

Comment

The McCabe Affair: twenty years after

A party in London has just been given to mark the twentieth anniversary of the day when all hell broke loose around Father Herbert McCabe OP, at that time Editor of this publication. As, at the time, the media made sure everybody knew, he was fired from the editorship for saying in this column, 'The Church is quite plainly corrupt'. Ironically, what Father Herbert was doing in that February 1967 editorial was arguing that the theologian Charles Davis had been mistaken to abandon the Church—an event that had shocked the Catholic Church in England a few weeks previously. But, taken out of their context, those six words were bound to be misunderstood. It took more than three years to sort out 'the McCabe Affair': Father Herbert only returned to the editorship in October 1970.

Today an incident like this would not be handled so clumsily and precipitately, assuming that it would be handled at all, and the men most closely involved in the deplorable business are all dead ... with the happy exception, of course, of Father Herbert himself (whose latest book is announced in this issue). Nevertheless, in our present world the battle to preserve truthfulness and openness is, if anything, much more violent than it was in 1967.

After all, just think of some of the stories that have been in the British press lately: Irangate, and the British Government's legally dubious attempts to cover up the truth about the Zircon project, and the fight in Sydney over the Peter Wright book, and the persistent (and moderately successful) efforts of the Conservative Central Office and its friends to knock guts out of the BBC, and the Guinness scandal, and reports of British gun-running to the Contras. And, in the Church, once more the Marcinkus Affair, which currently is doing more than any other single event to undermine the moral credibility of the Church in the eyes of the wider Western world. One of the prices of living in a media-made society has been a dramatic increase in lying, duplicity, crude silencings, and contempt for the rule of law.

It is all very well to say that truthfulness and openness are indispensable if a democratic society is to survive; a Marxist would argue that this is asking for the impossible in a capitalist society (read Gethin Rhys's article in this issue for more on this). Here all we are considering is what Christianity has to say on the subject; more exactly, whether it has more to say than a right-minded humanist, for example.

When, Bishop Agnellus Andrew OFM, the most outstanding

pioneer of religious television, died last January, the obituaries failed to mention that he was one of the creators of the Vatican's excellent 1971 document on the media, *Communio et progressio*. This says bold things about the human being's 'right to information' and 'right to communicate'. They are rooted in what the Church has to say about how human beings are related to their world, how spiritual growth is not just something private; they are also rooted in the Church's understanding of the Incarnation, God's self-communication. What this implies is that openness and truthfulness are not merely desirable extras; if we take Christianity seriously, they are absolutely central.

It is heartening to know that claims like this are to be found in an official document of the Catholic Church, even if multitudes of Catholics, both clerical and lay, have ignored them, and many more are not even aware of the document's existence. But what *Communio et progressio*, a product of a more optimistic time than this one, does not face is the sheer messiness of our world, a world in which our communications are in constant danger of being distorted or misused or suppressed, or—just because the world is so messy—of being unavoidably deficient.

What we Christians often forget is that the story of Jesus Christ is not just the story of life's one all-important communication but also the story of a violently assaulted communication, and what is unique about the Christian claim is the belief that that communication has life-giving transforming power not only in spite of but also to some extent because of the assault on it. For this reason, insofar as our communicating is one with the gospel we should not be overworried about the risks we have to take or the seeming setbacks we incur; the truth cannot be destroyed. Not in the long run.

Perhaps that is the message of the McCabe Affair for the readers of *New Blackfriars* today. But, however happy was the end of the affair, nothing can wipe out the suffering which the man at the middle of the affair went through. Father Herbert ended the Comment which caused the uproar with the words: 'it is not out of the question that Charles Davis should find himself with us once more in an altered and more human Church.' It could still be a little more human. But for that to happen we must not only press and pray for internal change, but also fight the dehumanising trends in our society. And that means exposing the forces that in this media-made world are producing more and more non-communication or pseudo-communication; it means convincing people—all sorts of people, everywhere—that they must preserve at least what truthfulness and openness there is, or for all practical purposes they will die.

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