

COMMENT

I hope there is no need to apologise for returning so soon to the theme of the papacy, since the papacy itself has done just that. In our September issue I suggested that the papacy has two incompatible job-definitions: the Pope is either primarily a good bishop of the diocese of Rome or else he is administrator of the universal Church. Either of these would be a great task for any man; it seems impossible that any man should try both of them. That is why you can always find an area in which a Pope has failed.

However that may be, it is necessary for the health of the Church that the Pope should do at least one of his jobs well. It might seem unnecessary to say this but for the fact that a contrary theory was beginning to become fashionable during both the recent interregnum periods. This theory was that what the Church really needed at the present time was an inconspicuous or even an incompetent Pope. It was being argued that, by diminishing the importance and prestige of the papacy as such, this would leave room for the emergence of local autonomy and collegiality in the Church. People, it was said, being less dazzled by Rome would be able to reflect on their own responsibility to be the local Church.

This utterly mistaken belief is just one expression of an oddly widespread theory according to which not only will things get worse before they get better but that the way to get them better is to allow them to get worse. It is a familiar ultra-left attitude in politics: let us rejoice as unemployment spreads, as the National Front gains votes, as the Conservative Party moves further and further to the right, for thus our society shows itself in its true colours and the stage is made ready for the appearance of a society of greater justice—as though the collapse of capitalism were not merely a necessary but a sufficient condition for the building of socialism. Really this view rests on a profoundly liberal optimism that if only obstacles were removed progress would take place almost automatically. For such people the revolution is not deliberately and painfully constructed within the structures of capitalism, but somehow miraculously replaces them. It is exactly the same kind of mistake to believe that democracy would come to the Church through the weakening of the institution of the papacy. Undoubtedly it will only come through a diminishing of the range

and comprehensiveness of Vatican decision-making, but this will be the work not of a weak Pope but of a strong and confident one.

It is certainly possible to imagine the Bishop of Rome taking the firm decision that his primary job is the one on his own doorstep; such a man would be restricting himself not because he was incapable of work in a larger field but because this was the way he saw his papal task. He could well bring forth a visible model of unity in charity and, in a Christian world tired of outdated schisms, could well become an ecumenical focus of unity in a less centralised and more democratic Church. A timid or withdrawn man who took refuge in the diocese of Rome would most certainly have no such effect; instead of democracy by default we should surely see his curia tighten its grip on the Church throughout the world.

Fortunately, though these speculations are now academic, for what we clearly have in Pope John Paul II is a strong and determined leader whose sights are set on the whole world. Perhaps he regards his position as the first non-Italian for several centuries (a fact not otherwise of great importance) as a sign that he was meant to be a Pope for the universal Church rather than primarily for the see of Rome. It was noticeable that in his first speech he made no reference at all to his diocese—though he later restored that balance (“I am a Roman now”).

His election is surely the most surprising and hopeful thing that has happened in the Church since the beginning of Vatican II. Like the Council it holds out enormous promise for the Church: in fact it holds out the hope that some of the real promise of the Council may at last be fulfilled. Certainly the Pope is insistent that this is how he sees his task, and he sounds like a man who means what he says.

The thing for which Karol Wojtyła was best known before his election was his championship of real collegiality which means, in less ecclesiastical language, the struggle for constitutional change in the Church. He believes that the Synod of Bishops, for example, should have actual decision-making power, and while nobody would expect this to transform the Church overnight into the Kingdom of God, the immediate effect will be to strengthen it as an institution. Democracy, even this small degree of democracy, is stronger than autocracy just as pluralism is more orthodox than party-line conformity. It is obvious that the Pope wants a cohesive, militant institutional Church and so does anybody who believes that the Church can be a force for radical liberation, for justice and peace.

Under this papacy, Vatican II may well come to be seen not just as the moment when the world became safe for pastoral liturgy, ecumenism and Hans Kung (no mean achievements, even

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of change on women who experience what they believe to be a call to ordination and on women who regard the traditional policy as an affront to human dignity. Disaffection on the part of women (as well as the men who share their concern) is likely to be as serious and regrettable as the projected impact of a change in policy on more conservative elements in the Church.

But a clearly distinct range of considerations applies to assessing such circumstances than would apply to appraising the Declaration's main argument. Debate about women's ordination is bound to become stalled when these strands of issues are not kept distinct and when the Declaration's argument is obscured by other concerns. I have sought to identify this argument's major supporting claims and to suggest some lines along which fruitful theological inquiry would have to proceed. Both sides in a renewed debate would have to accept the state of the question as it has been redefined by the Declaration: Does the appeal to tradition, to which the Declaration accords an unprecedented prominence, constitute a sufficient justification for the policy of limiting ordination to men in the Church?

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these) but the point at which the Church began to take itself seriously as the community of the dispossessed. It is surely of the first importance that this Pope has lived most of his life under a socialist regime, is old enough to measure its achievements against what preceded it and close enough to it to analyse its failures, especially its failure to be socialist. For him the socialist peoples' republics will be neither heaven nor hell but simply the real world of the future, needing to be lived in and challenged from within, not in the name of western liberal capitalism but in the name of Christ's poor. It looks as though we may have this time a Pope for the next world.

H.McC.