

Comment

It was in the late 60's that a young seminarian (hereinafter called Mr Y) wrote a letter to a lady. Those whose business it was to initiate Mr Y into the attitudes and behaviour expected of a priest steamed open this letter, read it, re-sealed it and sent it on to the lady—all this without saying anything to Mr Y. They then decided that Mr Y was unsuitable for the celibate life and dismissed him from the seminary.

Enter now another seminarian—let us call him John. John, it seems was both distressed and surprised by Mr Y's dismissal, for which no very plausible reasons were given, and he made the tactical error of *writing* to a priest in the Society to which the seminary belonged (not, incidentally, *the* Society). Three of these letters from John were steamed open, read, re-sealed and sent on without his knowledge, and he was told that his 'attitude to authority' made him an unsuitable candidate for the priesthood. His Superiors seem to have hoped that John who, unlike Mr Y, was already a member of the Society would seek a dispensation from his vows and leave. This John did not do. A little taken aback by this, his Superiors opted for what has become the classical solution and sent this awkward subject to a university for a while; here, however, he still showed no signs of seeking the delights of lay life. Instead he got in touch (but not, this time, by letter) with the Very Revd. Fr Frank Purcell, a major figure in the Society and a member of the Superior General's Council. He said he thought he might have been unfairly treated in the way his Superiors had come to decide about his ordination. Fr Purcell, who had access to the Society's files, examined them and discovered, amongst other things, the Superior's Nixonian approach to the postal services. He decided that, on the face of it, John (and Mr Y as well) seemed to have been treated unfairly.

Fr Purcell asked the Administration of the Society to re-examine the Superior's treatment of John and Mr Y. This the Administration refused to do on the splendid grounds that such an investigation would be 'unfair to Superiors'. They argued that 'until it had been *proved* that there had been an abuse of authority, presumption should favour Superiors'. This seems to mean that you may not conduct an investigation unless you know the answer already—a view, after all, not uncommon in Roman theological circles.

Fr Purcell was, not unnaturally, a little unsatisfied with this reply and suggested that the Council might consult a canon lawyer to check whether its procedures were really correct. This they refused to do. Fr Purcell then suggested that he himself might consult a canon lawyer just to make sure how the law stands in these matters. After initial refusals the Council finally agreed that he might consult a

lawyer from outside the Society provided Fr Purcell did not show him copies of the documents about which he would be expected to decide. Beginning, by now, to be thoroughly fed up, Fr Purcell went ahead, consulted an eminent canonist and gave him all the relevant facts. He was advised that it was indeed the responsibility of the Council to look into the matter of John and Mr Y. The Council promptly got together and voted that in consulting and briefing this canon lawyer, Fr Purcell had 'notably violated secrecy'. The spectacle of these indefatigable letter-openers complaining about violations of secrecy is one of the especially bizarre features of this whole story; like their view that it is unfair to a Superior even to ask whether he has been unfair it belongs, you might think, in a script by Kafka. Not so; what I have given is a simplified version of a full-page news report in the *Irish Times* by Mr John Cooney, their Religious Affairs correspondent (March 3rd). In many ways the most interesting thing about the whole affair to any Christian in England is that despite this wide coverage by one of the leading secular papers of the two islands (there was a further long report on March 6th) not a word about this holy watergate affair has leaked through the English Catholic press, at least at this date, March 18th.

There are other little gems in what has become a very complicated business—like the entry in the Council's minutes describing a suggestion of Fr Purcell's that he would undertake to preserve 'secrecy' provided the Council would consult a canonist as 'the product of a warped mind . . . devious, evasive and basically dishonest'. Fr Purcell records that 'One canonist in Rome urged me to resign. I told the canonist that all I was asking was whether or not there was injustice in the case. He looked at me with astonishment and said "You cannot ask that question. What are you trying to do; destroy the whole system"?' No doubt the kind of joke any lawyer might make but surely especially apt in this case.

There is a lot more to the story and there must surely be another side to it but this too seems to be kept secret. How long will it take ecclesiastical institutions to realise that secrecy is not only a feeble defence against external threat; it is also deeply corrosive within the institution itself? The cover-up barely conceals and always ferments corruption. The Society in question has now lost Fr Purcell who seems to be a man of integrity—he is now said to be seeking laicisation. We should not condemn the Society without a hearing (and it hardly need be said that the pages of this journal are open to the Society if they wish to reply); that would be to do just what Fr Purcell was complaining about, but we can unhesitatingly condemn the whole reflex reaction of silence and secrecy characteristic of so many Catholic institutions. It is surely time to move off the defensive; it is time to preach the gospel which means admitting the truth about ourselves as well as revealing the truth about the world; as to our security, we can leave that to the Holy Spirit.

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