

How Corrupt is the Church?

619

by Michael Dummett

Nothing is more important than that Catholics should continually ask themselves: how bad a state is the Church in? We are all aware of the possibility that the Church may appear to be corrupt, and of the actualization of this possibility at various times in the past. But we tend, I think, to assume that such corruption will always be glaringly obvious, a matter of simony at the papal court, or pluralist bishops, or priests with concubines and children: we therefore conclude that, to the extent that things seem all right, so they must be all right. Whereas in fact, I suspect, corruption is seldom easily recognized at the time. Perhaps even the examples I have just mentioned, which seem to us so scandalous, were not felt at the time as symptoms of deep-seated disease: after all, we know that the Church is composed, not of angels, but of men, and that we have no right to expect perfection from Christians, bishops included; so probably these things were usually put down as instances of the kind of human weakness that we know that we have to reckon with. Thus we must be prepared, at any time, to find that the Church can be deeply corrupted, a corruption for which we shall be sternly judged but to which we have long been blind.

When we have recognized that the Church can be corrupt, we have to enquire what could make it possible for this corruption to take place: and this is the most serious theological enquiry that can be made, for it concerns our understanding of the nature of the Church. All Christians, not merely Catholics, are committed to holding that there is a permanent witness to Christ's Gospel in the world: our differences relate to its character, and how it is to be identified. It is of the greatest moment that we should understand in detail to what forms of corruption this witness – the Church – is liable: both so that we should be able to recognize them when they occur, and also so that we should not be seduced into taking as the word of God what is only the babbling of men. Catholics appear to me far too seldom to take such enquiries seriously. I recently read a review in the *Catholic Herald* of a television programme, on which one participant had said that the burning of heretics in the past invalidated the Christian religion; and the reviewer dismissed this remark with a sneer, comparing it with someone who would reject some secular organization (I forget now which one he chose for his comparison) on the ground of a few human weaknesses

among its members. But if our faith in the Church is real, we ought not to think of making any such comparison : for when we see that in the past gross cruelty and oppression were practised in the name of Christ, by the Church Christ founded to be his witness to mankind, it ought to be an agonizing question for us how it can come about that things can go so horribly wrong. And when we know the answer to this question, then we shall be in a better position to see how wrong things may be, in different ways, today.

My own opinion, which I shall try to support in this article, is that we are now in the painful process of emerging from a time when the Church has seemed to be about as corrupt as she can be : but that we have not yet, for the most part, recognized the extent of this corruption, and that, unless we do, we shall not shake it off. The fact of our corruption has been obscured for us by the fact that God, in his mercy, recently sent us a saint as Pope, a saint, moreover, of the kind whose sanctity, or at least whose goodness, was evident to the whole world. While John XXIII was Pope, it was impossible to believe that anything was deeply wrong, or, at any rate, that anything wrong was not about to be speedily put right. Now we are in a position to see more clearly : and perhaps we can approach our enquiry into the extent of the malaise in the Church by asking, What harm has the Council done ? In posing this question, I do not wish to align myself with those who deplore the Council. On the contrary, it is as plain as anything could be, from Pope John's account of the matter, that the calling of the Council was a direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit of a man attentive to the voice of the Spirit. Even if the Council were never to reconvene, we must all rejoice at what has been accomplished by the constitutions already promulgated : and it is clear that the good represented by these far outweighs any bad effects that the Council might have had. Still, it could be maintained that the Council *has* had some bad effects ; and perhaps by looking at these, we shall gain some insight into our question, What is wrong with the Church ?

The most obvious ill effect is the continual hardening of the positions taken up by the two parties of progressives and conservatives. Now I am fully aware that it is difficult to find a pure progressive or a pure conservative : someone who accepts one or other party line on every single issue. Patriarch Maximos is an obvious progressive, yet he took a totally reactionary position on the Jews ; Cardinal Ottaviani is the prototype of a conservative, yet, if his published words mean anything, he takes the most progressive position possible on nuclear weapons. Thus, to take an example among laymen in this country, Mr Peter Geach is a clear example of a conservative : yet, both on the Jews and on nuclear weapons, he sides with the progressives. And it is not only on these two issues that people cross the floor. I suppose that there is no one issue over

which one could not find someone, generally progressive, who took a conservative view, and someone else, generally conservative, who took a progressive view. This fact, which has often been stressed, should not be allowed to obscure the fact that people are, all the time, lining themselves up with one party or the other, and that, within each party, the attitude to the other party grows daily more uncomprising. The fact that a given individual will diverge from the party line on one or two issues which he has thought about independently before the cleavage developed makes no difference to his general commitment to a progressive or conservative stance. He will form views on other issues in conformity with those accepted in his own party, and he will take up an attitude of dismayed hostility to those who belong to the other party. One has only to glance at the controversy which has arisen out of the introduction of the vernacular into the liturgy to recognize that, as the Council proceeds, with the victories generally going to the progressives, the conservatives are falling into a state of shrill hysteria, in which they are no longer able to remember that the Council may be guided by the Holy Ghost, or to listen to its teaching as something from which they can and ought to learn. Their attitude to the Council is, 'They're not going to force me to change my ways', combined, in some cases at least, with a sneaking hope that the Council may say something on the score of which they can accuse it of definite heresy, and so be able to denounce it as a robber Council leading the Church astray. They will not stop to consider the aspirations of the progressives; and, if they read their books, it is not with the hope of learning any truth they have to offer, but only with the desire to detect heresy, which they find chiefly by disregarding the plain sense of the words they hastily scan.

The progressives are no better. I myself have for years longed for liturgical reform, and until very recently nourished little hope of seeing it on any serious scale in my lifetime, so that I was dismayed by the agitation set up against the present reforms; but I cannot think that Mr Brian Wicker's lambasting of these agitators showed the slightest attempt to sympathize with the feelings of fellow-Christians. (Fr Howell's charitable letters to the *Catholic Herald* on this subject seem to me a model of how discussion should be conducted in the Church.) But the faults of the progressives, unlike those of the conservatives, seem to me to assume a rather different form among priests and among laymen. Progressive priests, particularly Continental progressive priests, appal me by their coterie-attitude. They are so soaked in contemporary progressive theology and exegesis that they have no thought of appealing to any authority outside their own circle. The writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church they dismiss without consideration whenever they tend against the currently accepted view among warranted progressive professor of theology. Where the progressive clergy are smug,

the progressive laity are arrogant. They are like vain women – praise has gone to their heads. They have been told that the laity are as important an order in the Church as the clergy, and that their voice must be heard ; so here they are, frequently with a quite inadequate background of study for the topics they undertake to pronounce on, spouting away, often complete rubbish, in disdainful assurance that anyone who contradicts them is not ‘with it’. (Mr Bruce Cooper actually saw fit publicly to rebuke Cardinal Heenan, in so many words, for not being ‘with it’ ; on which my only comment is : if this is the level to which theological discussion is to be reduced by the emancipation of the layman, for Heaven’s sake let us gag him again.) And I pray that I may not have, even once more, to read that clerical celibates cannot understand the problems of married people, from some individual who goes on to make generalizations about marriage, which I know to be untrue at least of mine, on the basis of his purely personal experience of his own.

We are learning to adopt an ecumenical attitude to separated Christians. But it is as if we *need* to have some group on whom, in religious controversy, we can vent our uncharity. With a few honourable exceptions, progressives and conservatives seem to find it hard to speak to each other in a charitable – an ecumenical – spirit : each side have set their hearts on total victory, and neither can any more summon the resources to try to understand and accommodate the other.

The second disquieting effect of the Council so far is, as I see it, the aggrandisement of the bishops. The history of the Church, since the break with the Christian East, has been to a great extent a struggle for power between Pope and bishops. Just as, in the Middle Ages, the liberty of the lower orders was often advanced by an increase of power by the King as against the barons, so the liberty of the laity and clergy in the Church has benefited more when the struggle has gone in the Pope’s favour than when it has gone in favour of the bishops. I am not deploring the adoption of the notion of collegiality : on the contrary, I regard it as one of the most welcome achievements of the Council. Nonetheless, a devolution of power from the Pope to the bishops will in the end be detrimental to the liberty of ordinary Christians if it is not accompanied by a corresponding devolution from bishop to clergy and from clergy to laity. Apart from a few general remarks about the importance of the laity, there is no sign of this taking place. The Anglicans have retained the feudal rights of the parish priest, which delivers him from the worst excesses of an autocratic bishop ; they have retained also the system of parish councils, by which the power of the parish priest is limited in its turn. Congregationalists and others of the Free Churches have restored the ancient liberty of Christian people to elect their own ministers. Doubtless none of these systems is ideal : but we can and ought to learn from them. Instead, the bishops have, over the centuries,

made themselves total dictators, not only over their laity, but also over their clergy: and now that papal protection against these episcopal dictators will be much harder to come by, because the Vatican will henceforth be far more chary of interfering with the independence of bishops, the last state of our Church will be worse than the first if we do not speedily erect safeguards against episcopal power. If anyone thinks that the dangers I have in mind are unlikely to be realized in these enlightened days, he has only to inform himself about the archdiocese of Los Angeles, where a dictatorship is imposed in flat defiance of both the ideals of the Church as a whole and the wishes of the American hierarchy in particular, and from which an appeal has been made to Rome without any answer having been given.

Thirdly I shall mention, not a bad effect of the Council, but what seems to me a danger that it runs. In the two crucial practical issues of contraception and nuclear weapons, there is ground for fearing that the Council will simply fumble; by which I mean producing a series of platitudes without making a definite pronouncement. As regards contraception, I do not think it would be either disgraceful or disastrous if the Council were to declare the matter as yet undecided, so that, until a subsequent decision, it could not be claimed as official Catholic teaching that contraception was permissible, but on the other hand, it could no longer be claimed as official Catholic teaching that it was immoral: the choice would be one that was, for the time being, placed upon the consciences of individual Catholics to make, and confessors and pastors would be bound to respect that liberty. The danger I have in mind is not this, but that the Council may simply evade the issue by saying nothing about it at all: the result would be confusion within the Church, and ridicule outside it. Within the Church, the conservatives on this issue would argue that, the Council not having pronounced on the matter, things would stand as they always had; the progressives, that, by not pronouncing, the Council had wished to indicate that nothing certain could be said. About the bomb, the situation is rather different; for here, I think, a declaration that the question whether it is morally permissible to use the bomb, or to threaten to use it, was to be left undecided would be a clear dereliction of duty on the part of the Council Fathers. So far as I know, the issue of contraception, as a topic on which there is doubt from a Catholic standpoint, is one that has only boiled up in the last three years or so: but the conscience of mankind has been tortured for twenty years by the problem of nuclear weapons, and, if the Council refrains from a pronouncement, it will not be because its members have not made up their minds, but because they are frightened of temporal consequences; and Milton's words will once again be justified, 'The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed'.

The danger that exists of the Council's evading these two issues re-

flects, I think, a defect in the whole approach of the Council to our problems: an unwillingness to dig deep. I have an impression, which could be unjustified, that there is a strong tendency to attempt to put things right without facing squarely the fact that they were wrong. An example is the declaration on the Jews. The Council has approached this as if the problem were merely one of standing out against the evil of anti-Semitism: whereas it is the far more disturbing problem of uprooting the anti-Semitism that is the direct result of the Church's teaching of Christ's Gospel. Whereas colour prejudice is primarily a Protestant phenomenon, anti-Semitism is principally a Catholic vice; and, whereas colour prejudice stems originally from the imperialism of secular powers, anti-Semitism arises from specifically religious conceptions. Now that we stand appalled at the ghastly climax of this evil in the gas-chambers of Auschwitz, our task is not merely to repudiate anti-Semitism: it is, first, to confess our guilt; and, secondly, to understand from what diseased cell in the flesh of Christ's Bride this cancerous growth can have developed. It is not enough to acknowledge the incorrectness of saying this or that about the Jews: for anti-Semitism unfolds rather naturally from the traditional Christian ideas about the role of the Jews in history; and it should not be a question of setting bounds beyond which these ideals must not be pushed, but of rethinking entirely our whole conception of that people. To this extent, the conservatives on this issue are right: the declaration on the Jews does overturn much that has been commonly accepted; but the work of replacing it with a new understanding that does not lead to anti-Semitism, as the old one did, has not been undertaken. The act of reparation composed by Pope John suggests that he saw this clearly: 'We are conscious today that many, many centuries of blindness have cloaked our eyes so that we can no longer either see the beauty of thy Chosen People nor recognize in their faces the features of our privileged brethren. We realize that the mark of Cain stands upon our foreheads . . . '.

These considerations lead on to what seems to me the glaring reason, still generally unacknowledged as such, for assuming the Church to be indeed corrupt: the apparent failure of the Church in face of the two greatest moral crises of our times. I do not intend to go into the controversy about the motives of, or excuses for, the conduct of Pius XII: but the indisputable fact is that the Church of God failed mankind in face of one of the most monstrous evils that has been seen in the last thousand years. Hitler's Germany represented an upsurge of diabolic malice on a staggering scale; and the fact that the Church which Christ our Saviour founded to witness in the world to his truth and his love gave the world no lead in opposing this Satanic outbreak, and offered virtually no resistance to it, can be explained only on the supposition that the seeds of corruption had infested the Church herself. We know all this; we know

that German priests and bishops were urging Germans to fight for the Fatherland, and that the Pope kept a long, careful silence: yet we do not ask what it means. We do not ask ourselves, 'How can it possibly have come about that Christ's Church, through whom alone all are to be saved, should have been unable to recognize Satan face to face, or to oppose him face to face? How *can* these things have happened, when liberals and socialists, and communists too, saw the evil and gave their lives to frustrate it?'

The other great moral evil of our times followed hard upon this, when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Almost all mankind—all those whose consciences were not utterly blunted—stood aghast at what we had done: it needed only one voice, speaking with authority, to awaken us to shame and horror at what we had perpetrated. And yet for twenty years the Church, the witness of the Redeemer, has kept silence.¹ The consequences of that terrible act enmesh us all in a net which we cannot escape: we stand facing the prospect of annihilation of life on the earth, yet we do not know how to abandon these dreadful devices. People inside and outside the Church are tortured by this, the most pressing and most agonizing moral problem of our time: yet the Church, as the Church, has not said a word. If the Church is what she claims to be, *how can this be?*

Of course, the two issues are connected. It may or may not be the case that the Pope was more afraid of atheist Russia and Protestant Britain and America than of diabolist Germany: but it is at least clear that he thought that Germany was going to win the war. Perhaps he kept quiet so as not to alienate the leaders of the resulting New Order; perhaps, too, he was deathly afraid of what would happen to him, and to the Church, from the victors when he realized that after all Germany was going to be defeated. And so he did not speak the condemnation which the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki called for, for fear of offending Europe's new masters: and so one betrayal led on to the other.

If it is, as I think, the inescapable conclusion from the fact of these two betrayals that the Church could be said to be in the grip of corruption, we have to ask how long this corruption has been present. And I should guess that it has been for several centuries. If we seek back in the history of this millenium for a crime comparable in scale to that of the Nazis, we find, so far as I know, only one thing: slavery and the slave trade. I do not need to expatiate on the staggering scale of the

¹While respecting a contributor's right to freedom of opinion, we should point out, as a matter of fact, that Pope Pius XII several times spoke in the strongest terms against nuclear warfare. In particular, in his Easter allocution for 1954, he castigated weapons that lead to 'gigantic destruction', with the 'peril which can arise for future generations'. And in an address to the World Medical Association, 30 September, 1954, he specifically condemned warfare that would lead to 'the pure and simple annihilation of all human life within the radius of the destructive action'. This, the Pope said, 'is not permissible on any account'. Pope John XXIII's words in *Pacem in Terris* are equally relevant. 'Nuclear weapons should be banned, and a general agreement should eventually be reached about progressive disarmament and an effective method of control'. *Editor*.

cruelty and degradation which this trade represented. I once read a 'Sword of the Spirit' pamphlet explaining how the Popes repeatedly condemned slavery; I can only say that, even if they consistently condemned it, they did not make their voices heard. Modern slavery was instituted by Catholic nations, though it was Protestant ones who in the end benefited; and, in the face of this horror, the churches should have been continuously ringing with denunciations. All chickens come home to roost in the end: it is largely because of that monstrous crime, on a scale unparalleled within the same period by any non-Christian nation, that our race has developed colour prejudice as a defensive mechanism to hide its own guilt, and the world holds its breath to see whether our victims will be capable of the magnanimity to forgive us, or whether we shall go down in a war between white and non-white. And the ultimate cause of all this evil was the first of the great betrayals of mankind by God's Church.

It is one thing to recognize from the symptoms that the Church must be corrupt: it is another to diagnose in what that corruption consists. I am going to mention one thing which seems to me a defect of the gravest kind: there may well be others to which I am blind. The point I am going to make is one that is fairly familiar, at least as applied to parishes; but I do not think that people have generally appreciated the gravity of the matter. The fact is this: that, while many inside the Church are living, or trying to live, Christian lives as individuals, the Church, *as a body*, has not been leading a Christian life at all. In our time we have come to realize more forcefully that the Mass is the supreme act *of a community*, and an expression of charity between the members of that community. But this realization is hollow when what is symbolized in this corporate act simply does not exist in reality. Neither the parish, nor the Church as a whole, is a community at all, in the sense in which a village, or a section of a city, or even an Oxford college, forms a community. The Church is at present merely a *religious* association: an organization to which those can belong who accept certain religious views, which exists solely to supply to its members what will fulfil their strictly religious needs. We do not know one another, we do not care for one another, and we have nothing in common with one another save our acceptance of certain religious tenets.

This is grossly wrong. We have before us all the time the pattern of the earliest Christian community, described in the Acts and in the Epistles: and we know that it constituted a society which undertook to care for its members. Indeed, it did not tolerate parasites ('if a man will not work, so neither let him eat'): but it accepted the responsibility to support and help its less fortunate members, the poor, the widows and the orphans. And this not only *within* each local church: when one particular church was in trouble as a whole, the other churches provided relief. This

pattern is so clearly laid down for us in Scripture, that it is a matter of bewilderment that we should ever have dared to depart from it. It ought to be taken for granted that a Catholic parish is a society of people who look after one another; acceptance of responsibility for the welfare of other members of the community ought to be a known condition of becoming a Catholic. In any parish, there are always many struggling with hardship: the poor, the out of work, the sick, the crippled, the very old; those with many children, those with sick or mentally defective children, those who have to take care of the old or the crippled or the ill. And in any parish, there are also those who are more fortunate, and it should be accepted without question, as being simply a part of what it is to be a Catholic, that the latter should help the former. But we do not even undertake to help the less fortunate in the performance of their strictly religious duties; there are many so hampered by their domestic obligations that, year after year, they are unable to participate in the great liturgical celebrations, and able to attend ordinary Sunday Mass only fitfully. I say that in every parish there are those who are more fortunate: for even if everyone suffers some misfortune, those who are unfortunate in one way may be fortunate in another; those oppressed by poverty may have time to spare for others, those who have no time may have money or room in their houses. But, if we accepted these ideas as an ordinary part of Catholic life, we should see to it that, as far as possible, a parish did represent a cross-section of the social structure: we should so draw the parish boundaries that every parish included some who were well off as well as some who were poor; whereas now, very often, the parish is neatly devised to include only members of a single social class.

Of course, I am not denying that charitable works have constantly been a standard part of Catholic life, for instance by such bodies as the Society of St Vincent de Paul. But such works have been thought to be a special vocation of a minority, rather than a normal part of the obligation which any Catholic accepts; and it has been a matter of dispensing charity to a few hard cases. A comparatively well off mother, struggling with seven children, or a respectable middle-aged spinster, tied to an aged and bed-ridden father, does not want, and does not think she ought, to become a 'case' on an S.V.P. list: whereas, if it were taken for granted that a Catholic parish is a community in which we *all* help *one another*, each giving what he is capable of, the atmosphere would be quite different, and no-one would be embarrassed or affronted at being offered help.

This cannot be confined to the parish level: sometimes help will be needed which simply cannot be provided by the resources of the parish. It ought to be universally accepted that the Church, as a community, has the obligation to assure, so far as is humanly possible, tolerable conditions

of life to her members. There is much to quarrel with in Dr Biezanek's recent book: but one thing in it which, in my view, is wholly justified is her complaint that when, by trying to live in accordance with what she then believed, and had been told, were the requirements of Christian morality, she was faced with the loss of her job, the dispersal of her children, and the breakdown of her health, the Church as a body simply refused to acknowledge the responsibility of saving her from these disasters. It seems clear to me that, if we lived *as a Christian body*, rather than as a number of individual Christians who happened to be present in the same building for worship periodically, we should have ample resources with which to save any of our members from being driven into such a state, and that we ought therefore, as a body, to accept it as our duty to do so.

If you reflect for a moment on how things would be if this doctrine had been accepted and put into practice, you will see how many, many evils in the Church, great and small, would have been avoided. There might have been, as there is now, a doubt raised within the Church about the correctness of the traditional teaching on contraception: but it is unthinkable that those who raised it would have done so in the spirit of bitter resentment that is now so evident, if all along those who were burdened with large families received the constant assistance of their fellow-Catholics in the back-breaking task of coping with them. We complain of the cruel attacks that are made on us from outside on this issue: but, if things had been as I am saying that they ought to be, who would have had the face to criticize us for heartlessness? Take, again, the scandal of wealthy or upper-class Catholics who have continued, with no awareness of inconsistency, to adopt towards Catholics of lower social class the attitude of aloofness and superiority standard in their society. This was possible only against the background of a Church that existed for a specifically *religious* purpose: such attitudes would simply have broken down if these people had had, as an ordinary part of their duties, to mind the children or scrub the floors of their poorer fellow-Christians; and the same goes for the shocking expressions by Catholics of racial prejudice, on the letter page of the *Catholic Herald*, as well as in South Africa or Louisiana. All I am saying amounts to this: that Christians ought to be an example to the world of Christian charity; and they palpably are not. Sometimes we repeat to ourselves the words, 'See how these Christians love another': ought we not to ask ourselves, 'How long is it since these words could be uttered without mockery?'
