Out of the Ghetto

by Antony Archer, O.P.

It is clear that the early christians expected the coming of the Kingdom almost at once, and equally clear that it has not come. This long period of waiting has caused a number of problems for the christian church and it is intended here to consider some of these and the way they were solved until recently in the Catholic church.

A number of them are those which are inevitable in an organisation that goes on a long time. The original spirit of the movement is replaced by routine. Rules and regulations are drawn up. Early practices lose their meaning—this is particularly true of liturgy—but, since they continue, new meanings are invented for them. A clear example of this is the old rule of eating fish on Fridays. When the original connection with fasting was lost people began to argue that it was about establishing one's identity in an alien environment. The history of the Mass and the complicated meanings attributed to the most trivial and accidental details are another obvious example.

In the same way a form of organisation develops which, as time goes on, becomes increasingly complicated and unwieldly. A special class of people, the clergy, grows up for running it, all with a career structure and rewards of their own and their established place in wider society—and so a gap forms between the clergy and the other members of the church.

To define the christian group statements of doctrine have to be drawn up and these too become increasingly complicated. Often enough they are only understood by a very limited number of clerical specialists. These statements of doctrine also need changing from time to time: they are about God and produced in different situations, but we do not really know all that much about God and situations really are different. Often enough, however, when a situation changes these statements of doctrine are not changed but just repeated, and so become misleading and inappropriate.

Some problems, however, are peculiar to the christian church. Christianity is for instance a religion of conversion and yet there is a natural desire to bring up children as christians. The Kingdom in which christians believe is both present and to come, but it is difficult to maintain this dialectic. Moreover the Kingdom is described in the New Testament as being for the poor, yet right from the beginning christianity has attracted rich converts.

It is important to look at these problems as they have been worked out in particular situations. It is very easy to work from descriptions of what the incipient church in the New Testament might have been like and to point out how the modern church differs from it: to point out how for instance Jesus taught a different view of authority from that practised in the Catholic and other churches. Simply asserting

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this fact, however, interesting though it is, is not very helpful, particularly when it is done by reference to a supposed reconstruction of the early church where these problems had not yet arisen. They are real problems running right through christianity and until the Kingdom comes will not be satisfactorily solved.

The particular situation that will be looked at here is the Dominican parish in Newcastle upon Tyne. Established in 1873, it covered part of the old city by the river and a stretch of the city's new eastern development. It was the kind of area of crowded housing and considerable poverty familiar in the rapidly expanding industrial centres. It can be seen at its hardest in what a parishioner writes of the turn of the century:

> Consumption (latterly call TB) was very common, especially among teenagers . . . I have often seen corpses of teenagers laid out on tables for lack of accommodation, and in the case of very young placed in a drawer in a chest of drawers.

Many of the new workers coming into this area were immigrants driven by poverty from Ireland, and they formed the basis of the new parish.

It was a strong and aggressive kind of Catholicism. All the peculiarly Catholic things were emphasised: the Pope, devotion to Mary, the particular Catholic ceremonies and devotions. With money collected entirely in small amounts, a vast and impressive church was built, which can be seen partly as a gesture of defiance by exploited immigrants. There was a good deal of fighting between Catholics and Protestants, sometimes just flaring up, sometimes provoked—a woman is remembered as always taking a green bucket to the public tap for water; sometimes the more formal clashes of St Patrick's Day. (The question was 'Peas or barley'?—from the Catholic point of view peas, being green, was the correct answer. The 'peas or barley' dispute continued into the 1920s but latterly as a children's game—for fighting on the way home from the schools and coming out of the churches.) For the Dominicans this was their return to Newcastle after the Reformation, it was part of the Second Spring: England was returning to the ancient faith.

On the fringe of the parish was a middle class area whose people could be expected to run bazaars to raise money for the schools, make gifts for the church, pay their bench rents and come dressed up for the sung mass. For the rest they remained aloof from the other parishioners and this division always characterised the parish.

The clergy were not able to do much about poverty, absorbed as they were in collecting money for the schools and politically in defending the voluntary school system. They were conscientious and sometimes courageous in their visiting. What the church provided was a religious and social centre and an elementary education which included the teaching of religion.

The 1930s are considered by people looking back now to have been the golden age of the parish and this period will be considered in some detail. The poverty which always characterised the parish was accentuated by unemployment. Eating pot-stuff and children barefoot or carrying their shoes to school again became common. Parish organisations for the relief of poverty were active. The clergy concentrated on their visiting. They had no money to provide anything. One of the 'Wor Mary Anne' stories in the parish magazine (1935) illustrates their dilemma. Wor Mary visits the household of a mixed marriage that did not take place in church. The story concludes:

> 'If you please', said Mary Ann, 'I've come for the outdoor collection'. 'What collection'?, says the woman. 'For the church', says Mary Ann. 'What's the church done for me'? shouted the woman. 'The church never gives us anything. The Protestant churches give people blankets and things—that's real religion, that is'.
>
> She went on raving, and the only thing she could think of was blankets! Wor Mary Ann's blood was getting up, mind you. She listened and listened. 'Has your church ever given me a blanket'? shouted the woman. 'Blankets isn't religion', says Mary Ann bravely. At this the woman started all over again, and could talk about nothing but blankets. 'Priests are not made for giving out blankets', says Joe, 'they have to look after our souls, and we have to help them'.
>
> 'Come inside for Heaven's sake', said the husband to the wife, 'you need not be so hard on the bairns'.
>
> 'You keep quiet', said the woman, 'I'm sorry I ever married ye'.
>
> 'As for you', she said to Mary Ann and Joe, 'never come back here again'.
>
> Mary Ann began to leave, but her blood was up and as a parting shot, she said 'I know where you are going when you die, and you won't want any blankets either'!
>
> Well done, Mary Ann!

The general reputation of the clergy in Newcastle was that they were Tories and their views should be disregarded by working people. The Dominicans shared in this reputation. The impression given by their preaching was (to quote a parishioner's interpretation) that, apart from exceptional cases of injustice, you should 'accept the position you're in and in that position get closer to God'. Some of the Dominicans were in fact committed to social justice but since their commitment was based on distributism and the papal encyclicals it was hostile to socialism, for socialism disputed the right of private property and was godless. The answer, Catholic Action, was for the world to be converted to Catholicism and then justice would follow. This conversion was to be done by good example—so though paying inadequate wages was reckoned evil, the important thing was that Catholics

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should not waste their employers' time and money. Prayer became in effect the recommended response to unemployment: the Blessed Sacrament Guild sent some of its unemployed members on a national pilgrimage for the unemployed to Rome, from where they brought back a blessing. It is not surprising that the clergy were assumed to be concerned only with the 'religious' side of life. The conclusion of this process was the clergy announcing from the pulpit when a candidate in the local elections was a Catholic and their congregation taking no notice because he was also a Conservative.

Throughout the 1930s, there were three things that bound the parish together: the choir, the Blessed Sacrament Guilds, and the schools.

The main parish liturgy revolved round the choir, with its singing of plainchant and music by such composers as Mozart and Byrd, making an appropriate accompaniment to the solemn ceremonies of the old monastic high mass. There were other services which also had a powerful affect on the emotions, such as the May processions, in which a May Queen, chosen from the school, placed a crown of flowers on the statue of Mary. The procession consisted mainly of children from the school. In 1934, for example, it was led by small children holding baskets of flowers, then came taller children carrying staffs of flowers of white, red and gold, then girls in blue dresses carrying posies of anemonies, followed by a small boy in a suit of pale blue and silver carrying on an embroidered cushion a crown of flowers. After this came the May Queen with two small boys carrying her train. She was followed by small girls dressed in blue and then the other children carrying flowers.

The Blessed Sacrament Guilds both provided colourful services, invariably including benediction, and served to bring their members together for social events. They were a meeting point generally. Waiting outside the women's guild service was one of the recognised ways of collecting a girl. ('You knocked the girls' hats off and they had to chase you'.) The large membership of the guilds is partly attributed to poverty and unemployment: 'People had no money for cinemas and no radio so they came for the entertainment'.

In the schools one learnt one's religion once and for all. It was required 'on pain of sin' that Catholic children should go to Catholic schools. It is worth digressing slightly on the schools to look at the case of a 19th Century reforming headmaster, which also illustrates the power the clergy exercised over the school. In 1874 this headmaster, after eight years, summarised his views in the school logbook:

> If boys are left with nothing to do (as they were) they will talk; and the master considers that if they were punished at such a time or for such a thing it would not be an act of discipline but an act of tyranny. Boys are not punished in this school for playing or talking if such playing or talking is the result of negligence in those placed over them.

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Four years later a new school manager (the manager was always one of the clergy) was appointed who seems to have taken a different view, for in 1878 the master records:

> Rev. Manager himself punishes those who come in any way uncleanly; and, once a week, those who stay away from church on Sundays. I think this is contrary to the spirit of the Conscience Clause. I also consider it very undignified in a clergyman to take the master's business out of his hands and inflict corporal punishment himself.

The Conscience Clause obviously gave him some trouble, for later that year he had to put up another copy 'as the old one had been removed without my knowledge'. This master was in effect dismissed that year. His successor lasted a year before he was dismissed 'for his incompetency' but he had recorded the entry:

> Two dozen canes ordered by the Assistant Master at the instigation of the Manager and each pupil teacher supplied with one. The consequence is a loss of tone in the school as each petty tyrant wields the ferule.

The master who succeeded him was more fortunate; the manager was moved to London and his replacement agreed 'as to the evils of such a repressive system' and it was abolished.

Returning to the 1930s, the teachers attended the childrens' mass in church on Sunday mornings. On Mondays in school the children had to say whether they had been at mass, Sunday school and evening benediction. As some remember it, children were strapped if they had not been to mass, according to others they received credit stars if they had. The clubs were supposed to take over when children left school: cards were issued to the members of the boys' club for instance, which they were to return on receiving their monthly communion, though failure now just meant a talk with the club chaplain; on leaving the club at eighteen they were expected to join the men's Blessed Sacrament Guild.

The religion shaped by these organisations—the choir, the guilds and the schools—threw the emphasis on the clearly defined beliefs and duties of a Catholic. There were no nuances of belief. God was in the tabernacle and in the Blessed Sacrament in a very straightforward and physical way. As to the liturgy, every move was specified. 'When you're in church you're in the house of God and have to conform to exactly what you're told to do' says one parishioner. There was only one way of going to communion for instance—with hands joined, head motionless, and eyes cast down and closed. Any talking, laughing or even smiling in church was irreverence: the congregation was to remain silent and still throughout. 'God's in the tabernacle and he's watching you and you've got to behave yourself; (church is) a place

set apart from the outside world', says another parishioner. Any creativity or differing contributions on the part of the people was excluded. The return for this passivity and the highly organised ceremonial, with the candles in the rather dark church, the mysterious latin, and the choir, was that the congregation was more or less assured of the same religious experience each week. Mystery, awe, dignity are the keynotes of this experience, one which is very much missed now.

The sermons and special missions reinforced all this. The clergy preached about the feast of the day, or the devotion of the month, or about the Church, rather than from scripture. Not what they said but their gestures, fine voices and the atmosphere they created are remembered. So one of them used to hold himself against a pillar in the attitude of crucifixion with tears streaming down his face during his Good Friday sermon. Rather as a revival campaign among evangelical Christians is designed to lead to a decision for Jesus, the special missions were designed to lead to joining one of the guilds, or reaffirming one's commitment. The special courses of lenten sermons tended to be about the duties of practice—the series on confession for instance ('The Secret Tribunal') was, as one parishioner puts it, about 'the merits of confession, how often you should go, how you should go, what you should confess'.

'Religion wasn't carried into one's life. Religion consisted of going *into* church'. To be a better Catholic was to go more often to church —what was recommended was daily mass, making visits to the church during the day, going to the guilds, the evening services, the lenten sermons and the missions. This emphasis on going to church formed the background for the religious experience. Religion was concerned in practice not with affecting the world people lived in but with providing a completely different world to go into. This different world was dominated by the clergy. They were seen (and saw themselves) as sacred people, set apart, the mediators between God and people. 'We don't yet see Christ face to face', says a parish magazine in 1931, concerning the feast of Christ the King:

> We don't see our King—Christ our King—we do see His viceroy, our Holy Father the Pope. We see our Bishop too, and our Priests, and they are all in their particular positions representatives of our sovereign lord the Pope, Viceroy of Christ. Pope, Bishops, Priests—in each and all we see Christ, and to each and all we give our whole-hearted loyalty and obedience, because in doing so we are loyal to Christ, obey Christ. Woe betide the man or woman who turns against the Pope, the Bishop, the Priest. They have turned against Christ. They are in mortal danger.

'When parents bless their children', observes an article in a 1933 parish magazine:

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they express a wish that God may bestow on them this or that spiritual advantage. When a priest blesses a person he expresses a similar wish, but by reason of his priestly office as Christ's representative there is a greater likelihood of his wish being fulfilled.

It was a form of Catholicism that emphasised sin and death and eternity. 'Looking back', says a parishioner, 'I regret the absence of more emphasis on the love of God and his mercy'. Another sums up the teaching so: 'Death will come soon, judgment will follow, then Heaven or Hell for ever—and this was a feature that was impressed on you in sermons. If you're a Catholic and you're good you'll go to Heaven'. 'Catholicism is the hardest religion to live in, and the best to die in' is a familiar phrase. In fact, though faith was expressed in terms of fear, it seems that in the end that people remained Catholics because of the great warmth they found with one another and the conviction that something good lies behind a pretty awful world—in fact, that there is a God. It should be noticed, too, that though being a Catholic was basically a question of birth, 'the religion you were brought up in', the fall-out rate was high. Forty per cent of Catholics were attending mass in 1933, and the figure is the same for 1939. Moreover, most Catholics in the parish were not involved in the guilds or any other parish organisation. (But it is reminiscences of the sort just quoted that convey people's deepest impressions.)

Now, this form of Catholicism was also seen as permanent. It had a timeless quality: 'We learnt the latin mass at school', says one parishioner, 'they should be taught it now'. What was taught in the schools was intended to last a lifetime, and this was particularly so in a way of life where reading and discussion about religion was not usual. This Catholicism was in fact an entire way of life and worked very well as such. The difficulty was that by the very nature of the detailed, closely knit and timeless way it was organised it could allow no place for change, either in the community or in Catholicism. Because of the concentration on the detailed practices of lent and so on, these practices were the things of which people were most conscious. If people brought up in this style of Catholicism were exposed to other styles of life, particularly ones which evidently included the humanistic virtues, they found it difficult to recall from their Catholic teaching what exactly christianity was about. Nor did these practices any longer fulfil any function among younger people of maintaining their Catholic or Irish consciousness for they no longer felt any need to assert this. This style of Catholicism was in fact very fragile when exposed to other ideas and views of life and often gave way before them. This is seen by some as beginning in the parish when the school ceased to be an all-age school and children came into contact with other influences. It has been continuing among younger people ever since. In the same way this kind of Catholicism tended to break down when the local community and its way of life was destroyed after the war as the

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district moved from clearance area to bleak inner city area. Finally, it could not cope with the changes in the Catholic church. For the Catholic church to become suddenly like the Protestant churches was bound to be confusing. People are very conscious too of the irony of the imposition from above of changes in something (e.g. the mass, now in English rather than Latin) to which they had been led to commit themselves as permanent—and changes imposed against their will, when consultation and co-responsibility had become the slogans of the Catholic Church.

This description of a form of Catholicism in its heyday and its consequences could be summarised as follows:

Perceptions of everyone

The structure of the parish round choir, guilds, school.
Very exact and detailed ritual, duties, devotions.

Perceptions of clergy

Saw great poverty.
Some concerned for 'social justice' but in effect only after world conversion to Catholicism.
Saw themselves as fathers of the people.

Perceptions of people

Experienced great poverty.
Religion was distinct from their situation.
Experience of liturgy—emotion, awe, dignity.
Saw religion as imposed on them, but rightly imposed: priest as mediator.

Interpretation

Provision of unreal world to escape into (better Catholic means going to church more).
The certainty of the religious experience because of the choir, unchanging ritual, no congregational responsibility.
The collapse of this sort of Catholicism (a) when people came into contact with other traditions, lost need to assert Irish Catholicism; (b) on breaking up of local community; (c) on the changes after the Council (the blow to those who remained).

The problems inherent in christianity were solved, then, in the following ways. As to the Kingdom being for the poor, some of the clergy thought they were on the side of the poor but the effect of what they did was to support the rich. The poorer people thought that religion had no connection with their position in life. As to the dialectic between the present and future promise of the Kingdom, this future hope of Christianity was eliminated. All the emphasis was on the presence of God in the ritual. The doctrine of the coming Kingdom was not taught. Nor was there taught the full doctrine of the resur-

rection of the dead: the resurrection of Jesus was taught simply as proof that he was God. The dilution of the Christian hope for the future is obviously an element in the acceptance of the status quo. Education as a child was the primary means of becoming a Catholic. Absolute monarchy was at any rate presented as the model of the church. That all christian statements are provisional was simply denied. All statements of doctrine and practice were permanent and presented as an unchanging language and culture—often indeed simply transposed from another language and culture. If one wanted to criticise this form of Catholicism it would be for this: the presentation of a permanence which could not be real. In addition, this presentation did not provide people with the equipment to reflect on christianity, concentrating as it did mainly on such things as the duties of lent. This is partly due to the clergy's control over information, a power which was misused.

Today this form of Catholicism has more or less come to an end. It will not survive its present adherents, though it will be a long time dying, especially in inner city areas such as the one described above where old people predominate.

It is possible to speculate on the future of the church and to generalise a little—though this will be done here without much subtlety. Only the position of existing members of the church and not that of possible converts will be considered.

There is clearly a movement for 'the rediscovery of the gospel'. The question is how is this to come about. There have been some changes in the church—in liturgy, practice and belief. Broadly speaking, these changes have been obtained by the middle class for the benefit of the middle classes. In England, for instance, the pressure has come largely from the new middle class emerging from the post-war advance in education. These changes have generally alienated those of the working class still in the church, who were in no way consulted and who, by and large, subscribe to the ghetto Catholicism just described. The rationalising and emasculated form of the new liturgy, for instance, can be attributed to the rationalising tendency of the middle class in wider society.

The official idea is that the wisdom of these changes will filter down from the middle classes, the natural leaders of the church, to the working class, who will in a generation or two accept them. Leaving aside the irritating elitism of this view, is it at all possible for this to happen?

The continuance of the present changes in the church depends on middle class Catholics being able to defeat the church bureaucracy. They have taken it on, but the question is whether they can defeat it. This rigid and uncreative form of organisation—with power highly centralised, with a form of administration that is at any rate intended to be highly rational and efficient, with officials with their own par-

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ticular jobs and spheres interlocking in an administrative hierarchy—is extremely difficult to defeat. It does not easily give up its power—and this is a question of power: that giving up or taking away power is involved is a point that is often neglected. The bureaucracy produces all kinds of illusory power-sharing and consultation, generally going under the name of participation. It might pay attention to the wishes of church members by asking them questions and listening to any replies—publishing consultation documents for instance. Or it might make a show of consulting particular people—consulting the clergy for instance. The often illusory nature of this became clear from the survey conducted to see if the people allegedly consulted over the appointment of a bishop of Nottingham actually had been, with the finding that mostly they had not (see Patrick Tierney & George Towler: *The Nottingham 'Consultation',* Pastoral Development Booklet (1972)). The 'advisory' nature of the Laity Commissions is another example. None of this of course is power-sharing. There was an attempt at what was called collegiality, but this was evidently for bishops only and clearly meant nothing when the church's teaching on birth control came up for consideration. Bishops are in any case peripheral figures in the administration of the church. In short, the lessons learnt by the various action groups that have taken on government (whether local authorities in England or the American War on Poverty) can be applied to the church: a bureaucracy will only give way before open conflict accompanied by publicity. 'Progressive' Catholics need the support of articles in the *Guardian.* It will be difficult to maintain the present rate of reform, and any genuine reform of the church is highly unlikely.

In the meantime, for reasons which include those set out above, the Catholic church, while still at present predominantly working class in membership, is following other churches and becoming a middle class church. The main freedom in the Catholic church is that you can get out, and younger working class people are taking this option. The mixture of middle class reforms and ghetto Catholicism that at present constitutes the church has nothing to offer them. Certainly the working class was alienated in the old church of ghetto Catholicism: the church provided an unreal world to escape into. They knew this, however, and were not deceived: they knew the church was not interested in getting justice for them. (This is a point to bear in mind if any Marxist analysis is applied to the church.) The present form of alienation is worse, including as it does a strong awareness of powerlessness and disillusion. 'Disillusion' is a better description than the more favoured 'apathy': there is no reason to suppose people would be apathetic if they had some genuine influence.

It will be argued by some wanting change that change must come from the bottom, but since it is evidently not coming from there, the doctrine of false consciousness must be invoked. But the doctrine of

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false consciousness is here at its most metaphysical, and perilously close to offering an explanation of why people do not behave as middle class intellectuals suppose they should. The advantage of introducing so overtly political a concept is that it is a reminder that the church cannot be considered atomistically—the situation of, say, the working class in the church cannot be considered apart from their situation in wider society, any more than the church as a whole can be considered apart from the commitment of its bureaucracy to the values of capitalist society. It may be that radical reform of the church can only follow radical reform of society.

In any case the intention here is not to predict the future of the church, but simply to make the point that, whatever the future, it lies neither with ghetto Catholicism, nor with the bureaucratic church.

For My Daughter

by Stan Smith

The world turns. Past midnight
a valve in my side
pumps on. Without collaboration
invisible cells burgeon and shrivel
for years yet. I lick
the seam in my palate where the slow tissues welded.

The house listens to itself,
and I listen, breath suspended.
It is the tick of the world running down.
There is black ink on my fingertips.

Grace tips the owl's shriek
off stage, where I am caught writing
in this room's hexagonal moment.
Silence invades that vacuum
left by the far cry. Night
contains this house and its stillness.

A patch of light sits like a cat on the stairs.
Sounds, driftwood of darkness
on the spent beach. You snore.
Your pink hands poach my life.

Puffball spores that never find soil
random as your beginning.

The world turns in its sleep
and my daughter turns, drowsily.

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