

## IN FILIAL DISOBEDIENCE

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Readers of *New Blackfriars* will remember that last March Fr Adrian Hastings contributed an article on Celibacy, in which he declared that he had come to the decision that as a Catholic priest he was free to marry. He has now followed this up with a book,<sup>1</sup> containing the original article published in *New Blackfriars* and some other articles on kindred subjects together with an account of his life, showing the background of experience which has led to this decision. This little book is, in fact, an *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, and as such it seems to me extremely impressive. When a person comes to such a decision, it is natural to ask, what are the motives behind it, conscious or unconscious, and to what extent he can be called a balanced personality. In this book the answer comes through with extraordinary clarity. It is written with transparent sincerity, with humour, intelligence and a profound sense of Catholicity. I do not think that any unprejudiced reader could question that this decision has been reached after mature reflection by one whose life has given him a singularly close connection through his experience in Africa with the issues involved, who has seen their implications for the whole Church and has had the courage to challenge the present system of the Church, which imposes celibacy on the clergy, by the witness of his personal life.

The challenge goes far beyond the simple issue of the celibacy of the clergy. As Fr Hastings made clear in his article in *New Blackfriars*: 'When one challenges the compulsory celibacy of all priests in the western Catholic Church, one is in truth challenging a development of many centuries, and one which relates not only to the Church's attitude towards marriage, women, sex and the priesthood, but also the whole stress of Roman institutional polity. One must not be blind to the wider ramifications of this. The law of celibacy is a key expression and condition of a particular kind of Latin clericalism and of the grip within the Church of men over women, of clergy over laity, of Rome over all. It is a matter of power more than anything else. . . . The tide of clerical celibacy flowed in as part and parcel of the tide of Roman domination over

<sup>1</sup> *In Filial Disobedience* (Mayhew-McCrimmon, 1978, £1.90)

the *Catholica*, and if one is utterly convinced that for the sake of the Catholic Church now more than ever that domination must be decisively challenged and from within, then it would be naive to exclude from that challenge the law of clerical celibacy.'

Fr Hastings is therefore challenging not merely the law of celibacy but the whole of the system by which the Catholic Church is governed today and in doing so he challenges us all. It must be made perfectly clear that this challenge comes from one who is completely devoted to the Church, has a deep respect for the authentic tradition of the Roman Church and acts in a spirit of 'filial disobedience' in the best tradition of Catholicism. What he is saying, it seems to me, is what the Catholic Church today has to face, if it is to be true to itself and to respond to the challenge of the world today.

On the question of celibacy by itself, there is no real problem. Everyone admits that there is no necessary connection between priesthood and celibacy. The New Testament itself simply takes it for granted that a 'bishop' will be married and in the early church this was the norm. Celibacy was a particular charism not of the priest but of the monk. In the Eastern churches this distinction was preserved. The bishop, who was always a monk was celibate, but the ordinary priest was married. In the Latin Church of the West the ideal of the monk was gradually imposed on the priest and celibacy became the rule for the priesthood. This was a particular development of the priesthood in the Latin Church at a particular period in history, and has no binding force on the Church as a whole. What has brought the issue to the fore at present and what forms the basis of Fr Hastings' objection to the law of celibacy today is the experience of the Church in Africa, where Fr Hastings spent a great part of his life, and also in South America, where the problem has long been recognised. The simple fact is that in these countries a celibate priesthood cannot answer to the needs of the people. There are just not enough priests and at the present rate there never will be. The choice is therefore between leaving the people deprived of Mass or of ordaining married men, of whom there are thousands already trained as Catechists. It is this fundamental pastoral need, which is recognised by many bishops in Africa, which is the basic reason for a change in the law of the Church today. But to this it must be added that there are now countries in Europe, like France and Germany, where the shortage of priests is becoming serious, and at the same time there are scores of married priests, in Britain as elsewhere, who are dedicated men ready to serve the Church, if the law of celibacy is relaxed.

What stands in the way of a change is not any principle of theology or pastoral need, but rather the whole system of Church government. The present system derives from the Middle Ages,

when historical circumstances led gradually to a centralisation of power in the Roman Church. This is a particular historical development, which has no basis in the ancient Church. In the fifth century, for instance, which may be taken as a model in some ways, there were four major Patriarchates, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Rome (standing it may be noted for Asia, Africa, Eastern and Western Europe) each governing itself independently, having its own liturgy, theology and canon law, but preserving communion with one another and recognising a certain primacy in the Bishop of Rome. This is 'typical' of the constitution of the Catholic Church. It is a 'communion' of local or regional churches, each having its own particular character due to language, rite, custom, tradition and other factors, but united in faith and charity with one another and with the (local) Church of Rome. This is, surely, the only model which has any value in the light of the ecumenical situation today and this is the authentic structure of the Catholic Church. This is brought out extremely well by Fr Hastings in a paper *Can the Pope be wrong?* written in 1968 on *Humanae Vitae* and reprinted in this book. In this Fr Hastings argues that the Pope by 'refusing to allow the problem to be discussed by the Ecumenical Council or by the Synod of Bishops, by rejecting the advice of a large majority of his own commission together with a resolution of the World Congress of Laity', was acting according to the old pattern of Roman authoritarianism rather than to the new understanding of the Church brought about by the Vatican Council. It was, as he says, treating the Church, not as a communion of churches with the Pope as the 'supreme judge of inter-church relations', but as if it were one only Church of Rome, unified not by a full communion but by simply obedience to a single government.

Fr Hastings takes up this subject again in a paper written in 1975 on the *Right to Govern* and shows how this is the central issue in the Church today. Here, as he says, 'we are still faced with two basically conflicting models: the Roman, uniform, governmentally controlled church on the one hand, and a diversity of local churches within the fullness of the Catholic communion of the people of God on the other'. This seems to me to be the fundamental issue facing the Church today. Whether in the matter of the Church's understanding of herself, of her relations with other churches and other religions, or of her relation to the world as a whole, everything depends on the choice between these two models. In theory the second model derived from the Second Vatican Council is accepted at least to a considerable extent, but in practice the old model (of the First Vatican Council) still tends to prevail. The question of the celibacy of the clergy is a key issue in this debate, and by challenging the prevailing Roman system by the witness of his personal life, Fr Hastings has challenged us all. Not

every priest, as the Editor of *New Blackfriars* said, will want to follow his example, but everyone can admire his courage and integrity. Personally as a monk I have no cause to question the law of celibacy, but I see it as a vital issue for the Catholic priesthood and the whole of the Church today.

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