

Comment

Years ago the Roman Curia proposed and gave the wrong answer to what was nonetheless a perfectly sensible question: In what way is it appropriate for a priest to earn a living? They thought the factory worker's hands too dirty to celebrate Mass (and, besides, worker-priests tended to enlist in subversive organisations) but their question remains. If the Church exists to humanise our class-divided society without unduly disturbing its foundations, then there was once a place for prince-bishops and the clerical administrators of medieval courts and there is now a place for industrial chaplains and the clerical administrators of universities. If, on the other hand, the Church exists to preach a gospel that challenges every human institution (and not just the institution of the human ego) then her clergy will not expect to be welcome amongst the establishment and will certainly not look for salaries from the ruling class.

Since in practice the Church is an uneasy mixture of established institution and radical movement, it is not too surprising to find that she has solved the problem variously in different times and places. The tradition in Britain for the Roman Catholic clergy is that they depend neither on state salaries (as they do in some socialist countries) nor, apart from some religious orders, on the kind of corporate investments that the Church Commissioners handle so efficiently (not to say ruthlessly) on behalf of the Church of England ministry; they depend for the most part on voluntary donations from the people they serve. This has been connected, no doubt, with the detached stance that a largely immigrant Church has taken with regard to the national institutions—a point discussed in this issue by Antony Archer. It is therefore interesting to look at one outstanding exception to this rule on the part of all the Christian Churches in this country. There is one notable group who are paid precisely as Christian ministers by the British government. These are the chaplains to the armed forces.

There are 424 of these: three Archdeacons who get over £140 a week, six Principal Chaplains who get about £120 a week and 415 Chaplains who struggle along on an average of around £85 a week—three of the Principal Chaplains and about one in six of the others are Roman Catholic priests with no family to support. I am sure the money, which is not subtracted by the Inland Revenue (especially from the celibate group), is spent wisely by these men in donations to charities or put to other good uses; it is not their personal wealth that should concern us. What we would like to know is: What do the armed services think they are buying with this annual two million pounds (if you add in the cost of maintaining chapels and the rest of the religious plant it is said to come to over twice that figure)?

The answer would seem to be that without necessarily any personal collusion on the part of the priests concerned, they are buying a Christian image for the officer class and, in general, for the programmes of the armed services chiefs. Of course there is no question of bribery; indeed there is no need for it. The Catholic Bishop of the Forces (of whom it is said that on the topic of Ireland he only opens his mouth to change feet) is not on the army payroll at all. The chaplains themselves may be filled with a zealous concern for traditional Christian morality (though Gordon Zahn's research into RAF chaplains does not suggest that they have worked it out very clearly) but the mere fact that they live on a salary from the Ministry of Defence means that willy nilly their position is compromised. Add to this the fact that they are without exception 'officers' themselves (in the army they 'rank' as Lieutenant Colonels and Majors and Captains and such like fooleries) and one can see how thoroughly they must appear identified with the interests of the ruling class.

Of course there should be a ministry to the men and women in the services, exposed as they are to such obvious temptations against the gospel of justice and peace and love, but can this ministry be exercised effectively by clergy in the pay of the authorities and so blatantly aligned with the officer class? When there is a conflict between military interests and Christian morality (e.g. torture or nuclear warfare) where do they stand? When there is a conflict of interest between the ordinary soldier anxious, for instance, to get away from the brutal and brutalising operations in Ireland and the officers keen to play with their new weaponry and to further their careers, where do they stand? A chaplain may (for almost anything is possible to the human mind) honestly believe in the justice of all that the Army command decrees, but how much clearer his witness (not to say his mind) would be if he were not in their pay. What would we think if it turned out that persistent critics of British army brutality like Fr Denis Faul or Fr Desmond Wilson were receiving £80 a week from the Republican Movement? Would not, in fact, our military chaplains preach the gospel more clearly and convincingly if the only privilege they received from the authorities were the right of access to all servicemen who wished to see them and if they lived not on a salary from the bosses but, like any of the parish clergy, on the voluntary contributions of those who valued their services?

Before this appears the annual meeting will have taken place of the international Pax Christi executive at which the British section will have urged just these reforms. Let us hope that they will have been generally accepted and that, if no one else, at least Mr Healey will recognise a chance to save a few more millions on 'Defence'. As Mgr Bruce Kent says, recommending the reforms in his excellent journal *Justpeace*¹: 'The roles of Church and State have too often been confused and the change may help us all to reconsider our priorities both pastoral and financial'.

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¹From *Pax Christi* Centre, Blackfriars Hall, Southampton Road, London NW5. 60p a year.