

# The Common Man Confirmed

by Jeremy Moiser

One often hears it said, and it is even more often accepted, that it is right to despise the masses.<sup>1</sup> The majority of mankind, it is argued, are subject to a basic shortness of vision and a fundamental inertia which make it necessary for someone else—a dictator, a power elite, a superior—to administer their affairs. On this view the passivity of the mass of people has to be offset, if man is to advance, by being manipulated by the competent, talented few. Progress in history and the growth of civilisation are the work of an oligarchy, while the people constitute merely the raw material out of which history is made.

On the other side a number of thinkers have espoused the cause of the *polloi*.<sup>2</sup> History is the vicissitudes of common folk, and nothing nobler can be contemplated than the numberless multitudes who shape the world's destiny.

It would seem difficult for a Christian to adopt either of these views for his understanding of the Church. If, on the one hand, the Church is thought to consist primarily in the clerical elite, it is hard to see why Christ took such pains to identify himself with the un-spectacular masses. If, on the other hand, the Church's history is seen as the development of the *sensus omnium fidelium*, it is not easy to explain the cult of exceptional members who are thought to have advanced the spread of Christianity more significantly than any others, and it is even less easy to explain the emphasis placed on the role of the hierarchy in the preservation of God's truth.

<sup>1</sup>Cf. these quotations given in the Bentley-Esar *Treasury of Humorous Quotations* (Dent, London 1951, 1971):

1. As good people's very scarce, what I says is, make the best of 'em (Dickens).
2. The people are to be taken in very small doses (Emerson).
3. The people are that part of the state which does not know what it wants (Hegel).
4. The more I see of the representatives of the people, the more I admire my dogs (Lamartine).

To these may be added the sentiments expressed in Dryden's 'Of Dramatic Poesy' (*Select Dramatic Criticism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1970, 70-71): 'If by the people you understand the multitude, the *oi polloi*, 'tis no matter what they think; they are sometimes in the right, sometimes in the wrong; their judgement is a mere lottery'.

<sup>2</sup>Sympathy with the down-trodden masses is often the driving force of revolutionaries, who identify themselves with the people. Cf. also B. R. Barber, *Superman and Common Men*, Praeger, New York 1971, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1972; A. Carrel, *Man the Unknown*, Hamish Hamilton, London 1935, Burns Oates, London 1961, 187-215. Even so patriarchal a figure as Confucius considers an element of culture to be the willingness to learn from one's inferiors (*Sayings of Confucius*, trans. J. R. Ware, Mentor, New York 1955, Bk. 5, no. 15, p. 41).

The dilemma is well expressed by Daniélou: 'The Church must strive to include all men. And yet there is a duty to see to a deeper and deeper personal commitment'.<sup>3</sup> On the common assumption that quantity and quality grow in inverse proportion (the more people the lower the standard; quality is an asset of the few), if Christianity is to be a going concern the decisions must stay with the hierarchical elite. The ideal of the Christian life becomes not the daily grind of common folk but the exceptional prayer life of the monk, the heroic virtue of the saint, the jurisdictional competence of the bishop.

This, in brief, is the dilemma we are to examine: is the common Christian man incapable of self-government, or is he the seat of true Christian progress? Before we broach this, a glance at some ideas on the common man in general will not be out of place.

Francis Galton refers to the *vox populi* as 'the utterance of a mob of nobodies'. 'The vast majority of persons of our race', he says, 'have a natural tendency to shrink from the responsibility of standing and acting alone'.<sup>4</sup> He proves the thesis by likening the behaviour of men to that of a herd of wild S. African oxen. Each herd is numerically determined by the amount of grazing land that will support it and the size that makes for best protection from hostile carnivora. Weak members are weeded out by processes of natural selection, and to prevent the herd from getting too small owing to the attacks of big cats on straying members, forty-nine out of fifty oxen are sufficientlyregarious to keep the herd together. The other one is the leader who manages the herd. Men are similar. Most of them are 'willing slaves to tradition, authority and custom', and they are characterised by a 'rareness of free and original thought'.

Much of what Galton says makes sense, and his thesis is supported by so eminent a philosopher as Heidegger, who maintains the inauthentic and commonplace existence of the majority of men.<sup>5</sup> But I do not think we can really accept his analogy with a herd of wild oxen.

José Ortega y Gasset defines the individuals that together constitute the multitude as those who 'demand nothing special of themselves, but for whom to live is to be every moment what they already are, without imposing on themselves any effort towards perfection; mere buoys that float on the waves'<sup>6</sup> This is not a flattering view, and the author dissociates himself from the masses he thus defines. His definition would appear to labour under a confusion. The masses, it is said, are those who make no special demands on themselves, the

<sup>3</sup>J. Daniélou-J. Jossua, *Cristianisme de masse ou d'élite*, Beauchesne (Verse et Controverse 4), Paris 1968, 12.

<sup>4</sup>*Inquiries into human faculty and its development*, Macmillan, London 1883, Dent, London 1907, 1911, 47-56.

<sup>5</sup>For example, N. Bobbio, *The Philosophy of Decadentism*, Blackwell, Oxford 1948, 32-39, J. B. Lotz, Sein and Existenz in der Existenz-philosophie und in der Scholastik, *Gregorianum* 40 (1959), 401-466.

<sup>6</sup>*The Revolt of the Masses*, Unwin, London 1930, 1969, 12.

implication being there is not that within them which would lead them to demand more of themselves. It could be, however, that the reason for their smallness of initiative lies not within them but in the external conditions of a society created by the non-masses. They are in a position of social servitude which denies them a context in which to exercise initiative. The opprobrium in this case rests with the elite, not as Ortega y Gasset suggests with the masses.

Henri Montherlant draws a picture of the great public as an unprotesting prey to the mass media, swayed by the mediocrity and moral ugliness of cinema, press and radio.<sup>7</sup> Ancient Rome collapsed, he says, because the average Roman was more interested in games than in poetry. Today four-fifths of France's adults read nothing but the evening paper; small wonder that the human quality of the average Frenchman is sadly on the decline. Linguistic analysts and McLuhanites will bear out the basic idea here: that mass media of communication control the lives and thoughts of citizens subjected to them, depriving them of personal initiative.

However, the main feature of any sociological or philosophical analysis of the common man is that it treats people by what they have in common. It depends, in other words, on a generalisation. In my view it is this aspect which renders it inapplicable to the Church. Christianity has made a significant contribution to the history of civilisation by its insistence on the unique worth of each individual. This theological pillar of Christian thought militates against any lumping of individuals together under a generic heading. Common in Christian thinking, of course, are terms like people of God, Church, laity. There is, however, a distinction to be made. Firstly, these words are not in the least pejorative, as is often the case with sociological nomenclature like 'the masses'. On the contrary, they serve to express the Christian's great dignity. Secondly, and more importantly, they denote not what the Christian is of himself but what God has made of him: the member of a salvific community. In sociology, generic terms such as the underprivileged, the elite, the religious-minded, the criminal, are used to point to situations which are the result of human agency. In theology, on the other hand, although such terms are not unknown, the ones we are talking about here describe the result of *God's* activity. Since God's activity is creative and gives rise to the autonomy and individuality of creatures<sup>8</sup>, to speak of (for example) the people of God is to draw attention to the individual dignity of the members that comprise it. It is not, as for the sociologist it might be, to gloss over what distinguishes one man from another, but on the contrary to focus on it.

<sup>7</sup>*Essais*, Gallimard, Paris 1963, 936-946.

<sup>8</sup>It would be useful, although space does not permit us, to develop this. Some ideas may be found in J. Ratzinger, *Schöpfungsglaube und Evolutionstheorie*, in *Wer ist das eigentlich—Gott?* ed. Schultz, Kosel-Verlag, Munich 1969, 232-245; Id., *Beyond death*, *Intern.Cath.Rev.* 1 (1972), 157-165; H. Rotter, *Geistbeseelung des Menschen*, *ZKTh* 93 (1971), 168-181.

The philosopher, therefore, will talk quite happily about the unexceptional rank and file, solid enough citizens no doubt, but lacking in perception, dull of mind, and easily satisfied. Even the revolutionary credits the people with little initiative of their own, as in his view they need a leader before they can redeem themselves from slavery to the capitalist or colonialist systems. In the past, Church leaders have been led into similar views of rank and file Christians. Origen and Cyprian both complained that vast numbers of Christians were nominal only, without any real enthusiasm for the cause.<sup>8a</sup> Maximus of Turin, for example, complained bitterly that his flock had remarkably little to show for all his efforts in their behalf<sup>9</sup>, and Salvian of Marseilles, a younger contemporary, castigated the people's failings unmercifully.<sup>10</sup> Their words are taken up by those modern research scientists who tell us that only five per cent of mankind show leadership qualities, the rest being content to be led.

Similar thinking characterises any non-democratic society, and in particular the Church of today. A community that insists on a governing elite is in practice dismissing the masses as of little account: they are there simply to be governed. According to Thomas Aquinas, most people have neither the time nor the energy nor the aptitude to pursue the higher activities of human life like philosophy and government,<sup>11</sup> but these are establishment thoughts. It is society's task to enable citizens to pursue these higher activities, just as in the thought of contemporary educationalists it is the task of the school (if it has one) to enable the pupils to develop their potentialities without being subject to indoctrination.

The inapplicability of sociological generic nomenclature to the Christian people becomes even clearer with a consideration of the sacrament of confirmation. It is now generally agreed that confirma-

<sup>8a</sup>W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church*, London, 1965. p. 107.

<sup>9</sup>Hom.100. De defectione lunae, PL 57, 483-486.

<sup>10</sup>De gubernatione Dei lib.5, PL 100-108. The eighteenth-century French theologian Claude Régner (1718-1790) wrote a treatise on the Church (edited by Migne and included in his *Theologiae Cursus Completus*, Paris 1839-1840, Vol. 4, 9-1140) in which he argues that only bishops, with the Pope of course, have authority to decide matters of faith and morals. He considers five objections to his thesis, all of them intending to prove that presbyters too have a deciding voice: it seems that not even opponents of Régner's thesis contemplated the possibility of the *people's* having a say.

For centuries in the Church there has been an effort to keep the laity down. A few examples will illustrate this. 'No lay person may set himself up as a teacher in matters of religion' (Council in Trullo, 692, canon 64, McC 11,972); the laity are forbidden to interfere in the affairs of the Church (Council of Rheims 1148, MaC 21,715); no layman may dispute about the faith, in public or private (Synod of Tarragon 1234, MaC 23,329); the laity are forbidden to have in their possession books of theology written in the vernacular, with the exception of prayer-books (Synod of Tarragon 1317, canon 2, MaC 25,628); lay people are not to be near the altar during divine services (Synod of Paris 1429, canon 35, MaC 28,1113). 'The Church of God consists in its priests' (Isidore, *Ep. Spur.* c. 7, 8, quoted by Y. Congar, *L'ecclésiologie du haut moyen âge*. Paris, 1968, p. 240.

<sup>11</sup>*De veritate* q.14. a.10, corpore (Marietti 137). Cf. *In Boeth. de Trin.* lib.1, q.1, a.1, resp. (Marietti p. 342); II-II 2, 4. Pope Nicholas I, on the other hand, admits that the laity are as interested in matters of faith as the clergy: *Epist.* 186 to the Emperor Michael, PL 110. 943-944 (also in MaC 15, 200-201).

tion, at whatever age administered, is the sacrament of Christian maturity.<sup>12</sup> There is sufficient evidence in tradition to support this view. For Ambrose confirmation is the perfection of Christian membership.<sup>13</sup> Peter Lombard refers to the imparting of the Spirit 'for vigorous action',<sup>14</sup> and Bonaventure interprets confirmation as the strengthening of the baptised Christian.<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas understands the sacrament as the conferring of a supernatural strength or power for Christian activity.<sup>16</sup> Now the low opinions of the multitude we mentioned earlier rest on the belief that the multitude is politically or socially immature: its powers of self-government are not sufficiently developed. The sacrament of confirmation makes it impossible to maintain this of the Christian multitude: every confirmed Christian is equipped to take his destiny in his own hands and to determine the life of the Church. This is what confirmation means.

Certain writers have recognised this, not necessarily for the same reasons. Newman acknowledged the Church's debt to the non-hierarchy throughout the difficult times of the fourth century,<sup>17</sup> and Conan Doyle for the present day.<sup>18</sup> In the last century Kierkegaard praised the Christian 'people' as the healthy womb from which beneficial developments can be expected.<sup>19</sup> In his *Christian Devotion*, John Baillie notes how St Paul, addressing letters to 'the saints' at Colossae, Ephesus or Philippi, accepts that the whole community is composed of committed Christians.<sup>20</sup> And it is significant that in Utopia the people will be so 'instruct and institute' that there will be no need of 'attorneys, proctors and sergeants of the laws': everybody will be politically mature under God's guiding hand.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>12</sup>For example P. Fransen, Confirmation, in *Intelligent Theology*, II, DLT, London 1968, 7-66; P. T. Camelot, Toward a theology of confirmation, *TD* 7 (1959), 67-71; Id., Il battesimo e la cresima nella teologia contemporanea, in *Problemi e orientamenti di teologia dommatica*, Marzorati, Milan 1957, II, 795-829; B. Botte, A propos de la confirmation: *NRT* 88 (1966), 848-852; the entire issue of *Lumière et Vie* 51 (1961); P. Nordhues, Ueberlegungen zum Sakrament der Firmung, *Theol.u. Glaube* 58 (1968), 281-297; J. Wall, Confirmation, *The Furrow* 21 (1970), 42-47; G. Delcuve, Is confirmation the sacrament of the apostolate? *Lumen Vitae* 17 (1962), 467-506.

<sup>13</sup>*De sacramentis* 3, 2, quoted by B. Neunheuser, *Baptism and Confirmation* (Herder History of Dogma), Herder, Freiburg—Burns Oates, London 1964, 233.

<sup>14</sup>*Sent.* 4, 7, quoted Neunheuser 243.

<sup>15</sup>*Breviloquium* 6, 8, quoted Neunheuser 247.

<sup>16</sup>In *Symbolum apostolorum expos.* a.10 (Marietti, Opusc.Theol.II, 990).

<sup>17</sup>*On consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine*, ed. J. Coulson, Chapman, London 1961.

<sup>18</sup>If the Church of Rome should ever be wrecked, it may come from her weakness in high places, where all churches are at their weakest, or it may be because with what is very narrow she tries to explain that which is very broad, but assuredly it will never be through the fault of her rank and file, for never upon earth have men and women spent themselves more lavishly and splendidly than in her service' (*The Refugees*, John Murray, London 1947, 297). Elizabeth Goudge professes similar sentiments of the Jews: 'Their High Priests up in Jerusalem had compounded with the conqueror, and so, for the sake of ease and gain had many of their men of wealth, but not the people, not the working people who were the bone and marrow of the nation' (*The Reward of Faith*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1971, 102-103).

<sup>19</sup>*La difficulté d'être chrétien*, ed. J. Colette, Ed. du Cerf, Paris 1964, 246.

<sup>20</sup>O.U.P. London 1962, 2-3. But cf. Cor 3, 2; Heb 5, 11-14.

<sup>21</sup>Thomas More, *Utopia* Bk. 2, Dent, London 1910, 1951, 103. The translation is that of Ralph Robinson, 1551, slightly modernised.

Now it cannot be that the Christian maturity conferred by confirmation is to be located beyond the external structures of the Church, as if the supernatural power for Christian activity mentioned by Aquinas referred simply to one's inner spiritual life. God's kingdom is a visible one, and the freedom Christ came to bring affects the external as well as the internal sphere (if such a distinction has any meaning). If the Christian is not mature in the outward ecclesial sphere, if, in other words, he is not able in company with other Christians to determine his own Christian environment, then he is not mature at all.

It is obvious that grace does not perform miracles, and therefore the sacrament of confirmation cannot be expected to turn every Christian into an ecclesial statesman. It seems to me, nonetheless, that confirmation requires us to respect every Christian's right to a say in the Church's deliberations. The common man does not cease to be 'common' because he is a Christian, but in the Church that cannot form the ideological basis for a refusal to introduce democracy.<sup>22</sup> We have it on God's authority, although it has rarely been recognised, that every Christian, however contrary the appearances, is of age, and therefore entitled to a vote in the Church. No one can take it on himself to deny this without emptying the sacrament of confirmation of its meaning. In Ephesians Paul states the work of the Christian community as a growth towards full maturity in Christ. Once fully mature, the community will 'grow in *all* ways into Christ' (4, 13-16). If that does not include the social aspects of Church living, I am at a loss to know what Paul could mean.<sup>23</sup>

The conclusion I allow myself to draw is this. The Christian community has no place for a governing elite. The organisation of the Church should be in the hands of the common man where God has placed it. If this is not so, it is difficult to conceive of the function of confirmation. Put less belligerently, I should wish to suggest that a rethinking of the sacrament of confirmation might lead us to work towards a more democratic functioning of the Christian community.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Democracy I take to mean self-government by the people. A fuller discussion of the Church as a democracy would take us regrettably too far out of our way.

<sup>23</sup>It could be argued that maturity means the responsible acceptance of orders from those in command. I find this view rather odd, given that even in a secular democracy, the presumed maturity of the citizens entails at least a measure of self-determination in the form of suffrage.

<sup>24</sup>Harvey Cox begins his *God's revolution and man's responsibility* (SCM Press, London 1969, 13) by saying that 'it is time we Christians move our focus from the renewal of church to the renewal of world'. I could not agree more. Nevertheless, for the Church to be effective in changing God's world, it must be of such a texture as will allow it to have an impact. It is my fear that unless the Church lives up more to God's brief to every Christian, it will in the very near future prove altogether redundant.