

Comment

After Spode

We sometimes commemorate the deaths of remarkable Dominicans in this column. Who, though, wants to read about the death of a remarkable Dominican conference centre? Yet Spode House Conference Centre, which the Dominicans ran in the heart of England's Midlands from 1948 until the end of last July, did have a life of its own. There is no doubt about that. It also had a widely unexpected death. Dr Jack Dominian, in a letter to *The Tablet*, praised Spode and bewailed 'the incomprehensible (*sic*) folly' of its closure.

Futurists once thought that advances in communications technology would free people from having to spend time and money on gathering together to talk and be talked at as if Gutenberg had never been born. In fact, in spite of Gutenberg and Bell and Marconi and IBM (or, rather because of them and the world they have done so much to help create) conferences abound. We grumble about them, but we go to them in increasing numbers, if only to be seen or to have a holiday on the side. The world-wide scientific community attends about two million of them annually. Some of the U.K.'s best-known opinion-formers have just set up something called The National Forum Trust 'to bring people together across all boundaries of our society'. How? Through conferences in a country mansion. And, during the past thirty years, conferences on religious topics too have multiplied.

In Britain that expansion was partly the work of Spode. In the Catholic Church of the Britain of the 1950s it was almost unique. Directly or indirectly, it did a lot to make Catholics in this country aware of the issues which were to be at the heart of the debate at Vatican II. In the 1960s it was helping them to understand the meaning for themselves of the work of the Council. To quote Brian Wicker, it was 'the focus of many creative revolutions within the Catholic Community in Britain'. One of the major reasons for its success was undoubtedly the personality of that 'classic enabler' Father Conrad Pepler, its Warden from 1952 to 1981 (see our special issue of July/August 1981 dedicated to him).

However, the post-Conciliar era is now over, needs have changed, and many more conference centres have opened. In recent years the only way to fill Spode from Mondays to Fridays (something vital if it was not going to run far into the red) was to welcome groups which were sometimes not even in the loosest sense religious, and which had new requirements. Running Spode became a different exercise from what it

had been a generation ago.

The closure of Spode, and the debate about it, forced some of us to think about the place of the conference centre in the Church today. Two very different men, one writing and the other written about in this issue, Professor Adrian Hastings and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, both believe that in modern urban society 'without a living civic faith things fall apart' (Hastings)—that when Christian revelation is relegated to the status of what a man does in his solitude 'the ethos which that revelation sustained begins to decompose'(Ratzinger). Religion is necessary for the survival of the so-called secular city. And the conference centre is quite a powerful tool for mediating it in that city. As every teacher knows, in coming together in a group at least some people learn some things much better than they can from just sitting in front of a book or TV screen. But, far from spreading understanding of the Good News in a godless society, the vast majority of extra-liturgical Christian gatherings only emphasise the distance between middle-class committed Christians and everybody else. In spite of all our admirable intentions, our conference centres and retreat houses are more often than not shrines of a new ghetto.

The Westerner lives in a world full of noise and precious little communication beyond commands and headlines. For Christians who are serious about their religion both good talking and good silence are necessary today, but both of them are quite hard to find and getting more and more expensive. Through our conference centres and retreat houses the gospel should spread, but it is not going to spread far unless people of different social categories and ways of life gather together. Barriers—cost, cultural differences, differences of speech-code—stop that often happening. Now that Spode has closed, *New Blackfriars* itself is going to be involved with the organising of some conferences, so *New Blackfriars* cannot speak on this subject from some superior independent standpoint. Let us all, though, no longer make the mistake of thinking that the intimate non-residential gathering about Christian concerns is just a poor substitute for the substantial Christian gathering of the more conventional kind. The international congress is as much part of our world as the car and the computer, but it will be that other sort of gathering which could help to realise our hopes for a renewal of the Christian presence beyond the church walls.

The spirit that inspired Spode will, surely, live on.

J.O.M.