

Comment

More gospel, less in-fighting

'Can't you print articles which are more apostolic?', we were asked recently, 'rather than more of all this stuff about Church power conflicts—fights with the Vatican, and so on?'

The criticism was a little unjust, but the fact is that it is not quite so easy as one might think to keep the two—the apostolic and the power politics—apart, and this has been the case from the beginning. 'May they all be one' is one of the most stirring texts in the whole of St John's gospel, but the New Testament scholars tell us that, hidden behind it, is an important power struggle.

No major religious group in the world, Christian or non-Christian, has been so preoccupied with questions of power as has the Latin Church. In the past, in certain times and places, this preoccupation has undoubtedly distorted popular Catholicism. Eamon Duffy, in his article in this issue, shows that most of the emphases and priorities of the Penny Catechism were those of the Church's fight against protestantism, with an overwhelming stress on authority and obedience and precious little of the spirit of the New Testament. And today a lot of the discussion about the two forthcoming Rome synods is about who in the Church should have power.

If you are looking for explanations, it is not enough to point to the influences on the Church of the ancient imperial court and the despotism of the princes of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Of most importance is something much more enduring—the great emphasis placed in Christianity from its earliest days on orthodoxy, on having 'the correct opinion'. Today only a vulgar Marxist would say that this emphasis on orthodoxy is no more than a facade, enabling the powerful in the Church to consolidate their power, but there is no doubt that the preservation of orthodoxy has helped to justify the perpetuation of authoritarian centralizing structures.

The preserving—or extending—of the prevailing power-interests in the Church and the perpetuating of orthodoxy have got so tangled together that sometimes it is hard to know which one is talking about. For instance, *all* discussion of *Hananæ Vitæ* is 'political'. What a man thinks of *Humanae Vitæ* is still *the* litmus test when sizing up his suitability for a bishopric or a Vatican job. And Alberic Stacpoole's critique of the Bishop of Hexham & Newcastle's recent correspondence on the subject, part of his widely-welcomed article in our May issue, perhaps unavoidably hinted that the Bishop might be

one of those 'churchmen who will tend to focus upon documents emanating from centres of authority at the expense of the people of God in their direct care'—a suggestion which, knowing the Bishop and his diocese as we do, we would say was certainly not correct.

Things are not likely to alter in the foreseeable future. The ever-growing complexity of post-industrial society is not, alas, undermining the dominant economic influences, but it *is* undermining the traditional notion of orthodoxy. Even if all say the same creed, the ways this is lived out are getting more and more disparate. And in the big cities of the Third World, too, society is getting more and more unstable. So Christianity's power-conflicts are likely to *increase*. In the protestant world the number of denominations and sects is likely to go on growing: there are over 20,000 already, and on average five new ones are starting every week. In the Catholic world there is likely rather to be more and more in-fighting. And many of us Catholics will, we fear, go on failing properly to understand what is happening to us. Probably most of us will go on believing that, if only we could get rid of those dreadful progressives or ultra-traditionalists or liberation theologians or curial monsters, everything would be alright.

What we should try to do is reduce the quantity of utterly pointless conflict. One thing that this past year's huge debate on liberation theology should have made clear is that there is a need for everybody (critics as well as the holders of power) at least to try to discern better what in a power struggle is specifically Christian or an intrinsic part of Church tradition and what is not.

In this issue we publish two consciously controversial articles about power in the Church. Rosemary Radford Ruether writes about the Vatican's strictures on religious and priests in public office and politics, and what might be done to change the Church's power-structures. Bede Griffiths presents a summary of the ideas of Luis Bermejo, a Spanish Jesuit theologian working in India. Bermejo is arguing that the problem of papal infallibility, which he sees to be the major obstacle to union with other churches, vanishes once it is acknowledged that Vatican I was not an ecumenical council in the traditional sense, and this he believes.

Both of these authors, in their different ways, compel us to ask questions—and especially questions about the adequacy of various political models when these are applied to the Church. We rightly reject the current model, which owes so much to the Byzantine court, but just how far is the democratic model an adequate substitute? How far, for example, does it match our understanding of the Church as the community of all God's people, living and dead? Surely a democracy just of those who happen to be alive now would not reflect the nature of the Church as a community born of the Resurrection? And what relevance has the Church's past for us if current Western

principles of representation are always our measure? Admittedly some ecumenical councils are more ecumenical than others, but if we say that Vatican I was not a genuine ecumenical council because parts of 'the great Church' had sent no representatives to it, where do we stop? Can we in fact absolutize any political model, when applying it to the Church?

There is, of course, one model which allows no place for domination or conflict and has no origins in politics—the model offered to us by the gospels themselves. It is familiar enough: 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, the leader as one who serves' (Luke 22:25f. par.) Equally familiar is the difficulty of living it out; in fact, the impossibility of doing this, on one's own. Much too much is working against one.

We cannot use that model on its own, but it has to be at the centre of all our dreams of what the Church should be, for it brings the apostolate into the middle of all the rough-and-tumble of Church politics. It makes sense for a publication like this to print articles about power conflicts in the Church so long as in one way or another they stimulate readers to ask 'And where, in this chaos, is "the serving Church"?'

J.O.M

THE POPE AND CARDINAL ARNS

*Dr Eamon Duffy says that he understands that Cardinal Arns has denied the story of the Holy Father tearing up in front of the Cardinal a letter about the celibacy law brought by the Cardinal to Rome from Brazil—a story referred to by Dr Duffy on p. 277 of our June special issue (for its source see *The Tablet* of 4 May 1985, p. 454, but it also appeared elsewhere). He wishes us to express his pleasure that the story is untrue, and his regret, therefore, at giving it further currency.*
