

Comment

Pick-and-choose church?

There are no signs yet that the Pope's September trip to the U.S. did anything much to narrow the gap in understanding between the American Catholic Church and the Vatican. John Paul II brought words of encouragement or comfort to Hispanics and AIDS-sufferers, but in his meeting with the American bishops in Los Angeles he did not shift an inch on any of the so-familiar central controversial issues: the relationship between the local church and the papacy, the role of women in the Church, the difficulties raised today by some of the Church's teaching on sex and marriage. What use is there in going over the old ground here? The work of the synod on the laity which is currently meeting in Rome is likely to be more memorable.

All the same, the words of the Pope in Los Angeles which dismayed people most are worth a second look. Speaking about Church teaching on sex and marriage, he said that the widely-spread idea that dissent from the magisterium was totally compatible with being a good Catholic and posed no obstacles to the reception of the sacraments was 'a grave error'. Does this mean that Catholics practising artificial birth control should be denied the sacraments? Some distinguished American bishops clearly hope that it does not mean that. But stopping Catholics from being so free about sex was only part of the Pope's objective; in saying what he did he was also saying something about the Church.

According to the Pope, if we are fully to participate in the life of the Church we must agree with everything the Church tells us, not only about faith but also morals. Is this so different from what Professor Dummett is saying in the article which we publish in this issue? Michael Dummett argues that the rationale for our staying in the Catholic Church is our acceptance of 'the paramountcy of unity': in other words, 'whatever the provocation, never to take any step to disrupt the unity of the Church'. He calls this 'a condition for membership of the Catholic Church'. Keeping the boat afloat matters more than our personal comfort (comfort, that is, in this life).

Dummett in fact is writing mainly about the obligation of Catholics to hold solemnly-defined articles of faith and to obey unworthy prelates. On the other hand, many American Catholics—and, for that matter, British Catholics—would say that it is not what is in the Creed that is worrying them. But in throwing over some of the Church's official

teaching on sex one says No to a certain idea of what the Church is: an understanding of it based, in the last resort, on faith. We have to face that. One is disagreeing with the Pope about the way the will of God is made present in the world. One is opting for what some journalists (consciously or unconsciously taking over the Vatican interpretation of American Catholicism) have called 'pick-and-choose religion'.

Bishops bewail the effect of modern 'subjectivism' and 'consumerism' on people's attitudes to the Church and its teaching, but a culture cannot be changed by ecclesiastical exhortations, let alone ecclesiastical decrees. Undoubtedly more and more Christians are inclined to see churches as they see service stations or health clinics—there to meet important needs but certainly not in possession of the whole of their lives. The clergy may wring their hands when they discover that even the majority of Catholics have such an impoverished ecclesiology, or what seems such an impoverished ecclesiology, but there is nothing gained by wagging fingers at the faithful and accusing them of 'subjectivism' and 'consumerism'. They belong to an advanced industrial society and this is how people in an advanced industrial society naturally tend to see things.

Does this mean 'pick-and-choose religion' is the only kind of religion likely to flourish in such a world? Not necessarily. A feature of this modern culture is that those who would change people's hearts must start from where the people are and lead them on from there; it is just a waste of time to try to impose on people what seems to them an alien and in fact incomprehensible world-view. But this is not an option for 'pick-and-choose religion' but for growth: the key-word is growth.

Nobody can successfully reconcile a model of the Church that is dynamic—the model of the 'servant Church'—with the static, military model that still dominates so much Roman thinking. But a local church that places all its emphasis on growth has surely not jettisoned 'the paramountcy of unity', for growth presupposes a goal, an end, which in this case can only be God, the sole source of that unity. One of the distressing things about the big debate on the state of the Church which the most recent papal trip has once more drawn to our attention is that in the course of the argument all concerned only too often forget that the sole purpose of popes and churches and ministries and all the rest of the ecclesiastical paraphernalia is to help men and women to God. None of that paraphernalia is important in itself. In fact, there will be no need for it in heaven. Thank God.

J.O.M.