# Catholic Newcastle as Microcosm

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The sociology of religion is unevenly developed. If you want to read a good book on one of the sectarian forms of religion, such as the Moonies, the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Hare Krishna movement, you can generally find what you are looking for. But on Catholicism there is a dearth of good sociological literature: a paradoxical state of affairs when one considers the enormous scope the subject offers for analysis informed by sociological insight rather than by theological or administrative concerns. For this reason, the publication of such an excellent study as *The Two Catholic Churches* is to be warmly welcomed.

Our concern here is with the issues Archer has raised rather than with the book itself. So, in writing about the portrait he presents of present-day English Catholicism, I shall be concentrating on the interpretation which he offers rather than on the descriptive element. But his description and his interpretation are so closely dovetailed that commenting primarily on the latter is a rather artificial procedure. In doing so, moreover, I may seem not to give this highly readable and stimulating book the praise it merits, since the interpretative framework strikes me as being more vulnerable to criticism than Archer's account of what it was like to be a Catholic in Newcastle before the Second Vatican Council. Yet it is in the nature of interpretations to be open to question; thus, if in what follows I do question some parts of the analysis, that in no way lessens my admiration for Archer's skill in conveying to non-Catholic readers something of the social reality of Catholicism in England.

Subscribers to *New Blackfriars* are likely to stand in less need of this than are sociologists, who in general read little about the Catholic Church unless they happen to belong to the minority with a Catholic upbringing; without a background of acquaintance with such things as novenas, benediction or Apostolic Delegates, it can all seem rather daunting and unlikely to repay the investment of effort required to come to terms with it, even as a social phenomenon for study. That non-Catholic sociologists so seldom look closely at the present-day Church is to be regretted, not only from the point of view of sociology but from a Catholic perspective too, for it means that a relatively dispassionate



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analysis of what is emerging from the changes made in recent years is harder to achieve. For this reason it needs to be emphasised that the element in Archer's book which might in academic terms be described as ethnography has great potential value as a source from which an outsider may gain an appreciation of what preceded the changes, and what these consisted of. For readers more familiar with what is being described, the focus is bound to be on Archer's understanding of what effect the changes have had, and it is with this analysis that my comments are mainly concerned.

How, then, does Archer see the significance of the new-style Catholicism? His title hints at his overriding concern with class, a concern made more explicit in the sub-title, 'A Study in Oppression' (suggested by Laurence Bright). The Catholic Church in the hundred years after the restoration of the hierarchy in 1850 was able, as Archer emphasises, to meet the spiritual needs of a section of the working class in England. In this respect, he contrasts it sharply with the Church of England. Anglicanism was fundamentally a form of Christianity that endorsed the class-divided status quo in society, whereas the Catholic Church became largely committed to depicting itself in the role of 'a counter-society'.

That commitment carried with it a certain freedom from the taint of association with the ruling class; but by the 1970s, the Catholic leadership was falling (in the words of Archer's title for his final chapter) 'into the consoling arms of the Establishment'. In the process of doing so, it was altering its character so fundamentally that many of its earlier working-class members no longer found it met their needs, and the number of converts had likewise dwindled.

Newcastle converts to Catholicism, and their families, are Archer's main source of evidence in support of this analysis. *The Two Catholic Churches* grew out of an academic thesis in sociology for which Archer interviewed sixty-three people who became Catholics after 1950, and also in many instances their spouses and other members of their families.

Archer's overall interpretation is in danger of seeming to be little more than a useful device for structuring his material, rather than a convincing account of the general effect of the Second Vatican Council, and of the changes associated with it in England. The problem with the account given is not so much a lack of plausibility (indeed, there is certainly much truth in it), but that it is incompletely argued and requires broadening in ways which would also modify its thrust. I say this for two interrelated reasons.

First, the Newcastle converts and their families form too narrow a basis for the judgement which their remarks are used to support. Naturally, Archer uses many other kinds of evidence as well, to back up his interpretation; and the reader is aware that behind the material

actually presented in the book lies a Dominican priest's wide range of experience. But much of the other evidence is schematic rather than detailed. And even wide-ranging experience is compatible with one-sided judgements.

Secondly, the style of argumentation is in places rather oblique, though it becomes increasingly clear in the book's final twenty pages or so (after p. 235). The conclusion drawn in those pages is that everywhere the Church has ended up by 'tacitly supporting all forms of society and eschewing, as political, all that would be divisive among its members' (p. 239). In Britain, for the sake of moving into the mainstream of national life, it has gone so far as to adopt a strategy 'entailing ... explicit support for the prevailing arrangement of society' (p. 248). Now, such a conclusion is inherently difficult to establish on an empirical basis, for it relates to style rather than substance. But empirical evidence does have some relevance, and indeed a certain amount is offered: for instance, Heenan's contribution to the revival of the Red-infiltration bogy in 1974. The question that one would like to see discussed is, how are we to summarise the whole range of relevant considerations? What would count for and against this view of the Church as co-opted by the Establishment? It is because Archer's best empirical material consists of his interviews, which have only an indirect bearing on the overall analysis, that he writes less convincingly in these final pages than he does in the more descriptive sections in the main body of the book. That is not to say that the argument of the concluding section suddenly appears, so to speak 'out of the blue'. The reader is carefully prepared for it by many remarks scattered through the preceding chapters; but these hints are even less capable of providing a closely reasoned basis for the book's conclusion.

How, then, might the account he gives of the Church's present condition be reformulated in a manner which would yield greater clarity about its relationship both to his own evidence and to other kinds of relevant evidence? The key to this question lies, it seems to me, in considering what the book says and does not say about the reform of the Mass.

The new liturgy is described in a typically perceptive phrase as 'hovering uneasily between the old promise of simply making the sacred available and the more recent one of generating it on a communal base' (p. 184). That remark occurs in Chapter 9, which is entitled 'Going Protestant'. The notion of uncertainty as regards the sacred picks up a theme elaborated two chapters earlier ('Vatican II and the Passing of the Simple Faithful'; pp. 142—3), where Archer writes:

> Hitherto the church had provided access to the sacred through the clergy's performance of the ritual, and maintained the doctrine that grace was at any rate available to

> those present, whatever part they played and whatever their dispositions. Now the emphasis on active participation seems to suggest that the communitarian assembly was either itself the source of grace or an essential prerequisite to its availability ... It was becoming unclear whether to enter a church was already to come into a sacred place or whether it was necessary to await the assembled and active congregation.

Judging by the context of this earlier and fuller statement of the dilemma, it would appear that Archer sees the uncertainty manifested in the new liturgy as reflecting a more pervasive uncertainty, inherent in the compromise attempted by the Second Vatican Council between two stances: acceptance of 'the modern world' as potentially redeemable from within, and a continuing rejection merely disguised in softer language.

In other words, I take it that in his remarks about the new liturgy, Archer intends to hint at a wider thesis: Catholic ritual now 'hovers' between two sorts of promise because the Church's whole relationship to secular society has become ambivalent.

Previously, the Catholic stance had been to condemn not just the modern world's shortcomings but even many of the ideals pursued in it. Whether it was a question of the liberal reformism of the Welfare State or the revolutionary zeal of capitalist society's radical critics, secular ideals were seen as deficient by reason of their indifference (or downright hostility) to the moral and religious salvation offered by the Church, and to the one true Catholic faith, wherein the combination of natural law and divine revelation provided answers to the basic problems of human existence. That self-confident stance towards the world at large corresponds to 'the old promise of simply making the sacred available' and providing 'access to the sacred through the clergy's performance of the ritual'.

But now, the earlier self-confidence had waned, and there was a widespread disposition to embrace an alternative: that is, to see the hand of God in many of the secular ideals of enlightenment and reform, or even in those which proposed a thorough-going emancipation from hierarchical social relationships. However, as these ideals were often belied by the practice of those professing them, and their proponents in some cases emphasised their incompatibility with the Catholic faith, the old insistence on the Church's unique authority to teach saving truth still retained its attractiveness for many among both clergy and laity. To expunge all trace of it from the liturgy would have been unthinkable.

Archer is alert to the new liturgy's ambiguity because in his ears the rhetoric of 'community' rings hollow in the context of a class-divided society; moreover, the readership he addresses is implicitly presumed to



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share his sensibilities in this respect. The inadequacy of any Catholic world-view complacent enough to envisage painlessly 'generating the sacred on a communal base' is for Archer and his imagined reader a corollary of the profoundly unchristian presuppositions built into the social environment within which the liturgy is celebrated. Although Archer has no illusion about the willingness shown by the clergy of those earlier days to endorse social inequality, he wants to suggest that the intransigence of the older Catholic stance *vis-á-vis* the secular world did at least correspond to the unredeemed character of these social arrangements. His reader has the sense of being invited to make a connection between two kinds of uncertainty: the uncertainty of the Second Vatican Council as to how far the world's ideals are to be praised and how far emulated; and the uncertainty latent in the new liturgy, as analysed in the passage I have quoted above (pp. 142—3). This reader, for one, would have liked to see some discussion of the underlying issue here: what kind of social arrangements within the Church (and thus, what kind of liturgy) would be capable of confronting the world with a truly Christian challenge—a centralised Church, with the kind of liturgy which that demands, or a Church that at any rate pays lip-service to ideals of equality and might eventually do more?

But though there are signs of his tacitly acknowledging the link between the two kinds of uncertainty, he nowhere spells it out. In other words, Archer too hovers uneasily between alternatives: in his case, two options regarding the real significance of liturgical change. One option is to regard it as signifying the start of a genuine democratisation of the Church, and the other is to see it as a mere gesture born of weakness. According to the stronger of these options, the switch out of Latin into the vernacular symbolises an abdication by the clergy from their functions as sacred oracle and ultimate human authority, and as focus holding the Catholic community together; and in that case the question arising is, how are these functions now to be met? According to the weaker option, all that is expressed by the coming of the vernacular (a pedestrian vernacular, as Archer caustically points out, found suitable by Church bureaucrats) is the waning of former aspirations to restore an imagined high-medieval theocracy, and their replacement by a form of Christianity still hierarchical in government but in practice individualistic in its spirituality: a sop to the demands of 'relevance' and rationality, a concession to the demands of the customer.

I have, of course, defined the issue at stake in terms which depart from those used by Archer himself. But the ambivalence is undoubtedly present in the book, even though latent. If the appearance of democratisation in the Church has so little ultimate significance as Archer implies, why bother to write such a book at all? That he did write it suggests that he regards a contribution to the sociology of Catholicism

as potentially having a more than purely academic value. Again, why give the book that sub-title, suggested by Laurence Bright, if the *Slant* people and their ideas of 'political Catholicism' were fully as unrealistic as they are (with no difficulty) here made to seem? And does the fact that 'the notion of human rights evolved with the rise of the bourgeoisie as a privileged class in Europe' (p. 239) relegate such talk, as Archer's discussion seems to imply, to the status of a mere abstraction which is compatible with the Church 'tacitly supporting all forms of society and eschewing all that would be divisive among its members'? Is that view borne out by the role of the churches in present-day South Africa? And finally, does the 'sideways movement to academic theology' referred to on p. 237 really constitute all that innocuous a trend (from the point of view of Archer's *bêtes noires,* the 'administrators'), when an academic theologian like Schillebeeckx can be quoted a paragraph later (p. 238) as dissenting from the complacent outlook which Archer is out to criticise?

What I am suggesting is that it is not in the last resort consistent with Archer's own underlying agenda to hold quite so dismissive a view as he presents with regard to the promise of 'generating the sacred on a communal base'. For all the deceptiveness of this promise emanating from a hierarchical body, it is not entirely reducible to a retreat to bourgeois liberal Protestant individualism, as Archer maintains in his final chapter. The empirical grounds which he gives for saying it has largely had that character in Britain up to now are good ones, on the whole. But the reasoning which leads him to extrapolate from the decline in working-class mass-attendance in Newcastle to a thoroughly pessimistic set of generalisations about the overall significance of the Second Vatican Council is simply too sweeping.

I started this articly by mentioning the sparsity of sociological literature on Catholicism. The shortage of really convincing studies need cause no surprise. A balanced overall account of the changes since the 1950s is extraordinarily difficult to achieve, because the Catholic Church is in so many respects like a seamless web. The perennial problem of all sociology, namely how to delimit one manageable field of study when everything in society is interrelated, becomes well-nigh insuperable in the context of an institution so old, so large, so deeply influenced by concepts of human existence drawn from succeeding centuries and shaped by such a diversity of political compromises with various regimes. What Archer has given us in *The Two Catholic Churches* is a masterly summary of the historical background of the Church in England between 1850 and 1950, and a set of closely-observed insights into the impact of the Council on some predominantly working-class parishioners who may be presumed to be fairly typical. For the sake of setting these accounts of Newcastle Catholicism past and present in a broader context, and for the sake of raising wider issues, he has structured the book's main argument



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in terms of the Church's capacity for responding to the existence of class divisions in society at large. Of necessity, this takes him, especially in the final chapter, far afield from the working-class Catholics of Newcastle. It is in this respect that he becomes less convincing, for the two reasons I have mentioned above: his empirical findings provide too narrow a base, though they are certainly relevant, and his overall argument is either elliptical and consequently elusive (in the main body of the book) or too compressed and therefore one-sided (in the last few pages). I will conclude by mentioning a number of empirical aspects of the Church's life which it might be worth taking into account for the sake of a more broadly-based discussion of the very important issues raised in those final pages.

The list is a pretty heterogeneous one. After presenting a straightforward catalogue, I shall go on to suggest how the items it contains might be seen as having some mutual relevance. They include the local background to Church pronouncements on poverty in different countries; the significance of Lourdes; the changing character of *The Tablet;* the variety of middle-class interpretations of what Catholicism is all about; and the impact of television.

In each instance, the topics mentioned are brought to mind by the two-fold dissatisfaction which, as already indicated, the reading of Archer's account of the Church provoked in me from time to time. There is simply more going on than he has space to advert to; and because he necessarily excludes so much, his overall analysis suffers from an over-schematised conceptual framework, which it becomes difficult for the reader to map on to the complex reality.

The five topics have this much in common: in their different ways, they all invite one to see the Church's life as embedded, more deeply now than before, within a set of secular processes that carry their own potential stimuli to the search for redemption. This presence even inside the secular world of something akin to the sacred has long been a stumbling-block for Catholicism, precisely because it offered a challenge to the old claim of an already-achieved spiritual universality. (For different reasons, it has not been easy for Protestantism to accommodate, either.) The Church has for centuries been reluctant to adopt the stance of a learner rather than a teacher. And as for the recent past, there is certainly truth in Archer's remarks about the deceptive nature of Vatican II's profession of openness to the world and to lay-people's experience of the divine; one does indeed need to bear in mind that it was a gathering of ecclesiastical administrators, whose rhetoric of openness scarcely betokened a willingness to dilute their monopoly of ultimate control over organisational resources. But for all that, and however tenuous the link between symbol and reality may be, the change whereby priests began to celebrate the eucharist face-to-face with their

parishioners and in their language is linked inescapably with an abandonment of monopolistic claims at a deeper level than that of procedures for diocesan or parochial decision-making. In cultural terms, it cannot but reduce the barriers against acknowledging autonomous manifestations of the sacred within the secular.

Archer tells the story of English Catholicism as a tale of how its leaders, having long been outsiders, eventually saw the opportunity of a place within the Establishment consensus and took it, at the price of being committed to endorsing the myth of English society's internal cohesion. Yet he concedes (p. 78) that not even Manning ever wished to do anything that might have fundamentally undermined that myth; and he is all but silent about the anti-Establishment turn within Anglicanism, mentioning David Jenkins only once and David Sheppard not at all (nor, more surprisingly, Derek Worlock). And had he chosen to draw an explicit rather than a fleeting implicit comparison with Brazil, he might have looked at the difference it makes when the Catholic leadership finds itself moving from the role of insider to that of outsider. It would then have been harder for him to write as if the Second Vatican Council and John Paul II had altogether excluded the possibility of bishops calling in question the basis of a particular society.

My reason for lumping together two such diverse manifestations of English Catholicism as pilgrimages to Lourdes and the readership of *The Tablet* is simply that they constitute two of the many facets of the Church's life which limits of space no doubt precluded Archer from discussing but which might have brought some modification to his rather one-dimensional portrayal of the increasingly complacent Church, pervaded by an individualistic spirituality. If the experience of a Lourdes pilgrimage is now available to mentally handicapped people as well as to the physically disabled, this reflects a learning of Christian values from the secular world, and a learning wherein human rights have taken a specific shape. As for *The Tablet,* which Archer quotes once or twice but never discusses in its own right, this very fact reveals once more his argument's lack of a reflexive character. *The Two Catholic Churches* might be described as a book written for a *Tablet* readership; yet these same readers can scarcely be expected to recognise themselves in the book's caricature of a middle-class laity of whom he writes (p. 161) that 'moving in a world of verbal dexterity, they could manoeuvre for their small victories' against clerical autocracy, when for the working class the only recourse was to drop out of the Church altogether, now that they no longer needed it to symbolise their cultural identity. Obviously, a few thousand readers of such a journal are a tiny minority among two million middle-class Catholics, but some attention to the kind of world-view it represents would have been a small safeguard against some very sweeping generalisations.

Perhaps one part of the reason why the varieties of middle-class Catholicism are not explored in Archer's account of the Church today is that the book grew out of the Newcastle parish that provided Archer's interviewees, whereas it is in the pastures of southern England that a hundred flowers metaphorically bloom. Archer does discuss some of the more exotic flora, even going outside Britain altogether to pluck one or two from places like Garabandal and Palmar de Troya. But it might have been helpful to include as well not only the Society of St Pius X and the Catholic Priests' Association (and *Slant,* of course) but one or two of the less flamboyant growths like the Catholic Renewal Movement, on the one side, and the Faith Association on the other. (The latter group, incidentally, belies one of Archer's generalisations (p. 205): 'Traditionalists of this sort found some support among older Catholics. They did not attract younger ones.') The reason why these relatively sober manifestations of lay activism deserve at least as much attention as the more extreme tendencies is that, being more aware of the perils of cognitive deviance, they seek to portray Catholicism as capable of answering widely-experienced human needs, though they set about this task in various ways.

Television is a topic on which Archer can readily be forgiven for not having chosen to write: the groundwork for a systematic analysis of its impact on religion has not yet been laid. But although there may be good reason for not trying to discuss it in depth, it does nevertheless call for some mention if one is seeking to give a sociological account of the transition from the preconciliar Church to the Church as it is today. The relevance of television lies not merely in the fact that since it arrived, Sunday-evening benediction has had to compete with rival attractions that were just not there in the 1930s. Marshall McLuhan may have been given to over-simplification, but in coining the phrase about a global village, he expressed an aspect of the new medium which no analysis of the changes in Catholicism can afford to ignore: its potential for contributing to a more immediate awareness of the diversity of human experience, both within our own society and around the world. Since the Church would no doubt have undergone a far-reaching process of change in the years after 1950 even if television had not been invented, it is difficult to decide what allowance ought to be made for its effects. But we need, however speculatively, to relate the more readily observable influences on Catholic life to this largely imponderable factor.

In commenting on what Archer says and what he does not say about the liturgy, I suggested that he might be seen as hovering between two latent options, a stronger and a weaker one. By and large, he writes in terms of the option which I call weaker. That is, he contends that the vernacular liturgy's ostensible promise of 'generating the sacred on a communal base' has not corresponded to the strategy the Church's

leaders in England have chosen to pursue, and the promise is thus deceptive. The suggestion I have sought to sketch out in this article is that those two options are sufficiently important to be worth rendering explicit. Had some pair of alternatives along these lines been sketched out, an underlying tension between two facets of Archer's purpose in writing the book might have been confronted head-on. As it is, he presents the reader with what in the final pages comes close to a cry of despair about the Church's bland response to the reality of oppression. The long-term optimism without which the act of writing the book itself would not be meaningful is not expressed. Therein lies the indeterminacy which robs the argument of some of its force. The remedy surely is to acknowledge that while the promise of generating the sacred on a communal base can never be a realistic one, it is not a pure piece of collective self-deception either. Ambivalence between the two interpretative options is inevitable for a sociologist as acutely aware as Archer is of the unfulfilled and unfulfillable character of much of the rhetoric of renewal. But if one cannot opt unequivocally for one or other of the two overall interpretations, it can at any rate be shown that each has some force.

# Two Churches : the significance of the political

Francis P. McHugh

There is a growing literature on the sociology of the Catholic Church which attempts to explain that institution's present condition in terms of tension between an official church and an unofficial one, both of which now exist inside what was once monolithic Catholicism. The work of Vallier on Latin American Catholicism and of Coleman on the Roman Catholic Church in Holland uses 'two-church' models, though their theoretical framework is integrationist, in a Durkheimian sense.[1] More explicitly, and on the specific issue of the respective roles of hierarchy and theologians, Dulles argues in the chapter, 'The two magisteria; an



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