

# The Passing of the 'Simple Faithful'

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The Catholic Church is the only Church in England to have had in recent times any substantial following among working class people. Now, as the Church loses this following, it is worth asking what exactly the attraction was. Evidently at one time working class people found something in the Church, and now they do not.

For all practical purposes the Catholicism we have now dates from the later half of the nineteenth century. The situation at the time is well known. There were a few, mostly well off 'old' Catholics, some pockets of the country where Catholicism had never entirely disappeared, a trickle of converts and the vast number of Irish immigrants working in the new industrial centres. A kind of Catholicism prevailed that found its inspiration in the Counter-Reformation. In Ireland it had been imposed by the Irish hierarchy in the power vacuum which followed the loosing of the English hold on what had not been destroyed of Irish Catholicism. In England it had been adopted after the restoration of the hierarchy in 1850.

Certainly there were objections to this kind of Catholicism. The 'old' Catholics grumbled at the rococo devotions introduced by Italianate converts and joined their bishops in resisting the ultramontane extravagances of Manning and his friends. To the Irish immigrants, however, 'Counter-Reformation' Catholicism had from the beginning a great deal to offer.

It is not just that Catholicism was 'their' religion, something the English had tried, but failed, to crush. Counter-Reformation Catholicism had the added attraction of its essentially alien nature. It was one thing in the country which was manifestly not English. Just those characteristics which made it uncongenial to English people—ranging from its doctrinal intransigence and incomprehensible liturgy to the 'papal aggression' and even the rather camp clothing of its higher ecclesiastics—rendered it for that very reason an ideal symbol of protest. It could represent their solidarity in opposition to the English.

This effect was reinforced by the fact that it was the old Catholics who, not easily distinguishable from their fellow gentry, stood aloof from their fellow Catholics. In the words of Mrs Charlton (in 1860), '... an English Catholic, not an Irish one, which is all the difference in the world. English Catholics are responsible beings who are taught right from wrong, whereas Irish Catholics, belonging to a yet savage nation, know no better and are perhaps excusable on that account'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from *Recollections of a Northumbrian Lady* by Denis Gwynn, 'The Irish Immigration' in G.A. Beck, ed. *The English Catholics 1850-1950*. London, Burn Oates, 1950, p. 270.

The assumption, widely held by converts, that England would become Catholic by the making of further well-to-do converts—the assumption that provoked Newman's statement that Birmingham people have souls—must also have reinforced the separateness of the immigrants. They were already physically segregated in the industrial cities. They were joined there by Catholics from places where Catholicism had survived, who came as part of the new working class. Any of the old religious practices these had retained were, with them, quickly swallowed up.

The strength of the Catholic Church as a symbol of protest lay in the way in which it was detached from English society, for in this it represented the interests of the immigrants. Its leader was the Pope and it was ruled from Rome. Its liturgy was foreign and never adapted for local conditions. It legislated for a universal church and was indifferent to particular nations and cultures. The question 'How can this be understood in Rome?' which Newman wrote in his journal must have been echoed in many places. 'What do they know there of the state of English Catholics?'.<sup>2</sup> A church so firmly based abroad, with its own concerns and purposes, was difficult to get at. It could never be simply absorbed in the local culture. It would always stand outside, offering not an alternative (for its concerns were always limited) but at least providing the material for dreams and practices which were at variance with those of the dominant culture.

A fortress makes a good symbol in hostile territory and the Church had for some time been engaged in making itself into a fortress<sup>3</sup>. Uniformity in belief and discipline was the basis of a united and well-organised defence. The truth had been revealed to the Church, parcelled up in its unchanging theology and bestowed on the faithful in the catechism. Discipline too was centralised—formulated and disseminated from above by divine warrant. Canon law, always far more than the rules of a voluntary association, was a mixture of divine law (i.e. natural law as the law of the Creator and Ruler, Old Testament revelation, the commands of Christ) and divinely sanctioned ecclesiastical precepts. Most law is about the resolution (generally in favour of the powerful) of people's conflicting interests, but Canon law turned out to be about only one set of interests, those of God. These were known to the lawmakers. All authority came from above—it was a one way system—and obedience the proper virtue. By an organisational masterstroke the Pope, as vicar of Christ, was arbitrator of both belief and discipline, a development which reached its consummation in the declaration of papal infallibility. Integrated in this way, the Church was now ready for any attack. It knew itself to be founded by Christ more or less in the form it now took as a perfect social body and it had taken steps to secure the deposit of faith. The organisation and

<sup>2</sup>Wilfred Ward: *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, Longmans, 1912, Vol. 1, p. 584.

<sup>3</sup>Most of the points that follow are made in more detail in *Concilium*, Jan. 1974, a volume on 'The Church as Institution'.

the faith were completely identified. To challenge the organisation was to challenge the truth, even to challenge God.

To a large extent this belligerent but essentially defensive Church was a response to losses inflicted on it. It had begun before the Reformation to lose its hold on the way men thought. People turned away from the Church for knowledge and for guidance on how to live in the world. At the same time the scholarship of the Church lost contact with developments in philosophy and science, it did not reflect on man's changing understanding. Lost too were the more obvious forms of temporal power. But then, with the loss of intellectual influence, came the syllabus of errors; and with the loss of the papal states, came the declaration of papal infallibility. The Church had given up the fight and withdrawn into its own sphere of the sacred, bestowing this quality on itself as it went. It made and ruled the sacred as its own special territory.

From the point of view of the dominant groups of society this withdrawal was entirely satisfactory. A Church which permits them to go their own way without interference is the sort of Church a capitalist state wants. The Church was welcome to the sacred. It had been turned down the path leading to irrelevance. Its concerns were not to be those which are most important in our society, and the Church accepted that this should be so. It collaborated, that is to say, in its own irrelevance.

There were, too, some immediate disadvantages for the Church. In Europe it had more or less given up missionary enterprise. Membership was to be built up from within and outsiders converted by attraction rather than preaching, which largely took the form of defensive polemic. Birth was the way to become a Catholic, marriage to another Catholic expected, and the baptism of infants obligatory. Individual conversion was not required for a born Catholic—there was no concept of conversion for those baptised as infants. Though this in theory meant that one was born into a way of life that required continuous conversion, in practice none at all was required and individual thought and reflection were discouraged. Loyalty and obedience were the organisational demands. Having accepted that religion was concerned only with the private side of life and that individualism was the norm, the Church made the pursuit of personal sanctification the sole aim of religion. It was something for getting through this unhappy life.

Again, it was difficult to deduce anything that might be of practical assistance in living from the eternal truths in which the Church dealt. In practice, instructions for living had to be taken from the dominant values of society—so the emphasis on respect for employers, not wasting their time and so on.

The separation of the Church from life was reflected in its liturgy. There the Church was permitted to reign supreme and could assert itself as the exclusive source of the sacred. Untroubled by the doubts which assail people, free of all relationship to any particular time or specific culture or situation, eliminating the human (e.g. the priest was a vested back) and the physical (e.g. not touching or chewing the host)

the Mass was exclusively about God, to the elimination of human concerns. The strength of the Catholic mass was precisely that, moving as it did wholly at some cosmic level, it was protected from the threat of the particular. A liturgy—and a God—so remote from everyday experience can only work as a miracle, and the Mass was indeed that. It is only through miracles (Lourdes, Fatima, etc.) that the supernatural can be revealed. The distance of God in the Mass called forth the various devotions—notably Benediction, where God was incapsulated. These devotions retained an element of miracle—something was guaranteed on completion of the First Fridays or the Novena. Their frequency reinforced the restriction of religion to the sacred. It all rubbed off on the clergy too—the organisation had been made sacred and its officials shared in this quality: a kind of devotion to them was encouraged. Faber's view<sup>4</sup> that the situation of the Pope was 'as if heaven were always open over his head and the light shone down upon him' and that opposition to him was the sin against the Holy Ghost is not so far from the general understanding. By declaring itself sacred and separate the Church was also starting the process by which it effectively separated itself from those who were privileged to be its members. No wonder Mary appeared to be the only human being one could turn to in the Church's pantheon.

Since the Church was the exclusive means of salvation it was necessary to disparage other churches. It was the Catholic Church that was one (i.e. uniform), holy (perfect), apostolic (unbroken succession of Popes from Peter) and Catholic. It was necessary to rewrite history from this point of view, and indeed a special sacred science, church history (latterly salvation history) was developed, protected from the inroads of secular historians. The scriptures, on the other hand, were not necessary.

It can be argued that the disadvantages of the Church's withdrawal into the sacred outweighed the advantages. Newman certainly thought so. 'Nothing would be better than a historical Review', he wrote to someone who suggested it, 'but who would bear it? Unless one distorted all one's facts one would be thought a bad Catholic'<sup>5</sup>. 'This age of the Church is peculiar', he wrote in another letter:<sup>6</sup>

—in former times, primitive or medieval, there was not the extreme centralization which is now in use . . . there was true private judgment in the primitive and medieval schools,—there are no schools now, no private judgment (in the religious sense of the phrase), no freedom, that is, of opinion. That is, no exercise of the intellect. No the system goes on by the tradition of the intellect of former times.

In fact, ' . . . intellect is not met with counter and stronger intellect, but by authority'.<sup>7</sup> As to devotional trends, of Faber's *The Blessed Sacra-*

<sup>4</sup>Quoted from two printed sermons (*Devotion to the Pope and Devotion to the Church*) by Meriol Trevor: Newman: *Light in Winter*, MacMillan, 1962, p. 225.

<sup>5</sup>Ward's *Life I*, p. 572.

<sup>6</sup>Ward's *Life I*, p. 588.

<sup>7</sup>Ward's *Life I*, p. 605 (letter).

ment, he said he knew of no book which would so readily turn him into an infidel.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, in its fashion, the sacred held the Church together. And in England, despite these disadvantages, the Counter-Reformation Church was an effective symbol of solidarity for the Irish immigrants. This is what they expected of it and this is what it provided. Almost inevitably it opposed Fenianism and the General Strike of 1926. The first duty of its officials was to protect the organisation. Their responsibility was to this, not to its members. Catholic schools, for instance, were important to the organisation, in a way that the working conditions of its members were not. The schools themselves were only important for the teaching of the Catholic religion. Once this had been secured, the Church was willing enough to disregard the majority of its members—as it now accords prestige to its public, convent and grammar schools and neglects its secondary moderns. The Church, however, was not expected to represent its members but to preserve the sacred. It had separated itself from its members in separating the sacred from the world. So people were not disappointed. The Church's symbolic function was not vitiated.

The Church had nothing to offer the indigenous working class and made no impact on them. They were already largely unaffected by the Church of England. Particularly after the First World War, when a great many people's eyes were opened, it was evident that the Church of England was for the middle classes and gave its support either explicitly or by acquiescence, to the powerful. Methodism had early moved decisively in the same direction. A middle class way of life presented as Christianity is not especially attractive, and to the more politically minded it is objectionable. Besides other institutions now make middle class values available just as effectively for those who want them. Most of the ancillary services of the middle class church (clubs, dances, etc.) can now also be found elsewhere. All the Churches now have to offer is the ideology of the established order to which they are a perhaps useful, certainly not necessary, adjunct. They are no longer a channel for dissatisfaction, and have no compensations to offer the unsuccessful. As to the Catholic Church, there was never any reason for the indigenous working class to see it in any other way than they saw the other churches. Its alien and incomprehensible services were just that. They had no symbolic value, but further isolated the Church. In fact, the working classes in England have, reasonably enough, become indifferent to the Christianity that is offered them.

Those of Irish extraction have become largely indifferent too. For them the process was slower. Religion is habit forming and it is only comparatively recently that the usefulness of the Church as a symbol of Irish solidarity and protest has disappeared. Moreover the conflicting interests of members of the Church were long concealed by its exclusive concern with the sacred. For the sacred's lack of any connection with any real situation gives it a superficially classless quality. So

<sup>8</sup>So H. J. T. Johnson 'Cardinal Newman' in *The English Catholics 1850-1950*, p. 260.

the Church was not just symbolic for Irish exiles and the communities which grew from them, but also for the wealthy who could romantically admire 'Catholic culture' and for intellectual converts who could immerse themselves in its superb synthesis. In the midst of increasing diversity the Church's cosmology really was breath-taking and all Catholics could admire it. It was good to know too that people like Arnold Lunn were winning the argument, though working class Catholics took no great interest in it. As it turned out, however, this apologetic was not in fact working. The argument could only be conducted in Catholic terms and, while admiring its texture, the world was passing it by as irrelevant.

There was always a considerable leakage from the Catholic Church but it remained relatively stable until the 1950s. In 1950, Bishop Beck<sup>9</sup> was able to see the Church as strongly established in England and having achieved its aim of providing all the elements necessary for maintaining the sacred:

Apart from the strong Catholic centres in Liverpool and Lancashire, in the North-East and in London, it may be said that the greater part of the last hundred years has been spent in bringing each diocese to maturity and that, as the centenary of the restoration of the Hierarchy is celebrated, the great majority of the dioceses of England and Wales are at last becoming what in theory they are meant to be—self-governing units of the Church, each under the jurisdiction of a bishop and each containing within itself all the elements necessary for the spiritual welfare of its members, with the Mass available to all, the regular administration of the sacraments, and the provision, from its own population, of vocations to the religious life and to the pastoral clergy.

In some senses the crowning of all this effort of a hundred years was the establishment by the Holy See in 1938 of an Apostolic Delegation in this country.

But it was in the 1950s that the disadvantages of the sacred Church came home to roost. Outside the Church, the working class Catholic communities of the cities were breaking up. The Church had never made these communities, merely offered them a service. Moreover the service was offered to the community through the Church's clergy, and them only: the community was never much involved in or part of the Church. The various guilds and sodalities might be seen as attempts at cross-binding among members of the Church but they were not very effective and were focused upwards to the Church and its officials. This is important for, since the Church had separated itself from the community, it was not the Church which bound the community together. What held the community together was the shared values, experiences and interdependence of working class people.

In short, when these communities broke up, working class Catholics, or at any rate their children, suddenly woke up and saw no reason to

<sup>9</sup>Editor's preface, *The English Catholics 1850-1950*, p. vii.

be Catholics. The Church was hardly a symbol of solidarity when the communities no longer existed. It no longer had any distinctive service to offer. The policy of shielding the simple faithful as if they were idiots, essential to the defensive structure of Counter-Reformation Catholicism, now rebounded: it had shielded them from the gospel too. They were not after all idiots and could see the Church plainly enough. It was now just another innocuous religious body offering church services, more or less boring, within the context of the prevailing values of society. There was not much potential in that, nothing of interest going for them there, any more than in the Church of England. To make broad comparisons, the Catholic Church in England could once perhaps be compared in some ways with the Church in Poland, which is constrained (though by different means) to the religious field, but provides the material for dreams outside the state system. Now its situation is to be compared with that of the Church in France, which too is reaping the harvest of its long unconcern and has nothing to offer the working class either.

Inside the Church, the forces of disintegration were at work too. The bombs of scripture and history had been left inside the Church when it closed up on itself and they now went off. People had been studying them. A new middle class had been growing up in the Church, including, in England, many of the now established descendants of the immigrants. Some of these were infected by the taste for open debate, spontaneity, social concern and doubts about authority and institutions that were found among their contemporaries. It was no longer possible for the Church to externalise this as a threat—these people did not leave the Church but stayed and argued. The Church could no longer hold the line against either desertion or internal dissidence. There was no longer any point in remaining static. Rather belatedly the Church turned to face the world. All the genies were let loose in Vatican II.

The resulting confusion has been enormous. The pilgrim people of God replaced the perfect juridical body as the official account of the Church. There is, however, no way of conveying this new view to the members of the Church for their acceptance or rejection of it. Catholic education was precisely designed to stop when people left school and the Sunday Mass can hardly bear any more instruction in it. This is not just a difficulty for those who are still working on the old view of the Church and for whom some aspects like the liturgy have inexplicably changed, and for whom some disciplines like fish on Fridays have equally inexplicably disappeared. It is a difficulty for many of the progressives who wanted the changes but are still working on the old view of the Church too—they have simply deduced from the eternal truths of the supernatural instructions more suitable for their way of life: their concern is with birth control, the education of their children, clerical celibacy and so on.

The confusion between different views of the Church is found at its very centre. Again it can be seen in its official liturgy. Torn between

uniformity and plurality, between the old form and something new, it is neither one thing nor the other. No group is gathered round what is neither a table nor an altar, and nobody is sure if it's bread or hosts. The new Mass demands that the participants should be in some way already members of an already existing group known to each other, which is generally not the case. The old Mass, when this often was the case, did not. The liturgy in fact is an uneasy compromise: 'Keep away all earthly thoughts and enjoy his presence', says the 1970 edition of *A Simple Prayerbook*, of communion. If a group follows the instructions to adapt to its local situation, it is bound to depart from the norms within which only is adaptation permitted.

In fact the Church is struggling with a number of insoluble contradictions. Uniformity was the basis of its self-understanding, but it has now admitted the fact of plurality and the need for local differences. It centralised itself but can now hardly cope with the information flowing in or with the minutiae of decisions that are reserved to the centre. It depended on a particular reconstruction of history and scripture, but has admitted that this reconstruction needs correcting. It made itself and its liturgy ahistorical, or at least part of a continuously developing tradition, but it has suddenly started justifying itself by reference to a previous age, shedding accretions and so on. It has even started inventing liturgy, itself a difficult enterprise, comparable with the difficulty of presenting liturgy from above rather than letting it develop from below.

Opening up the Church has allowed all sorts of groups to find their inspiration within the Church, for the gospel is a very potent source of new ideas. The Latin Mass Society, pentecostal enthusiasts, political Christians, neighbourhood groups, people drawn together by some common concern, communes searching for the libertarian and uncompetitive style of life enjoined by the gospel, all find their place in the Church. (Curiously the traditional Church communities, the religious orders, having emancipated themselves from their old style of community life seem to have been fired by the 'Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism' and many of their members have adopted precisely the career ethic that modern communities are so anxious to get away from.) No one form of the Church can hold these competing groups together—the things they are looking for from the Church are after all quite different. The solution would be federation and occasional coming together for a joint eucharist, just as this is the solution to divisions between churches—unity is a hoped for attribute of the Christian Church.

These groups are largely middle class and do not attract working class people. This is partly because of their style of life (folk masses, e.g., are far from working class culture); in some cases too their interests are entirely contrary to those of working class people; and most suffer from people's reasonable insistence on looking at the Church and its history as a whole. Mainly, however, it is because these groups are affected by the general irrelevance of the Catholic Church.



For the Church in England has no place in the power structure—the separation that enabled it to consolidate its position over the sacred left it with nothing to say on anything but the sacred. No important contribution is required of it by society and there is no question important to a large number of people in which the Church's interests are in conflict with those of our society. Ironically the Church of England, with its rather dubious responsibility for sacralising the present arrangement of society on state occasions, is in a rather better position—but is a Church ever likely to risk losing status by challenging what gives it that status? The Catholic Church does not have any place in the affections of the people as a whole either—it can no longer mobilise sections of the working class as it could when its educational interests were threatened by the Lloyd George government.

In short, the Church's doings are not of any general concern, as they are, say, in Latin America or Ireland. No significant group can see the Church as usefully representing its interests or see how any reform of the Church would put it into a position to do so. The Church will have to wait until some new social upheaval brings it again into prominence, and the various groups in it can only keep their interpretations of Christianity alive and wait too. Meanwhile the present job of the Church is to comfort people like the sick and the dying—which is no mean task.

The power of the gospel to produce the new is very great and simply pointing out that the forces that made the Church go private prevent its effective reform neglects this—as it neglects the hope we have as Christians. Strangely even the limitation of the Church to the private has contributed to keeping the gospel alive. By not exercising explicit control over this area capitalism has left a gap in its system. It is precisely in their private lives that people have started saying: now we can be ourselves, now we can work out what the human values are; and from that position they are turning again to look at our society. Irrelevance has suddenly become an ideal and a criterion for dissent—and not just for those engaging in escapism.<sup>10</sup> It would have been better if the Church had challenged the ideals of competition and achievement, but perhaps its exclusive concern with the sacred and emphasis on church services has in fact helped, though in a distorted way, to maintain opposition to the whole work ethic. Religion's position as a leisure time occupation is an ambivalent one, and perhaps this is one of the cracks that could be broken open by the full preaching of the **gospel**.

<sup>10</sup>See Frank Musgrave: *Ecstasy and Holiness: Counter Culture & the Open Society*, Methuen, London, 1974.