

Comment

The end of Catholic theology?

What a caption for a Comment on the CDF's recent *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*! Surely there is enough paranoia—mirrored paranoia, mainly—around already in the Church? Yet could what that caption is suggesting just possibly be true?

Nearly all of us would agree that the theologian should not 'lose, by conforming himself to this present world, the independence of judgement which should be that of the disciples of Christ' (32), and that conscience is 'not an independent and infallible faculty' (38). But things like this are not, of course, what the row over the document is about. The row is about power. A moderate man, Geoffrey Turner, in a letter in *The Tablet* of 28 July, talked of 'ecclesiastical totalitarianism'. He thought some of the things the *Instruction* said were 'a scandal, a stumbling block to those of us who believe it is possible to live the Christian life in the Roman Catholic Church.'

Paul Parvis, in his article in this issue 'Guardian Angels and Carrotburgers', gives a fairly full and sober analysis of the document, so here we are focussing just on the most important issue it raises. Over and over again in recent years we have been asked: is the time approaching when no Catholic dogmatic or moral theologian whose work is more than mediocre will be in a Church-controlled post? We have yawned and brushed the question aside. But can we do this any longer? As Dr Parvis writes, this document 'is concerned with the responsibility of theologians, but leaves little room for the doing of responsible theology'; if the CDF means what it says, 'the theologian is stripped of his proper job'.

From Vatican II until now a lot of us have thought that the all-important mark of Catholic theology was that its practitioners should never abandon that 'generous loyalty' written about by Newman, *even when* they felt compelled to say things which would probably irritate the CDF. In other words, we thought charity—a deep love of Christ and His Church—was the all-important mark ... something quite different from the kind of obedience a company expects of its junior executives.

The most disturbing thing in Dr Parvis's article is the wittiest: his comparison of the Magisterium as it appears in the new document with the senior board of a global fast-food chain launching new products (e.g. carrotburgers) which it will be the job of the local executives —i.e. the theologians—to sell. More than once we have written about the trend in the modern Catholic Church uncritically to take over organisational models from government and industry. The CDF wags a finger at the theologian who grabs for the latest theory, the latest opinion, floating in the cultural pond. But this other form of unconscious sell-out to the

dominant culture—by the Vatican itself—is much more dangerous, because it is more profound and subtle.

If what we are saying here is right, whether or not you approve of this document depends not on your ‘conservatism’ or ‘liberalism’ but on how you see the Church—whether, behind all the rhetoric, you see it first and foremost as an organisation, a multinational corporation. If you do, what the document says about the Church’s theologians makes perfect good sense. And some powerful people in the Church do see it like this—the ecclesiological shift which Fred McAndrew writes about in his short article in this issue, ‘Subsistit in’, shows that.

Then is there going to be no room for theologians who understand their role differently? In many clerical circles the basic rule of most theologians of the five decades between the Modernist crisis and Vatican II could creep back again: providing you know when to keep your mouth shut you will be alright. But the 1990s are a decade very different from those decades. People disagreeing with the CDF are told in the *Instruction* not to air their opinions and complaints in the mass media (30, 39). The media, though, are not like a taxi firm waiting to be rung up; today they infiltrate the whole of our culture, and that includes the Church.

And what about the future? A number of people with creative minds will continue to aspire to be theologians in the Catholic Church, but only as long as the Church will offer them space to think—space for diversity, in other words. *The Instruction* says much about dissent, nothing positive about diversity (cf. 32, 34). But listen for a moment to somebody in a different field. John Reader, writing in *Man on Earth* (1988) on the thesis of the anthropologist A.F.C. Wallace that culture is the organisation of diversity, and that diversity is the well spring of human existence and evolution, says: ‘Diversity can never be swept aside or swamped or ruled out of law by a single uniform system of cultural behaviour.’ (p. 193) History is against all the builders of monolithic structures.

For the sake of the future, it is desperately important that today’s Catholic theologians understand better how power functions in the Church. The Vatican is currently out to centralise as much as it can. But at least some of the power it is getting over theologians is power ‘by attribution’—power and importance given to it by the theologians themselves, by paying so much attention to what the Vatican is saying about them. The CDF contains a tiny handful of highly intelligent people but also—alas—quite a lot of narrow, insensitive ones. Their critics are giving them more attention than they deserve.

J.O.M.