

On Scandals in the Church

Hugo Meynell

Scene: The Faculty Club of the University of Scunthorpe.

Anthea: Hello, Bertram. What on earth is wrong with you? You look as if you had seen a ghost.

Bertram: Thank you for asking, Anthea; I *do* feel rather shattered. However—it sounds an unfriendly thing to say, but please don't take it so—you are the very last person I should confide in.

Anthea: I won't take offence, if you explain yourself to my satisfaction!

Bertram: Is nothing against you personally; quite the contrary. But I know that you have always found my Catholic faith at once intellectually absurd and morally repulsive; though you have been good enough to have some regard for my mind and heart—or so I flatter myself—in spite of it. What has got to me is the news of even more sexual scandals among priests and lay brothers which I read in the paper this morning. This certainly makes me understand your point of view, and even tempts me to share it.

Anthea: It is true, I'm afraid, that I consider Catholicism to be both intellectually and morally monstrous, and as a consequence find all these scandals unsurprising. That I think a compound of a peculiar upbringing and acute psychological need has warped your own attitudes in matters of religion, does not make me value you less as a person; I can even respect your judgment in non-religious matters. Allow me to say that people may be virtually insane in one respect, but quite rational in others; this is just one of the facts of life one has to get used to. There's nowt so queer as folks, as they say in Yorkshire! Here's Cyril, whose faith always seems to me so serene and untroubled; let's see what he has to make of all this.

Bertram: Anthea was teasing me about the latest scandals in the Church. She was also saying that it would be interesting to find our your reaction to them.

Cyril: So you both want to put me on the spot, do you? There is no doubt that there have recently been some very regrettable occurrences. But I think the best thing for us Catholics to do is to admit them frankly and put them behind us. What is now mainly needed is that Catholics should close ranks and defend the Church. If you put me on the spot, Bertram, it seems only proper that I should do the same thing by you. You are the kind of Catholic who goes out of your way to complain to all and sundry about the abuses in the Church. I must tell you, frankly, that I find that your attitude

smacks of disloyalty.

Bertram: Catholics certainly have the duty to be loyal; but loyalty comes in many shapes and sizes. For the sake of what the Church really is and stands for, one ought to inveigh all the more passionately against her present corruptions, and exert oneself to the utmost to get them corrected. I can be frank too; I think the Church in its present state needs the kind of loyalty you seem to have in mind like one needs a hole in the head.

Anthea: I would have thought, Cyril, from my position as an outsider, to say that there have been “a few regrettable occurrences” is a bit of an understatement. Sexual abuse is reported to have been going on for decades in a Catholic orphanage; a bishop is accused of misconduct; a regular vice-ring for procuring and abducting children is discovered among priests. And so on, and so on. Those who protest that everything is all right after all, apart from a few small details, remind me of the old French song. ‘Everything’s going all right, Marchioness. There’s just one thing, we have to inform you of the death of your grey mare. But apart from *that*, everything’s going all right.’ And so on till the last verse. ‘Oh yes, and your husband the Marquis has committed suicide. But apart from *that*, everything’s going all right.’

Cyril: Perhaps the two of you would prefer to indulge in a witch-hunt. It has to be borne in mind that these people are sick.

Bertram: If you think I want a witch-hunt, you have mistaken my intention entirely. I agree with you about the sickness; I would like an honest and steady look at the institutional forces which may have caused the sickness.

Cyril: Surely that involves an unwarranted assumption. Is it not likely that the people concerned were disposed to behave in these ways before they entered the priesthood? We have been assured that, in future, candidates will be more carefully screened.

Anthea: Did I not hear, somewhere, that the shortage of priests had already reached crisis proportions?

Bertram: I do not *assume* that the way of life demanded of many priests would *compel just anyone* to behave in these deplorable ways; I agree that those who do so may very well be thus predisposed to some extent when they enter the priesthood; but what I would like is for the authorities of the Church to attend carefully to the *possibility* that the way of life to which they subject some priests and lay brothers *increases* whatever tendency that may have in this direction. I do not assume that institutional pressures are entirely responsible; I merely insist that it is wrong to assume that they are not at all responsible. I would be very glad to hear of convincing evidence that they were not.

Cyril: I must say, I don’t hold with this modern fashion of blaming the shortcomings of individuals on institutions. It seems to me part and

parcel of the abdication of responsibility which is such a typical feature of our times. Traditional Catholic teaching has rightly emphasized the importance of the will.

Anthea: What price 'sickness' now?

Bertram: Well, I suppose a person can have desires and inclinations indicative of mental illness, and still be to some degree responsible for yielding to them. I agree with Cyril that the will has its margin of freedom, and that this has to be taken into account, to a degree that some of our contemporaries do not. Even a very compulsive desire may be succumbed to in spite of more or less of an effort; and we can influence our desires in the long term, if not in the short. But surely, when you get behaviour in an institution which appears to be quite systemic, it flies in the face of the evidence to attribute it merely to individual acts of will. Anyway, the extent of Cyril's stress on the will appears to me more Pelagian than orthodox.

Anthea: Forgive me for saying so, but from my vantage-point the trouble is not so much institutions *within* the Church, but the institution *of* the Church. A Catholic upbringing, so far as my observation goes, produces rather more than its share of shrivelled, smashed, and messed-up creatures, and of others whose consciousness is so restricted that they can't see the difference between these and real human beings.

Bertram: I wish I could say honestly that I thought that was a total caricature. I wish that the Catholic faith appeared to all but the invincibly prejudiced as an enhancement of human life, rather than however it does now. Our Lord says he is come to bring us more abundant life; St. Thomas, that grace perfects nature, rather than taking it away. But things don't always look quite like that.

Anthea: *Can* you, either of you, really lay your hands on your hearts and say that the people who are presumably your role-models, your priests and bishops, are as a rule especially excellent examples of humanity?

Cyril: There are exceptions, reprehensible, pathetic, or both; but on the whole, I can.

Bertram: I would certainly not be as sanguine as that; but, thank God, I have known priests and bishops who were quite outstanding as human beings.

Anthea: Even I would not go so far as to deny that some of them might be so.

Cyril: In any case, saving your presence, Anthea, one would not expect the secular world to be able to recognise true sanctity.

Bertram: On the contrary, I believe it to be one of the notes of true sanctity, that it is often acknowledged by the secular world. We read of our Lord, that 'the common people heard him gladly.' And think of the virtually universal human admiration for Mother Teresa of Calcutta

or Pope John XXIII. There is a fine story told of Archbishop Antony Bloom, who as a teenager took for granted the atheism in which he had been brought up. One day he went, if I remember rightly, to a kind of summer camp, and was enormously impressed by the sheer human excellence of one of the leaders there. That this man also happened to be a Russian Orthodox priest, was one of the things which influenced Bloom most towards re-examining the credentials of the Christianity which he had previously rejected.

Anthea: But even granted the excellence of some of your celibate clergy as human beings, what can they know about many central aspects of the life of ordinary people—I don't just mean matters of sex in the restricted sense, but matters relating to one's spouse or children? Does not this lack gravely impugn their effectiveness as preachers, or in the confessional?

Cyril: A priest isn't just a counsellor or psychotherapist.

Bertram: But isn't this at least *a part* of his role? I have always thought it something of a miracle that some priests have the understanding of sexual and matrimonial problems that they do. But many do not have such understanding; and to run into them in the confessional, or to hear them preaching on some topics, can be both a harrowing and a disgusting experience, a real trial to one's faith.

Anthea: Still, mere crassness and insensitivity in dealing with people is one thing, crime another. What seems to the outsider so horrifying is not so much the crimes themselves, as the institutional reaction to them. In East Ruritania, where the Church has been powerfully established for centuries, a woman suspects that her son, who has been serving as an altar-boy, is being sexually abused by his priest. She takes her complaint to the bishop; and is vehemently reprovved for her evil-mindedness in even supposing that such a thing was possible. Later, an independent inquiry, not sponsored by the Church, established that the abuse had been going on.

Cyril: To someone inside the Church, the worst effect of all these scandals is the lack of trust which has ensued from them.

Anthea: If you mean that the mother of the altar-boy we just mentioned is a bit hesitant about encouraging another of her sons to be an altar-boy, I must say I'm all for lack of trust.

Bertram: 'Don't make a fuss, children; leave everything to us,' I do detect something of a tendency to such an attitude in a number of Church authorities; and in not a few laypersons an inclination to put up with it. My own view, for what it is worth, is that to accept such counsel, in present circumstances, would be irresponsibility which bordered on moral insanity. If ever the Holy Spirit said anything loudly and clearly, she is saying through these scandals, 'the lifestyle of at least some of the clergy needs a thorough overhaul.'

Cyril: It has to be remembered that any serious dedication to the Christian life involves sacrifice. Here is yet another important fact we seem

to have forgotten in the modern period.

Bertram: I dare say you are right, that the modern world underestimates the worth of the right kind of sacrifice. But I think we on our part should learn from it a greater sensitivity to the difference between the kind of sacrifice which is merely barren or destructive, and that which is an effective means to a greater good. St. Thomas himself insists that virginity and poverty represent failures to observe the due mean, when they are embraced for the wrong motives.¹

To take the obvious example, celibacy, I don't think even Anthea would doubt that celibacy might occasionally lead to an enhancement of life, either for the celibate herself or for others. The important question is, whether it does so in the case of all or most of those of whom the Catholic Church has required it.

Anthea: Self-sacrifice is a very dangerous business. It can lead to a envy of those who have not made the sacrifice, and to attempt to spoil their happiness. Allow me to say, that it is impossible for an outsider not to see many of the rules imposed on the laity by a celibate clergy in that light. I hazard a generalisation: repressed celibates tend to have a vested interest in human sexual misery.

Cyril: That is mere calumny.

Anthea: Why? Are you conceding that a significant number of celibates are repressed?

Bertram: I wish that I thought Anthea's remark *was* mere calumny. Anyhow, what she says is perfectly consistent with the conviction that *some* celibates are *not* repressed, but have turned their sexuality into true dedication to God. In Freud's sense, in their case you have sublimation, not repression.

Anthea: I would like to revert to another aspect of these scandals which disturbs me. If such evils, kept in place for decades by deception and downright lies, can flourish in East Ruritania, how can you be sure that they do not flourish closer to the centre of power and authority in the Church? I believe that it is -generally agreed that one or two bad things happened in the courts of the Renaissance Popes. What good theological reason is there to think that such things do not go on in the Vatican now? How do the two of you react, I wonder, to the claim that good Pope John Paul I was murdered? What grounds have you for supposing that such a thing could not happen, other than that this would be profoundly disturbing in its implications for Catholics, and is consequently, as the old phrase has it, 'offensive to pious ears'?

Cyril: So you take seriously David Yallop's fantasies? I think that the Vatican's official response says all that needs to be said on that subject. 'Fanciful and absurd ... infamous rubbish ... taking fantastic speculation to new heights of absurdity.'

Bertram: I suppose, without great confidence, that Yallop's claims are false. But I did look through his book, and I agreed with the judgment of

The Irish Independent, 'He has surely proved that there is a case to answer.'² I would be happier with a detailed rebuttal from the Vatican rather than with brief dismissive comments of the kind quoted by Cyril. That is not the kind of way you talk if you are concerned that people who are both honest and intelligent, and not blindly committed to your point of view, should believe you. Faced with this allegation, just as in the case of other supposed scandals in the Church, the properly loyal response is, 'Let us find out the truth, following every scrap of evidence where it leads, and act accordingly;' not, 'Let us preserve the face of the Church at all costs.'

Cyril: And what, pray, was supposed to be the motive?

Anthea: Oh, there was motive enough, and more than enough, if Yallop is to be believed. The signs were, that the Pope was intending not only to reverse the ruling of his predecessor on birth-control, but to put an end to some of the sleazier dealings of the Vatican Bank.

Cyril: The old fashioned Catholic attitude was that the Church could do no wrong. I am not sure that I prefer the attitude of Catholics like yourself, who seem to take for granted that the Church can do no right.

Bertram: I admit that there is a real danger here. But I think that it is just the exaggerated deference and trustfulness of traditional Catholics which is apt to lead to intransigent and embittered rebellion when it is disappointed. What I want is a genuinely critical loyalty which is not too eager to believe either the best or the worst.

Anthea: I think of you as a person full of pagan decency and sensibility, Bertram, and my impression has been confirmed by our conversation of the last few minutes. Frankly, I can't think why you don't just get out of the Church. I think too well of you to suppose that you're such a coward that you can't do without the eschatology.

Cyril: If I agree with Anthea on nothing else, I agree with her that it is surprising that you remain a Catholic.

Bertram: The other day I met a friend whom I had not seen for several months; she said to me, 'Are you *still* a Catholic?' It turned out that she meant that anyone who was both decent and intelligent could hardly remain so, after the recent scandals. Well, here goes; I'll do what I can to state my case briefly. I maintain that there are better reasons to believe that God exists than that God doesn't exist; and given God's existence, for accepting the fundamental doctrines of Christianity as a special revelation of the divine nature and purposes for humankind. Furthermore I think that Catholicism, with its treatment of the manner in which faith and reason fit together, and its taking account of the historical fact that, for better or for worse, we have received our Scriptures from the hands of the Church, is the only form of Christianity which is intellectually

acceptable in the last analysis. Protestantism seems to be caught in a perpetual oscillation between a faith which defies reason, and a rationalism which leaves no room for faith. Against Eastern Orthodoxy, I see no good reason to believe that the Church's authority to define doctrine was withdrawn after the Council of Chalcedon, or after 1054, or whenever. I take for granted, of course, that Catholics stand to gain an enormous amount from listening carefully to the objections which non-Catholic Christians, and non-Christians, bring against their position.

Anthea: So you do have your reasons, or think you have, for commitment to Catholicism as such. How far does this force you to acceptance of the structures of the Church as they now exist?

Bertram: I think that there will always be a place for such distinctions as that between bishops, ordinary clergy and laity; though the way in which these distinctions are understood, and the social privileges and liabilities which are taken to go along with them, need radical reassessment. A few years ago, an ex-Jesuit claimed in a lecture that the whole distinction between clergy and laity is out of date. I think this goes too far, but is quite understandable as an exaggerated corrective to the abuses of clericalism. The Church's remaining the Church is perfectly compatible, in my view, with a great deal of change in its social structure, and especially in the way of life expected of the clergy. An Austrian writer, himself a priest, has recently published a book which provides substantial grounds for supposing that priests are often compelled to follow a way of life which is virtually incompatible with sanity.¹ I ought to add that if I were to become convinced that the Church was so corrupt that there were no signs—even substantial signs—of sanctity within her, in spite of her present sorry state, I would promptly leave her; but I am not so convinced. As Jeremiah, who was also accused of disloyalty, remarked, 'I go not over to the Chaldeans.'⁴

Anthea: I am really the polar opposite of you. I agree that there are outstanding examples of real virtue in the Church, which every now and then are something of a trial to my secular faith; but on the whole I think that Catholicism is a grievous system of errors, whether you look at it from the intellectual or the moral point of view. Mind you, I am inclined to agree with you that there is an excellent case for maintaining that, if one is a Christian at all, one ought to be a Catholic. But I infer from that—so much the worse for Christianity.

1 *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae lxiv, 1.

2 In God's Name, by David Yallop (London: Corgi Books, 1984), back cover.

3 Bertram is alluding to E. Drewermann's book, *The Clergy: Psychogram of an Ideal*, which he had seen reviewed in *Time*, January 8th, 1990, p. 48.

4 Jeremiah 37:14.