

President's Report

Bishops and Other Teachers: Some Signs of the Times

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In his President's Report three years ago, Jack Mahoney considered whether a theologian's relation to the episcopate should not be more like that of artist to patron than mandarin to minister, and he ended by suggesting that 'part of the role of our Association is ... to have a sacramental function' within the local Church, both reflecting on our common faith and aiming to communicate that reflection.

During the past year, a series of in themselves apparently unconnected developments convinced me that it might be helpful as part of our fulfilment of the tasks which Jack indicated, if we were to set aside an hour for their consideration. The developments that I have in mind may be listed under seven headings:

1. First, and most diffusely, I sense a growing thirst, on the part of Catholic laypeople, for continuing theological (and especially biblical) education—the impetus for which comes variously from parental responsibility, from questions of justice and peace, increasingly (I think) from concern for creation and, most generally, from the recognition that, in an ever more barbarous and philistine society, only faith appropriated and purified through prayer and shared reflection can hope to stand.
2. Secondly, there is a disturbing tendency towards polarisation in our perception of the relationship between 'form' and 'content' in religious education. This is surely an area which cries out for improvement in the quality of dialogue and collaboration between bishops, catechists, and theologians.
3. Thirdly, the 'Cologne Declaration' signed in January by 163 theologians from Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands, was followed by statements from theologians in France, Belgium, Italy and Brazil. These statements varied in both tone and content (variations which reflected the particular circumstances and concerns of different local churches: the 'mild and conciliatory tone' of the Italian document, as described by *The Tablet*, was in contrast with the thunder rumbling from Germany!) Nevertheless, taken together they constitute an impressive

consensus of disquiet.

4. In the fourth place, there are the new Profession of Faith and Oath of Fidelity, which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared to have come into force from the first of March. It is, of course, quite possible that, as Professor James Burtchaell argued with most excellent wit, these documents are forgeries but, for the time being, it would seem prudent to work on the disturbing assumption that they are authentic.¹

5. In the fifth place, there is the proposal to establish a European Society for Catholic Theology. I have distributed copies of the invitation received from the Preparatory Committee, and will return to the matter later on.

6. In the sixth place, we should, I think, take note of the document approved by the episcopal conference of the United States in June, by 214 votes to 9, entitled 'Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstandings between Bishops and Theologians'.² Without wishing to appear unduly complacent, I would hope that we never need, in this much smaller country, machinery as cumbersome as that which the Americans have set up. Nevertheless, there are surely lessons for us to learn from this remarkable document, which was three years in preparation, and which received the green light from Cardinal Ratzinger's officials in March.

It consists of three parts: a general sketch of the ecclesial context within which bishops and theologians exercise their different responsibilities, a set of proposals for promoting informal cooperation and dialogue between them, and suggested structures for the formal clarification and resolution of doctrinal disputes. The document is entirely and admirably constructive, and its language is refreshingly free from legalism.

7. Finally, the bishops and their advisers will, as you know, be obliged to devote much time and energy this winter to consideration of Rome's proposals for a 'universal catechism'. Like most of us, I imagine, I have not yet seen these proposals: they may, in the event, consist simply in a recommendation that Herbert McCabe's catechism be translated into a hundred and eighty further languages! But the matter must surely form part of our agenda.

There can clearly be no question of my attempting, in ten minutes, detailed analysis of any of these developments. I simply want to try and do two things. First, to sketch a theological 'map' with the aid of which we might consider how these different issues and events relate to each other and to our responsibilities as an Association. Secondly, to make one or two practical proposals concerning: the relationships between bishops and theologians; the proposed European Society; and the new profession of faith.

Any human institution requires, for its successful functioning, the operation of some system of checks and balances between its constitutive features or impulses. This I believe to be as true of the Church as it is of a nation, a family, or a university. And the balance, or harmony, of a social

system is always precarious because it is ever under threat from its own constitutive forces or principles, each of which 'pulls' in a different direction from the others.

Where Catholic Christianity is concerned, no modern theologian has understood this better, I believe, than Newman, according to whom the community of the Church is constituted by sustaining the tension between the requirements of personal experience, of truth, and of action or organisation.

Some years ago in a study of that great Preface to the third edition of the *Via Media* in which Newman gave final expression to this view of the Church, I suggested that, since all three 'offices' of Christ, and their refraction in the life of the community, may be considered as aspects of God's pedagogy or *magisterium*—of the ways in which we are, by God's grace, enabled to guide each other towards better hearing and enactment of his Word—it is therefore of paramount importance to appreciate that there is no single thing, no one activity or enterprise, which 'teaching' always is. And I suggested that we might distinguish between the 'doxological', 'declaratory' and 'critical' dimensions of the Christian quest for and expression of truth.³

The first of these dimensions may most appropriately be associated with the work of pastors, and preachers, and parents, and catechists—of all those directly engaged in the forming and feeding of faith. The second, declaratory, task finds focus in the exercise of episcopal office while the third dimension finds typical expression in the critical, exploratory, interpretative labour of academic theology.

It is, of course, central to Newman's account that the kind of map I am so briefly sketching is by no means to be understood as mere 'division of labour'—as if the bearers or typical instances of each office could suppose themselves entitled simply to go their own way, do their own thing. On the contrary, it is essential for the health of Catholic teaching that each office is exercised under continual corrective pressure from the requirements of the other two. Thus, for example (as I put it in a recent paper for the bishops' Theology Committee): catechetical concentration on 'experience', when insufficiently attentive to Scripture and Tradition, and unconcerned with catholicity, becomes sectarian and self-indulgent; theological preoccupation with academic rigour, without responsibility to the needs of particular people and to the wider tradition, becomes mere theory; and episcopacy without theology and submission to experience becomes at best mere management.

So far, my remarks apply to the Church in each place, and at every level. But, to complete the sketch, mention must be made of another constitutive tension: namely, that which we tend, misleadingly, to describe in terms of the relationship between the 'local' and the 'universal' church. This terminology misleads because, while it recognises that any particular group of Christians are only one small feature of some much vaster and more complex whole, gathered from every time and place, to which they

bear responsibility, it nevertheless obscures from view the equally correct and fundamental principle that, where two or three are gathered together in His name, there you have, not a *part* of something larger, not a branch office of a multinational corporation, but the Church of Christ in its entirety, its universalness, its catholicity. And it is precisely the recovery of this latter principle (which we might perhaps call 'sacramental' or 'congregational') in Catholic structure and imagination, to which Vatican II gave so powerful an impetus, which is now already once more under threat.

Finally, then, one or two practical proposals for our consideration.

1. I take first the relationships between bishops and theologians. We are, I think, very fortunate in this country that these relationships are as relaxed and friendly as they seem to be. Without, however, in any way wishing to look a gift horse in the mouth, I am bound to say that I suspect this tranquillity to arise, in part, from mutual tolerant neglect. After all, if Newman is right, then we should expect it to be a sign of genuine collaboration that mutual corrective pressure between different offices should sometimes make sparks fly!

I wish we could persuade more bishops to apply for membership of the Association and to attend our conferences—both to help them to keep in touch with moods and developments in current theology and to deepen our awareness of the burdens which they bear.

I also suggest that current debates on catechetics might be helped by some more structured collaboration between bishops, theologians, and experts in religious education. And I hope that the bishops will make full use of the theological expertise available, at diocesan, regional, and national levels, as they prepare their responses to the proposal for a 'universal catechism'. (I have, therefore, with the approval of the Theology Committee of the Bishops' Conference, taken the liberty of asking our secretary to arrange for a copy of the Directory to be sent to each diocesan bishop.)

2. Next, there is the question of setting up a European Society for Catholic Theology, on the Founding Committee of which I have agreed to serve. We cannot, at this stage, do much more than give encouragement—since the Founding Committee will not hold its first meeting until December—but I believe that the project deserves our help and backing. I would therefore like to suggest that, at the Annual General Meeting tomorrow, we pass a resolution warmly welcoming this initiative.

3. Last, but not least, there is the new Profession of Faith, on which I will make just three remarks and one proposal.

In the first place, it is surely intolerable, and especially so twenty-five years after the promulgation of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, for any body *other* than the bishops of the Catholic Church (*cum Petro et sub Petro*, by all means) to enact revisions of the formulation of Catholic faith. And yet this new text came to them, as to the rest of us, like thunder out of a clear sky.

In the second place, I can think of few devices better calculated to sow

discord and mistrust between bishops and theologians, and between local churches and the Holy See, than the attempt to make so solemn a matter as confession of faith (the articulation, that is to say, of that for the truth of which one would hope to be willing to die) the instrument of a particular and controversial pattern of ecclesiastical discipline. It is scandalous to play party politics with Catholic faith.

In the third place, the second and third of the new paragraphs in the text of the Profession have to do with matters which are explicitly stated *not* to be 'de fide'. They therefore should have no place whatsoever in a profession of faith.

Addressing the Italian bishops in May, the Pope is reported to have said of theologians: 'From them, one must demand a particularly close, loyal and respectful collaboration with the bishops'. I would therefore like to suggest that we pass a further resolution tomorrow, inviting the two episcopal conferences to which we are beholden to set up a joint working party with us to explore the implications of the new profession of faith.⁴

In his Report to the Association last year, Ted Yarnold urged us, as British theologians, to 'bring abstractions down to earth' and to resist 'the temptation of eclectic serendipity' (a disease to which he thought that foreigners were prone). Although the range of issues I have touched upon is very broad, I would plead not guilty to charges of eclecticism. At the same time, I hope that my sketch of the ecclesiological considerations which bind them together as a single set demanding our attention as an association of Catholic theologians has not been so succinct as to convict me of unearthliness.

- 1 James Burtchaell, 'Too Bad to be True', *The Tablet*, 8 April 1989, pp. 388, 390.
- 2 Full text in 'Bishops and Theologians: Promoting Cooperation, Resolving Misunderstandings', *Origins. CNS Documentary Service*, Vol. 19, No. 7 (June 29, 1989), pp. 98—110.
- 3 See Nicholas Lash, 'Life, Language and Organization: Aspects of the Theological Ministry', *Theology on Dover Beach* (London, 1979), pp. 89—108. esp. p. 107. See also the February 1989 special issue of *New Blackfriars*, entitled *What Counts as Catholic Teaching?*, and especially Edmund Hill, 'Who Does the Teaching in the Church?' (pp. 67—73).
- 4 At the Annual General Meeting, the following resolution was passed by 46 votes to 2, with 1 abstention: 'The Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain expresses its disquiet at the introduction into the Church, without consulting the Bishops of the Church, of a revised Profession of Faith and Oath of Fidelity. Recognising our mutual concern about the possible doctrinal, pastoral and ecumenical implications of this revision, and wishing to cooperate with our bishops, we therefore request that the Episcopal Conference of England and Wales and the Episcopal Conference of Scotland enter formally into consultation with the Association on this subject.'