

# Comment

## *Restoration, Roman style*

Who are going to decide what the dominant world-view in the Church of the 1990s will be—the optimists or the pessimists?

Catholic religious will again be mulling over that question. For there are some obvious parallels to be drawn between what was done to the Jesuits of the world in October 1981 (when the Pope “did the unthinkable”, and put in his own man to govern the Jesuits) and what has just been done to the Carmelite nuns.

As early as February 1982 the Pope realised that he had been unnecessarily alarmed about the state of the Jesuits. It is not clear that what the Carmelite nuns are going through at the moment will end so swiftly and satisfactorily.

For years the nuns, who, live in over 800 autonomous Carmels, have been working on the reform of their constitutions, just as hundreds of thousands of other religious have been doing. For the past six years they have been living under provisional new legislation—“Declarations” which were the product of much research and consultation and approved by the Vatican. More than four out of five of all the Carmels of the world accepted these, and last autumn the nuns were about to have the definitive text of their legislation approved, or so they thought.

It was then the blow fell: the Pope swept aside the new legislation as if it did not exist and imposed as law on all the nuns their old—very old—constitutions, the so-called Alcalá Constitutions, which are full of the odour of baroque legalism and authoritarianism. The Sacred Congregation for Religious was ordered to add footnotes to these “to update them”.

What has been done has shocked and pained a lot of Carmelites, of course. Understandably, they want to keep the affair “in the family”. But the rest of the religious of the world cannot shrug it off as merely another nasty example of ecclesiastical chicanery.

A lot to do with it is strictly Carmelite business only. Only they can say what a Carmelite nun should be like today. We can guess Rome’s reactions to stories of American Carmelite prioresses being seen driving about in slacks, and with hair-dos, but it is not for the rest of us to say whether those prioresses are departing from the charism of St Teresa. Also, most of the political aspects of the affair are

internal. Clearly many of the nuns underestimated the influence of the 73 Carmels (two-thirds of them Spanish) which had rejected the “Declarations” altogether; a group of 20 of these had made strong representations in Rome backed—surprise, surprise—by Opus Dei.

No, what concerns us all is the shocking way these women have been treated, suffering arbitrary treatment of a kind only justifiable in grave emergency. But this, of course, *is* the justification, time and again today, in the minds of some of the most intelligent men in the Vatican. A reading of Vittorio Messori’s interview with Cardinal Ratzinger, printed in the Italian magazine *Jesus* last November, is an education, because it reveals just how pessimistic is Ratzinger’s worldview, and, consequently, his view of the state of the Church; how alarmed he is.

Simon Tugwell once said that, if perfect love casts out fear, it seems also true that perfect fear casts out love. And this is never truer than when apocalyptic begins to creep in. Just as, in Roman thinking, the Jesuits are to be a model for all Catholic missionaries and educationalists, so, in Roman thinking, the Carmelite nuns are to be a model for all women in contemplative life. If it looks as if all but a tiny remnant of them are being seduced by this naughty world there is only one thing to do: save the remnant and stamp down on the rest. That is the standard apocalyptic scenario.

After this, though, the scenario breaks down. One can jam women behind double grilles, but that is not going to turn them into women of prayer—certainly not twentieth-century women of prayer. One can fire commands at the Church’s great armies of religious, but the only thing that holds those armies together and makes them move forward is love, not threats. And who can rule today by love whose attitudes to the world are basically negative and fearful? In the past, yes, perhaps. For once, perhaps, flight was possible. In fact, Ratzinger talks of the need “to find again a link with ancient spirituality, that of ‘flight from the *saeculum*’”. But now, thanks to technology and our social and economic structures, none of us can get the world wholly out of our hair. No, not even the most tightly enclosed Carmelite nun, as good Carmelites know.

The pessimists, then, will not win. But how much sorrow and frustration must there be in the meantime?

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