligible meaning of the word 'valid' is 'recognized by the Church'. In that

case, for a Roman Catholic Anglican Orders are at the moment invalid. But it by no means follows that they are absolutely null and utterly void.

*Should the question be reopened?*

The question of Anglican Orders has, of course, been reopened already by the general argument in which we have been engaged. But whether the time is yet ripe for an official reconsideration of Anglican Orders by the Roman Catholic Church, as Hughes advocates, one may well doubt.

First of all, any such official reconsideration would certainly involve a request from Rome for an official doctrinal statement from Anglicanism as to the meaning of the presbyterate. Would such a request really help the ecumenical movement at this point, or would it not rather imperil the unity of Anglicanism itself? With an awareness of impertinence in doing so, one may beg leave to doubt how well Fr Hughes knows Anglicanism. He makes no mention of the Protestant Anglicans who hailed Clark's thesis with joy, saying they heartily agreed that the Reformers did not mean to get rid merely of some fringe superstitions, but of the sacrificial doctrine of the Eucharist itself: this, in their view, was what the Reformation was about. One has only to read, for example, the statement in *Anglican-Methodist Unity: the Scheme* (nn. 71–73) of the divergent views on priesthood in fact held (whether officially recognized or not) in the Church of England, to realize that a possibility of Rome recognizing Anglican presbyters as 'really priests' would meet with a very mixed reception indeed.

But, secondly, is the Catholic theology of the ministry in general, of the priesthood, and of sacramental efficacy, itself sufficiently coherent and cohesive at this moment for Rome to take up the question? It would surely be better for us all to continue for some time helping each other in the general debate. Any official act of Rome would come better when the fraternal discussion had already been completed, simply to give outward expression to a foregone conclusion.