

A couple of weeks ago the synod of Bishops in Rome came to an end amidst an almost unanimous chorus of disapproval. It was generally agreed that it had been a 'shambles', 'chaotic', 'frustrating' and 'disappointing'. Evidently we had been witnessing a major disaster. But was it a catastrophe? Just who was disappointed? What kind of people felt frustrated?

Let us admit straight away that 'shambles' seems to have been a kind word to describe the organizational chaos at the end, but that surely had more of farce than of tragedy in it. Granting that, what else was wrong with the synod? If we look at what it was supposed to do and what it did, it was certainly not a waste of time and probably not even a waste of money.

In the first place the synod is not a council, it is a consultative body for the Pope. It is in reality as much a part of the papal apparatus as the curia. A number of us feel that it is a vast improvement on the curia alone, that it allows for a wider range of experience and that it is rather less bureaucratic—as witness its comic procedural deficiencies—but it is, in a sense, an extended curia. It is in no sense a body alongside the papacy. Even a council, of course, does not exist in separation from the papacy, but it has a status of its own, an authority which the synod does not have and was not meant to have. The synod's purpose is to help with the job, at which the curia has hitherto been spectacularly unsuccessful, of keeping the Pope in touch with the thinking and activity of the Universal Church. It was not meant either to witness to the faith of the whole Church or to legislate for the whole Church, these tasks belong to ecumenical councils and Popes. The job it really had to do it seems to have done pretty well. For example, it ended thoroughly divided on the question of clerical celibacy and this seems to reflect fairly accurately the attitude of the Church as a whole. After *Humanae Vitae* one can no longer be certain how much attention the Pope will pay to his consultative bodies, but that is not the responsibility of the synod.

The decision to report to the Pope rather than to the world represents a realistic assessment of the status and function of the synod, and realism never does any harm. The general lack of interest in the proceedings on the part of both secular and Catholic press again reflects the true state of affairs. Nobody felt it was going to be a very dramatic event and there was really no reason why it should have been. The synod at this stage has roughly the same function as the earliest parliaments—to aid the king with their counsel. History has shown that such small beginnings may lead eventually to a kind of democracy but we must allow institutions to develop in their own way; it is foolish to pretend that we can skip the historical process.

The men who attended the synod were not suited by aptitude or

training to run a democratic assembly. They were mostly brought up with the rather attenuated ecclesiology that prevailed in pre-conciliar seminaries and as young men they were not expected, and certainly not encouraged, to have either the initiative or the discipline necessary for a community which takes its own decisions in common and stands responsible for them. Even the actual techniques of discussion amongst equals are in many cases relatively new to them. To expect such men to have formed a modern-style parliament of the Church would be absurd. In fact they seem to have displayed goodwill and honesty as they fumbled their way into acquiring the unfamiliar skills.

Parliaments grew to power and eventually superseded the kings because they represented new and growing economic interests; it is hard to know whether there will be equivalent pressures to enable the synod to develop in this way and harder still to know whether it would be desirable. Centralized parliamentary democracy may be losing its political appeal just as it is being adopted by the Church. As people are turning their attention away from bourgeois parliaments to workers' control of the factories, to the commune and to the local soviet, the Church may well become the last institution in which detailed decisions are taken centrally by elected representatives.

The real question is perhaps not how we can democratize the decision-making procedures at Rome, but rather whether we want Rome to be that kind of decision-maker at all. Of course the notion of the Pope as a 'focus of unity' without any jurisdiction is a dream and rather a bad dream, but the tendency will surely be in the direction of more legislative autonomy for the particular churches, and in that case the question of how far the Pope is assisted by a permanent civil service and how far by a biennial gathering will take on less importance. Everyone knows that in practice the question of priesthood and marriage, for example, is going to be decided in the local churches; at most Rome (whether Pope or synod) will be asked to ratify an existing arrangement.

The discussions on the important topic before the synod, justice in the world, brought out this fact more clearly than anything else. What was seen to be needed was not a modernized 'Catholic social teaching' but a programme of action to identify the Church with the poor and the oppressed, but this means something quite different in Bombay and in Belfast. There is considerable value in bishops involved in quite different situations discussing each other's detailed practical problems—perhaps especially when they are in deep cultural disagreement—but no conceivable value in any agreed communiqué that might emerge. The Church speaks with many, often discordant, voices: the Catholic Church has no simple formula either for healing the world or for expressing the glory of God; for the synod to have made that clear is for it to have witnessed in its own way to an important Catholic truth.

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