

What is Corruption?

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by Michael Dummett

Father Herbert McCabe was penalised, or disciplined, for having written that the Church is corrupt, and the censor who passed the statement for publication has been removed from office. I have very little doubt that it was the use of this word, 'corrupt', which brought down such indignation on their heads; and, indeed, I can readily understand how his statement, torn from its context, provoked feelings of anger and shock. Taken out of context, the statement appeared to bring against the Church the gravest possible charge, and to do so on a flimsy basis of four complaints about particular actions, only one of which (Cardinal Spellman's militaristic speech) was obviously substantial. Of course, most people who have followed the affair know by now how misleading this appearance was. First, the general drift of the editorial was a rebuttal of Father Davis's accusations against the Church, in explanation of his own withdrawal from it, so that the statement so widely quoted had the force of a concession to Father Davis of what Father McCabe found true in his charges, although he nevertheless found the general assessment incorrect. Secondly, the role of Father McCabe's examples was not (as it appeared out of context) as proof of the corruption of the Church: rather, the proof was that we took such things as expected behaviour on the part of bishops and the like, instead of as shocking aberrations. It was, no doubt, foolish of Father McCabe to write a sentence so liable to be quoted out of context, and so misleading when thus quoted; but far less foolish than the behaviour of the authorities who dealt with the resulting situation by first silencing the one man who could have explained exactly what he meant, and thus corrected the misinterpretation.

The whole affair has naturally, and rightly, concentrated attention on the system of thought-control now prevalent in the Church, and the intentions of those who manipulate it: in particular, on procedures under which a man can be silenced, punished and publicly abused, without a chance to explain himself in private first or to defend himself in public afterwards. These important issues are in danger of obscuring what were after all the questions to which Father McCabe addressed himself: Is the Church corrupt? In what sense is it possible to hold that the Church is corrupt?

The word 'corrupt' played, I believe, both a crucial and an obfuscating role in the whole controversy. I suspect that if Father

McCabe had used any other word, he would have got away with it; and it is plain that many people, from Archbishop Cardinale down, were confused as to what he meant by it. This, again, is a matter of context: for in June 1965, I had published an article in *New Blackfriars* entitled *Is the Church Corrupt?*, arriving at a predominantly affirmative conclusion, and sporadic discussion of this topic had continued in the periodical for a year after that; it was to this discussion that Father McCabe intended to allude (contrary to Mr Neil Middleton's assertion in *New Christian*, 23rd February, Father Davis had not used the word 'corrupt'), and any regular reader would have recognised the allusion, and had thereby a clear guide to the sense in which the word was used. It is, however, important to return to the question, because there has been so much confusion about it, because the original discussion did not completely clarify the issue, and also because it has been left unclear whether the objection of the authorities is to the notion that the Church may be corrupt, or only to allowing the secular Press to get hold of this notion.

At the Council of Constance, John Hus (who notoriously had presented himself after having been assured of a safe conduct) was ceremonially condemned by the bishops, in words which included 'We consign your soul to the devil': he was then burned alive, his body, after his death, being pushed further into the flames to ensure its complete reduction to ashes. That such an act is in the most flagrant contradiction with the will of him who said, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged', is palpably evident to us. The significance of the episode lies in the fact that it was not a temporary fall from grace of a few bishops: it was the solemn act of the whole assembly of those appointed to govern the followers of the Saviour who spoke the words I have quoted, and they did it without any consciousness of disloyalty. On the contrary, they did it in self-righteousness, convinced that they were doing the sacred work of God.

It is in the light of such occurrences that the maxim, *Corruptio optimi pessima*, receives its most significant exemplification. We tend, in connection with this maxim, to think of those who have conducted their lives according to the highest ideals, and who have subsequently fallen, and, knowing that they have fallen, have in despair abandoned themselves to vice. But evil of that nature is surely not comparable to the evil done by those who do not know that they have hideously distorted the ideals which they originally set out to follow. It would be a mistake to assert that the most wicked acts are always performed by those professing to follow ideals which we should recognise. But surely the following is certainly true: that, with very few exceptions, the most wicked acts are performed by those who believe themselves to be thoroughly justified, and often morally obliged. This is why the, to me, rather wearisome reiteration, by Fathers of the Council and 'new theologians', to

which we have been subjected recently, of the half-truth that it is Christian teaching that a man must always follow his own conscience is so dangerous. St Thomas teaches that a man is always culpable if he fails to do what his conscience tells him he is obliged to do: and this is surely right, and no doubt needs stressing. But when we reflect on the acts of monstrous wickedness committed by men who have been so following their consciences, we shall be more receptive to the complementary teaching of St Thomas, which is always suppressed by those who quote him on the authority of the private conscience, that those who do what is objectively wicked are not excused by the fact that their consciences were misinformed, that they mistakenly believed what they did to be right. To the objection that one with an erroneous conscience is then unable to do right, since he sins if he obeys his conscience or if he disobeys it, St Thomas replies that he has the capacity to form his conscience correctly. I do not know whether hell contains people who have knowingly fallen away from God into drunkenness, promiscuity, theft, swindling, and the like: but if it does, then, if God is just, it must also contain those who in self-righteousness, and even in the name of God, have oppressed, enslaved, tortured, deceived or massacred their fellow-men. Surely St Thomas is right that the excuse, on the lips of such men, 'We thought that what we were doing was right,' should be properly answered, 'You ought not to have thought so: it only makes your wickedness the greater that you would not recognise the evil of your acts'.

The important fact for us to acknowledge is that corruption of this sort is possible, and indeed of quite frequent occurrence, within the Church, on the part of Popes, Cardinals and bishops as well as of clergy and laity. Whatever Christ's promises guarantee us protection from, we are not protected from this. We set out to be followers of Christ: but because we forget to listen to his voice, we substitute for it our own distorted understanding, until we may be found carrying out with the utmost zeal the most vile of deeds, in flagrant contradiction to his teaching. Such corruption is never going to be easy to recognise. It will, at any time, when it is present, be what the most devout are proclaiming to be the will of God, even the test of adherence to the faith.

I am not concerned, in this article, to answer the question I tried to answer in my original article, namely how much of such corruption is present among us now. The point I want to establish is that if loyalty to holy Church is taken to mean that we deny that such corruption can be present, or that it can now be present, then we expose ourselves to the utmost danger of betraying the Son of Man with a kiss. One can well understand the shock, the resentment, the dismay of those who are bewildered by the present upheaval, and who cannot understand why people should be saying and writing damaging things about the Catholic Church: why do such people

remain Catholics if they think things are so bad? But the fact is that we cannot afford any longer to risk blinding ourselves to the possible existence of an evil infection within the vessel of salvation itself.

The allegation that such corruption is present necessarily makes less credible the claims of the body in which it is said to be present to be the Church founded by Christ. In so far as that body can be said to have led men into error or sin, or to have failed to warn men against error or sin, so far the probability is lessened that it is really the enduring witness established by Christ to his teaching and his way. But the question is one of truth: is such corruption present or is it not? If it is not, then those who say it is there are damaging the effectiveness of the Church's testimony to the Gospel: but, if it is, then that corruption itself does the damage, and those who are blind to it are assisting in the damage. I wish, however, to make it very plain that, for myself, I think that, while pious and a mistaken interpretation of loyalty may have concealed from us the extent to which corruption is possible, a Catholic must in consistency acknowledge limits beyond which corruption cannot penetrate: the corruption cannot affect the essence of the Church. We cannot be loyal followers of Christ if we do not hold ourselves open to recognise that what a bishop, a Council or a Pope proclaims as the teaching of Christ may in fact be clean contrary to that teaching: but if we do not acknowledge that in certain circumstances we have guarantees against such disasters, then we have ceased to be Catholics at all.

Ever since the Church embraced the ecumenical endeavour, there has been an unresolved tension. Before Pope John, it seemed to most Catholics that the very claims of the Church made participation in the ecumenical movement impossible: such participation would involve an implicit relinquishing of the claims which were the Church's *raison d'être*. And many still do not quite see why that is not so. Of these, some welcome the situation: for them, the entry of the Church into the ecumenical movement has meant that they need no longer, to be Catholics, grant to the Church to which they belong any privileged position among the Christian churches. This is seldom said quite explicitly: but, if I am not mistaken, it lies behind many turns of phrase that have become familiar. I turn, for an example, once more to Mr Middleton's article in *New Christian*. After rightly pointing out that the drift of the editorial for which Father McCabe was disciplined was an affirmation of loyalty to the Church, as an explanation of why he did not accept Father Davis's reasons for leaving the Church, he remarks, 'He does not make this point in any empire building way. It is the reason why we remain Roman Catholics when so often the obvious thing seems to be to leave. It is not given as a reason for converting other Christians to the Roman Church'.

Now these sentences, as they stand, are unexceptionable. It is true

that Father McCabe, in that particular editorial, was not concerned with setting out a case for a Christian's belonging to the Church of Rome rather than to any other communion: he was merely concerned with the repudiation of charges made by Father Davis, which Father McCabe saw as in part true but as one-sided and misleading when taken as a whole. But, in the context, it is hard to believe that Mr Middleton was meaning merely to draw attention to the limitations on what Father McCabe was trying to do in that editorial. Rather, surely, he is hinting pretty strongly that he could not have followed Father McCabe unless he had remained inside those limitations. Mr Middleton does not think there is any case to be made that a Christian should belong to the Roman Church rather than any other, I would say that, if a man does not think this, then essentially he is not a Catholic any longer.

It has, until very recently indeed, been taken for granted that to be a Roman Catholic entailed ascribing to the Roman Church an essential identity, possessed by no other church, with the one holy Catholic Church of the Creeds. Other Christians are incorporated into that one holy Church by baptism, and, to greater or lesser extent, possess its doctrine, its sacraments, its ministry; and, in so far as there are baptised members of that Church not in communion with one another, the Church is divided. Yet it is essential to the Catholic view of the Church that, even in the midst of these divisions, there must remain some one community, membership of which constitutes full membership of the Church of the Creeds, to which, therefore, each Christian, once he has recognised how things stand, has the duty of belonging. However wounded that community may be by the loss of communion with other Christians, however corrupted may be her religious life, the moral guidance given by her leaders, or her forms of worship, still there is guaranteed to her what the others can lose: the validity of her sacraments, freedom from error in her doctrinal decrees, and the protection of the Spirit from ultimate decay. It is therefore incumbent upon anyone who holds the Catholic view of the Church to identify that one community as best he may, and to join himself to it; and to be a Roman Catholic is to have identified that community as being that of the churches in communion with the Roman See.

All of this is clearly maintained in the Decree of Vatican II on *Ecumenism*. Many members of the Reformed churches, however, evidently take this as a transitional stage: the abandonment of these exclusivist claims is, for them, a necessary preliminary to the full co-operation of the Roman Church in the ecumenical movement. But I suspect that a certain number of members of the Roman Church are under the same impression: for them, the Decree represents a half-way stage to what they are waiting to hear said, 'We are just one church among many: we have no special position'. It seems to me that one who has come to think like this is as out of

place in the Roman Church as a man would be out of place in the Anglican Church once he had ceased to believe in infant baptism. I have heard people say that one does not need a reason to belong to one church rather than another. Possibly not: but one must at least be able to recognise membership of one's own church as reasonable; and membership of a church the whole reason for whose existence and distinctiveness from other communions has precisely been its claim to constitute in a special sense the Catholic Church of the Creeds is no longer reasonable when one cannot acknowledge that claim.

If one acknowledges that claim, then there are certain things to which one remains irrevocably committed, certain respects in which the Roman Church cannot have been corrupted without losing her essential identity with Christ's Catholic Church. Quite likely the fuss caused by Father McCabe's employment of the word 'corrupt' was due to people's thinking that he meant an essential corruption of this kind, which rendered the claims of the Roman Church invalid. While Fr McCabe has been rendered incapable of speaking for himself, I will express my own opinion that if, as is to be assumed, he was using the word in reference to the preceding discussion in *New Blackfriars*, inaugurated by my article, then this was not at all his intention. At the same time, I am struck by the extent to which Roman Catholics appear to confuse the onerous task, which is now laid upon us, of reforming our Christian life as a community, our grasp of and obedience to Christian moral principles, and our understanding of Christian doctrine, with a possibility of overturning teaching which cannot be gainsaid without denying the foundation of our claim to be in a unique way continuous with the one Church founded by our Lord. Let me give a deliberately trivial example. In a recent discussion of the theology of marriage, a Roman Catholic participant expressed disbelief in the idea that consecrated virginity is a higher state than marriage. I remarked that Trent had endorsed this doctrine under anathema, to which he replied, 'I know, but I don't agree'. Now the doctrine in question is a very minor one: if someone was unaware of it, I should not think that there was anything noteworthy lacking from his understanding of the Christian religion. Nevertheless, if the Roman Church retains an essential and unique identity with the Church of Christ, then what her ecumenical Councils solemnly pronounce as of faith is safeguarded from error; and, whatever new thoughts it is our duty to explore, it simply is not open to us to say of such doctrines, 'I don't happen to agree'.

But is not the claim to such a special position among the Christian churches incompatible with participation in the ecumenical movement? Does it not destroy the basis of a common search for unity? It would be superficial to answer these questions negatively merely by observing that it is not taken as a pre-condition for participation in the ecumenical movement by any other church that it first

abandon those beliefs which presently place an obstacle to unity. Perhaps the following is more helpful. While a Catholic cannot envisage reunion coming about on terms other than an acceptance of the Catholic conception of the Church, i.e. of the general principle that, whatever divisions may occur, there will always be one body membership of which constitutes full membership of the Church of Christ, there is no necessity for any agreement on the historical question, which body fulfilled that role during the centuries of our division. We are all agreed that there can, at any time, be at most one legitimate Pope: but the mediaeval schism between Rome and Avignon was eventually ended without any decision about which line had been the legitimate one.

It remains that those who accept the Catholic view of the Church, members of the Orthodox Churches and more particularly those in communion with Rome, are necessarily under a suspicion on the part of other Christians that they do not take part in the search for unity on equal terms, and this for two reasons. First, while we maintain that authoritative doctrinal decrees by Councils and by Popes, while perhaps in need of complementation and able to be improved by reformulation, are not to be repudiated, we bring with us a much bulkier load of previous doctrinal commitment than do members of the Reformed churches. And secondly, the strength of our commitment is greater. The attitude of, for instance, an Anglican to disputed doctrines can quite consistently be, 'As I see things at present, I believe this, but I could be mistaken': for him, his adherence to the particular tenets of his Church is not a manifestation of that faith with which he adheres to the articles of the Creed. For us, it is different: it is the same faith with which we acknowledge Christ as our Lord and with which we accept the teachings of his infallible Church. There has been much sloppy talk lately about doctrinal change; and indeed we must be wary of confusing that to which we are formally committed with the surrounding, and changing, teachings of theologians. But I do not see that we make the prospect of reunion brighter by pretending that there are no limits on the changes which we could consistently accommodate.

Rather, we have to face a situation which necessarily renders other Christians distrustful in advance of our whole-heartedness in the common search for unity. We shall be able to overcome this distrust only if we prove ourselves readier than they need to be to recognise in ourselves those failings whose possibility we are in no way committed to denying. We have to be willing to face the extent to which, now or in the past, we have failed our Lord by co-operating with evil or by introducing unchristian practices into the very life of the Christian community. We have to test all our institutions and customs, our habits of thought and patterns of life, against the model which is held up for us in the Gospels and the other parts of the New Testament: and I think that, when we really do this, we will find

to our shame that, while we have formally preserved the essentials of Christian doctrine and worship, we do not recognisably resemble what the Scriptures so plainly show us that Christians ought to look like. If we can undertake this self-criticism with real honesty, then – and only then – I believe that the obstacle to unity constituted by our recognition of the claims of the Roman Church will appear very small indeed; because it will no longer appear an expression of pride.

For the most part, the things which divided us at the Reformation do not seem likely to continue to divide us very much longer. Because of shifts in understanding on the part of Catholics and Protestants alike, it seems quite probable that we shall discover that we no longer have any irreconcilable differences over such matters as grace, free will and original sin, sacramental theology or even the nature of the Church. And yet, when we look at the condition of many of the Reformed Churches, the prospect of unity appears hopeless, in view of the fact that, in those Churches, there are theologians and high ecclesiastics openly denying the fundamental doctrines concerning Christ and the Trinity that were settled by the Councils that were held long before our present divisions occurred: the Church of England, for instance, even contains a bishop who has seen fit to jeer at the Lord's prayer as expressing a childish belief in God as a 'Daddy in the sky'. If you question any of the more orthodox members of these Churches about this, you will receive the reply that, deplorable as such manifestations may be, they are felt to be the necessary price of avoiding the kind of thought-control by means of which we have suppressed them in our own communion. And, indeed, the whole question of the exercise of authority over the expression of opinion is one that cries out for resolution if any progress towards unity is to be made.

Now, much as we have to be remorseful about in this respect, I do not think we ought to adopt a wholly apologetic tone. The system of censorship that has existed among us has undoubtedly been an affront to human dignity, and has resulted both in personal suffering and in the stunting of intellectual progress, including progress in the understanding of the faith. But we have the right to point out that the motive from which it sprang was a positive one: a consciousness of the preciousness of the treasure which had been entrusted to us, and of the duty laid upon us to preserve it intact. And I think also that we have now the difficult task of arriving at some compromise. I cannot agree with those voices which have been raised in favour of the complete dismantling of any kind of control over what statements may be made by bishops, clergy and laity on matters of doctrine: for the state of affairs which now obtains in the Reformed Churches, in which high authorities may without correction deny most of the articles of the Creed, is surely not consistent with any belief in the teaching mission of the Church, and can hardly be a necessary condition of that respect for intellectual freedom which

is necessary both to protect the rights of individuals and to foster intellectual development. Thus, it is plainly not the duty of the censor for a diocese or order to interfere with the expression of any opinion which he does not hold to be heretical, nor is it the business of his superiors to remove him for refraining from such interference: the restraints on unfair or tasteless comment ought to be the same as those which operate in secular life. But it seems to me an error to conclude from this that the whole system of censorship should be abolished: it is surely right that Catholics should be prepared to submit what they write to the judgment of an expert theologian on whether it contradicts authoritative teaching, provided that it is plain that that is the sole criterion employed.

I realise, of course, that the matter is not a simple one. Not only is it often a matter for quite uncertain judgment whether or not a given statement is in conflict with some doctrinal decree, but also it is frequently not in the service of truth to suppress the expression of views which are certainly false as they stand. The first fumbling formulation of a new idea may well be demonstrably incompatible with the truths of faith, even though the idea, when developed further, may prove most fruitful in the understanding of those truths. Precisely such a situation existed, for example, with the introduction of Aristotelian ideas into medieval philosophy.

Thus, for instance, it is rather to be expected that when contemporaries attempt, for the first time for three centuries, to give an account of transubstantiation not based on a Thomistic metaphysics, their first efforts should be at best dubiously reconcilable with the Conciliar decrees on the subject. Premature suppression of such accounts risks not only the condemnation of views a deeper understanding of which may reveal that the incompatibility was only apparent: even when the incompatibility is genuine, the views expressed may contain insights which, pursued, would lead to a deeper understanding of this mystery of faith, and the suppression of them therefore risks stifling these insights. A censor, or any other authority responsible for safeguarding orthodox belief, therefore has a very delicate task; but, at the same time, one which he can hardly fulfil unless he can be assured of the will to orthodoxy on the part of those whose utterances he is reviewing. It is quite a different thing to encourage adventurousness of thought among those who recognise that a demonstration that a theory is inconsistent with the dogmatic pronouncements of (e.g.) Trent would show the theory to be untenable as it stands, and to licence speculations by those who imagine that they are no longer bound at all by the teaching of the past.

The task of devising a system which shall reconcile the genuine claims of the autonomy of the intellect and the liberty of the individual with the necessity for safeguarding the truths that have been entrusted to us is hard enough in itself: and it is rendered equally more onerous by those who conceive that all restraints should be

lifted and by those who have no desire for intellectual advance or respect for personal integrity, but seek refuge in the reiteration of received views because they feel these have been proved to be safe (even if they do not actually follow from what is of faith). It is difficult to believe that the Doctrinal Congregation (as I understand the descendant of the Holy Inquisition is now tactfully termed) is not full of men with precisely this latter mentality, and that therefore, as an instrument of guidance in matters of faith, it ought to be totally demolished. At the same time, I do not believe that attacks on this, or other institutions of the Church, can carry any weight unless they face squarely the problem that has here been posed, instead of resting on a merely gaseous libertarianism.

I have here deviated to a discussion of the topic which the 'McCabe affair' directed attention to, that of free speech within the Church, from the two questions with which Father McCabe himself was concerned, what are the limits within which the Church may be corrupted, and how far it has in fact been corrupted. On the second of these questions, I have already given my opinion, in a previous article: but it is the first which has been so obscured by the series of events provoked by Father McCabe's expression of his opinion. And it has been my principal reason for writing this article to dispel this obscurity. If theologians or those in authority in the Church consider it heretical to envisage the possibility of corruption in the sense explained in this article, then I and many others will be glad to have had it made clear that this is their view: as I have made plain, I for one have no wish at all to advance heretical opinions. If there is no such response, I hope we may take it as established that it is not heretical; and – since it cannot be heretical to assert the actuality of that of which it is not heretical to assert the possibility – it will follow that the measures taken against Father McCabe were not grounded on the ascription of theological error to his detection of corruption in the Church. If, on the other hand, those who are disposed to rebuke me for being insufficiently radical consider that I have drawn the limits within which this corruption can occur too narrowly, or that I have betrayed an essentially anti-ecumenical viewpoint, then it would be equally interesting to have their case clearly expounded.

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THE PURIFICATION OF THE CHURCH, an S.C.M. Broadsheet (S.C.M. Press, 3s. 6d.), contains Mr. Dummett's original article 'How Corrupt is the Church?' to which he refers above, and which is essential to the discussion. Also included are the February 'Comment' by Fr McCabe and the ensuing 'Comments' by Archbishop Dwyer, Fr Ian Hislop and Fr Cornelius Ernst. The booklet does in fact put the whole debate in perspective and corroborates a great deal of what Mr Dummett has written above. C.P.