

# Comment

'This could be worse than the suppression of 1773,' whispered one Roman Jesuit. 'It's the most important act of his pontificate,' said another. That was last October, when, instead of permitting a quick new election, the Pope 'did the unthinkable' and put in his own man – Fr Dezza – to govern the Jesuits in place of their progressive but now very sick General, Fr Arrupe, and Arrupe's Vicar.

World media coverage showed then that this was not small-town news, as most Church news is. Change and development in the Catholic Church has for centuries been pioneered mainly by its international religious orders. As Arrupe, also President of the Union of Superiors General, once said, 'The Church cannot do without us'. But this event harshly reminded the leaders of all those orders that it is Rome that guarantees them their power and independence. They wondered how far this type of supervision would spread. And Latin American human rights workers, bishops and political bosses, and Washington's men, also sat up and took notice – in their case because of the outstanding role of Jesuits in that continent's liberation campaign.

And now? On the 27th February, the men responsible for running the Order, summoned to Rome, went – in trepidation – to hear what the Pope had to say to them. And they heard a speech without a word of direct criticism in it; on the contrary, full of praise for their Order, so central in the life of the Church, said the Pope. 'It was more than any of us dared to hope for,' one admitted. John Paul II had discovered that the Jesuits were still Jesuits, even in anoraks and jeans. They had responded to the papal blow on the jaw – his *prova* or 'test' as he called it – not by organising protest marches and mass petitions, but stoically, silently. He told them the situation had been an 'exceptional' one. Within a year – he promised them – they should be able to call the General Congregation which will elect a successor to Arrupe.

So had the Pope been misled by loose talk about the Jesuits' 'crisis of authority'? Had he blundered? Not at all. With the aid of an extremely intelligent advisor, (Dezza may be octogenarian and almost blind, but he could teach Britain's conservatives a thing or two) the Pope has made the point he wanted. Paul VI scolded the Jesuits as if they were naughty boys, and did nothing. John Paul clapped them in irons, kept them on bread and water for four months, and then invited them to a splendid banquet with all the best people. Frail flesh rarely withstands that treatment.

He encouraged them not only to work in their traditional activities, like teaching, and in newer ones, like the media, but also in areas opened up by the Council, Ecumenism. The deepening of relations with non-Christians. The study of atheism. And even the promotion of justice. . . . providing justice was seen only as an integral part of evangelisation and never as one's first job, (here he

was merely repeating what he had said at Rio in 1980). The Church, he said, was waiting for the Society of Jesus to contribute effectively to the implementing of Vatican II.

When they heard that some of his audience must have wondered what they had been doing all these years. In fact it is here that the crunch comes.

The Pope said in his speech that he sees the spreading of unity in the post-Conciliar Church to be the job for which the Jesuits are specially qualified. That sounds alright. But lately *unità* has become a fashionable word in high Vatican circles, usually coupled with the word *collaborazione*. And, lo and behold, that is here too. John Paul summons the Jesuits to collaborate with the (mainly weak) new curial departments – the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, for example.

Surely a good idea? But when, recently, a very powerful Roman official said 'We want to know how you can collaborate with us', to the directors of an independent Church organisation suddenly suspected of sympathies with liberation theology, the directors knew what he meant immediately. They knew there was only one thing they could do to keep their integrity: close down. And in curial offices in Rome the job of the man called a *collaboratore* is not that of 'collaborating' in the English sense of that word, implying as it does give-and-take, and the shoving to-and-fro of ideas. *Collaboratori* are there to do what they are told, not to question the wisdom of the people they are 'collaborating' with.

What, then, was the Pope doing when he talked to the Jesuits on 27th February about unity and collaboration? There are good grounds for thinking that, in this 'very triumphalist speech' (as a Jesuit called it), he was before anything else reminding them of their traditional role of crack personnel in a mighty military organisation.

But is the model of the Church as a 'spiritual army', which is one John Paul II favours, any longer an obvious model in the minds of many people? And, as many Jesuits have said, surely there are strong reasons for believing that the way our world is developing is going to make it more and more difficult to turn into reality that vision of a tightly-disciplined military-type Church marching in step against the Prince of this world? Some of the Church's most respected theologians (some Jesuits among them) believe that even before Vatican II this was a doomed vision. How likely is it that all the Vatican's current efforts (the tightening up of supervision of the Jesuits included) will save that vision?

The Pope himself has sometimes used very different models of the Church – non-military models. One day might even his Roman advisors be saying what old-fashioned Archbishop Mathew, brother of the late Gervase Mathew O P, said decades ago: 'The Church will win men's hearts only when it is humble and poor and weak'?

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