

# Response

## Peter Hebblethwaite on the Synod

*Nicholas Rogers writes:*

Why did he write it?, I wondered as I read Peter Hebblethwaite's comments on the Synod on the Laity in *New Blackfriars* for December, (pp. 544—552). The occasion was clear enough, a meeting of the London Newman Society, but not the reason. Surely he was not just indulging in reflex Curia-bashing. Surely he was not just sniping at the Pope in close season. Searching for the reason I slowly came to the conclusion that Mr. Hebblethwaite wrote that article because he had to. In his role as a 'writer and broadcaster on church affairs' he is motivated by the journalistic obligation to acquire information. His aim may be higher, but he is moved by the same compulsive spirit of enquiry as the reporter of a tabloid exclusive.

But what place does this demand for information have in a faith which is centred in mysteries? Freedom of information, a laudable aim in politics, could well impede the working of the Holy Spirit, burdening the Church with transitory secular pressures. There is a need for secrecy, or rather privacy, in the workings of the Church. If Mr. Hebblethwaite had been at the foot of Mount Tabor he would have demanded that the three chosen Apostles share their experiences there and then. If they had refused he would have insinuated that these 'nominees' had a 'preferential option for secrecy'. And if they had spoken, would he have understood?

These doubts are stimulated by the way in which the journalistic approach tends to trivialise debate and elevate 'news-worthy' confrontation. This is doubtless the reason why Mr. Hebblethwaite is antipathetic to the process of consensus. There is no denying the politicking of the Synod. Such activity can be discerned in any political body, even the most austere monastic chapter. But it is foolish to try to apply the language and categories of secular politics to such an event. They do not fit. Peter Hebblethwaite falls into this error. We are told that 'Comunione e Liberazione, the Neo-catechumenate, the Focolare Movement and the Charismatic Renewal' are 'organizations of a distinctly right-wing nature'. What will we be told next? That the Holy Spirit is a Conservative?

The use of the label 'right-wing' might induce a Pavlovian reaction in certain readers, but it is no substitute for argument. It is just a convenient smear, used in the same way as that colourful Communist term 'clerical-fascist', which I expect to see revived soon. Similarly latent racism, of which the liberal is the most subtle exponent, is employed when convenient. The African bishops, who represent one of the most vital areas of the Church, are presented as incapable of a thought of their own, financially dependent

on the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (in the same way that Peter Hebblethwaite is dependent on the B.B.C.). The 'Orientals' are dismissed in half a sentence as an inconvenient body, needing to be tranquillized. Cardinal Ratzinger, the great Satan of Peter Hebblethwaite's demonology, is, we are cunningly reminded, a German. Horror of horrors! Never trust a German. Images of Adolf Hitler, the Kaiser and Martin Luther flit through the minds of the more susceptible.

Peter Hebblethwaite shows all the frustrated anger of the self-appointed expert who has discovered that there is a perfectly viable alternative to his suggestions. Here we have the real reason for his article. Its hidden agenda is hinted at in the last paragraph, which speaks of the gap between 'the thinking of the Vatican, officially endorsed by the Synod, and the local Churches'. Mr. Hebblethwaite's vision of the future is one of a fragmented, Anglicanized Church in which the Pope would be a figurehead. So I am glad that Mr. Hebblethwaite, like one of his heroes, is 'angry and disappointed'. Better the rock of Simon Peter than the shifting sands of Peter Hebblethwaite as a foundation for one's spiritual home.

*Peter Hebblethwaite replies:*

Tut-tut! I cannot fathom this speculation about my motives for writing about the 1987 Synod. I have reported all the Synods there have been (except one) and wrote books on the Synods of 1967 and 1985. I write about Synods because *pace* Cardinal Ratzinger they express collegiality (albeit of a partial kind).

Moreover, as a footnote pointed out, the reports of the 12 language-based discussion groups had just reached me. This allowed my account of the Synod to be filled out in three articles in *The Tablet*, which also appeared, in a fuller version, in *The National Catholic Reporter*. Asked about the American article, Archbishop John May, President of the USCC, said it was 'a substantially accurate account of what happened at the Synod'.

I do not know on what grounds Mr. Rogers says that I am 'financially dependent on the BBC'. What a joke! I have been Vatican Affairs Writer—the terms were carefully chosen—of *The National Catholic Reporter* since September 1979.

I utterly repudiate the unworthy jibe about having a vision of a 'fragmented, Anglicanized Church in which the Pope would be a figurehead'. Hasn't Mr. Rogers heard of ARCIC? My 'vision' is simply that of *Lumen Gentium*, 23: 'The variety of local Churches with one common aspiration is particularly splendid evidence of the catholicity of the undivided Church. In like manner the episcopal bodies of today are in a position to render manifold and fruitful assistance, so that this collegiate sense may be put into practical application.'

Cardinal Ratzinger, please note. Incidentally, I fail to see why calling

him a 'German' should be a hanging matter. Anyway, I usually call him a 'Bavarian'.

It simply will not do to defend secrecy at the Synod on the grounds that faith is 'centred in mysteries'. The Synod was decidedly not a 'Mount Tabor' experience and nobody thought it was. The only 'mystery' at the Synod was how far *Comunione e Liberazione* and *Opus Dei* would be able to manipulate. Secrecy masked that operation. Unveiling frustrated it.

The 1971 Instruction on Social Communications, *Communio et Progressio*, said that the Church should have the same standards of openness and access to sources of information as anyone else. 'The liberality which is an essential attribute of the Church demands that the news she gives out should be distinguished by integrity, truth, and openness, and that these should cover her intentions as well as her works.'

Finally, no one who knows me has experienced 'the frustrated anger of the self-appointed expert'. I am content with my work, and do not spend my time gnashing my teeth.

## Reviews

**NUCLEAR DETERRENCE, MORALITY AND REALISM**, by John Finnis, Joseph M. Boyle Jr. and Germain Grisez. Oxford, *O.U.P.*, 1987, £30.00, 429 pp.

Despite the fact that it covers nearly four hundred pages with careful argument, with many footnotes, and voluminous endnotes overflowing from almost every paragraph, the central argument of this book is not too difficult to summarise. All three Western nuclear powers base their security on threats to destroy cities, either in some deadly game of 'city-swapping', or in a final retaliation. This amounts to a permanent intention to kill innocent people in large numbers if certain circumstances arise. It is not bluffing. Only the French declare outright that the intention is to threaten populations. The British authorities say the 'primary purpose' is not to attack civilians and the Americans that they do not target cities 'as such'. These are nothing more than evasions intended to pull the wool over the eyes of decent churchmen who cannot bring themselves to face the reality of the deterrent. Although Western Governments have a duty to deter Soviet domination, which would almost certainly be imposed if the West were to get rid of its nuclear weapons, common Jewish-Christian morality categorically forbids the intention to kill the innocent under any circumstances. Most people resort to consequentialist arguments in order to resolve this dilemma in one way or the other, even including Catholic bishops and others who do not argue this way on other issues. However, no consequentialist arguments are adequate since none of them can work in the way they claim—producing the morally right decision by weighing up future consequences. Only a theory of morality based on absolute respect for basic human goods—among which is innocent life itself—is sound. Such a theory underwrites the common morality prohibition of killing innocents. But the West desires the Soviets to fear the deaths of innocent citizens—that is the essence of the deterrent. All tolerance of deterrence as a stage towards disarmament or to some more moral, counterforce, deterrence is based on an illusion. Therefore deterrence must be renounced without delay and all those citizens of Western nuclear powers who accept these conclusions have a duty immediately to