

The Language of Renewal

by Terry Eagleton

Here, almost literally at random, is a paragraph of print from the front page of a Catholic newspaper:

‘(Sunday) is a day primarily for Mass, then for relaxation and for good works. The precept of servile work was first enunciated to give an opportunity for relaxation so that people might be able to worship God and to be with their families.’

There is nothing very startling about this statement for a Catholic, but it's worth considering the effect of it on someone outside the Church. What kind of sensibility does it show at work? There is a marked tendency to categorization, to begin with: Sunday is divided neatly from week-days and then subdivided between Mass, relaxation and good works. The language has a stiff remoteness: ‘good works’, ‘precept’, ‘enunciated’ have a period flavour, and so does ‘servile work’, which the Catholic eye takes in and slides over automatically. But the stiffness is a matter of feeling as well as language, as the final message makes clear: Sunday was enunciated by precept as a day of rest so that people could worship God and be with their families. What kind of concern is it which arranges worship and rest by precept, under pain of serious sin? What validity is there in the implicit assumption that worshipping God is done better relaxed than driving a bus? Is worshipping God a special activity, in its own category, apart from working or even from being with one's family?

The statement was never intended to stand up to close analysis, of course, but it was made publicly by a responsible man, and the fact that we accept its loose, dehumanized legalism without complaint is part of what being a Catholic has come to mean. We let it go without a murmur: it's all part of the official Catholic sensibility, the hard channels of feeling which we would reject as part of our personal lives but accept as a necessary part of public Catholicism. The most important point about this kind of statement, ultimately, is that it would only get past a Catholic, someone raised on a diet of precepts and enunciations, special days and sanctions, as the man who made it was raised. Most intelligent and humane non-Catholics, aware that life isn't a matter of prescribed pigeon-holes and accustomed to feeling and talking this way in public as well as private, would be instantly hostile. This is something, it seems to me, which is worth worrying about.

It is important, if the Council is going to win any real attention from the world, that this is not the kind of language it should use. Language like this has its uses, of course: *communiqués* from Whitehall or Washington are often just such a series of poised verbal gestures which never quite focus into sense, and this is all right as long as everyone knows about this kind of announcement. This kind of statement is usually quite harmless because part of its point is that it conveys in the very process of being articulated the fact that it isn't demanding close scrutiny, and in fact is asking for a slight blurring of attention: it is the equivalent, in loud public terms, of tailing off an understood and accepted phrase in a mumble. (It would of course be a great deal better if politicians did not feel they had to do this, but, as long as they make it clear implicitly that their statements are merely gestures, confusion can be avoided.) This is one kind of language which the Council has at its disposal, and to use this is to establish a stance which the world can identify and respond to; if it speaks in this way it places itself on a level with the Foreign Office or the Kremlin and confirms that it is interested in evoking a particular kind of attention. The world, still uncertain how to take the Council, doubtful whether to identify it as comparable with the United Nations or a Royal Commission with a specific, detailed brief, can then relate itself to a recognized reality. The relationship will in fact probably take the form of polite detachment, which is one argument against using this language and this stance.

The other kind of language available for the Council's use is that of close and urgent exploration. There is an immediate difficulty here in the fact that it is difficult to mediate closeness and urgency in a statement made jointly by a vast body of men and aimed at a global audience, but it is possible that a necessarily public voice can be sufficiently flexible to cope with personal, detailed feeling and thinking: good oratory does this. Too often, in watching official Church announcements, we have seen the embarrassment of a public voice trying to handle local, complex detail and failing both in the detail and the quality of public conviction. Official Catholic communications seem to have fallen time and again between the two stools: the traditional patterns of feeling and syntax struggle to wrap themselves round hard fact and end up gesturing vaguely in a void. It is like watching a man trying to sing an aria and simultaneously disentangle his foot from a painful trap. Catholic social encyclicals veer uneasily between the realms of high, abstract thinking, with its lists of natural rights and duties, holy contracts and sacred bonds, and sudden, focussed detail to underpin a general theory: generalizations about atheistic communism swoop to a specific leftist atrocity, and this use of concrete detail can sometimes justly be suspected as distortion, open to all the dangers which sudden reduction of a case to a single instance can create. The usual trend of Catholic social thinking is static, working in terms of intrinsic rights

and functions, rarely using dynamic concepts of man and society, men in actual relationship; this then descends to concrete illustrations which are only specific at the expense of being distracting.

The Council can keep to generalized gestures, outlining a series of unexceptionable positions like supporting peace or condemning unscrupulous business practice or noticing the wonder and potential of television. (Wonder, incidentally, is a common posture in papal encyclicals, with its hint of a response to modern complexities which is not quite inwardly understanding but nevertheless generally appreciative: in this way approval of modern developments can be combined in tone and quality with a prudent detachment.) If the Council uses this language, its statements will be noted and filed along with the thousand other polite papal and episcopal nothings which have hit dutiful headlines and been stowed away so that the real thinking, by political theorists and scientists and sociologists, can be got on with. If, on the other hand, the Council wants to establish relevant contact with men outside the Church, it needs a different language and a different stance: it needs to see itself as part of a common world culture and a common exploration, learning and contributing alongside others. One test of the Council's sense of itself is in fact how far it sees its business as a general contribution to common thinking and culture, how far it sees its job just as transmitting the relevant points of contemporary thinking to the faithful. It will have to say more than that television should not be crammed with triviality and enquire a little into the socio-economic causes of cultural trivialization; it will have to advance a good way beyond the right to a living wage and examine the Christian potential of schemes of industrial democracy; its discussions of human dignity will need detailed application to bombs and pills.

Renewal has discovered roots which now can't easily be disturbed, but there is a danger of complacency: we have lost a lot of time and our thinking is still many steps behind the world in depth and humanity on many topics. It is not just the fact that we needed a Council in the first place which presents an obstacle to reform, but the fact that the whole necessity of withdrawing for a while into ourselves to leap forward better has its own dangers. The Church is gaining a new sense of herself, but not in the way a person or institution can best do this, through spontaneous involvement in the world, self-discovery *within* the process of action. Things have become so bad that we have had to withdraw for a while to take stock, and although the withdrawal is ultimately creative, it can also sub-consciously strengthen the sense of Church over against world in damaging ways. The fact that we are having open discussion of Church and world is vital: it is also in a way a pity that we are distanced from involvement in world-structures to the point where we can conceptualize the problem as we do, as a matter of balancing and relating two different realities. Setting up a relationship between

two realities is a creative move, but it implies an initial separation which can become sensed in the process of trying to relate, and can indeed break down the relationship if it becomes too strong.

One sign of this kind of barrier has been a degree of excessive self-consciousness in some progressive thinking, and this can be traced in the exuberant use of key items. 'Existential', 'dynamic' and 'living' are preferable on any reckoning to 'essentialist', 'static' and 'dead', but it is possible to forget that while we Catholics were plodding round in the wilderness of sacrament-as-thing and Latin in the liturgy, the world had latched onto the language we have recently discovered and absorbed it naturally into its thinking. We don't have to *tell* intelligent, radical humanists that life is a dynamic, flexible affair or that society should be a living, organic community. It is generally accepted ways of thinking about being alive we are coming back to, and we have to recognize this before we can start to make original extensions of these ideas.

But the real danger in Catholic progressive thinking is that it may well seem to the world, after a while, that the joyful talk of living encounter and existential dynamism comes down basically to the old, familiar change-of-heart: that the energy is being channelled towards this at the expense of actual changes in structure. But it is structures which are crucial: these, after all, are the way Catholicism is available to the world, the institutions and forms which are physically present to be judged by those who can't so easily appreciate inward change. Catholic progressive thinking in this respect has a good deal in common with common liberal attitudes in political society. The dynamic up-to-dateness of one kind of liberal, his talk of streamlining and efficiency, sweeping off cobwebs and creating a new spirit, is frequently talk about attitudes, talk about talk; the new dynamic consciousness looks around and finds that short of modernization here and there society remains after all much as it always was, in its basic institutions and relationships. A newspaper like *The Observer* has a smart, with-it classlessness, a cultural liberalism embracing everything from Kierkegaard to the Kinks, which in fact conceals a very real commitment to the political *status quo*: in terms of generated consciousness it is progressive, in terms of hard fact it is capitalist. This is a danger in Catholic thought: much progressive thinking seems to envisage a fine, flexible, dynamic life, which will work within (very largely) existing structures, making them humane and authentic where it can. The basic question is perhaps whether certain familiar structures, authentic or not, will in the long run do at all.

Two examples of what seems to me the serious limitations of current renewal-thinking can be found respectively in Michael Dummett's *How Corrupt is the Church?*¹ and in Thomas Merton's article on monastic renewal in this issue. I take Mr Dummett's

¹*New Blackfriars*, August 1965.

article first because it strikes me as showing a serious failure at certain points to press a real concern with renewal through to its full conclusions. Mr Dummett remarks, very rightly, that we have lost a sense of community as a Church, and he goes on to suggest that one way in which this can be regained is by a re-organization of the parish. If we accepted the idea of community in parish life, he says, 'we should see to it that, as far as possible, a parish did represent a cross-section of the social structure: we should so draw the parish boundaries that every parish included some who were well off as well as some who were poor; whereas now, very often, the parish is neatly divided to include only members of a single social class'.

This is in fact a very reactionary statement, not progressive at all. For in trying helpfully to re-organize existing structures to create a better sense of community, Mr Dummett is in fact merely accepting and reinforcing a whole social *status quo*: he presumes without questioning the fact that society will be composed inevitably of rich and poor, different social classes, and takes this as a framework within which his progressive ideas operate; whereas in fact, of course, the proposition that in any good society the present social and economic divisions between men will continue to exist is very arguable indeed. It is this failure to see Christian and social structures in constant inter-relation which is so marked in progressive thinking (I am not by the way implying that Mr Dummett is generally a 'progressive' since he has doubts about the term, only that this attitude is typical of progressive thinking). The progressive does not only accept the *status quo* and then work within it: he may well, as Mr Dummett does here, actually sharpen the existing situation by the changes he proposes. Changes in Christian structures which seem good when the Church is seen in isolation from society can be actively harmful when looked at in a whole social context. In the same article, Mr Dummett makes the point that the parish ought to be a genuine community of mutual help and welfare: he says it always contains many suffering hardship, 'the poor, the out of work, the sick, the crippled, the very old . . .' But what needs to be pointed out here is that social structures for dealing with this hardship already exist (extremely inadequately, of course), and the real centre of Christian commitment, surely, is engagement in the work of creating and sustaining these common structures – the Church in the world – rather than the creation of a substitute welfare State within the parish which can patch and repair human damage and thereby (as in the last century) take pressure off the society which is supposed to be doing this itself in the first place. Such a parish would be humane and progressive, but it could well prove a new type of progressive ghetto, concerned with *Catholic* welfare and community rather than just human community. To renew an existing institution like the parish, making it into an effective

community with its own welfare services and workers and activities, may actually weaken and confuse an overall social condition by diverting Christian energies from where they should really be focused: on the work of creating, not a community within a society, but simply a good, communal society. The conservative wants to keep given structures more or less as they are; the liberal wants to make them work more efficiently and humanely; the radical believes that in the case of certain structures no real change can be made short of total re-thinking. The question of whether the parish is itself the best unit is a valid one, and needs to be asked before we start wondering how to make it work: divisions of the Church which are based on historically outdated divisions of society, and which tend to duplicate social activities and thus create a new kind of enclosure, may well be less valuable than structures working inside and along with social institutions: centred on industry, for instance. The progressive's criticism works too much within an uncritical acceptance of given datum: he lacks the ability to distance himself to the point where he can ask the basic questions, those obvious to the non-Catholic observer. If we begin at a point short of the observer's starting-point, taking the basic facts for granted, we may simply undercut his confidence that what we are engaged on has living relevance to himself: his concern falls as a result from personal concern to academic interest.

A similar attitude to Mr Dummett's seems to me to appear in Fr Thomas Merton's account of monastic renewal (pp. 5-17). What would seem most evident to a non-Catholic outsider is that the attention which Fr Merton focuses on the validity of forms and practices within monasticism might well be focused to start with on the validity of monasticism itself, in the context of our world. Like Mr Dummett, Fr Merton sees renewal as a return of meaning to existing structures, 'a restoration of authentic meaning to forms and acts that must recover their full value as sacred signs'. Can monasticism in fact be an authentic form in the middle of the twentieth century? This is too controversial and complex to try to answer here, but the point is simply that the question has to be asked, not as a formality but as a relevant consideration. I do not think personally that Fr Merton's own justifications of monastic life in this article would be convincing to a non-Catholic, although other arguments might well; and I think again that the inadequacy lies in a failure to look in detail at the relation between Christian structures and society. Fr Merton says of monastic life that it can be 'simple, austere, well-ordered, close to the soil and to nature', and this is doubtless so; but these terms, in our society, have a whole world of social meaning behind them which must be made explicit and examined. The appeal to the withdrawn quiet of the monastic life ('organic' is the word which Fr Merton does not actually use but which sums up his description) involves an attitude to contemporary society which

may be by no means as straight and simple as mere escapist rejection, especially in the case of Fr Merton; but to talk about a life close to the soil, and to refer also to the status of industrial man as 'cogs in wheels', reveals a kind of attitude which seems to me questionable. We have to be careful in deciding how much a description like 'cogs in wheels' is a description of what contemporary living in industrial society feels like from the *inside*, and how much it is a way of external looking. Do we feel that 'cogs in wheels' catches the dominant reality of our society and experience, or is this, partly, an external response which has become as respectable and automatic as the easy jargon about rushing masses and faceless suburbia and little boxes, phrases which expose the observer's own alienation in his attempt to describe that of others? The appeal away from mechanical living to the organic life is part of a long and significant social tradition, but it is also now a popularized and potentially clichéd way of looking at society, which blurs over the real, complex experience in the interests of a quick category-judgment. It is easy to assemble a convincing picture of the flashy supermarket, the inane faces, and when this is used as the basis of a committed attack on certain aspects of Western life it can command respect perhaps slightly more easily than when it is merely part of an acceptable consciousness, detached from any radical engagement. Even then, it is a dubious technique, one relying often on the superficial response, the surface and external detail. An experience is never the same when lived as when looked at, and what may look from the outside like disconnected noise and rush may be quite different when lived. The observer may of course have a point and a useful insight – there is certainly some truth in the criticism of mechanism in this way – but finally it is those who are involved in the processes, not the observers, who have had the experience and therefore the capacity to judge.

To end on a note of agreement with Fr Merton: the renewal which the Council represents is for us as well as for the world. What we have to avoid above all is the suggestion that we are putting our beliefs into the world's language so that the world can understand them. We are not, as any Wittgensteinian theory of communication would make clear: the way we make our beliefs intelligible to others is the way we make them intelligible to ourselves. This is where the husk-and-kernel image (the idea that truth is the constant kernel within the ever-changing husk of expression) finally breaks down: for the truth isn't in some way behind or beyond its expression, it exists for us only in terms of it. There is, naturally, continuity with the past: but we negotiate truth through our communications of it, and to look for the image, as poets know, is to look for the idea. What we are doing, in the age of the Council, is interpreting the truth to ourselves by mediating that part of us which is culturally Roman Catholic to that part of us which, for want of a better term, is humanist. The world-and-Church division will never do in the

long run: they are united in us. It is a pity that the schizophrenia ever set in, and it may flare up in the very process of welding, but there is still a good chance that we will push through into sanity.
