

Comment

The faith of Plante's Catholic

The deadline of 11 February has almost arrived for responses to that massive consultation of the laity on the laity which is being carried out in England and Wales by the General Secretariat of the Bishops' Conference as part of the preparations for the Roman Synod of Bishops of 1987. Some of the responses are lively and creative. There is a working-class voice though rather an elderly one. The National Youth Assembly has sent in a good response, and some have arrived from the sixth forms of Catholic schools. All the same, bearing in mind their numbers, it is the voice of the dedicated educated middle-aged middle class that comes across most strongly. Where, on the other hand, is the voice of their sons and daughters? It is on these that we are here focusing.

They are young adults and late teenagers who have grown up since the Council, and who in theory are better equipped than any Catholics to live as committed Christians in post-industrial society. Many of them have had a theologically far richer Christian upbringing than their parents and grandparents ever had. They have seen some of the best of the Church. They have quite often been involved in admirable activities like the CPW—the Catholic People's Weeks—and have had plenty of opportunities to talk with enlightened understanding church-people. They are unlikely to have been scarred by the religion of ignorance and fear that some older Catholics of their class have written about with such relish. Nevertheless, a lot of them are dropping out of the Church and many of these intend to stay out. Plenty has been said over many years about the lapsing of young Catholics. The point we are making here is that it is not only the young who have grown up in 'bad' Catholic families or who have had 'bad' experiences of the Church or Catholic education who are turning their backs on the Church. Their rather saddened parents often comfort themselves by underplaying the seriousness of what is happening, saying that what really matters is that their sons and daughters should at least 'keep their values'. What, though, are these 'values' rooted in? None of us can be complacent about what is happening.

If we are going to say anything here on the subject, it is clearly pointless for us just to repeat what is already fairly well known: the thinking of the social scientists on the subject, or pulp generalisations about the rejection of parental authority and the pressures of peer

groups. More useful would be a glance at David Plante's latest novel, *The Catholic*, published in the autumn by Chatto & Windus (£8.95). Set in Boston, its hero, Dan, drops out of the Church in his late teens, and the heart of the story is his working out of that. It is not a 'religious book', but it is one of the most 'theological' novels to have been written in English for some time. (This, mind you, does not mean it is likely to be warmly received by much of the Catholic press—it contains an account of a remarkably passionate homosexual love-making that goes on for 21 pages.)

Dan's struggles and hopes and uncertainties are the struggles, hopes and uncertainties of very many, though statistically he is certainly not 'the typical young lapsed Catholic'. He is too sensitive and subtle for that; furthermore, he is bisexual. His lapsing is 'typical' in that it is undramatic. It is the outcome of his finding the image of the body of his college friend Charlie freeing. 'What made me decide that I loved Charlie and didn't love Christ was that Christ made me think about my sinful self, whereas Charlie removed me from my world to one where there was no thinking about yourself and therefore there were no sins.' (p. 5.)

One of the major themes of the book, skilfully woven through it, is the persistence of Catholic symbolic systems in a Catholic's thinking even when he has turned his back on the Church and told himself there are no sins. And persistent above all else is Catholicism's ambiguous body-imagery. 'In my Church, to deny your body was to deny your soul', Dan says (p. 72).

The story is also, however, the story of somebody who, having kicked over Christianity, still yearns to escape from the deadly subjectivism so common in a world where the transcendent hardly has a place. Now twenty-four, Dan sees his passionate and obsessive relationship with Henry, somebody who is almost a stranger, as freeing him from the limits of the self. But the magic does not last. 'He was a young man not much different from me. I could not accept the revelation. What was happening to that body, come from outside the world and standing above the world, which the world loved?' (p. 143.)

Dan is thrown back on himself. He has a fantasy struggle with a dying Henry, a dying Christ-figure, whom he recognizes has come to dispossess him 'of all the images of love-making'—in fact, of all images. For Dan, clinging to those images, this is a struggle for belief, for belief that he 'could be made different'—something, he says, 'only the general promised', by which he means the sense of the general he believes he found in love with Henry (p. 146). 'How could the very person who revealed faith to me destroy it?' he wonders. The 'dying Henry' forces him to recognize the falsity of the images he is clinging to. 'He left me with a desire for faith that was impossible.... Why was there such a sense of promise in us, if the promise would never be kept?' Then Dan discerns

that what survives all our self-derision is ‘apprehension of those moments, just before you destroy them, when all your apprehension shifts, and you know that it is possible to be other than you are.’ (p. 149.)

Present, then, when we have given up clinging possessively to images, given up trying to possess what are in fact always inadequate ways to transcendence, is the enduring knowledge—enduring, however briefly glimpsed—that we are not after all hopelessly trapped in ourselves. What is especially ironic about Dan’s story, at any rate for a Christian, is that the freeing of him from the hotch-potch of distorted Christian imagery still in his system (the healing of Dan, you might say) is brought about through the most profound Christian image of all, that of the death of Christ.

Maybe what matters above all is that people should come to that ‘apprehension’ Dan talks about. But even Dan himself, a thoughtful man, only reaches it two pages before the novel’s end. All of us in any way concerned with helping young people to grow up as Christians and stay Christians must ask ourselves: Are we offering something hopelessly cerebral? What images do we incarnate? What sense of the body do we offer? How do we give people a sense of their bodies and the bodies of others that does not deteriorate into either guilt or possessiveness? And are we helping people to realise that the sense of the body deep at the heart of Christianity, far from cutting us off from the fundamental concerns of life, actually opens them up for us?

These are not the questions which many people in the Church in the West are praying over, wrangling over. They are not the ‘interesting’ questions. But they are immensely important for the future. And they are questions that the laity—above all, the laity!—should be asking, and trying to answer. Or are the committed ranks of the laity, as much as the clergy, getting dangerously out of touch?

J.O.M.