

The events of the past few weeks have an importance that transcends the domestic affairs of the Dominican Order. The role of a priest-editor of a semi-official journal has been discussed both in the Catholic and national press. While no one denies the rights of personal judgement and critical analysis, there remains a tension between the view that an editor is appointed on the understanding that he has freedom to express sincere and critical views which are personal to himself, within the context of his faith, and that which maintains that his role is a representative one, his task being to hold the balance between opposing opinions and to encourage a creative dialogue; but always having in mind that his own comment is official.

The relationship of the laity to the hierarchy has been raised in a new form, and one of the happiest results of the incident has been a greater awareness on both sides, of the implications of the Vatican decrees and an increasing sensitivity to issues that are of great concern in contemporary English experience. One hopes that this will find expression in some institutional form.

The Order has attempted, often very imperfectly, and frequently with an emphasis that has alarmed the conventional, to maintain contact with the new groups of educated Catholics in our universities and elsewhere. Many of us are convinced that this contact is valuable and creative, and that, in spite of our mistakes, the Gospel is preached; indeed that this is a truly pastoral work, demanding much of those engaged in it, particularly a great love of persons in Christ.

The perplexities involved in the presentation of the Christian faith to contemporary man, so that he may hear the Word, have at times led to partisan statements and ill-balanced remarks, but in an age that calls for original theological thought, in terms of new insights, such mistakes are in practice inevitable on the part of fallible creatures. The bewilderment that this sometimes causes can only be met by a patient tolerance and a deep charity; care and concern for those who disagree with us informing all our discussion. Statements must be reformulated in the face of objections, criticisms and reactions so that they may merge in a more refined form. We are not attempting to win an argument, only to state more clearly and more relevantly the Gospel in our own day.

This is not to say that the Order holds lightly the tradition of the past. We are children of the Church, loving her, and believing in the

message she preaches in the name of Christ, second to none in our loyalty to the See of Peter. We have always experienced, in our community and in our pastoral lives, the holiness of the Church, which is the presence of Christ. It is our love for the Church that drives us to seek that constant renewal which in every age she herself seeks; and we, who are her sinful sons, are called by our vows to fulfil this renewal in our own lives.

To this is allied our passionate love of truth, for all truth that reflects the primal Truth. Our ethics are only valid if judged by the Gospel, our lives only meaningful as lived in Christ. There is often an impatient shrillness in what we say, and at times our zeal leads us into exaggeration and makes us forget our primary commitment to accuracy. It is our obedience that recalls us to an awareness of a wider view, more objective than our own. We mature, not by an anguished isolation of ourselves from the historic Church, but, in the company of Jacob, by wrestling with her angel in the darkness of faith. The religious believes that the spirit of Christ speaks through his superiors to him, that his loving acceptance of their instructions is his entry into the mystery of the Father's will, through which human wisdom and prudence is confounded. The pain he suffers is redemptive, and with renewed courage he continues his work as one purified through fire.

In the case in question there is some importance owing to certain headlines, in stating what the underlying argument of the editorial comment by Fr Herbert McCabe in the February *New Blackfriars* actually is. One is not concerned with the language employed, which has caused so much comment, or with the examples adduced, but with the author's intention as expressed in the article. The occasion of writing is stated to be Mr Charles Davis's decision to leave the Church and about this Fr Herbert makes a personal assertion and gives a quotation from Mr Brian Wicker, from which the word 'corrupt' is immediately derived. On the use of this word the article by Fr Cornelius Ernst O.P. in this issue will be found helpful. Fr Herbert thinks that Mr Davis's action may involve a setback to 'progressive' theology, but that this need not worry us, as it was developing 'a rather brutal and triumphalist radicalism.' He then asks whether this implies that there is something wrong with the Church. Fr Herbert himself accepts the charge that the Church is 'racked by fear, insecurity and anxiety,' and in this sense says 'the Church is quite plainly corrupt.' This phrase, and some of the argumentation may be doubtful, but the intention is to state that the Church, holy with the holiness of Christ, is, as a visible institution, in need of purification.

He then asks whether we remain Roman Catholics only because we live on the fringes of the institutional Church and replies, 'I think not.' He argues that there are institutions in which people nourish their spiritual lives and that these institutions could not exist 'without the overall and relatively impersonal structure of the hierarchy.' He sees a dialectical tension between the framework of the Church and its

points of growth. This section of the article both implies that the hierarchy is essential to the existence of the Church, and (though many would dispute this) puts a low value on the hierarchy as a point of growth. He goes on to say that to talk about tension is not to excuse corruptions and follies, particularly the special irrelevance of so much of the behaviour of Church officials, which looks like a private game. This, he thinks, means that they neglect their true role of preserving a balance between the variety of points of growth in the Church, for which purpose, he insists, they must speak with authority. In the final section of the article he says, 'we believe that the hierarchical institutions of the Roman Catholic Church . . . do in fact link us to areas of Christian truth beyond our own particular experience and ultimately to truths beyond any experience,' and this is why we remain members of this Church.'

Thus the intention of the argument, whatever its merits, emerges in its attempt to show to Catholics, disturbed by the moral problems of our times, that there is no need to follow Mr Davis in his despair of the institutions of the Roman Catholic Church. The article should be read in conjunction with the important remarks of the Archbishop of Birmingham contributed to the March issue at the request of Fr Herbert, and Fr Cornelius's theological essay already referred to.

Much of what has happened recently has been painful for all of us in the English Province, most of us are very ordinary men, who try to carry out our duties loyally and faithfully; a few carry the burden of the public limelight. We are all united in our loyalty to our Master General, whose actions have a paternal and domestic character, which it goes against our family spirit to discuss in public. We are also moved and heartened by the obedience of Fr Herbert, and the trust that he has placed in his brethren, and the word 'brother' is no empty one in our common experience.

Some have felt, and probably still feel, that there is something suspect in the activities of the Order, something of disloyalty to the hierarchy; here we want to put it on record that our public work is one of service in subordination to the hierarchy, whose criticisms and directives we are happy to accept. Not that it has been simply a matter of criticism, much help and encouragement has been given us by the bishops and we want to continue our work in closer cooperation with them.

Primarily the work of the Order is the theological analysis of contemporary experience. This is simply thinking about our anxieties and preoccupations in the light of revelation. It means that the approach will be intellectual rather than devotional, in the narrow sense, and the emphasis will rest on accuracy, on the truth of a statement, rather than on whether it is opportune. This is no mere academic exercise and it affects every level of communication. Not only does it involve the work of the professional theologian, but it also requires the translation of theological positions into terms understood

by non-professional hearers and readers. There are signs that we have failed to some extent in that too great a gulf has been allowed to open up between the language and attitudes that are taken for granted in professional circles, and the views and susceptibilities of many good and devout persons. We need to think more seriously about the communication of religious truth, to study more carefully the needs of audiences of different types; above all, the pressing practical problem of the pastor has to be evaluated and interpreted by the theologian and the expert working in cooperation with him. For the Order this great task can never be a merely individual one, the public work of an individual must emerge as a result of years of dialogue within a community both very conscious of its historic tradition and of the demands of contemporary man. The product is intense and personal, yet is not dependent upon the experience of one man in isolation, but as transformed and enriched by that of his brethren both living and dead.

So many and so great are the problems which confront the English Province that we might well lose heart if we look to ourselves, but we are convinced that God, through the Church, has given us this great and exciting task, and in faithful confidence, having learnt much from our experience, we offer ourselves again to the service of truth and our brothers.

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*Provincial.*