

Comment

The Faith of the Church

Lumen Gentium tells us that the chief duty of a pastor is to proclaim the Word. Bishops and their co-workers are to be heralds of the Gospel. One of the abiding images of pastoral instruction is that of Augustine sitting in his basilica in Hippo with the Scriptures open on his knees, preaching and instructing his flock; moving them at times to tears, at times to groans and laments, and often to applause and delight. On 5 December, 1984 Pope John Paul II began an extensive series of catechetical addresses in his weekly audiences. He situated this project within the context of his Petrine ministry. As Peter on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem undertook the catechesis of the Church, so his successor in the see of Rome considered it his duty to continue this service.

On Pentecost day, so Luke writes in Acts, Peter stood up together with the eleven and *lifting up his voice addressed the crowd*. (Acts, 2:14) The initial reaction of the polyglot and international community gathered for the feast in Jerusalem was amazement, incomprehension and ridicule. The sudden appearance of a confident, assured group announcing the truth seemed vainglorious and inappropriate. Yet at the end of his speech the crowd had become a congregation. All of them were cut to the heart and asked 'what must we do?' (Acts, 2: 37) The preaching of the gospel often has this effect. On the road to Emmaus the hearts of the two disciples burned within them as Jesus spoke to them, opening to them the scriptures and teaching them to look on the face of the crucified Christ who is at the same time the Lord of Glory. As C.H. Dodd wrote, 'on the apostolic preaching, it was the searing effect of the Passion and Resurrection and their living-out of the paschal faith that opened their eyes to see on a thousand roads to Emmaus what they had missed on the one road to Calvary.' The vivid emotion felt by the congregation on Pentecost day is a curious one. It has associations of broken-heartedness and open-heartedness. It is the grace of the Holy Spirit that transforms one into the other.

The congregation on Pentecost day was pierced to the heart. The stab of pain that Peter's words produced has connotations of anxiety. It is ironic that the intensely anxious and insecure group of women and men gathered together in the upper room should be transformed by the grace of the Holy Spirit into a dynamic, evangelical community which pierces the hearts of the society in which they live. There are two

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possible reactions to this. Hearts can remain closed, sealed within the protective certainties of conventional wisdom, or they can be opened into the wider space of tradition, the carrying stream of God's faithfulness to his promises and his delight in his gifts. The prospect of release from the prison of the temporal to the liberating bliss of the eternal is not everywhere welcomed. Especially since it involves change. When he was asked by the congregation in Jerusalem what they must do, Peter answered, 'You must repent'. You must find your heart. In some ways the message of the gospel is always addressed to a world that has lost heart.

On Pentecost Sunday the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was finally published. Controversy about language and selective treatment and presentation of certain themes in it should not detract from the fact that this is a major achievement. The composition of the Catechism was a Pentecostal enterprise. It is published on the Apostolic authority of the Pope who declares it to be, 'a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion.' However, as Peter stood up with the eleven on Pentecost day so the Pope does not speak alone. He lifts his voice to speak authoritatively but always in communion with the members of the apostolic college which has the principal responsibility for witnessing to and teaching the faith of Christ.

In July 1986, the Pope appointed a commission of twelve bishops to draw up proposals for a draft Catechism for the universal Church. The composition of the Catechism was to be an exercise in collegiality. The team of authors, with one exception, were diocesan bishops drawn from all corners of the world and shouldering a heavy pastoral burden. They were not remote scribes imprisoned in dingy cells, distanced from the world and blinded by the apologetic certainties of neo-scholasticism. Extensive collaboration was undertaken together with theologians, exegetes and catechists. When the revised draft was sent out in November 1989, over a thousand bishops offered opinions on it and 24,000 of their observations were taken into account. On these grounds alone it could claim to be an authentic and authoritative statement of what Catholics believe.

On Pentecost day every one heard the Word of God being preached in her own language. As the Preface of Pentecost prays,

today we celebrate the great beginning of your Church when the Holy Spirit made known to all peoples the one true God, and created from the many languages of man one voice to profess one faith.

The Catechism is not intended to be, in Cardinal Ratzinger's words,

'superdogma', neither is it meant to be 'supratemporal'. Theological research is not meant to be inhibited by the Catechism, neither is it believed that all other theological languages will be suppressed in favour of the mode of discourse adopted by the authors of the Catechism. The unity of the mystery of God may be expressed in many different forms. The Catechism aims to offer an organic synthesis of Catholic doctrine. Catechisms which are composed in the various national, ritual or ethnic constituencies of Catholicism are not precluded by the new Catechism. Instead it is hoped that it will serve as 'a point of reference for the catechisms or compendia that are composed in the various countries.' The breadth of historical vision and the frequent references to a wide range of Christian texts and traditions are meant to impart some kind of diachronic vision to the faithful, so that their hearts can be opened to the richness of Catholic tradition and that they may be freed from being tied too much to the circumstances of the moment. Given all of this it is hardly surprising that the Catechism should have met with a violent and hostile reaction from most sections of the British press.

With the exception of the *Sunday Telegraph* the British 'quality' press responded with scorn to the publication of the Catechism. Coverage ranged, like most journalistic attempts to deal with the Catholic Church, from the inaccurate via the ignorant, to the scathing and simply hysterical. Set against the intelligent but by no means sycophantic treatment of Catholicism in general, and the Catechism in particular, by European newspapers such as *Le Monde*, the pretensions of the 'quality' press in Britain to the fair reporting of religious affairs is in serious doubt. Since most people in this country receive their impression of how the world is constructed from the mass media, their view of Catholicism threatens to be decisively affected by every fashionable wind that blows down from the literary Parnassus of Hampstead, together with its provincial equivalents. Why does it matter?

Britain prides itself on being a democratic society. Discussion, debate and argument are central to its traditions. Freedom of speech has long been the proud boast of this country. Debate is only worthwhile if it is based on mutual respect, a conviction that partners in dialogue honestly believe what they say and are generally interested in the truth. If a position is incoherent its inadequacies may be exposed and some resolution of the point at issue arrived at. Debate is only possible if we trust people enough to believe that they mean what they say. In other words, truth matters. The central thrust of the case against the Catechism, as made by the press, is that it is an outmoded, dogmatic, reactionary document promulgated by power-crazed, geriatric clergymen intent on burying once and for all the optimism and open-

mindedness aroused by the Second Vatican Council. Furthermore, it is claimed that it is an unrepresentative document, composed without consultation, to be ruthlessly imposed on a battered and cowed faithful terrified into non-resistance by the prospect of eternal damnation. Worst of all, the Catechism is found wanting because it attempts to disguise fixed 'ideological positions' as eternal verities. Why is it that 'Ideology', as Terry Eagleton has observed, 'like halitosis, is what the other person has?' In other words the press onslaught against the Catechism, an attack which is repeated in much of its treatment of Catholicism, is as much a clash of philosophies as theology. In this conflict, it is the influence of what has been called post-Modernism which is well to the fore. The consequences of a wider application of such philosophical principles threaten to be dire, not only for religion, but for the stability of the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society which Britain is rapidly becoming.

When Peter began to speak in Jerusalem the responses to his message were varied. Some were uncomprehending, others laughed. Ridicule features markedly in many approaches to Christianity and to Catholicism in general. It is ridiculed because it seems oppressive, inhibiting and outmoded in its insistence that there are absolute values and that there are actions which may never be performed under any circumstances. Catholicism is thought to block the path to human liberation. It encourages its devotees to cling to their chains. It is portrayed as patriarchal and oppressive, resisting those who suggest that all law, all restraints, all principles of human action are simply human constructs. The world in which we live is riddled with such sub-Nietzschean certainties, all of them unquestioningly accepted and complacently peddled. We are encouraged not to look at what is said, but by whom it is said and from where it is said. Nietzsche's cry, 'Down with all hypotheses that have allowed the belief in a true world' has many subliminal echoes in much of popular contemporary philosophy and psychology which share a deep-rooted distrust in institutions. Institutions, of which the Catholic Church is almost the last remaining to claim any metaphysical foundation, are seen as the primary sources of social power. Their effect is understood as submerging the individual by drawing her into projects and purposes which are not authentically personal. The only way to authentic personhood is through the destruction of such institutions. Carried far enough such a policy involves the destruction of all corporate sense, the impossibility of acquiring habits of membership, patterns of service, types of responsibility, customs of citizenship, disciplines of charity and forms of friendship. In such a society obedience to rules is slavery, the authority

of hierarchy is tyranny and conformity the ultimate vice. The solution for the modernist is the destruction of institutions by showing their inherent ridiculousness. In such a society there is no place for forgiveness and reconciliation, but only for revenge. Justice becomes the settling of old scores. Those who feel excluded may escape from their oppression by tearing down what is arbitrary and replaceable and in that way further the cause of liberation, but at the cost of creating a moral and psychological waste land. The deconstruction of dogma is part of a wider attempt to deconstruct meaning.

Over the next few years we may expect more, not fewer attacks on the Catholic Church and its teachings. There will be more disbelief and more ridicule. The battle for truth is still worth fighting not simply for the future of the Church but for the future of humanity. History shows us that where metaphysical bonds no longer count other ties cannot easily maintain themselves. In the end it is the truth that sets us free.

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A New Interpretation of Fra Angelico

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Part II

In part I, I examined William Hood's recent attempt to understand Fra Angelico as a propagandist for the Observant reform in the Dominican Order. In his magisterial treatment of *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (Yale University Press, 1993) Professor Hood interprets each of the works against the background of its predecessors elsewhere in Dominican or other art, or elsewhere in Angelico's own corpus. His particular concern is with the *institutional* tradition out of which Angelico spoke: the spaces, spirituality and devotional practices of the friars, which conditioned the subject matter and significance of the works. He persuasively argues that Angelico's art is to be understood as an expression of a particular view of Dominican community and tradition. I proposed that Angelico's art would be better understood if there had