

# Comment

## *No through road?*

Presumably we should be grateful for small mercies: the Pope's recent letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury about the ordination of women to the priesthood in the Anglican Communion does not terminate Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue. All the same, it compels us to recognise that, assuming there still exists a road to visible unity (and that is now far from certain), it is going to take very much longer to travel than we thought. The ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate appears to 'effectively block the path to the mutual recognition of ministries', the Pope says, for the Catholic Church 'is firmly opposed to this development, viewing it as a break with Tradition of a kind we have no competence to authorise'.

As a result of this crisis some more Anglican men will become Catholics and some more Catholic women will become Anglicans. But we will not write about the immediate future here. What might the more distant future now hold? Unlike the Holy Father, quite a lot of Catholics are convinced that there is no solid doctrinal reason why women should not be ordained priests: that the objections are basically cultural, and sooner or later the Catholic Church will change its ruling, not because of ideology, and probably not because of practical necessity, but because of cultural change. Said the playwright Arthur Miller in a *Marxism Today* interview last January: 'I often wonder whether, fifty years from now, any of this culture is going to be comprehensible.' Whatever those massive cultural changes may be, it is fairly safe to say that fifty years from now it will hardly make sense anywhere in the Christian world to disqualify people from any role simply because of their sex. We are tempted to go on to conclude that the Church will *have* to cease to exist.

Will it, though? In fact, adopting this line of thinking is a dangerously easy way of pushing an upsetting problem into the back of the mind. In saying 'The difficulties are really only cultural, not doctrinal', we shut our eyes to the immense importance of cultural differences (and politics is part of culture) in the defining and preserving of church divisions—both divisions between churches and, at least in Catholicism, inside the church.

Nearly all of us, so it seems, are now wide awake to what modern culture is doing to people's beliefs and values. As Cardinal O'Connor of New York said to the Pope last March, 'frequently when American bishops are perceived as questioning the authority of the Holy See, what they are really doing is trying to make things "work" in our culture.' We are not quite so wide awake to the ways cultural forces, much more than doctrinal disputes, not only are bringing five new Christian sects into

210

existence somewhere or other every week but also reinforcing many of the barriers and blockages that already cram the Christian world. And building new ones. Our problems can never be safely shrugged off as 'only cultural'. Christianity is not just a cluster of things to believe, things for theologians sitting round a table to sort out, but the living out of those beliefs in a culture.

Currently there are in the Catholic Church symptoms of quite a lot of fear and unease. To take recent examples, there have been the removal of Paul Valadier (the editor of the highly-acclaimed French Jesuit journal *Etudes*), the appointment of some almost embarrassingly little men as key bishops in the German-speaking world and parts of Latin America, and the proceedings started against several authors of books critical of the Holy See. 'The climate of fear in the Church is serious', said Valadier at his press conference. There is a reassertion and some redrawing of boundaries—an attempt to narrow what it means to be a Catholic, at a time when Catholicism world-wide is an increasingly complex phenomenon.

What, basically, both the Church's rulers and its ruled are frightened of is that the way of Christian life that they each personally treasure might be destroyed. What they may be clinging to is the Catholicism of the Central Europe of the 1930s, or of the North America of the 1960s—just what kind is beside the point. All we have to say here is that it would immensely aid unity if people were more honest about precisely what kind of life they are clinging to, fighting over.

But a course in sociology is not the only answer. As our regular readers will know, *Believing in God*, Gareth Moore's 'philosophical essay' recently published by T & T Clark, may not be everybody's book, but there are things in it that are superb. And some of these are liberating ... which is why we are mentioning the book here.

It could be said to be a reflection on Aquinas's 'Deus non est in genere substantiae' (ST 1a. 3, 5, ad 1). Moore argues that much of our thinking about God is hampered by our tendency to think of God as 'an invisible Charlie' (p. 148). 'To fear God', he says, 'is not to fear one being instead of another, nor to fear one as well as another, and neither is it to fear without any object of fear; it is *not to fear at all*. ... God is not somebody else, whom the Christian serves, somebody else, whom he is anxious to please. To serve God is to serve nobody, to be free, and to be anxious about the things of God is to be free from anxiety' (p. 139). Eventually our lack of fear—in other words, our freedom—depends on how we understand God. And the dissolution of at least some of our conflicts and divisions partly depends on us having that freedom, the freedom that comes from knowing 'that you are safe, that you are all right, whatever happens to you, however unsafe you may be, however much things may go wrong' (p. 123).

J.O.M.  
211