

THE CATHOLIC PARISH: INSTITUTIONAL DISCIPLINE, TRIBAL IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT IN THE ENGLISH CHURCH by Desmond Ryan, *Sheed & Ward*, London, 303 pages, £35.

Though now intended for the general reader, this book started life as a report on research on Mass attendance in the Catholic archdiocese of Birmingham, England, commissioned by the Archbishop, and conducted by means of interviews over three months in the winter of 1990-91. The author did most of the interviews, and it was mostly the clergy whom he interviewed. The book centres on the relationship between Church and society: some think that, since Vatican II, the Catholic Church has accommodated itself so much to secular society that it has lost its distinctive identity, while others think, on the contrary, that the Church remains too aloof. Dr Ryan contends that these are false alternatives — ‘the core problem’, as he sees it, is ‘the inability of the senior levels of the institution to re-absorb inherited structures, evolved in earlier ages for other tasks, into a continuing process of Vatican II-isation [sic], whereby the opposition between the Church and the world formerly prevalent is transmuted into a dialogue between them’ (page 2). The first half of the book, chapters 2 to 6 inclusive, offer a rich ‘ethnography’ of the Mass, the other sacraments, the school, agencies such as the St Vincent de Paul Society, and the role of the priest as perceived in a variety of parishes in the area studied. Very interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, the author identifies what he has no hesitation in calling ‘recusant’ parishes — where, though of course the political and social repression of Catholics has long ceased, there is a ‘religious minimalism’ that was formerly the effect of that repression: typically, though often the wealthiest and most expensively educated, these Catholics believe that ‘the laity should pray, pay, and obey’. The last thing they want is the sort of priest who wants to ‘build community’ (shaking hands at the kiss of peace, even worse, holding hands at the ‘Our Father’ etc.). In such parishes there already is a community — people have their place in a social structure which the Sunday liturgy is expected simply to reflect and endorse. At the other extreme, in the decaying inner cities, there are parishes certainly one step up from Third World shanty-towns but which the ‘model-building imagination’ of the analyst labels the *barrio* type: the ‘dumping ground’ of resourceless people, socially almost unable to fend for themselves, where the parish priest has a ‘tutelary presence’, called on to be an authority with the authorities. Most parishes, of course, are somewhere between these extremes, but they are not ‘figments’ of the sociologist’s need to give shape to his analysis. The main problem that emerges is the passivity of the laity, their ‘immaturity’, their unwillingness to take responsibility for anything, at least as this is perceived by the clergy with whom the interviews mostly took place. The author brings systems theory to bear in his concluding reflections: in the end, the parish has to escape from being a ‘self-perpetuating structure into self-

organizing process: 'All over the world, people are living the Gospel in ways that articulate their own lives and speak to the lives of those around them. But because the feedback and coordination functions of the system as a whole are so under-developed, these initiatives are either not reported on and evaluated, hence the local learning-gains fail to become part of the wealth of the whole organization; or, more wastefully, after the fact they are held to have departed in some way from the One True Path and therefore criticised or repressed'. The vivid ethnography of English Midland parochial life turns out to be pervaded by a deeply felt and highly articulate vision of what the Church needs to become.

'A BROTHER KNOCKING AT THE DOOR': THE MALINES CONVERSATIONS 1921-1925 by Bernard Barlow OSM, *The Canterbury Press*, Norwich 1996, 267 pages, £25.

The archives in Rome were not accessible, indeed even backed by letters from the Bishop of Arundel and Brighton and Cardinal Edward Cassidy, the author was refused permission to consult the relevant papers held by the Secretariate of State. Apart from that, as Bishop Geoffrey Rowell says in the foreword, this 'painstaking and scholarly work provides us with the fullest account so far of the conversations'. Chapter 1 sketches the background in the 19th century: the Oxford Movement, the proposals for a 'Uniate' Church of England using the Sarum rite, the strongly Ultramontane attitude of the Roman Catholics in England, particularly because of the large Irish immigrant population. Chapter 2 rehearses the story of the condemnation of Anglican Orders in 1896 ('the growing influence of the young Anglo/Spanish cleric, Mgr Merry del Val, in advising the Pope on English affairs ... the opposition of Cardinal Vaughan of Westminster, in conjunction with the other conservatives in Rome ... forced through the one-sided commission of enquiry and the publication of its negative decision'). Cardinal Mercier, from whose pastoral letter of 1924 the title of the book comes, appears in chapter 3, agreeing to 'informal conversations' at his residence in Malines, requested by Abbé Fernand Portal and Lord Halifax. Chapters 4 to 8 give us a careful account of the four conversations between December 1921 and May 1925 and the preparation for a fifth, never held since Mercier died in January 1926 and Portal in June. The story is interwoven with the reaction, both public and private, with doubts on the Anglican side as well as increasing hostility on the Catholic side. In 1923 Vincent McNabb and Bede Jarrett, by far the best known Dominicans in England, were encouraging Lord Halifax, who considered them as possible participants; but McNabb was also corresponding with Halifax about the effects of Modernism on High Church Anglicans and Jarrett eventually advised Halifax to become a Roman Catholic. Though Mercier and Portal were favourable to including Jarrett, Halifax's suspicions prevailed. In retrospect, perhaps, it would have been wiser to include a