

Preface

The levelling of the ghetto

Plenty has been written in many languages about what *ought* to have happened to the life of the Church after Vatican II, and what people *imagine* has happened to the Church's life, and there is no end to what has been printed about the politics of the post-Conciliar Church. Yet amazingly little has been published on the sociology of the Catholic Church in this last quarter of a century. And what sociologists have written of the recent life of the Catholic Church in England would not fill eighteen inches of shelving (and that is including doctoral dissertations). Yet, now that the years of alternating euphoria and gloom are probably over, it is clear sociologists have something of major importance to contribute to the Church's self-understanding.

A year ago SCM Press of London published Anthony Archer's *The Two Catholic Churches: a study in oppression* (273 pp; £9.50), an account, by a sociologist who is also a Dominican priest, of the Roman Catholic Church in England (and, more specifically, in the North East of England) before and since the Council. You will find a short outline of the book in W.S.F. Pickering's article here, and all the writers in this special number, *Class and Church: after ghetto Catholicism*, comment on the book in places. However, this number is not one long disguised book review, and you should find it quite stimulating to read even if hitherto you have not even heard of the book. For this is, first and foremost, an attempt to wrestle with the issues that the book raises.

Of these, the central one is Archer's claim that the main consequence of the Council for the Catholic Church in England has not after all been to make the Church more accessible for the people of our time—as had been hoped and is still widely assumed. On the contrary. He sees the reforms of Vatican II as a triumph for middle-class intellectuals and argues that what we have witnessed since then has been what Kieran Flanagan calls 'an ecclesiastical embourgeoisement' which has marginalized working-class Catholics—though the Catholic Church in England was for a century overwhelmingly a working-class church. Archer thinks the Church is becoming 'just another Christian denomination', identifying more and more closely with the civil Establishment, and embracing the values and ambitions of middle-class English society.

How true is this claim? And, if it is true, what are the implications? As the list on the last page shows, the writers of the present number of *New Blackfriars* are nearly all sociologists themselves. All of them are also Christians—Roman Catholics, with two exceptions. We decided not, at

this stage, to bring a Marxist voice into this debate. All the same, there are plenty of varied and conflicting views here. But none of the writers altogether rejects Archer's thesis, and most of them agree with quite a lot of what he says.

To be frank, this does surprise us a little, for Archer's approach is undoubtedly controversial. His book closes off more or less every avenue of escape from the predicament it points to: every ecclesiastical posture, from the disciplined closure of the post-Modernist Church, through the excesses of the fringe in the 1960s and 1970s, to the liberal consensus that Archer now laments—all these and others too are (often brilliantly) described and rejected. In this sense it is a pessimistic study, even (oddly) one in which Vatican II itself emerges as an event of minor importance in the Church's history. Perhaps only one who is young enough to take John XXIII for granted can write with what to another generation might appear to be so little appreciation of the Conciliar achievement.

A second query concerns the alternative vision of society which Archer claims the inter-war Church had on offer. This is perhaps to exaggerate the radicalism of the English working class in those years. The 'alternative vision' was itself essentially middle-class as well as highly intellectualist. And (one last query) why are the religious attitudes generated by Vatican II regarded as 'middle class' *in themselves*? If the middle-classes had a monopoly in the understanding of what was going on in the liturgy (and that in fact was the case until the Council), was it not high time that they lost it? To suppose that working-class people cannot understand modern services and should be left to say their rosaries against the blessed mutter of a distant Mass is simply to patronise them, surely?

Yet Archer has raised questions of central importance which concern more Christians than just the Roman Catholics living in England—and this is why we have dedicated a whole number to their discussion. And his basic claim is yet another reminder that we are fools if we try to interpret the troubles of the modern Church entirely in terms of fights between radicals and reactionaries, liberals and fundamentalists. In his book *Non-Bourgeois Theology* (Orbis, 1985), Joseph G. Donders, after making the point that even conservative Church leaders in Africa agree almost unanimously that the African does not feel at home in imported Christian church communities, goes on to ask, 'But do Christians in the West feel at home in the type of Christianity they have been and still are exporting?' (p. 15).

Is there an answer? Here and there in this number the beginnings of an answer are sought, but most of the time our contributors are concerned with the less ambitious yet unavoidable preliminary task of trying to sharpen the questions.

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