

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO VATICAN II? by Michael Winter, *Sheed and Ward*, London, pp 221, £8.50

I suppose this is a sad book, though it is not quite meant to be. The back cover tells us that Michael Winter is 'far from pessimistic' despite demonstrating in chapter after chapter that the English Catholic Church (and, indeed, Rome too) has lamentably failed to implement and follow up the insights of the Second Vatican Council over the last twenty years. He looks at the work of the National Conference of Priests, the National Pastoral Congress at Liverpool in 1980, the new code of Canon Law and much else, and at every point his verdict is the same: the pastoral opportunities of the Church in this period have been almost wholly squandered until, today, there might seem little left to play for. The Catholic Church in this country is now declining so rapidly and on so broad a front that it is hardly possible to see any way in which this could be either reversed or even slowed down. The basic enthusiasm which did still exist ten years ago for a real renewal is now no longer there.

Father Winter certainly offers a new model; that of basic communities, and a completely new pattern of basic priesthood, one wide open to the married. I am convinced that this is a good model; it has been indeed the best way forward for twenty years, and perhaps in another twenty some attempt may actually be made to move towards it in this country on the road Brazil has long taken. But there is today no longer either the will, the flexibility or the imagination to do so creatively. As I read Winter I could not help recalling the lines from *Julius Caesar*:

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which taken at the flood leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries;
On such a full sea are we now afloat.

I quoted these verses in the preface of my *Church and Mission in Modern Africa*, published in 1967. At that point the Catholic Church stood with the tide in full flood. It had the vigour to respond. On almost every front from the late sixties it has lost the will to do so. Yet in this country, even at Liverpool in 1980, it was possibly not quite too late, but despite the trumpeting about the Spirit's presence there, in fact the bishops stalled on every serious point the Congress asked for.

It is, however, not surprising that the Church's leadership has failed to meet the challenge. After all, the Roman Curia evaded any serious call for its own reform during the Council and the model of a centralised, clericalised and uniform church came out, as a result, theoretically altered but hardly so in curial practice. If the system could so successfully withstand the conciliar battering, how much more anything that it had to face once the Council ended? It seems that the ecclesiastical situation will have to get a good deal worse in clerical terms (a massive decline in the number of priests and in available income) before any serious degree of ministerial change is possible.

Yet, it is also true—and this Winter largely fails to recognise—that the problems are far deeper than matters of current Catholic institutional arthritis. The underlying issues are ones of basic intellectual and social relevance pertaining to all the churches. It is not entirely clear that a more generous implementation of the spirit of Vatican II would have made all that difference. Winter fails quite to recognise how cold is the winter settling in for religious faith and ecclesiastical vitality. To some extent I cannot help thinking that the Ratzingers of this world have seen the severity of the climate more discerning than the liberals. The return to neo-conservatism may be a blind alley but its reasoning is clear enough.

Nevertheless, it is a blind alley and what we are immediately left with is what Winter rightly calls 'a credibility gap of staggering proportions' (87). There is no large scale way round this now—certainly not that favoured by John Paul II. Perhaps, in view of the

intellectual mediocrity of the church's leadership, there really never was any alternative. It has become, indeed, almost boring to catalogue—as this book does—so sad a story. What Winter does not do, I think, is to point sufficiently at the small scale areas of lively survival amid the wreck. In almost no case are these areas of survival due to episcopal initiative. Nevertheless they do exist. Little networks like the Interchurch Families Association, the Catholic Institute for International Relations, the Advent Group of married priests, lively parishes here and there, Blackfriars itself, and so forth. Effectively the only thing the faithful Catholic can do today is to ignore the hierarchy and its sinking ship, and try to get as many little lifeboats afloat—as many little basic communities—as possible. The massive decline of the institutional Catholic Church, at least in this country, is now irreversible. The survival of a vital tradition, however, if there are enough brave spirits about, is still possible.

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READINGS IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY edited by Peter Hodgson and Robert King.
S.P.C.K. 1985. Pp. xii + 418. £15.00.

This book is a collection of eighty-six readings, intended to supplement *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*, a collection of essays also edited by Hodgson and King. The readings are grouped under fourteen headings, which correspond to the chapter headings of the latter book. They are: Theology, Scripture and Tradition, God, Revelation, Creation and Providence, Human Being, Sin and Evil, Christ and Salvation, The Church, The Sacraments, The Spirit and the Christian Life, The Kingdom of God and Life Everlasting, The Religions, and The Christian Paradigm: Alternative Visions. The readings are short (between four and five pages each, on average); hence they could not, I think, be profitably read independently of *Christian Theology*, despite the editor's claim. They are best regarded as a collection of illustrations for that book.

Each chapter (except the last) starts with one of more classical statements of a Christian doctrine, from the Fathers of the Church (especially Augustine), from Anselm or Aquinas, or from the Reformers. Then there follow readings which trace its history in the 19th and 20th centuries. The editors forestall criticism of their selection by pleading that their purpose has not been to provide representative selections from the works of major theologians of the past or the present, but to present a diversity and plurality of points of view. One notices, however, that an undue number of points of view are those of German or American Protestants! Most of the 20th-century excerpts are from Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, Moltmann, Pannenberg, the Niebuhrs and more recent Americans. There are some welcome selections from Liberation Theology, and also from Black and Process Theologies. But apart from Ruether and Gutierrez, Karl Rahner is the only 20th-century Catholic writer to be represented. Eastern Orthodoxy gets an even worse deal: one excerpt from Schmemmann, and that is all. The choice of authors has also skewed the selection of topics: there is little, for instance, on the role of doctrine or on the Holy Spirit (the chapter on 'The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life' is mostly on mysticism, ethics and spirituality); and nothing on Mary. There are, however, a few welcome surprises: Möhler (but why nothing from Newman?), Ricoeur and Rowan Williams.

Within its predictable limitations, then, this is a useful selection of short texts. It requires, however, to be supplemented by other selections and to be used in conjunction with a text book.

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