An Outsider on the Inside: Anglican Reflections on the Synod on the Consecrated Life

H. Benedict Green CR

To be catapulted, at very short notice, into the deliberations of a world-wide gathering of Catholic bishops and religious was inevitably something of a culture shock, compounded no doubt by the sheer effort of concentration involved in listening, five hours a day for the first fortnight, to individual members' interventions in their own languages (with instant translators whose command of Latin idiom tended to survive in their English versions). Yet the comprehensive overview of the present situation of the consecrated life in all its manifestations that emerged could hardly have been projected in any other way. We heard moving accounts from sisters, still young, from the countries of eastern Europe of the way they had not only maintained the religious life underground in the face of communist government restrictions, but continued to attract new vocations and to carry out their formation. We heard from African bishops (speaking confidently, I thought, for a church come of age) of an explosion of vocations that promises to give the lie to the assumption that celibacy will always be something alien to the African male; of the inherent dangers in a society where so many, in the secular sphere, are looking for ways of self-betterment; of the need for higher levels of education, for which outside help will be needed, and at the same time for a process of inculturation which the indigenous can only achieve themselves, and to which the assumptions and living standards of expatriates can be a serious hindrance. The call for inculturation was heard also, in a more specifically religious connection, from India, where assimilation in dress and lifestyle and local organization (the ashram) to the indigenous tradition concerning holy men and women was felt to be urgent; and from Thailand, where the traditional Buddhist expectation that most persons will spend some years of their earlier life in a monastery without, at that stage, any permanent commitment has suggested that comparable opportunities ought to be offered to young Christians in that country (a plea echoed,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1995.tb07097.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

from a totally different context, by Cardinal Danneels in Belgium and Bishop Vincent Nichols in England, and taken up in the final Propositions). We heard from all sides of the continuing urgency for a gospel witness to the poor, and a rousing call from Cardinal Etchegaray of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace to 'reconcile a poverty to battle and a poverty to embrace'. The presence of Mother Teresa at the Synod (rather than her mainly inspirational interventions in its discussions) was an effective sign that it was not to be allowed to forget that issue.

The 'vocations crisis' in western Europe, North America and Australia (in which the Anglican communities for which I spoke fully share) needed to be seen against that background; it is not so much that the religious life is in decline as that its centre of gravity has shifted — a fact vividly brought home to me by the composition of the Circulus Minor (small working group) in which I found myself (one of four in which English was spoken). I was the only Briton there, and the countries represented included, in addition to those once coloured red on the map and the United States, the Czech Republic, Albania, Italy, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand. The consequences of falling numbers in countries where that is the case received a certain amount of attention, such as the problems of dying communities, of finding new roles for the elderly and adequate terminal care for the aged in communities with too few able-bodied members left, and of maintaining a sense of vocation and fidelity to it in situations where recovery would seem to require a miracle. All this was familiar territory. But the causes were nowhere, to my knowledge, systematically analyzed. Cardinal Danneels suggested a decline of belief in an after-life as a factor; Canadian bishops in my working group pointed to the marked decline in Catholic family size. Both of these can surely be seen as particular manifestations of a more general phenomenon: in the one case the crisis of faith, and in the other the sexual revolution, along with the social emancipation of women.

The last-named factor had clearly reached the Synod, and made a visible (and audible) impression on its composition and proceedings. Given that this was a Synod of *bishops*, and that the twenty general or major superiors who sat and voted with them were all male and in priest's orders, it was still striking to find that 60 out of 95 non-voting members (exclusive of ecumenical representatives) were women. It was important that they came from all over the Third World and not just the west, but it also mattered that among the most impressive of them were what I may call 'sisters of the new look' from North America and Australia, who have claimed for themselves as women the right to

practise the kind of detached apostolate (chiefly to the poor and marginalized) that has been open to male religious at least since the foundation of the Jesuits. I was impressed with the maturity of their outlook and its freedom from the more transient features of secular feminism; while the fact that they presented themselves at a formal assembly of this kind, dressed for the most part like female executives, apparently without comment from above, was symbolic of the Rubicon that has evidently been crossed. How many they converted and how many were on their side already is beyond my power to conjecture. There is no question that in the aftermath of the papal pronouncement on women's ordination the great majority of bishops were bending over backwards to affirm the dignity of women and the indispensable contribution of feminine qualities and insights (rather overshadowing the fact of their common humanity, I thought; but I heard no complaints). There was a strong feeling among them (the bishops) that monasteries of women (not least the enclosed) should have the same right of self-determination as those of men. A number spoke in favour of admitting women to the decision-making bodies of the Church, and one (a Jesuit bishop from the Congo) thought that this should not stop short of the College of Cardinals. The Pope, in his speech at the luncheon that followed the final Mass of the Synod (for which I was not able to stay), was reported to have picked up this remark, and to have said that it was by no means as far-fetched as some who heard it might have thought. He also promised to involve women consultants in the preparation of the apostolic letter that will be the final fruit of the Synod's work. The contrast between this and what was reported of Pope John Paul's first visit to the United States suggests that the impact of the women's participation reached to the top, and that neither the final form of the proposition on women in the consecrated life (somewhat watered down, I have been given to understand), nor the backlash over the attribution of feminine qualities to God that one or two dissentient voices were allowed (through inept chairmanship) to raise during the final discussion of the *Nuntius*, should be seen as a serious setback to it.

Of the 224 bishops present, 151 had been elected by their national bishops' conferences, as against 37 nominated by the Pope (heads of Curial bodies and eastern rite prelates account for most of the remainder). It was noticeable that most of the more backward-looking interventions came from the ranks of the nominated. I do not claim to find anything sinister in this; those with unfashionable opinions have a right to be heard, and the principle can cut both ways. But with recollections of Vatican II as received from contemporary reports and eyewitnesses' subsequent accounts, I more than once found myself

wondering: suppose that Vatican III was being called today — where are the Liénarts and the Frings', the Alfrinks and the Suenens' and the de Smedts, the Ritters and the Meyers? Not invited, or not appointed, or just not there? Much recent evidence would seem to point to the second of those three answers. I shall be told that I must ask as well: where now are the Ottavianis and the Ruffinis and the Siris? Or that a Synod of little more than two hundred is no more than a tenth of the numbers at Vatican II (let alone what they would be now), and no fair sample from which to generalize. Nevertheless the point stands: recent appointment policies may have produced, not only on fundamentals but on issues of policy, an impressively unified episcopate, but does it leave room for a 'loyal opposition'? And if it does not, are we not on the way to a situation that treats the latter expression as a contradiction in terms?

Here is an issue which touches closely on the nature of the religious vocation, and which was evidently not far below the surface in much of the discussion that took place about the relations between religious and bishops. It points to a deep tension between two aspects of that vocation: that which sees it as integral and indeed central to the Church's life (as in the revised CIC of 1982, which treats it as a state of life distinct from both clergy and laity and constituting with them the totality of the membership of the people of God); and that which sees its true place as on the frontiers of the Church — marginal though not therefore marginalized. It is the latter perspective that has inspired the more creative and pioneering developments in its history, from the Desert Fathers who saw themselves in the front line of the struggle against the powers of evil (returning to the city in times of persecution), to the friars and the later apostolic congregations as they reached out to extend the frontiers of the world claimed for Christ. As we were reminded more than once, there is (despite the language of *Perfectae caritatis*) no contradiction between monastic and apostolic; the monastic life is apostolic by definition.

It is with the first of these two aspects that a bishop, especially if he has to rely heavily on religious for the pastoral and missionary work of his diocese, will be primarily concerned, and he may not unnaturally (as the history of the subject repeatedly shows) feel uncomfortable in the presence of other priorities which he has not initiated and which are not fully under his control — not least when defended in the name of 'prophecy'. The prophetic gift can be caricatured by those who claim to have received it as well as by their critics; those with first-hand experience of the contemporary charismatic movement will generally be familiar with the initiate who, having received the signs of renewal in the Spirit, then proceeds to attribute every random thought that comes

into his head to the Spirit's inspiration, as if to put it automatically above criticism. That sort of argument has clearly not been lacking in recent conflicts between bishops and (especially younger) religious. I am reminded of Bishop Butler's celebrated response to John Wesley: 'Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing'. Yet, as that same episode suggests, a right discernment of spirits, where there is real integrity on both sides, will not invariably favour the authority figure; and it is surely better that the discernment should not have to be made later with hindsight. The Spirit blows where he will, and that is often located on the frontiers.

The intervention of Bishop Maurice Taylor of Galloway, speaking on behalf of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland and in close consultation with the religious of that country, called, in low-key and uncontroversial language but with deep insight and potentially revolutionary implications, for the development of a more adequate theology of consecrated life in the light of its prophetic character. Not only, he said, are its origins to be found in the gifts by which the Spirit builds up the Church, but those called to it are being prompted now by the Spirit, through the experience of falling numbers, loss of traditional forms of work and dearth of new vocations, to a renewed prophetic witness to the values of the Kingdom — in a Church which exists to serve these same values, yet has, constantly and at all levels, to be recalled to them. I find it deeply significant that this understanding should have surfaced in one of the areas affected by the vocations crisis, for it is chiefly in these areas (apart from certain countries of Latin America, where the issue is the apostolate to the poor and the religious are caught up in the conflicts of a hierarchy deeply divided against itself over it) that some bishops and some religious have come into collision. These are the new pluralist societies, in which a single Church will not, in the foreseeable future, command a majority, and where at the same time the model of a strong minority pressure group, which has served well in some of the areas of Marxist repression will not have the same appropriateness to a participatory democracy. (I cannot help contrasting the courageous and highly responsible statement addressed to their country a few years ago by the US Bishops' Conference on the subject of nuclear armaments with the contributions of some of them to the current political hysteria over legalized abortion — a topic not wholly absent from the interventions in the Synod. Far be it from me to argue for the rightness of abortion for Christians; but a democratically ordered people can only be governed with their consent, and assent to a better order of things has to be won by persuasion. Our job is to convert, not to

coerce.)

I do not mean to locate the sphere of the prophetic solely or even mainly on the frontier between morals and politics, and certainly not to claim Bishop Taylor's authority for doing so. I am attempting rather to insert the blade of a knife between the fundamentals of revealed faith and morals and the papal policy package in which, for Catholics, they are conveyed to Church and world at any one time, something that we know varies from pontificate to pontificate and which has not, to the best of my understanding, been promised total protection from error. Without a place for 'liberty of prophesying' this runs the risk of identifying the voice of authority in the Church with that of the Lord of the Church. It would be idle at the present time to expect constructive public dissent from the ranks of the bishops (I write this in the week of the deposition of Bishop Gaillot of Evreux). And if not from them, from whom but the religious?

I have put this provocatively, and I speak only for myself. But it is undeniable that there was in the Synod an element that would have liked to impose controls on the free expression of religious; one intervention even pressed for a papal voice in the appointment of general superiors. To me the most memorable of the interventions in the Aula was that of Timothy Radcliffe OP urging his audience not to be afraid of debate: 'Debates and arguments are the signs of a Church which is always being renewed by the Spirit. A perfect unanimity would be the immobility of death.' And he went on to speak of the need to have the humility, and the vulnerability, to listen to those with whom we disagree, which is a part of what we understand by obedience. This is not, I think, a message that attracts ready assent from the Curial mind, even since it has been internationalized; nor is it very congenial to the Latin, particularly the Hispanic, tradition. I could sense an atmosphere of apprehensiveness among the religious as the time approached for the finalization of the Synod's Propositions and the vote on them. In the event, I understand, those fears were not realized. But the tension was sustained to the end in the personal message which Cardinal Hume appended to his final statement as Relator of the Synod, in which he appealed for a properly pastoral handling of disciplinary problems between bishops and individual religious in the spirit of St Benedict's guidelines for a superior (*RB* 64). I hope that the coding of this was as perspicuous to his fellow bishops as it was to me.

I have left to the end the dimension that was responsible for my presence in the first place: the ecumenical. This had been well prepared for in the *Instrumentum laboris*, but while it found a place in the final Propositions, it had much less prominence in the intervening

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1995.tb07097.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

proceedings — naturally enough, given that the great majority of those taking part would have had no opportunity for contact with non-Roman Catholic religious, and more pressing matters on their agenda. The *Instrumentum* referred in two places to the importance and the aboriginal character of Orthodox monasticism; this was taken up in a number of interventions in the Aula, and was the subject of a formal address delivered by the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bishop Isidore of Tralles, a monk of Patmos now serving in the Patriarchate — who did not however stay for the remainder of the Synod. The Patriarchates of Antioch, Moscow and Romania were all represented by senior monks. All this was in line with the known *Ostpolitik* of Pope John Paul. But it was noticeable how few of the interventions from eastern rite Catholics mentioned even the presence, let alone the monastic tradition of the Orthodox, and that the pattern of their own religious life, in its variety and active emphasis, was unmistakably western. While the silence of those who had lived under Soviet repression can be excused by their need to concentrate on survival, the same cannot be said for the bishop representing the Syro-Malabar rite Catholics of India, who gave no hint of the presence of a substantial part of that tradition that is not in communion with Rome, let alone that it has retained its ancient monastic tradition. The fidelity of eastern rite Catholics under persecution in the present century must not blind the Church to the injustices often involved in the establishment of Uniat Churches in times past. When the Austro-Hungarian empire in the early 18th century annexed the province of Transylvania (restored to Romania after 1918), and its Romanian inhabitants were forced into communion with the Holy See, they were allowed to retain their former liturgy, but the monasteries which had been the spiritual heart of their communities were simply suppressed. This and comparable stories were not heard in the Synod. But their implication is that reaching out towards the monasticism of the Orthodox east calls for an expression of *metanoia*.

The revival of consecrated life in the Churches of the Reformation is itself an expression of *metanoia* for its suppression in unhappier times, and both the recognition of its ecumenical significance in the *Instrumentum* (for which I think we have to thank a Relator with personal experience of interconfessional dialogue of religious in this country) and the invitation to participate were a generous response to it. Since the Synod was a representative gathering of bishops to study the place of the consecrated life in the Church as a whole, it was proper that the ecumenical Auditores should represent their ecclesial rather than their religious communities; this had the effect of cutting out Taizé,

since it is now an explicitly interconfessional community (though its sister community at Grandchamp, which has not developed along the same lines, happily was represented). In the event Prior Roger Schütz and Frère Max Thurian (now a priest of the Catholic Church) made their appearance in the final week. Exposure to the full range of the consecrated life in the Roman Catholic Church was a salutary cutting down to size, and a reminder that Anglican (and Protestant) communities are all located in the zone of the vocations crisis: a situation that we share with the Catholic communities that are geographically near to us, but without the encouragement, *except through them*, of better things in other countries. The ecumenical implications are plain enough. In such circumstances it was cheering both to be encouraged to take a full part in the discussions of the Circuli Minores, and to be invited to address the whole Synod. I was happy to be able to refer, if only briefly, to fifty years of theological exchange between the Dominicans of the English Province and the Community of the Resurrection — most of it, for me, an extended preparation for a memorable experience.

"Christology": What's In a Word

Guy Mansini OSB

Yes, Christology is the *logos* or science of the Christ. But science is the invention of the Greeks, and while *Christos* is Greek, too, it does duty here for "Messiah." The word contains the encounter of Jerusalem and Athens that has been the sustaining event of the whole of Western culture, which, in these days, and notwithstanding the abiding vigour of Indian thought, is increasingly the culture of the world. And already thus far "Christology" proves itself a weasel word. For if indeed we speak of an "encounter" of two "cultures," then Athens bids fair to absorb Jerusalem as just one more collection of human conventions and *nomoi*. But if we say that "Christology" signifies the destruction of proud arguments (*logismoi*) and the capture of every thought unto the obedience of Christ (see 2 Cor 10:4–5), then it may be thought that

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1995.tb07097.x Published online by Cambridge University Press