

IV: The Cardinal and Post-conciliar Britain

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No doubt Cardinal Ratzinger would be the first to agree that the overwhelming majority of Catholics throughout the world will go on worshipping God, facing sickness, injustice and death, and so forth, in all but total indifference to the very existence of the CDF, let alone his views about the present sad state of the Church (not to mention mine). This is not to say that his views, and the work of his staff, are of no importance at all. It is merely that, as he says with some humour at the end of the interview, one must not exaggerate the influence that his tiny staff of some thirty, no doubt poorly paid, theologians can exert on 800 million Catholics (or whatever the figure is). The office staff of the municipal cleansing department in a town the size of Oxford is as big as, and certainly far better paid than, the officials of the CDF. The Catholic Church is so much vaster and so much more diverse, so much more irrepressibly and (one may surely say) supernaturally alive, than anyone can begin to comprehend, that neither the CDF nor those whom Ratzinger targets for criticism will ever make that much difference to the history of most people's experience of God.

Nevertheless, for those of us who belong to that insignificant minority of the human race that Cardinal Ratzinger dignifies (or ridicules) as *das neue Tertiärbürgertum* (cf. 4), it is good to have his word for it that the very idea that the CDF might exercise any dictatorship over our theological reflections is a joke.

But is the state of the Catholic Church anything like as corrupt as Cardinal Ratzinger's 'bitter assessment' (3) makes out? 'Self-destruction ... manifold collapse ... centrifugal forces' ... His analysis is pervaded with images of entropy. It is as if the Church had been infected by some degenerative malady, some morbid deterioration of the doctrinal tissue, with the fatal germs being carried by certain theologians right through the system. It is the picture of the Church that regularly appears in Roman rhetoric. At least since the days of Pope Gregory XVI the Roman perception has always been dismally negative. The grim and doleful rhetoric ceased briefly with John XXIII and the Council; but that 'euphoric vision', so Cardinal Ratzinger seems to think, was a diabolical illusion.

A few phrases extracted from *Quanta cura* (1864) suggests this

well-established fretful Roman tone:

Wherefore Our predecessors have with Apostolic fortitude continually resisted the nefarious attempts of unjust men, of those who, like raging waves of the sea, foaming forth their own confusion ... to abolish all virtue and justice, to deprave the souls and minds of all men ... Scarcely had We been called to this Chair of Peter when We, to the extreme grief of Our soul, beheld a horrible tempest stirred up by so many erroneous opinions, and the dreadful and lamentable mischiefs ... etc. etc.

Or fifty years later, this time from *Lamentabili* (1907):

In these latter days we have witnessed a notable increase in the number of the enemies of Christ ... striving to destroy the vital energy of the Church ... in her very bosom, what is to be dreaded and deplored ... many who belong to the Catholic laity, and, what is much more sad, to the ranks of the priesthood itself, who ... imbued with the poisonous doctrines taught by the enemies of the Church, and lost to all sense of modesty ... etc. etc.

According to this longstanding Roman rhetoric, the Church has always been drowning under hostile seas, or having her vitals gnawed away by venomous vipers. The Church that has the infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed that she should be endowed, in the famous words of Vatican I, is repeatedly and repetitiously pictured in Roman rhetoric as being about to collapse under the pressure of external pressure and internal corruption. It is amazing how easily, from a Roman vantage point, the Catholic Church displays these alarming symptoms of almost terminal disease.

True enough, Cardinal Ratzinger's alarmist and lurid diagnosis of the Church's post-conciliar diseases is a relatively innocuous example of this long boring tradition of hyped up, panic-mongering hyperbole. Perhaps if your cultural ears are tuned to Verdi and Wagner you feel you have to shout: the last time that I was in Rome, listening to official speeches in Italian that went on interminably, lurching manic-depressively from gloomy lamentations to dithyrambic enthusiasm (about Thomism), I found that they made better sense if I treated them as a kind of music. In certain cultures, evidently, a statement will not be heard unless it is wildly exaggerated and repeated several times. Obviously, then, what may well sound a reasonable and responsible statement in Latin or Italian or German will often make the rest of us uncomfortable. Language and perception go together, and when we hear a shrill cry we expect to see some considerable calamity.

The detailed symptoms that Cardinal Ratzinger highlights are, however, remarkably academic and arcane. No doubt, as he might be

the first to say, the Catholic Church in Britain and Ireland is relatively free of the post-conciliar diseases that he perceives 'in large parts of the world' (cf. 3). Anyone who claimed that the last twenty years have been 'remarkably unfavourable for the Catholic Church' in our part of the world would be maintaining the opposite of the truth. (That does not mean that we do not have problems: see below.) With about twice as many Catholics as there are in Holland, and with not far short of half as many as there are in Cardinal Ratzinger's native West Germany, the Irish and British Catholic communities together no doubt seem, in comparison with the dwellers in the lands of Schillebeeckx and Küng, extraordinarily and inexplicably docile and orthodox. (At least I *suppose* the British desk in the Holy Office is not piled high with files, unless they are chock-a-block with crackpot delations of our theological Triton.)

To say that 'a dissent has divided us which has gone from self-criticism to self-destruction' is simply unintelligible in the British Isles. To talk of 'discouragement and vexation' that have 'overcome many people', or 'a process of manifold collapse' that 'has discredited it (the Council) in many people's eyes', must seem not only greatly exaggerated but simply entirely groundless when we contemplate the Church with which we are familiar. Of course there are critics among us. On the eve of the Pope's visit to Britain the pressure group 'Pro Ecclesia et pro Pontifice' sought to alert him to the allegedly wishy-washy doctrine of our bishops. Victoria Gillick, that heroine of parental rights, has taught her children to call Cardinal Hume 'Basil Brush'. Auberon Waugh conducts an unpleasant vendetta against Archbishop Worlock in the pages of *Private Eye*. We have profound social, economic, and political problems in Britain, all of which involve and sometimes divide Catholics very deeply: to name four—semi-official civil war in the north of Ireland, the collapse of our great industrial centres, the proliferation of American military installations, and the integration of immigrants from former British colonies. Some critics would say that the Catholic community at large, or some of our bishops, pay far too much attention to these problems 'which should be left to the politicians'. Others would certainly maintain the very opposite: civil strife in northern Ireland is something that Catholics in Britain find peculiarly difficult to discuss. By and large, however, if any generalisation of the type which Cardinal Ratzinger favours is to be risked, the post-conciliar awakening of the Catholic Church in Britain has prepared us, and certainly some of our bishops, to deal relatively effectively with these immense moral-theological problems and urgent evangelical demands.

Of course there will always be far more to do; we have no grounds for complacency. Long before the Council, in the 'twenties and 'thirties, a significant number of people were already engaged,

theologically and practically, in these moral issues. But that these matters are now at the centre of Catholic concern, in many ordinary parishes as well as in the episcopal conference, clearly owes a great deal to documents such as *Pacem in terris* (John XXIII), *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican II), and *Populorum progressio* (Paul VI). There has been a great 'leap forward' in Catholic conscience and consciousness since the 'fifties. This is what we mean by 'openness to the world'. This is no doubt the 'revision of church-world relations' which Cardinal Ratzinger ascribes to Vatican II (cf. 9). *Of course*—to repeat—it is an opening to a whole range of issues that is bound to divide us in practical judgements; but the first thing that 'the Church since Vatican II' must suggest to any informed observer of the period in Britain or Ireland is this unprecedented engagement with the wider theological and evangelical issues of our society. 'Vatican II' may mean doctrinal confusion and moral anarchy in the Church 'in large parts of the world', as Ratzinger says. 'Vatican II', in Ireland as well as in Britain, means 'Justice and Peace'.

This too is the legacy of Vatican II, and of Pope Paul VI (constantly belittled by often none too subtle implication in Roman effusions and decisions): far from being a 'bitter assessment' or a 'negative balance', it is a surprisingly positive judgement that the Catholic Church in Britain deserves. This new openness to the deeper evangelical issues is, of course, a very demanding task that requires a discipline of theological reflection and a personal and corporate asceticism that we are only beginning to discover.

Cardinal Ratzinger, amazingly, makes no reference to this whole side of the post-Vatican II Church—which makes his assessment very lop-sided indeed. His alarmist rhetoric obliterates the achievement of a *critical* 'openness to the world': a difficult and deeply theological change of perspective and practice. As he very rightly says, 'the capacity to oppose so many cultural developments of the world we are in' is one of the most urgent tasks for the Christian (9). It is just that his reckless swipes at certain post-conciliar phenomena create a quite misleading picture of how lively 'the capacity for non-conformism' actually is, in large parts of the Catholic Church across the world.

So far as England and Wales are concerned, the National Pastoral Congress of 1980 showed very clearly how deeply and enthusiastically the Catholic Church had entered into this side of the legacy of Vatican II and the two Popes of the Council. True enough, the visit of the Pope in 1982 diverted the energies and resources that might have gone into implementing the expressed will of the Congress for institutions to deepen our faith and prayer for an even more constructive engagement in the 'Justice and Peace' issues. Some critics, of course, suspect that the papal cavalcade was deliberately arranged to take the steam out of the Congress. It is certainly true

that, with every great occasion identified with one or other of the sacraments, the indispensability of the hierarchical element in the Church was heavily underlined at the expense of that 'conspiratio' of bishops and laity that was so beautifully revealed at Liverpool. But there are signs, which the forthcoming Roman synod may even reinforce, that people and clergy now want to get back to the ecclesiological vision of the Congress, and to get on with the evangelical and redemptive work on the ground.

Even granted that Ratzinger has put his finger on certain negative features of the Catholic Church today, to what extent is his apocalyptic alarmism justified? What phenomena does he regard as symptomatic of the post-conciliar disease? Obviously I cannot speak for 'Africa' or 'Asia' or 'North America' or even for 'Europe': the very idea that every continent's 'crisis of faith' may be encapsulated in a pithy phrase is simply ludicrous. But consider the picture that we are offered of Europe: 'If we look at Europe we get the impression—in the theological field too—of a disenchanted world grown old, afflicted with academic snobbishness and blasé indifference' (25). No doubt neither Britain nor Ireland counts as 'Europe' in Cardinal Ratzinger's eyes, but as a generalisation about the supposed crisis in the Catholic Church in western Europe that is so bizarre that one hardly knows what to make of it. Ratzinger was a bishop in Bavaria, where the traditional rural Catholicism of his youth has not coped very well with post-war immigration and industrial sprawl: seeing lovely baroque churches emptier than ever must be depressing. For that matter, Munich (like Vienna) holds a certain nostalgic charm for the Hapsburg empire, so the sense of a 'disenchanted world grown old' may make more sense there than it does in Thatcher's ruthlessly philistine go-getting Britain. Ratzinger was also a distinguished academic theologian and, as one or two other allusions in the interview suggest, he may carry the wounds of some internecine German professional fracas. Moving to Rome does not remove people from their history and culture: the evidence is, on the contrary, that they see the immense diversity and heterogeneity in the orb of their private nostalgia. It is, at any rate, extremely difficult to believe that Ratzinger's summary of the 'crisis' in Europe would make much sense to Catholics in many countries from Finland to Spain. Anyway, what is 'academic snobbishness'? Is it one of the five wounds of the Church?

Cardinal Ratzinger's perspective seems extremely narrow, not to say 'academic'. Obviously it depends what is meant by 'theological output'—but the more technical and erudite theology is, the less its circulation and the more its defects are visible only to other professionals in the field. Assuming that we are talking about the sort of books that affect ordinary people's understanding, say, of interior

life, it is simply amazing that Ratzinger apparently knows nothing of the great popularity and relatively large sales of introductions to, and new editions of, 'classical spirituality', at least throughout the English-speaking Catholic world and certainly in North America.

Again: schooled in old-fashioned Thomism as I was, I agree entirely that God, rather than Christ or salvation history, has to be the focus of theological reflection. Ratzinger clearly dislikes the influence of his old friend and master Karl Rahner: the scoffing references to Vatican II as a 'radical caesura in the history of the Church' (4) and to 'anonymous Christianity' (5) are magisterial put-downs of phrases which, if properly explained, illuminate perfectly genuine ecclesiological issues, as Ratzinger may well concede—but his rhetorical use of them in the context of his interview is little more than a smear. But whatever reserves one may have about Rahner's theology and its influence (and I have quite fundamental ones myself) the one thing that certainly has to be granted is that it is overwhelmingly *theocentric*—and, for that matter, supportive of traditional Ignatian spirituality. But then it turns out that the symptoms of the loss of 'the metaphysical depth and breadth of the concept of God' are the so-called ephemeral 'death of God' theology, and the idea of Jesus as God's 'representative' (14). Presumably we are still supposed to be talking about what has happened in *Catholic* theology in the years since Vatican II: Ratzinger's ministry, after all, does not extend to supervising *Protestant* theologians.

In fact, it would be hard to find even many *Protestant* theologians, let alone parish ministers and ordinary people, whose faith has been in the least affected by the handful of post-Nietzschean atheologies that appeared in North America in the late 'sixties. Of course it is possible to find *some*: Don Cupitt's recent television series 'The Sea of Faith' is exactly what Ratzinger would be perfectly justified in calling 'death of God' theology. That such work must have *some* effect on Catholic readers and viewers need not be questioned. But it would be a great exaggeration to say that it constitutes anything like a 'crisis of belief' among the great majority of clergy and congregations in the Anglican Church: on the contrary, it is having the effect of firming most of them up in the traditional faith. (A few radical questions from the occasional maverick does a lot more to deepen ordinary people's faith than a steady drizzle of admonitions from the Holy Office.) But really—as regards the vast majority of *Catholics*, for whose orthodoxy Cardinal Ratzinger bears a certain responsibility—just who is going in for the 'death of God' theology of the late 'sixties?

When someone in Cardinal Ratzinger's position holds forth on the 'crisis of faith' in the Catholic Church he really needs to be extremely careful not to project an oratorical fantasy populated with

straw-men and bugaboos. The first duty of any pastor is to have an accurate, fair and documented picture of the heresies in his patch—and a wise pastor may often prefer not to shout about them from the rooftop.

Once again, just how widespread is the movement 'to feminize God' among Catholic theologians, let alone among Catholics in general (cf. 14)? It sometimes looks as if Cardinal Ratzinger's picture of what Catholics in general believe these days is based on the occasional issue of *Concilium*—certainly his *bête noire*. Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* is a marvellous book, but it is not going to make any Catholic think of God in some new way. William Oddie, my Anglican neighbour in Oxford, would no doubt be glad to let Cardinal Ratzinger have his dossier of the dafter flights of feminist thought. Of course there is a *problem*. But it is wildly exaggerated to suggest that 'radical forms of feminism' are on the point of subverting people's faith in the Trinity. The theological problem is to do with symbol, metaphor and analogy—and it is surprising how the few efforts that there have so far been to retrieve the feminine and maternal images for God that have always been there in the Bible and in the tradition have revealed a quite widespread, unwittingly idolatrous attachment to the masculine and paternal genders, among women as well as among men. To speak of God *analogically* never has been an easy matter: the grip of the univocal or the vagaries of radical ambiguity have always been preferable. Feminist theology is actually making very little headway: *The Motherhood of God*, the report commissioned by the Church of Scotland, a carefully qualified statement, may make Presbyterians reflect on *any* image of God, but it is certainly not going to 'feminize God'.

After Freud, according to Cardinal Ratzinger, our society views paternity with suspicion, and this lead us to a 'crisis regarding the Father as the first person of the Trinity' (14). Well—once again: just how many Catholics, in Europe or North America, are in the throes of this particular 'crisis'? It is perfectly true that, since Hitler and Stalin and with more recent 'softer' dictatorial figures, people who have a certain 'capacity for non-conformism' are going to be extremely suspicious of patriarchal authoritarianism *wherever they see it*. (What many people saw, in Popes like John XXIII and Paul VI, was some sign that the successor of St Peter might at last be liberated from the legacy of absolute monarchy.) It would fit with Ratzinger's narrow and lopsided view of the last twenty years that he does not seem to extend 'the capacity to oppose so many cultural developments of the world we are in' to suspicion—in the name of Christ—of the patriarchal authoritarianism which is as characteristic of the western democracies as it is of eastern bloc or Third World countries. (Oddly enough, as his scoffing at 'partnership, friendship and brotherhood'

suggests, Ratzinger probably thinks that we have *too much* democracy!)

There is, on the other hand, a certain truth in Cardinal Ratzinger's assertion that 'Arianism' has become the Christological temptation for many Christians today, including Catholics (14). Twenty years ago, as Rahner, Congar and others variously point out, the great majority of Catholics would have been tempted to semi-docetic views, and that is surely still the case. Most Catholics would still be far more inclined to minimise, if not exactly deny, Christ's human limitations. Years of discussion groups have shown me that it is easy to find devout and well educated Catholics who have to think twice about whether Christ has a human soul. As Jungmann pointed out some years ago, Christ is so thrust up into the mystery and majesty of the Godhead that his high priesthood and his human mediation of prayer to the Father are seriously diminished in the liturgical experience and personal piety of many Catholics. But in reaction against that sort of crypto-monophysitism and with the recent discovery of Jesus the Jew, and all that, of course the pendulum has swung back—certainly among those of us who belong to *das neue Tertiärbürgertum*—back to a certain 'Arianism'. Given that orthodox Chalcedonian Christology is necessarily the product of denying both 'Arianism' and monophysitism, it is surely the task of every theologian, as well as every pastor, to encourage people to think out the alternatives in order to take hold of the truth.

The one thing that may well be doing great damage to people's faith is the ICEL version of the liturgy. This of course received the approval of some Roman dicastery and is authorized by the Episcopal Conferences of the major English-speaking countries. If I had to name the one thing in the years since Vatican II that threatens the integrity of the Catholic faith, affecting vastly more people, and working incomparably more insidiously, than the loopy feminist excesses or the potty heralds of 'death of God' theology which evidently fascinate Cardinal Ratzinger so much, it would (alas!) be the liturgical language with which ICEL has burdened us.

Consider just one example. The offertory prayer for the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time runs as follows in Latin:

*Mysteria tua, Domine, debitis servitiis exsequentes,
supplices te rogamus, ut quod ad honorem tuae majestatis
offerimus, nobis proficiat ad salutem.*

Nobody would claim that this is among the greatest of these prayers, but consider the difference between (1) an old-fashioned, fairly literal version and (2) the ICEL translation:

- (1) As in our due service we perform your mysteries, O Lord, we humbly ask you that what we offer to the honour of your majesty may help us to salvation.

- (2) Lord, as we make this offering, may our worship in Spirit and in truth bring us salvation.

Of course this is a 're-creation', not a literal translation. But God is not asked for anything, humbly or otherwise, in the ICEL version. It is 'our worship', rather than 'what we offer', that is presented as bringing salvation. It is our worship 'in Spirit and in truth', which people as affected by 'the liberal-radical libertarian culture' as Cardinal Ratzinger (rightly) thinks many of us are would be strongly inclined to take to be some 'subjective experience', that brings us salvation. In the Latin original, by contrast, we are brought to salvation by the sacrifice which we present because it will become the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ: 'what we offer'.

Here, as so often, the ICEL liturgy is pervaded with some perverse determination to pelagianise one prayer after another—not to mention the banality of so much of the language. Again and again, the accent is shifted towards *us* and our subjective attitudes, and away from Christ and the objective realities of his work for our salvation.

The theological poverty of the ICEL liturgy has often been noted and lamented over the past twenty years. Parish congregations are of course far more immune to sloppy liturgy and silly sermons than their pastors find it easy to admit: it is the principal demonstration of that 'supernatural sense of faith' which Vatican II located in the whole People of God (see *Lumen Gentium*, paragraph 12). If ordinary people's faith can survive so much boring liturgy and so many irrelevant sermons it is not going to be very deeply disturbed by the unreadable tomes or the extravaganzas of the lunatic fringe of Catholic theology. But, even so, the one thing that may in time lead ordinary Catholics away from the central truths of the faith is the language of the liturgy. It is the staple of our ordinary Catholic worship that needs a very thorough scrutiny—by the Holy Office if need be. (It would not surprise me to learn that Cardinal Ratzinger is well acquainted with this problem.)

Ironically enough, it is official refusal to heed ICEL's critics over the past few years, together with papal objections to a more congregational celebration of the sacrament of penance, that are doing far more to entrench 'the affluent middle class' in those attitudes of the surrounding culture which Ratzinger somewhat colourfully refers to as 'its liberal-radical ideology of individualistic rationalistic hedonist character' (4). Many of the people whom he must have in mind have given up going to confession altogether—but could easily be brought back by a wider use of the rite of general absolution. A substantial minority of the same 'affluent middle class' have got so fond of lengthy 'more personal' celebrations of the rite of individual confession that the experience of a general examination of

conscience in an ordinary middle-of-the-road parish congregation is exactly what they need to snap out of their pious self-absorption.

The vast majority of Catholics do not belong to *das neue Tertiärbürgertum*, at least in the English-speaking world. But they, like the rest of us, depend largely on the sacraments of the Church to sustain their faith in its integrity. There is every sign that they too want a less individualistic mode of celebrating the sacrament of penance. Cardinal Ratzinger's concern, at least as far as Europe and North America go, is plainly with Catholics of 'the affluent middle class'. As I have tried to suggest, he plays down the very significant way in which such Catholics have begun to make the 'Justice and Peace' inheritance of the 'sixties their own. But he is quite right in his main perception: such Catholics are extremely vulnerable to the liberal-individualist ethos that dominates in the western democracies. The awakening to the evangelical and ascetical dimensions of the 'Justice and Peace' issues—so strongly affirmed at the National Pastoral Congress—is the one thing that helps to counteract the liberal-individualist values that surround us (Thatcherism, as it is more commonly called in Britain). *What is particularly alarming, as far as the English-speaking world is concerned, is that the sacraments of the Church do not offer the sustenance that they should.* Confronted with individualism, the time is absolutely ripe for that group reflection and examination of conscience which so many Catholics already sense would help to free them from that individualism. Threatened and tempted by various forms of rationalist humanism, such Catholics need above all to hear a language of public prayer that imperceptibly deepens their faith in the mystery of God in Christ. They can certainly do without a liturgy that perceptibly dilutes and distorts their faith in precisely the ways that Cardinal Ratzinger indicates.

If we have a 'crisis of faith' in the English-speaking world such as Cardinal Ratzinger detects, the ICEL liturgy is a much more significant symptom of it than anything he mentions—and the first reaction to the 'crisis' (one may perhaps dare to suggest) should be to listen to what people have already said that they want by way of teaching and sacraments. They know what they need. How much longer do they have to wait?