

Vestimenta Imperatoris

Open Letter to a Fellow-Priest, Replying to his Invitation to give a Talk on the Forthcoming Papal Visit

P J FitzPatrick

There is no question of my declining your kind invitation; rather, the talk I would give is not the talk you would want. I think that the Papal Visit is *lamentable*. I could do nothing but deplore it. And I ask you to hear my reasons.

It is not the sensationalism and vulgarity against which I complain – the souvenirs, the “logo”, the Popemobile, the hiring of a publicity-agent, the whole unlovely apparatus of a whistle-stop tour. After all, if the thing is going to take place at all, it will have to be financed from somewhere, and the cost seems crippling enough to call for every money-making scheme that ingenuity can devise or gullibility fall for. There is, I suppose, something vaguely comic about it all, but then there always is something vaguely comic in the travels of the very great. No, if there were no more to it all than a chance for crowds to see the Pope, my reaction would be very much what it is to cup-ties, or Butlin’s, or pilgrimages to Lourdes: carry on, God bless you, don’t expect me to join in, have a good time. Unfortunately, much more is involved, and if I had to state in a phrase what that something more is, I would say that the Visit is profoundly and damagingly *misleading*. Let me say why.

You will know that recent events and changes in our own Church – the concept of Oecumenism, the recovery of the Bible, the Second Vatican Council – are examples of how Christians of all denominations are trying to come to terms with their past and to understand it. For instance, the starkly contrasted verdicts once passed on something like the Reformation by Christians of different traditions have given way to judgments more complicated and more subtle. That this development should have taken place is not surprising, because human understanding has become more aware both of the sheer complexity of the past and of the questions that it raises. I am not naïve enough to suggest that the majority of Christians speculate abstractly about their faith, but I am suggesting that their belief and their practice have been affected, usually unconsciously, by a whole family of realisations like these: the past must be judged in terms of its own aims and limitations; there is a tension between present and past; experience of what life teaches us today interacts with what we have inherited from yesterday; our heritage in religion is heterogeneous and has been transmitted from widely different sources; needs evaluating; is neither exempt

from time's limitations nor discardable at will. These and similar thoughts have become, in our own life-times, more familiar than once they were, and we cannot be surprised that such thoughts should at times disturb. A religious heritage goes deep, and we should not want revaluation of it to be easy.

It is not surprising that, in the discussions that have taken place between Roman Catholics and other Christians, authority should have frequently been a topic for investigation. Not only is the concept of authority one that religious debate can hardly avoid; the Roman Catholic Church itself has, over the centuries, evolved a specific embodiment of authority in a concrete and powerful method of ecclesiastical government, centred upon the Bishop of Rome. It is natural, then, that discussions should have considered the relationship between the Pope and other Bishops throughout the world; the role and the necessity of the Papal Curia; the balance between extraordinary doctrinal utterances and the ordinary, day-to-day teaching in the Church. Indeed, as you know, all these topics have been discussed between Roman Catholics themselves in and since the Second Vatican Council. Whatever else the discussions have done, they have at least reminded us of the great variety, the 'haphazardness' if I may so put it, in the development of Papal power over the centuries. There is nothing novel in this claim, and you will be familiar with the pattern of events and changes that have given Rome the place it now has. There was the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century; the missionary efforts that went beyond what had been the Imperial frontiers; there was the alienation of the Eastern Empire from the West and its dominance over the older Church of the East, with the gradual spread of Islam that weakened and isolated the Eastern Church; there was in the West the practice of appealing to Rome in order to settle disputes with local authorities, and the growth of belief that in some sense the Papacy was apostolic in a special way; there was the policy of some Popes to extend Papal powers into what we should call secular matters; there was the medieval spread of 'mobile' religious orders, exempt from diocesan jurisdiction and so looking to Rome for support; and at last there was the break at the Reformation, when the Papacy became the most clear and unequivocal dividing line between the two parties. All that is standard Church history. But the shoe begins to pinch when we try to evaluate this very varied and patchy story, and to see what mandatory value it has for us here and now. That this is a very hard task will, I think, be denied by nobody. We need to be as clear as we can in such a facing of the past, and to avoid whatever can make the facing more difficult, or our own assessment of the past less clear. And, I submit, the present policy of Papal Visits is doing

just what should be avoided: it is obscuring our critical assessment of the past, it is making things more difficult for us as we try to face up to our very mixed inheritance.

To shew you why I think this, I ask you to consider two things that, over the last two hundred years, have helped to give the Papacy the position it now has. The first we might call 'The French Revolution', and I use the phrase as a label for all the upheaval that brought in the nineteenth century: the end of the old political order, the destruction of so many older structures and traditions in the Church, and the opening up of Europe to the Industrial Revolution. You know yourself the pattern of events that has repeated itself since then. There has been a shift to secularism in human values, and with it a wish to change, to experiment, to call into question; and, in the Church, there has been time and again a policy that defends, denounces, and tardily comes to terms. What more undeniable a pattern? But what a pattern to make Roman Catholics think of their Church as embattled, and to focus all their loyalties and tenacities upon the person of the Pope! Do not let us deceive ourselves into thinking that such attitudes were a transient eccentricity in the days of Pius IX. They have been and are a product of a rejection of things that go with modern secularism; Rome has gained from that secularism at the expense of the rest of the Church.

But if what I call the 'The French Revolution' has helped to strengthen the centralising tendencies in Roman Catholicism, they have been strengthened by another and stronger cause: the advent of modern communications. You know that appalling hymn of Wiseman's – 'Full in the Panting Heart of Rome'; indeed, I suppose you will be singing it *ad nauseam* during the Visit. Find an *Old Westminster Hymnal*, and look at the last verse, which talks of 'Those sparks of unseen fire, that flit along the magic wire'. That verse is rarely sung today, more's the pity, because the Papacy of Pius IX and of his successors – its continuous traffic of messages, its control and checking, its tangibility and accessibility as the centre – all that is due, if it is due to anything, to what we might call with Wiseman 'The Magic Wire'. Once the Electric Telegraph was invented, Rome was as near a Bishop as was his episcopal neighbour. Technology had changed the Church, whatever Councils might say. And technology has further changed the Church, and is changing it, with the advent of television. Rome can, apparently, be as near now as the nearest switch.

Why, though, should this create a problem and cause damage? Not for any distinctively religious reason. Theological problems are rarely purely theological, and this is no exception: the problem and the damage are linked with all television and with all pictures.

Put it this way. You switch on your set; the News comes on; a foreign correspondent (brave man!) is there in the midst of the bombs and the bullets; here, in your own room, you see death and destruction as they are taking place. But why are they taking place? How did the two sides get where they are? Alas, that is a different matter: a 'discussion programme' follows the News, in which the history of complicated and long-standing differences and mutually inflicted wrongs is condensed and judged inside half an hour. We all know the sharpness of the contrast, but are not always willing to admit the cause: pictures are vivid, immediate, compelling; but they cannot analyse. Analysis and criticism and judgment call for *time* and call above all for *words* and for reasoned argument. *In principio erat verbum*; we cannot get away from that need for language. If we think that pictures are enough, we are throwing away reason; and if we do that, we perish. Language is tricky, and using it to make judgments is difficult: how on earth can we learn to keep our heads, if we surrender ourselves to a medium that in its essence does not work by words at all? The truth is a blunt one. We must resist the temptation to think that the picturesque and the colourful are enough; and we must resist it above all when our faith is involved and its seeking of understanding. Euphoria is not enough; mass-demonstrations are not enough; public expressions of loyalty to a powerful ruler are not enough. Surely, if our century has taught us anything, it should have taught us that much!

I said that it is in religious matters above all that we need to resist the temptation to acquiesce in pictures, and I said so because I think that the temptation is, in such matters, peculiarly strong. Perhaps an example drawn from elsewhere in our belief will shew where the strength lies. You and I and countless other priests are endeavouring to preach the Eucharist as a sign of our oneness and life in Christ, our Risen Lord. Excellent. But what has come more easily to people's belief in the Roman Church? That understanding of the Eucharist as a sign? Or the picture of the Eucharist as Jesus, confined and available as a quasi-object in the host? What still comes more easily to many priests in their sermons? What came more easily to those who built altars and churches? The tendency, I repeat, is not confined to religion, it is part of a more general tendency we have to focus all beliefs or attributions of meaning onto an *object*. But, where the topic has the obscurity of religion, the tendency is stronger. And pictures reinforce the tendency in our religion, and are reinforcing it here and now. How easy it is to sum up the whole complex and living relationship between tradition, authority, the Good News, Life in Christ and the rest, into one picture: that of the Pope and his place in the Church! It is more than easy, it is almost irresistibly tempting, and television in-

creases the temptation: you cannot televise the Communion of Saints, you can televise the Pope.

Does it matter? Well, come to that, does anything matter? It depends, as it always depends, upon what you want. More precisely, it depends on what you are prepared to sacrifice. Vatican II began to face that problem I mentioned at the beginning of this letter: it did acknowledge, in an unprecedented way, the need to face both past and present; it did at least try to shew the Church in a way that did not match the centralised model to which the course of events had accustomed us; it did face up to the whole question of the relation between Scripture, Tradition, Authority and the rest. It did all this; but once more, you cannot photograph ideas and arguments, and you can photograph the Pope. What we take the Church to be is a matter of many things, but one of them undoubtedly is what we experience through communication. This is not a cause that goes away if we ignore it. At least we should have an idea of what is actually being done to Catholic belief. As the oecologists put it, you cannot do one thing at a time; whether you like it or not, this influence is at work. And now that the whole process is to be turned on us during the visit, now that the pictorial presentation of the Church is to be made so very available and so very widespread among us, surely we ought to decide what we think of the process?

At this stage of the proceedings, I fancy that you will – reasonably enough – be interpreting what I have written as directed personally against the Pope and his preferences. The interpretation may be reasonable but it is not in fact correct. It is quite true that I do not agree with a good deal of what he says, and of what I take his style of Pontificate to be, but I should never be taking up your time like this if there were no more to my dissent than that. What is wrong is not the *man*, what is wrong is the *structure*. You must yourself have encountered cases – it could be in a family, or in a business organisation, or in a parish, or (God help us) in a presbytery – where personal merit and good will just aren't enough because the whole structure, the whole 'machinery' has gone wrong. That is what has happened here. You will have a fair idea by this time of what I think has gone wrong with the structure of the Roman Church, but a concrete example occurs to me that points in a pleasantly ribald way the moral of what I have written.

When the Cardinals were in conclave in 1484, trying to elect a successor to Sixtus IV, they were faced with a real problem, as they collected bribes and promises from each other. If they elected X, would X keep his part of the bargain, and distribute jobs, money and privileges as they had stipulated? To force him to do so, they all bound themselves by a blood-curdling oath to keep all the

promises they were making during the Conclave towards their fellow-Cardinals (some of the promises were rum in the extreme: it's all in Burchard's Diary). But then the penny dropped – once Cardinal X becomes Pope, he will dispense himself from all promises, and where are you then? So the vows were still more blood-curdling, but to no purpose once again – vow as you please, once a man is elected he can change the rules. The parable is not hard to apply, is it? Do what you will in our Church in the way of theology, of Councils, of renewal, of what you please; you will not grasp the nettle as long as (as was amusingly and fairly said) our Church has 'two sorts of members: those who are Pope and those who are not'. It was Bernstein, wasn't it, who said that being given a television-franchise was being given a licence to print money? As we have the Papacy, its office gives the holder a licence to print new rules of the game. Which means that you have no game at all; the structure is bad, the body itself is diseased.

Reject, if you wish, the judgment I pass on the Papacy here; my objections to what is happening in the Church (of which the Visit is a symptom) in no way depend on it. What matters is that things like the reflexion on history encouraged by the Council, the greater awareness of how ecclesiastical structures develop, and the mutual questionings between Christians of different traditions, have raised questions about the Papacy that need answering. These questions are now widespread in the Church, and deserve an answer that does justice to the complexity of relations between past and present. What chance have they of getting any answer at all if the whole force of mass-communications replaces reasoning by public appearances? What chance is there for genuine theological reflexion on the Petrine office, on the development of the role of the Bishop of Rome, and all the rest, if a television-based policy of public tours by the Pope is short-circuiting thought in favour of pictures? The technology, for all that we take it for granted, is powerful; the view of the Church it encourages is breath-takingly crude. What misunderstandings and misconceptions about the Gospel and the Church are going to be created in our own country by what is due to take place, and how on earth are they going to be put right?

I say that my case rests on structure, not on personality. It is, of course, quite true that – as I see it – the personality of the present Pope lends itself to the process that has so accelerated in our time. And, more than personality, it is his upbringing in the stress and danger of Poland that has played its part (one victory any tyranny wins is that those it oppresses have to use the weapons of their oppressor to resist him – he decides the terrain of battle). Nor should we forget the insidious tide of flattery and enthusiasm that surround him. How, in God's name, can he resist

so persistent a commercial, and how can those resist it who take the pictures they see at their face-value? I have every sympathy for him in his preposterously impossible post, and every sympathy at the maiming which the brave man has undergone and the effects of which he still has to endure. But he is the victim of a *structure* that is wrong, and when people grumble at his exercises of autocracy (I suppose the appointment of a 'General Pro Tempore' of the Jesuits, or the wooden intolerance of liturgical differences are startling examples), they are in my view right to grumble, but wrong in the direction of their grumbles. You will not mend matters by ensuring that the Pope is broadminded. You will mend them by ensuring that the Church's structure manages to make the breadth or narrowness of a Pope's mind a matter of small importance. Disagree with this opinion by all means, but be clear as to the nature of the disagreement. Debates over structure in the Church are being overshadowed by the role that television and mass-communication are playing there. If you like things that way, well and good; but do not think that the debate is being decided theologically, it is not – it is simply going by default.

Plato used to say – a little optimistically, I think – that evil was its own punishment. But bad structures beyond question hurt all who have to do with them: they are hurting the Pope and the Curia, and they are hurting the rest of the Church. I have traced the 'drift' of the Papacy to two types of cause, one of which is the spread of modern communications. It is amusing, then, in a sad sort of way, to see how the communications are taking their revenge. Let us put aside for the moment all differences of opinion over what the Pope says: have you ever reflected on *how much* he says? On *how much* is being published and disseminated by the Curia? Look at any number of the *Osservatore*; or look at the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, and see how each succeeding year gets an ever more bloated volume. It's terrifying: no one can have that much to say, and no organisation can indulge in this reckless logorrhoea without revealing just how sick it is. But if they are being damaged in the Curia, damage is being done to language elsewhere in the Church as well. You need go no further than the nearest Catholic paper for obvious examples of sycophancy (some of it episcopal in origin, God help us), but all that might be dismissed as an occupational hazard of reading Catholic papers. I have something more serious in mind – a language is developing about the Papacy *in which it is impossible to criticize*. I recall a remark made after the Conclave by the obviously good and lovable Cardinal Hume: asked what the process was like, he spoke of "being eye-ball to eye-ball with the Holy Spirit". Now, I simply ask you – what did he *mean*? That the results of conclaves are inspired by God? He knows too

much of their history to believe anything like that (think of the blood-curdling oaths already mentioned). That prayers for guidance made at a Conclave will be heard? Well and good; but what do his words invite us to conclude from that pious belief if it is not that, once elected, a Pope is sure, by and large, to be doing the right thing in his policies? Alas, could there be a better invitation to bitter disillusion? One thinks of the first Pope who saw the power of pictures, poor Pius XII (so curiously like the present Pope in his undoubted piety and intelligence, and in his equally undoubted beliefs that a Pope can decide the course of the Church and that all words used by a Pope automatically mean something). Think of him: little but adulation during his life-time, so much dismissal and relegation after his death. With the rights and wrongs of this I am not concerned, what concerns me is that the Papacy needs something more in the way of criticism than delayed post-mortems. But criticism is just what pictures and public appearances are making ever more difficult. They offer something palpable and vivid, as a focus and symbol of religious belief; but this cannot be done without automatically reinforcing a view of the Papacy that makes criticism seem impious, and a view of the *status quo* in the Church that makes it seem beyond rational questioning. I wrote that a language is developing in which criticism is impossible. It might have been better to write that a language is developing which has much the same role as background music; communication of ideas is not its point.

I gladly run the risk of seeming eccentric or unbalanced, and I say — picking my words and meaning them — that I have come with some reluctance to the conclusion that the old-fashioned Protestant had something when he said that the Pope was Antichrist. Leave aside the biblical fundamentalism that went with the claim (and, to be fair, the vulgarity of speech into which old-fashioned Protestantism so easily fell), and he was bearing witness to a danger that is ever present to a sacramental and hierarchical religion like our own. In one sense, we all are and ought to be ‘Antichrist’, because the Greek word ‘anti’ can mean ‘instead of’. We should be Christ to each other, and all the structure and activity in the Church, which is his Body, is to lead us to God through him. But — as we all know — means can become ends, and what is meant to shew him can finish by taking his place; and ‘anti’ passes over to its other meaning of ‘against’. A danger like that can threaten other things than religion, but religion is peculiarly liable to it, and for the kind of reasons I have been giving. We baulk at mystery and seek something tangible. And where a religion already has tangible things and to spare about it, the danger is all the greater. You may have come across some examples of extreme ‘infallibilist’

writings produced at the time of the First Vatican Council. One that has stuck in my memory was a parody – to use no harsher word – of the ‘Pange, Lingua’ in which the words were transferred from the Eucharist to Pius IX. One verse ended:

“Ad firmandum cor sincerum
Solus Pius sufficit”.

Now that may strike you as a piece of dated irreverence (it wasn’t an isolated example, by the way); but do not be patronising about it, we are not as far from it as we should like to think. And we shall not distance ourselves from it unless we distance ourselves from what, here and now, things like the Papal Visit are inviting us to think.

‘You cannot do one thing at a time’. I quoted the saying earlier, when I submitted that mass-communication has effects on religion that do not go away if they are ignored. I quote it again here, because what goes on anywhere is always more than a matter of what people *say* is going on. The application of a eucharistic hymn to the Papacy would be rejected unequivocally by the most zealous advocate of the Visit, and he would accept just as unequivocally the doctrine that the Church must lead to Christ, not replace him. Unfortunately, all that is not enough. Descriptive language never is. Any politician is prepared to speak well of ‘national reconciliation’ and ‘a just peace’; he begins to shew what he really thinks when he votes for or against this Bill on Unions or that Bill on Defence. Descriptive language needs filling out with ‘specimens’, it always does. You can talk, as our bishops do, about the Pope’s pastoral office, or his concern for reconciliation, or his humility, or whatever you like. You can insist, as they insist, that there is no triumphalism in the Visit, and that it is an expression of a spiritual mission for love and peace. You say all this, and be just as sincere in saying it as our bishops are. Sincerity is the whole trouble. It is not what you *say* that really matters; all your sincerity shews is that you have missed the point. What matters is what is *going on*, what people are *doing*, how the *structure* is working. Explanations are not enough. Archbishop Worlock put his finger nicely on the matter the other week, when he said that the Pope was ‘not coming as some charismatic pop-star’. The Archbishop’s motive and his fear are plain enough – that is precisely what the publicity and presentation of Papal Visits *do* shew him as. And you can no more stop them from doing this by explanations or disclaimers than you can stop the phrase “you get stuffed” from being vulgar by saying instead: “To use a vulgar phrase, get stuffed”.

I end with a question I asked earlier: does it matter? Alas, in one way it does not. For better or worse, the central problems of human life today are not even being put in religious terms, let alone

answered in them. I suppose the two most urgent I'd name would be, in the widest sense, the growth of unreason and violence, and the unjust ravaging of the Earth and its resources. Not much there that we can say very distinctively, is there? (Which, of course, goes with something you may have noticed, consciously or sub-consciously, of late. We are always being told by our Bishops that something terribly important is going to happen – Pastoral Congress, Episcopal Synod, Papal Visit ... it never seems to come to much, does it? A drum makes most noise when it is empty.) So, put in that way, it doesn't really matter all that much. But there *is* a way in which it might matter, or be made to matter; there is a chance we have, and are throwing away. I have harped in this letter on the need to take into account the history of the Church and of all that goes with it, and to acknowledge the historical limitations of what we have inherited. When we do – if ever we do – start taking such an account, then there will indeed be a reappraisal that will agonize (which, once more, makes it so tempting to stick to pictures: no reappraisal there). But, paradoxically, our faith is, even from a human point of view, uniquely well-equipped to do this. Whatever else Roman Catholicism is, it is extremely old, and it has weathered the centuries as nothing else has. I said – and believe – that Unreason and Destruction are the two central problems that face mankind. But, deep down, is not each of them linked with a lack of balance with the past? The Unreason of fundamentalism, whether Christian or Moslem, will not face the tension of past and present. Brutal dictatorships are just as uneasy, as they try to exist as if nothing had preceded them. And Destruction of resources, with injustice to those who lag behind in industrialisation – what else is that but a morbid and selfish concentration on the present moment and on some problematic future that is supposed to license the destruction of what is not new? History is part and parcel of what we are as men and women, and it cannot be denied. Our own Church, so venerable and so enduring, is suffering a sickness that has been engendered by (among other things) the uncritical acceptance of the devices provided by modern communication. The acceptance has been uncritical, because in the short run the devices help on a process of centralisation that suits those at and near the centre. And meanwhile we do not give a precious example that we are uniquely fitted to give. And reason and history are both disregarded. And the Gospel is not proclaimed as it should be.

Early this year I was in York, and saw Knavesmire Race Course (the place was previously best known as having been where Dick Turpin was hanged). Knavesmire is a pleasant expanse of green on the Tadcaster Road, with an attractively unprofessional looking

racecourse. Pleasant green spots are badly under pressure at the moment; I hope that the damage done by the crowds assembled there will not be irreversible. Yes, the crowds will – weather and fatigue permitting – enjoy themselves and see the Pope. But, the next morning, Knavesmire will indeed be mire, and all the filth and rubbish dropped there will have to be cleaned up. Which things are an allegory, aren't they? Euphoria is one thing, damage is another. And here I want no part with either.

Psalm Singing as Eucharistic Act

Timothy Radcliffe O P

What is the significance of singing the psalms? It is the one form of prayer shared by every major christian denomination. Whatever the disagreements about the Eucharist, charismatic prayer, the rosary or whatever, the singing of psalms has gone unchallenged as the typical form of christian prayer. And yet it is not immediately obvious in what sense the psalms are either christian or, for that matter, prayer. How can it be an act of christian prayer to long to dash out your neighbour's children's brains on a rock, to celebrate a law by which we are no longer bound, and to proclaim God's mysterious intention to use Moab as his washbowl? The question is not what this or that psalm, might have meant originally in the Temple. It is not even of what christian theological sense we might discover or construct for any or all of the psalms. That is an important question but its answer will not make sense of our practice of singing the psalms, in which there is no time to carry out complex theological hermeneutics and during which our minds are often enough dull, vacant or distracted. The question is not of the meaning of the psalms but of the meaning of singing them, though, as we shall see, the relationship between the two is complex.

The first thing to note is that we are not just singing the psalms, we are singing the psalter, and it is the canon of the psalter that gives us a preliminary definition of the significance of psalm singing.¹ It is true that we do not sing all the psalms in the psalter,