

Comment

All that human hearts endure

Celebrating of the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution has been overshadowed slightly by the El Salvador-style massacre of students in Peking by the People's Liberation Army. We have been harshly reminded that 'revolution' and 'liberation' can be slippery terms. Often in this column we concentrate on change or the need for it; for once let us write of *persistence*.

The one bright memory we have of that atrocious event in China is of the courage and idealism and independence of spirit of those children of the Cultural Revolution whom the Revolution's soldiers were mowing down. It would seem likely that there are some qualities in human nature which no amount of ideological conditioning can completely stamp out of everybody.

Persistence has, of course, been a striking characteristic of Chinese culture for a long time, as its art demonstrates. Even so, Chinese Catholicism's survival is something to be surprised over. It is almost entirely a result of the endurance of ordinary people. For forty years they have been cut off from the rest of the Catholic Church—Vatican II has not touched them. Though the 1982 Constitution gave them freedom of worship, all foreign influence was still forbidden. Government retrenchment will revive China's xenophobia; it is now anybody's guess when official contacts with the Vatican will begin. So these Catholics will stay split, with a minority in an 'underground church' and a majority served by the bishops nominated by the Government-controlled 'Patriotic Association' (the only ones whose consecrations the Government permits, but in Rome's eyes they are illicit). But Chinese Catholicism ever so slightly grows.

Yet, if recent American social surveys are right, also in the West people are persisting in being Catholics—many more than we were anticipating fifteen years ago would now be possible (so overawed we were then by the forces of secularization). The decline reckoned to have been precipitated primarily by *Humanae Vitae* stopped in the mid-1970s. The Church today does not, of course, dominate the lives of Catholics in the way it did; the ghetto has almost gone, and so has a lot of the grilling and the guilt. What, though, is interesting is that so many Catholics choose to stay on (or return). Lucinda Vardey's *Belonging*, now available in the UK (Papermac, £6.99), is for people like its author, who, after a strict Catholic upbringing, distanced herself from the Church and then felt compelled to come back; she writes of the difficulties she faced and how she overcame them. It is an irritating, uneven, occasionally inaccurate book, but it could help some individuals. 'Persistence in the Faith' takes very different forms from in, say, the 1590s or even the 1950s, but it is a reality all the same.

Persistence, religious or political, is not so exciting to write about as change, but without persistence any revolutions and liberations are mere sand driven by the wind.

J.O.M.