

Every year fewer young men decide to become priests and every year more who had decided change their minds and return to secular life. Taking a world-view this cannot yet be regarded as a practical problem in England. We still have a rather high proportion of priests compared, say, to the countries of South America. There remains however a serious theoretical problem which it forces on our attention. A young man nowadays does not just have to answer the question: Should I be a priest? He also has to find a new answer to the more fundamental question: Why should anybody be a priest? This is not, of course, a rhetorical question; part of being a Catholic is to believe that it has a good answer. The trouble is that the answer is no longer perfectly obvious. The way it was put in the past does not sound satisfactory any more. The young Catholic today may not be able to formulate his dissatisfaction very clearly but the fact that for him the question is a real one shows that the old answers do not work. The purpose of answers is to eliminate questions.

Some conservatives argue that the 'shortage of vocations' is just one aspect of the general decline due to the Council. There has been unleashed upon the church a pack of theologians whose bizarre ideas had hitherto been safely imprisoned in learned journals and theological faculties. There is, it seems to us, a good deal of truth somewhere in this view: Of course there is no single concerted conspiracy of 'progressive' theologians (even the tightly-knit group of politically-minded Dominicans, dreamt up by a journalist the other day, does not actually *exist*) but it is true that ordinary Catholics are, often for the first time, feeling the impact of theological discussion and disagreement, and this is bound to be disturbing. In the long run this is a good thing. It is a good thing for theology to be taken out into the fresh air of the streets and it is a good thing for the men and women in the street to take a more responsible and critical hold upon their tradition. But in the short run there are difficulties. It is extremely easy to pass from the discovery that some hallowed formula may be questioned to the vague feeling that it is all questionable. You discover theologians discussing the eucharist without using the word 'transubstantiation' and you begin to feel that the anchor has got lost: now *anything* is possible.

When you lose, or feel you have lost, the old landmarks, the first reaction is to look round desperately for new ones – almost any new

ones. The first accidental effect of popularising theological debate is a period of slogan-theology. This is not at all because theology properly belongs to an élite (the disastrous failure of the scholastic élite is where we start from) but because the return of theology to its proper place after so long a time causes a temporary period of shock and slight hysteria. Conservatives are quite right to point out that, to some extent, conformity to the old party line has been replaced not by critical thought but by conformity to fashion; they are surely wrong simply to wish that the whole thing had not happened. The rest of us will see in the present confusion merely the inevitable disturbance that accompanies a revolution, a breaking up of the hard packed earth so that new shoots may grow. But in the meantime there is uncertainty and it affects such vital areas as the Christian priesthood. There is an urgent need to clarify this matter; the remedy for a little theology is a lot more. For this reason we are particularly glad to publish Fr Nicholas Lash's article which carries on the debate begun so excitingly last December by Terry Eagleton. The discussion is evidently not closed: granted that, as Fr Lash insists, the priestly ministry implies some rôle outside the liturgy, it remains to ask what form this can take in our society. And if we combine this with Fr Edmund Hill's vision of the future, the discussion becomes still more open.

There must be many readers of *New Blackfriars* who are not content to make liberal or revolutionary gestures from the comparative security of the welfare state but would like to do something practical about the hideous situation that has developed in the southern states and elsewhere in America. We would like them to read this letter we have received from Fr Philip Berrigan, s.s.j.:

'The Poor People's Corporation was established in Mississippi a year ago in an effort to combat the economic hardships of the southern Negro. Fifteen co-operatives employing several hundred formerly jobless Negroes are now in operation producing leather goods, toys and apparel. Many of the co-op workers have seen their incomes triple since they joined a co-operative (some of them were formerly cotton choppers who made two dollars a day). All possess highly valuable skills gained from the training programme offered to new workers. The control of the programme is in the hands of the people themselves. A loan fund has been established from which grants are voted by members at quarterly meetings. Products made by the co-ops are sold through Liberty House, a store and mail-order service in Jackson . . . Money is urgently needed.'

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H.Mc.C.