

Before he was removed from his post the previous editor had asked Archbishop Dwyer of Birmingham to comment on the February editorial. This response by the Archbishop will take the place of an editorial this month.

* * * *

Dear Father Herbert,

You have asked me to reply to your editorial of last month in case I 'feel its criticism of the bishops is unfair'. You wrote your piece in grief and anger. That was understandable in the circumstances which prompted it. But grief and anger are bad counsellors. When a man writes under the stress of those emotions he is not on oath. So I would be unwilling to take issue with you on points which you might well make differently and perhaps more temperately on calmer reflection. In any case by the time this letter appears doubtless such things will have been only too thoroughly thrashed out elsewhere. If I write now it is because Father Provincial has added his request to yours and in any case because the question you raise of the role of the hierarchy at the present time is indeed crucial.

Whilst the Vatican Council was in progress it became customary to divide the bishops into Progressive and Conservatives. As a rough and ready classification this had its uses. But the English bishops, in common with the vast majority of the other bishops, refused to accept either label. At a General Council the task of a bishop is to bear witness to the Faith as handed down and taught in his diocese. He has no warrant to decide what new doctrine might be available. He has to say 'This is the faith as we know it in my diocese'. On the other hand as Pope John pointed out in his inaugural address the substance of the Faith is one thing, the manner of its expression is another. The one is unchangeable, the other changes as language and manner of thinking change and as the Church sees deeper into and draws out more fully the implications of the Faith once given by God through Christ and his apostles.

This is simple enough to say but far from simple to put into practice. Form and substance are not always so readily distinguishable. Hence the debates and the arduous and, at times, disturbing discussions. But in the hottest debate there was never a failure in courtesy. The English bishops rarely made the headlines. Few bishops of any country did. The number of speakers was bound to be

limited. But in commission, in informal gatherings and even in casual encounters the mind of the Council was formed. If ever it is possible to write the history of that side of the Council the role of the English bishops will be seen as an honourable one. On Religious Liberty, on Ecumenism, on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, on the Blessed Virgin, to name but a few topics, the contribution of the English hierarchy was balanced, open-minded, and influential. This could be documented and maybe some day will be.

When the bishops of the world returned home they were faced with the task of putting the Council's decrees into practice. How many bishops, how many people realize just what an enormous revolution has occurred? It will be years before the full consequences of the Council are seen. But one thing was immediately clear – that there must be much more open discussion, much narrower grounds for authoritative statement than there had been in the past. There was dead wood to be cut out, new shoots to foster. At the same time the trunk of the tree remains with its roots in Christ and the sap still rising. Pruning must not mean setting the axe to the roots. There are plenty of eager hands to set to work. The English bishops therefore consciously and of set purpose did not attempt to inhibit discussion. So far from intervening with authoritative and disciplinary directions they left a free field. Men who died twenty years ago would hardly believe their ears if they were alive today.

Unfortunately it must be said that what should have been open discussion turned out an acrimonious and in the literal sense of the word, unholy row. You mentioned yourself in your editorial, 'a rather brutal and triumphalist radicalism which could be just as indifferent to persons and truth as could episcopal authority'. Yes indeed – except that episcopal authority has intervened hardly at all, whereas too much of the 'new' writing has been in terms of violence, abuse and contempt for persons, for the imagined opinions of authority and often enough, for all the old ways of thinking, praying and teaching the Faith. Unless this ceases the results will be disastrous.

The mind of the Church as expressed in the Council is that we should learn to be responsible Christians. The multiplication of particular laws is to change to an insistence on the fundamental, general laws of God. The spirituality of the Church is to be renewed and revitalized by a biblical and liturgical formation; theological thinking is to be freed from a rigid confinement in the categories of a particular system. It would be naive to imagine that these things can be done without danger. Heresy, falsification of the Faith has occurred in every age: our own and future ages will certainly not be exempt. Let us be quite clear that the danger is twofold. If there is risk in novelty there is equally risk in a stubborn and uncritical attachment to the old ways. The St Vitus dance of some of the new men is a disease but so is arthritis.

It is equally clear that there is danger of bruising unnecessarily minds and hearts. 'New' men or 'old' men must bear in mind that the vast majority of the people are, like the bishops at the Council, in the middle, attached to their ways of thinking and worship, but willing and indeed eager to learn. There must be an end to a wanton and insensitive tug of war between extremes. What men need is help 'to love Christ Our Lord more dearly, to know Him more clearly and to follow Him more nearly'. A style of theological dialectic that does not help to that end is futile and pernicious. If a man puts forward ideas and leaves his hearers under the impression that he has denied a doctrine of the Faith, he has failed in communication. If he puts up a caricature of a doctrine as taught in an 'old' or a 'new' way and then proceeds to demolish this aunt sally with ridicule he is behaving like a third rate politician instead of a teacher of the Faith. There has been far too much of all this.

What we all need now is intellectual humility and intellectual courtesy, both of which come down to charity, patience and compassion. It is only a little over a year since the Council ended; the documents have been available to all for barely twelve months. But it is time for an examination of conscience and a *mea culpa* in more quarters than one.

The hierarchy of this country decided as long ago as last October to set up a doctrinal and theological Commission. At the meeting in January Bishop Butler and myself were charged with this task. We set out with these principles in mind. That the present ferment in the Church is the work of the Holy Spirit; that the 'new thinking' in the Church can be both fruitful and exhilarating, that the task of the bishops is to encourage new exploration of the Faith whilst preserving the essential continuity with the past. To this end we shall bring together for discussions representatives of every school of thought at every level. A first meeting has already been held. We shall take it for granted that all are men of good faith and that even those who have been most extravagant or intransigent in their mode of expression are moved by zeal for the Kingdom of God. We shall hope that all will bear in mind that we are all of the 'household of the Faith' working to build up the body of Christ of which we are members.

A bishop is a pontifex – a bridge builder. We shall try to live up to the name. But let it be well understood that we are building bridges, not opening a road into a quagmire. I hope you will be among those who will be helping.

Yours devotedly in Our Lord
✠ George Patrick Dwyer
Archbishop of Birmingham