

Comment

'No' to the tidy Church

It is exactly a year ago since we published 'Ratzinger on the Faith: a British Theological Response', our much discussed special issue, and one of its creators was recently asked to speak on 'the Ratzinger question now' to some people in a West-country cathedral town. He thought he was giving the group quite a balanced presentation of the issues, when he was interrupted.

'Clearly you do not understand what kind of audience you have,' said a woman. 'We are against premarital sex. And abortion. And homosexuality. And masturbation.'

'Yes,' a man cut in. 'Cardinal Ratzinger is saying out loud all the things that the parish priests since Vatican II have been forbidding us even to murmur.'

'When we were first in Africa', a woman said, 'the natives were pious and went to church regularly and did what they were told. And then the priests began to bring in all this theology of liberation, and it was disastrous. The natives stopped going to church regularly, stopped doing what they were told.'

The speaker tried to end the uproar by getting the group to realise that he was defending neither the moral theology of Fr Charles Curran nor liberation theology (not, at any rate, that evening), but was merely putting to it the question which Catholic theologians of all sorts have been asking themselves: Is Ratzinger in his ardour destroying the ambience for good theologizing?

That, though, is not what we are commenting on here. Here we are focussing for a moment on something less discussed but quite as troubling: that, if you do start talking about that hot subject, it is very difficult not to be pushed into one of those two worn categories, 'liberal' and 'authoritarian'. The majority of moderately informed Catholics just do not seem to understand you if you say that you have big reservations about Ratzinger's presuppositions and policies and yet think there is quite a lot of truth in some of his criticisms of theologians and trends in the Church. Say that, and more often than not you are seen as somebody with no worked-out opinion, or else weakly trying to adopt an in-between stance. Hardly ever as somebody thinking on altogether different lines.

Kieran Flanagan's provocative article in this issue should make us more careful when we start to generalize about what is going on in society, but there is one generalization about current religious developments which even some sociologists are making. Recent reports and surveys (including one from the Vatican) are confirming what the

world-wide boom in conservative evangelicalism has already told us: that we live in an age in which a rapidly growing number of people are seeking in religion above all for security and a sense of certainty. They are looking, in other words, for a world in which things are much more sharply black and white, and one's fellow-human beings are either 'in' or 'out', 'loyal' or 'disloyal', saved or damned. And the appeal of that world-view is catching. Some of the pressures now being put on us in the Church encourage us to revert ourselves to the siege mentality (as we called it twenty years ago). When, on Ascension Day, the President of the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications spoke—to those of us Catholics in Britain who are in communications—about 'public opinion', he was not talking about how he might help society to become more truly free and so more open to the Christian message, but how we should campaign for the suppression of abortion, homosexuality, and so on ... quite a different exercise. And writers who should know better are again telling us that if we cannot believe in all the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* we should ask ourselves seriously what we are doing staying in the Catholic Church.

We are talking in this Comment not about morals or even about being ecclesiastically 'left' or 'right', but about a way of thinking. Accept this mentality and you have adopted the golf-club model of the Church ('Keep all the rules—that's all that matters—or get out'). And what an attractive model that seems, sometimes—when, in other words, we are sure that the law is on our side! But what a travesty it is of the truth about the Church, if the Church is indeed destined to be the one place in which human beings of all sorts are capable of being reconciled, and all divisions healed.

To be true to itself, the Church must at one and the same time keep its doors open and stay prophetic. And, if that is what the Church is really like, we who are part of it are to be like that too—not only so that we can speak to the world's hopes as well as its fears, and so that we can occasionally do good theology, but so that we grow ourselves. For our own sakes as well as other people's we must say 'No' to the forces that would categorize us and would convince us all that the way to salvation and security lies in categorizing everybody else, in getting everything, in fact, as far as possible under control.

Most of the tussles in present-day Church life are not really extremely important, but this is.

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