

# To *the Archbishops and Bishops of England and Wales*

Next November the Extraordinary Synod assembles to evaluate how far the Church has succeeded in faithfully implementing the decisions of the Second Vatican Council. It is for this reason that we are here presenting, for the consideration of you, the bishops of England and Wales, a response written by a group of British Catholic theologians to what the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had to say about contemporary Catholicism in his famous *Jesus* interview. This is an unusual thing to do. Isn't it rather an impertinence? A possible affront to the Cardinal Prefect? A possible embarrassment to the bishops?

We are convinced it is not. With his wonderful sense of 'Catholic wholeness', Cardinal Newman believed that an essential feature of authentic Church life is internal dialogue—in other words, continuous interrelating between three facets of the life of the Christian community: theology, worship and government. (Professor Lash says a little more about this in these pages). The Church only remains properly Catholic, in the truth, in so far as the dialogue continues. Catholics still often feel that it is disloyal in any way to question what comes from 'on high'. The Catholic who in any way dissents is identified as not properly 'orthodox'. But orthodoxy requires us to believe that the Holy Spirit is poured upon the whole Church. And that Church remains Catholic because the conversation between the theologians and the bishops and the laity carries on. It has been a sound Catholic tradition that grace perfects nature, and that our faith is thus a perfection of our humanity, but we will remain humanly and theologically immature unless we discover how, as a Church, to explore areas of dissent and disagreement without fear. The truthfulness of the Church is threatened by opposite forms of infantilism, both that which identifies communion with the bishop of Rome with an unquestioning acceptance of every word that comes from the Vatican, and that which is unable to tolerate a single word of criticism or correction from the wider Church, and especially from the centre. Both are renunciations of that dialogue whereby the Spirit leads us into all truth. The four theologians who here are writing about Cardinal Ratzinger's conclusions on the state of the Church, and addressing themselves first to you, our own bishops, do so in the hope that they are contributing to the growth of a Church in which we may learn to speak and to listen without fear.

When, last November, the Milan-based monthly magazine *Jesus* published what they called 'a preview of some of the most notable contents' of the Cardinal's long interview with Vittorio Messori in the previous August, we were certain that what the Cardinal was saying demanded serious attention, and developments since then have made this more obvious than ever. The international debate which followed the Vatican's document on theology of liberation, *Libertatis nuntius*, had already made his name one of the three or four most famous in the Church. The calling of the extraordinary Synod, and Cardinal Ratzinger's role in documentary preparation for the Synod, meant that there would be no need at all to explain why all sorts of people, not just Vatican-watchers, should be interested in the Cardinal's views. According to Roman gossip, the long-promised book version of the interview would be 'a key to the Synod'.

What will be 'the Vatican position' at the Synod? In the past it has, in similar situations, quite often been difficult to tell whether the Vatican has even had a 'position'. The Pope's appointment of Cardinal Ratzinger as Prefect of the CDF was important for many reasons, but perhaps as important, today, as his reputation as a theologian is his ability and readiness—so rare in Vatican circles—to outline publicly his thinking about major issues in the Church. One can acknowledge that gratefully, while being uneasy about some of that thinking.

The title of the *Jesus* abridgement of the interview set the tone: 'Ecco perché la fede è in crisi' ('Here is why the Faith is in crisis'). Coverage in the English-language press concentrated almost entirely on the Cardinal's pessimistic assessment of post-Conciliar Catholicism (and especially his remarks on 'restaurazione'), on what he had to say about theology of liberation, and his critical observations on episcopal conferences. Exactly how close were the Cardinal's own views to the Pope's own thinking? That was not easy to gauge. Reports circulated that one of the reasons why the book version was taking so long to appear was a request made 'at a high level' that the Cardinal should put what he had to say 'in a more positive way'. But these reports were unconfirmed, and, in any case, changes had already been made before the publication of the German edition of the *Jesus* text in December, the edition which the Cardinal said was to be the official one, and the one on which the response in the present pages is based.

Now the book version is out (for particulars see the note at the opening of the next section, 'The Cardinal, in summary'). But still there is no English translation available. We have resorted to compromise. In 'The Cardinal, in summary' you will find extracts from the Cardinal's own words which should give you at least an unbiased outline of the main points that he made in the interview, and

which should help you to follow the discussion in these pages and see quotations in their proper context. We decided that without a source of reference like this, easy to cite, the response would lose a lot of its force and 'the other side of the argument'—i.e. the words of the Cardinal himself—would be missing.

The theologians who have responded to what the Cardinal had to say have not produced an 'agreed text'. All four of them happen to be members of the Committee of the newly-founded Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain, but they have not written as representatives of the Association. They have written from their individual standpoints and according to their very varied interests (for a little more about them, see the page of notes preceding their texts).

Dr Duffy has focussed on the Cardinal's evaluation of the secular world, the world which he thinks that the Church should be less 'open' to. Profesor Lash explores the grounds for fearing that the Catholic faith is in danger of collapse. Father Mahoney looks at three areas which the Cardinal speaks about—teaching on the salvation of non-Christians, developments in moral theology, and episcopal activity in the Church—and points to the evidence in these areas of positive growth in Catholic doctrine at least as great as alarming decline. Father Kerr considers how far the picture that the Cardinal draws is reconcilable with what we know about the Church in Britain today. One important topic of the Cardinal's— theology of liberation—is not touched on, as so much has already been written on it lately. And what the Cardinal has to say about 'restaurazione' is not touched on directly, as its 'sinister' content was greatly exaggerated last November, especially by the Italian press.

Our hope is that the forthcoming Extraordinary Synod will be a mature dialogue in the common pursuit of truth, a fully Catholic debate. We hope that these contributions will help to inform you, our bishops, about current debates on some issues which will be of central importance.

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