

## COMMENT

Once upon a time housewives and warehouse keepers were afflicted by mice and quite naturally this gave rise to certain yearnings; it was in those days that the man who made a better mousetrap also made a lot of money. How very different from our own day: we have seen a great shift from creating a product to supply a demand towards creating a demand for the product. If you wait patiently until the world manifests a spontaneous desire for skateboards, package tours, Punk Rock or the powder with the biological action you will grow old in bankruptcy. In a world governed by profit it is a natural development that promotion and selling should take precedence over and control production.

The change has been made both possible and necessary by the electronics revolution and the consequent sudden growth of a certain kind of communication. Both vast transnational companies and enormous production lines have grown because of easy communications. This has meant huge investment that cannot be left at the mercy of guesses about the market. Here, once more, the communications revolution makes possible what it made necessary; give or take a little human ineptitude the new advertising can create the market that the new production requires.

I have not said all this in order to repeat the familiar socialist plea for rational, democratic control of this process to gear it to the needs of the many instead of the profit of the few, but just to indicate how easily our society can generate a trend or a fashion—even when no commercial interests are directly involved. Nevertheless such trends are not created *ex nihilo*, they must usually correspond in some complex and hidden way to the real desires of people, even if they fail to satisfy these desires.

These commonplace meditations arose for me, as a matter of fact, not out of skate-boards but out of the Holy Shroud of Turin. Here we have a sudden religious fuss, evidently created by press and television but still, no doubt responding to some need of our times.

What need? Clearly the shroud, even if it were the burial robe of Jesus has no direct theological significance. Like any archaeology it might throw light on New Testament times—how people were crucified, what the crown of thorns would be like, and so on—and, as is usual with such discoveries, it may serve indirectly to defend the general historical plausibility of the Gospels. Its theological interest, however, is well upstaged by the Dead Sea Scrolls which nobody, so far as I know, has yet venerated. Specu-

lations by scientists about the origin of the marks on the shroud, even if well-founded, would have less relevance to the resurrection than the already known fact of the empty tomb. The shroud is certainly a puzzling object to scientists and historians, but wherein lies its religious interest?

The answer of course, is that it purports to be a *relic*—a good modern relic, surrounded by respectable scientific trappings instead of medieval mummeries. The orchestrated interest in the shroud may be made possible by modern communications but it is surely built upon a primitive and only half-acknowledged desire for relics, and this means a desire for concrete bodily contact with holy things, in this case the holiest material thing of all, the body of Christ. The desire for and veneration of relics is linked with a real need, the need that our religion be not simply a matter of ideas and doctrines but of the body.

The cult of the shroud, though, should worry us a little. Why is there such excitement about the supposed availability of the robe that wrapped the dead body of Jesus when his living body is present to us daily in the eucharist? On the 25th of this month we celebrate a feast, Corpus Christi, deliberately designed to keep this truth before our minds; should Catholics not ask themselves whether they are proclaiming it clearly and insistently enough? Should not the fuss about the shroud warn us that people are not finding in the eucharist the experience of the presence of the body of Christ that should be available to them? The medieval cult of relics may have been connected with the fact that hardly anybody then actually went to communion. The new cult, even amongst those who receive the eucharist regularly, may be connected with a failure fully to recognise the real presence there of Christ's body.

Eucharistic preaching and writing in the Catholic Church during the past few decades has for the most part been engaged in the absolutely necessary task of correcting a physicalist misinterpretation of the real presence—the idea that Jesus's body is present as Jesus was in Galilee but disguised as bread and wine. But having disposed of this notion have we really succeeded in getting across the truth of the positive sacramental presence? When we say that the body of Jesus is *sacramentally* present has 'sacramentally' (like 'in a deep sense' or 'fundamentally') come to be the equivalent of 'not'? God forbid that we should lapse back into the nonsense of the 'prisoner in the tabernacle' era, but unless and until we can preach and proclaim the real sacramental presence of the living body of Jesus Christ in the eucharist we may expect that the human hunger for the love of God to reach out and touch us in our bodies will be diverted from the bread of life to the shroud of death.

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