

Comment

Dreaming of the catacombs

What could catacombs have to do with the definitive draft of the Vatican's *Universal Catechism of the Catholic Church*?

There is no need any more to explain what this document is. The debate over it is now getting written about even on the front page of a British Sunday paper as secular as *The Observer*. What it has to say about sex and authority has been leaked to the faintly indignant millions; the positive things it has to say about social justice do not get quite so often mentioned. In fact, it would now be in the Vatican's interest to withdraw the document's *sub secreto* classification. Many of the critics are saying that it is not what the Extraordinary Synod of 1985 voted for, namely a 'Catechism of the Council', but instead an 'instrument of the Roman restoration'. If Rome wants to convince the Church that these critics are wrong it will have to make the text accessible to everybody.

Here, though, we are not focusing on its content nor even on its object, which is to secure 'greater doctrinal clarity and certitude' (quoting what the Pope said about it on 10 June 1986). Here we are considering what the object presupposes. And this is where catacombs come in.

The document is by bishops, primarily for bishops, and in at least one way it certainly *has* got roots in Vatican II: it is partly a product of the inordinate emphasis of the Council on the role of bishops. A man very closely associated with the project recently said to us: 'At Vatican II many of the bishops were overawed by their theological consultants; here at last they have a chance to say what they think themselves.'

How long will it take for Rome to realise that it is not points of doctrine but social and cultural factors that are at the core of the differences between the Church's bishops and its so-despised theologians? If this text is any guide, theologians are much more sensitive than bishops to the enormous difficulties involved in speaking of the faith today.

When we first wrote about the *Universal Catechism* in this column, in May 1988, we said that there will be far too many other voices in tomorrow's world for it to be able to straight-jacket the mind of the Church efficiently—a word of warning by us rather than of comfort. It could still, we thought, be a useful 'point of reference', but only if it were brief. Brevity, though, is just what the 7-lb. draft, with its 392 pages, has not got. Trying to say so much, it inevitably exposes itself to the widely-voiced criticism that it ignores the cultural pluralism of the modern world; more seriously, it can also be accused of ignoring that world's complexity, its absence of firm boundaries. What is meant by that is

considered by Andrew Lascaris in his rather Girardian article in this issue.

What chance, then, has the *Universal Catechism* got of being an effective instrument? Your answer to that question will depend on how far you are ready to opt for the catacombs.

After all, we surely all know, at least instinctively, that in today's world the Church cannot impose a monolithic system of teaching even on its committed followers like a triumphant political party can impose its policies on the electorate. 'Christendom' as it is written about by Anthony Fisher in this issue belongs to a different age. In the 1990s the most anybody in the apostolate can hope to do is touch men's and women's hearts—to expose, not to impose. But that means for the Church there are now really only two options. It can try to dialogue with the world (as Vatican II tried to do). Or—and this is a serious alternative—it can retreat to the catacombs, and wait for better times; it can become primarily inward-regarding, in other words.

Not only sects have gone for the second option. Sometimes it has been the only way that the Church has survived persecution and anarchy. It is the option favoured by quite a lot of intelligent young Catholics today; it appeals to nearly all religious people occasionally; currently it appeals to a number of senior Vatican officials. Go for the 'catacombs option', and all the faithful could, perhaps, live according to one big plan.

But there are snags. The 'catacombs option' does not take into serious account the pervasiveness of modern secular culture (it has got under the finger nails of us all). Nor the fact that Catholicism is by its nature a religion normally to be lived out close to the crowd. Nor just how central a place the Church's 'social' commitments now have in its understanding of Christianity. To be consistent anybody with a 'reverence for life' must take at least some of those commitments on board, as Cardinal Bernardin has recently again pointed out; fighting abortion is not alone enough. So the call to holiness today compels nearly all of us to stay out of the catacombs most of the time.

And, if that is the case, the prospects for a detailed blueprint of the Christian life for every Catholic, everywhere, any time, are not terribly good.

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