

Since the startling eruption of events after the appearance of 'Comment' in the February issue of *New Blackfriars*, both the Archbishop of Birmingham and the Provincial of the English Dominicans have contributed to putting the controversy into perspective in these columns. It seemed appropriate therefore to invite 'Comment' from the laity as well, and Dr John Bryden who undertook to fly to Rome with the petition has kindly agreed to add his 'Comment' to the list. We publish it here with gratitude to him for taking on this additional task. C.P.

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Since the publication of the February issue of *New Blackfriars*, the Church in Britain has been in the public eye almost continuously. As one of those involved in some of the activities which have aroused this interest, I welcome the opportunity to give a brief account of some particular events, and more importantly the reasons why they happened at all.

The news that Fr McCabe had been dismissed broke over the weekend 10th – 11th February, shortly after the Apostolic Delegate's unhappy comments on the February editorial had appeared in the *Catholic Herald*.

After the initial shock, the reaction of very many of my friends and associates was that some joint lay action was necessary to express the strong disapproval of the Master-General's action felt by many of the laity. This disapproval sprang from the feeling firstly that a grave injustice had been done to Fr McCabe and secondly that if his dismissal went unchallenged then freedom of debate within the Church (at least in Britain) was in grave danger. Hence the petition to the Master-General. It must be stressed that the organization and financing of the petition was on an entirely ad hoc basis. I can only suppose that the reason why I and other prominent members of the Newman Association were approached and urged 'to do something' was that in the nature of things we are widely known personally within the Association and to some extent by members of other Catholic organizations. Nevertheless, after many clarifications of the subject, it seems it must still be repeated that neither the petition nor the subsequent Pray-in was organized by or on behalf of the Newman, whose policy has always been not to take a public stand on any controversial issue,

on the other hand, officers of the Association have never been denied the right to act and speak as individuals without committing the Association or other members. Indeed, the Association is one of the few structures of the Church in Britain which provides an opportunity for disagreements to be vented and issues debated in a mature way.

The petition was drafted in the widest terms as the issue was not approval or disapproval of what Fr McCabe had written but his right to make serious and sincere comment on important issues in the life of the Church.

Initially, copies of the petition were sent to about seventy people who had either urged action or were known to be friends of Fr McCabe. Shortly afterwards 'The Guardian' published a letter signed by myself and others who had taken action which gave details of the petition and invited Lay Catholics to give their support. Of the 400 or so letters received only five were in any way opposed to the idea. Many sent money and asked for copies of the petition to enable their friends to sign also. Although the original letter was of set purpose addressed only to the Laity some fifty clergy and religious also wrote. Many of their letters were quite long and the point was frequently made that they were themselves not free to speak openly for fear of disciplinary action of some kind.

Eventually some 2,100 signatures to the petition were obtained. Of these a very high proportion were identifiable as prominent in Catholic life as writers, publishers, lecturers, officials of Catholic organizations etc. In addition there was a very wide cross section of lay-life ranging from manual workers to university professors. Few if any of the petitioners were recognisable as habitual protestors or Catholic 'cranks'.

At a meeting called to co-ordinate the activities of a number of separate groups of people who were planning activities in support of the principle of free speech in the Church, it was decided that I should personally take the petition to the Master-General in Rome. The actual timing of the visit had to be brought forward due to the Master-General's impending departure on a tour of Dominican Provinces in Australia and the Far East, and therefore only 850 signatures were actually taken to Rome although more were known to be on the way.

The Master-General received me most courteously. I explained to him that I was representing only those who had signed the petition, and that most of them had benefited tremendously from the excellent intellectual apostolate carried out by the Order of Preachers in Britain, particularly since the war, in which Fr McCabe has been prominent. Very many people owed a great debt to him. His dismissal was especially disturbing to these people, precisely because this was a denial of the intellectual freedom which the petitioners enjoyed in their professions or vocations. I further explained that this dismissal had caused scandal to our non-Catholic colleagues and friends and con-

firmed their worst fears about the Church. I concluded my appeal for Fr McCabe's reinstatement with the view that his dismissal was curious when one considered that the main point of the offending editorial was to argue that whatever might be wrong with the Church the last thing anyone should do was to leave it.

The Master-General replied that he was genuinely grateful for the interest and concern shown by the petitioners in this matter, and was very gratified that the work of the Order in the intellectual field was so greatly appreciated. He assured me that Fr McCabe was held in the highest esteem by the Order and that there was no intention of curtailing his work. It was pointed out that there were difficulties in reinstating Fr McCabe immediately as editor of *New Blackfriars*, but that this might be possible 'in a little while'.

In the general discussion which followed it became clear that the editorial had been interpreted in a very different way in Rome to the understanding obtained by many British readers. I endeavoured to explain the general context in which it had been written and the fact that it had to be seen in a British context. Thus to me and many others it was not an attack on the holiness of the sacramental life of the Church but rather that the institutional nature of the Church was as every other institution, affected by human weakness and sin.

The Master-General was distressed that Fr McCabe was apparently advocating a renewal of the Church such that would leave her indistinguishable from the Reformed Churches as they are at present.

I fear that, probably as a result of our different cultural backgrounds, the language difficulties and the lack of time, I was not able to persuade the Master-General of the valid alternative interpretations of the editorial which were possible certainly to British readers in the British context.

It seems a great pity that the main thesis of Fr McCabe's editorial has gone so largely ignored and that we should be so ultra-sensitive as a community to certain phrases used. Have we nothing better to do than to hunt for heresies in an age when three-quarters of our fellow men are indifferent or are even hostile to christianity? I venture to suggest that certain recent activities within the Church have caused far greater scandal to the world to whom we are commanded to preach the Gospel, than a thousand charges of corruption ever could. The former seems to indicate a negative, inward looking, panic stations attitude whereas the latter at least indicates awareness of our individual and communal failures and of the constant need for repentance, conversion and renewal just as much as a community as in our individual lives.

Even though the petition to the Master-General was couched in temperate and moderate terms it was clearly a protest. It was therefore felt that this should be accompanied by genuine prayer and penance in reparation for sins against Justice and love committed by members of the Church (of whatever rank or function) against each other. It was

in this spirit that the Pray-in on March 11th was organized. The Hierarchies of England Wales and Scotland were advised of this proposal and their blessing was sought. Not all their Lordship's replied, but those who did were generally sympathetic although some felt it necessary to state that they would have to dissociate themselves from any element of protest to the Master-General that might be implicit in the Pray-in. Cardinal Heenan and his auxiliaries concelebrated Mass at the Pray-in in Westminster Cathedral which was in fact attended by some 1,500 to 2,000 persons who would not normally have been present in the Cathedral at that time. The Cardinal thanked the organizers from the altar and preached a short sermon, the text of which has been widely published. The Cardinal's principal point was the value of prayer at all times but particularly in this sort of situation. The 'Pray-in' continued for some hours after the Mass with a hard core of about 100 worshippers. At the same time similar activities were taking place in other parts of the country and at the time of writing some 7 or 8 smaller associated 'Pray-ins' have been heard of.

The Council of the Newman Association decided that bearing in mind its policy of not itself taking a definite stand on a controversial issue, it could best make its contribution by providing a platform on which the issue could be debated. In the event it was regrettable that the subsequent Teach-In had to be organized at such short notice but bearing in mind the close proximity of the Easter holidays this was inevitable. It was a pity that despite strenuous efforts more speakers could not be found to put a more traditional view on 'Freedom of speech in the Church' than the two who at very short notice agreed to put their views and did so with humour and courtesy. Nevertheless I feel that the 'Teach-in' was a success and that the majority of the 600 or so who attended apparently felt the same, judging by their comments as they left the hall at the end of the evening. The event was reported with varying degrees of accuracy in both the Catholic and National press as were the events surrounding the petition itself and the Pray-in.

Apart from the inevitable sensationalism in some quarters, the serious coverage could be fairly divided under two heads: firstly, that which reported the facts and, where it commented, was on the whole in favour of free speech and against the dismissal of Fr McCabe; secondly, that which consisted almost entirely of editorial comment and correspondence, the tenor of which was sometimes hostile to the efforts made on behalf of Fr McCabe. Most of the latter was ill-founded allegation apparently based on rumour or felt that the 'campaign' was directed against the Hierarchy and destructive of the authority of the Church. I can only state that both these criticisms are totally false. At no time have members of the British Hierarchy been attacked either individually by name or as a body, on the contrary they have been kept fully informed of what was being proposed either in writing or personally. Indeed personal contacts on this matter with our Hier-

archy have on the whole been both open and courteous, and at no time has disapproval been expressed of any of the activities described above. Further, the Dominican authorities, appeared to regard the petition, not as a revolt against authority, but as a genuine and welcome expression of interest and concern in the Order's work in Britain.

It seems important to try to draw some tentative conclusions and lessons from the events which have arisen from Fr McCabe's editorial.

Firstly, we must agree with Archbishop Dwyer, who writing – in the March number of *New Blackfriars* said 'The English Bishops therefore consciously and of set purpose did not attempt to inhibit discussion. So far from intervening with authoritative and disciplinary directions they left a free field'. Many are very grateful indeed for this helpful attitude. At the same time however it is clear that in the Church in this country there do not yet exist completely adequate structures either for the open discussion of important issues or for genuine dialogue at all levels between clergy and laity of whatever rank or function. It is true that much has been done in this direction especially during the last year or two but it is vital that before final decisions regarding permanent structures are made, there should be a continuation and development of the informal structures that already exist. This will ensure that the necessary information can be gathered and views discussed which will indicate which particular structure is most likely to correspond to the needs of the Church, not only in the next few years but in the medium to long term future. It would be the gravest tragedy for the Church if structures were set up which contained within them the seeds of fossilisation or irrelevancy. This is a danger which could easily be underestimated.

Another lesson which I think we are being taught is that there is a serious problem of communication between individuals. We are oversensitive to each other's language. I think that before we launch into attacks on others we should seriously consider what the other person is saying or trying to say. Phrases should not be taken out of context. All are guilty of this sort of thing. Perhaps it is inevitable in an age when the Church as a whole is necessarily experimenting with new ways of expressing the Faith in a language which has meaning to an increasingly sceptical and indifferent world. The Dominican Order has been in the forefront in developing in this country, the dialogue with the other churches and such groups as atheists and Marxists and it is perhaps the lack of understanding of the language which they have of necessity had to develop which has caused some of the disfavour in which they are regarded in some quarters.

On the other hand it is not Christian charity but neurotic sensitivity to attempt to inhibit any criticism of the actions and words of others on the grounds that 'we are one big family'. Surely it is in the family that criticism can be at its sharpest and yet most loving and fruitful. It is often forgotten that criticism frequently springs from a loving concern rather than hostility.

Finally, it seems that the events of the last few weeks have shown that the laity can defend as well as criticise their clergy, that the conciliar teaching on the role of the laity is beginning to be understood in this country and that there is a growing understanding of the ways in which Bishops, priests and laity can work together for the good of the Church and the service of their fellow men.

JOHN BRYDEN

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