

# Comment

Why is it that the recent activities of the Sacred Congregation of Faith, with regard to a number of theologians (and perhaps particularly Edward Schillebeeckx), have provoked offence, dismay, depression and even anger? Is it any more than liberal theologians and their friends whining now that they have at last received their comeuppance from a vigorous, no-nonsense Pope? Or is there something more involved? Undoubtedly there is, in some people's minds, the haunting and chilly memory that this institution was once called the Holy Office and before that the Inquisition, with all that that meant in the way of witch and heretic hunting pogroms, stifled theological discussion and development, and broken, miserable lives.

Certainly there is, in some quarters, a gathering alarm and despondency that there is 'something going on' in the Church and that those gloomy days of condemnation, suspension and silencing are creeping back. This alarm has focussed itself on the 'Schillebeeckx Affair', but over the past few months there have been a number of 'goings-on' – the suspension *a divinis*, for example, of the French Dominican Jacques Pohier. In one number alone of the *Tablet* (1st December 1979) the following three news items were reported. Firstly that Karl Rahner had sharply criticised Cardinal Ratzinger, the Archbishop of Munich, for having vetoed the decision of the Senate of the University of Munich to offer a chair in the theological faculty to Johannes Metz, because, suggests Rahner, Metz has influenced the development of Latin American liberation theology which the cardinal finds disagreeable. Secondly, that 300 students of the University of Regensburg had protested to the local bishop because he intervened in their affairs to prevent Hans Kung from lecturing to them. Thirdly, that the Vatican has been pressing the Bishop of St Gallen in Switzerland to submit an application for the laicisation of Fr August Bernhard Hasler, because of the views he expressed on papal infallibility in a recently published book on that topic. It would seem that the mood of the Church is changing.

Some Catholics will welcome this change of mood; from those who have had an uneasy sense that the old security of the Catholic Church has been undermined by the wayward liberalism sponsored by the Second Vatican Council, to those crack-pot groups busily printing reams of ranting rubbish proclaiming the heresy of Vatican II, the new *Missa Normativa*, John XXIII and Paul VI. Indeed, in his Advent Pastoral Letter, the Archbishop of Cardiff seems to have let his glee at the thought of a return to the good old days when "there was a catholic nose which instinctively sniffed out heresy" swamp his compassion and good taste when he observes, "Let

us not be too hard on those unfortunate priests or nuns who have left the Church. At least they have recognised that one cannot serve God and Eros.”

There can be no doubt that the Church needs some way of proclaiming a *regula fidei*, some criterion for judging when a theologian has strayed from Catholic doctrine, some way of calling attention to and rejecting heresy. However, the disquiet and dismay that many feel, highlighted by the proceedings against Schillebeeckx, arises not because they don't believe that errors and mistakes should be corrected, but whether the Congregation of Faith is the best institution for doing so. The history of its predecessor, the Holy Office, and even more so its ancestor the Inquisition, was not a happy one. It not infrequently cast a smear on the public face of the Church and gave grave scandal. Not only because of the brutal way it so often harassed theologians, (and in some cases wrecked their lives), but also because of its ineptitude in discerning what were and what were not errors. It did err in its decisions. We must not forget, for example, that in some instances, (Congar, Chenu, Rahner), the very theologians who were once victims of the Holy Office's zealous condemnations, were the same theologians who pioneered much of the theology of Vatican II. "Twenty five years ago," writes Rahner in the piece quoted above, "The Holy Office in Rome forbade me to write anything further on the subject of concubination. That was a senseless, unscientific manipulation by Church bureaucrats". Nor should we forget that there was a time when such opinions-as for example, that Moses did not compose the Pentateuch or Paul the Epistle to the Hebrews, were in their time considered 'errors'.

Moreover, the official Church watchdogs seem to have little success in stemming those errors and heresies which seem endemic in some popular understandings of christian doctrine. Anyone with pastoral experience knows that errors are not the property only of academic theologians. Think of how many of the faithful hold to a Christology which is frankly docetic; of how common it is for christians to believe that Jesus' resurrection means the revivification of his corpse; of how physicalist is some popular understanding of the Real Presence – 'you mustn't chew the host'; of the Manichean views on the body and sex; of the Pelagian or semi-Pelagian understanding of justification; of how papal infallibility means that anything and everything that the Pope says must be true. And what are we to make of those lunatic groups with titles like The Blue Army of Our Lady, who constantly claim visions and revelations from Mary: curiously and conveniently, in these revelations Our Lady's vocabulary seems to be astonishingly similar to that of right wing christians and displays an obsession with

*Continued on page 515*