

Comment

Speaking partly of ourselves

In a year of so many anniversaries it does not sound particularly self-regarding to mention that with this issue *New Blackfriars* reaches its silver jubilee. It is a quarter of a century since the Dominican publications *Blackfriars* (by then 44 years old) and *Life of the Spirit* merged and took a new title.

In the first number the Editor, Iltud Evans, said that *New Blackfriars* 'is new in the sense that every day is a fresh awakening to an actual need. It hopes to look at the world as it is and not as it might have been.' Those words sounded much bolder in the Roman Catholic Church of 1964 than they do today, and the 'actual needs' were clearer to define then, but it is still not a bad description of what a publication like this should be doing. More controversial is what the Editor said a few lines further on: '*New Blackfriars* has no other purpose than to use the resources of theology, not as a private language for specialists but as a contribution to a living debate that concerns us all.'

One of the painful lessons we have learned in the last quarter of a century is just how difficult this is to do. How does one explain to the public the theology behind the Archbishop of Canterbury's much-debated recent criticisms of the moral values of Thatcherite society? Theology—at least good theology—is not like a series of useful equations, which can be employed for problem-solving even by people who do not understand them. Theology is something people have to engage with, but much of it *still* is a 'private language for specialists'. In the Church of 1964 there was a lot more confidence than now in the possibilities of 'communication', and in the likely results of 'effective communication', precisely because so few Catholics knew what it was like to try to communicate effectively in a secular society. Communication tended to be confused with clarity. The awful dreariness of most of the liturgy in our churches in spite of Vatican II, and the quantity of division and distrust in the Church traceable to the persistence of the drain-pipe model of communication, and the difficulty we have in talking good theology in the wider Church (let alone beyond it), show how badly the Church of the mid-60s underestimated the challenge of communicating Christianity successfully in today's world.

By its very nature, the search for the answer has to be the work of a wide range of people, all kinds of people. It cannot be done by one

individual, however intelligent, sitting alone in his study. Or even (dare we say it?) by one periodical. And how well we grow in common understanding is closely linked to the basic object and content of whatever it is that is being offered for our common understanding. People in Latin-American base communities seem to have picked that up much more quickly than people in Western universities. If what we are trying to communicate has for its basic aim the domination or exclusion of people (and this is still true even of some of what passes for Christianity) then there is never going to be genuine common understanding.

Yet nobody can be a prophet—even a minor prophet—in a vacuum. When the *New Blackfriars* editorial board has its plenary meeting in December it would be futile for it to say: 'Let's be more prophetic!' During the past 25 years this magazine has changed, partly because of its writers and editorial team, but above all because of changes in publishing and changes in the Church and the wider world. In this past decade many of the dominant trends in the world and in the Church have been hostile to some of the fundamental principles for which we believe this journal stands. Lately we have had to give more time than we have wanted to fighting rear-guard actions. We have even had to look critically at one or two of those fundamental principles (guess which!).

All the same, none of us are ever completely controlled by the situation in which we find ourselves. As one of our finest writers once said in private, our limitations are God-given and they can be creative. And surely this can be as true for periodicals as for human beings? We always have the example of St Paul and his companions, men with frailties facing a hostile world. Trends in the Church and the world may be more hostile than in 1964, but hostility *can* prompt hard thinking.

And the hostile forces do not always win: the best-known Editor of *New Blackfriars*, Herbert McCabe (Editor 1966—7; 1970—79), who was temporarily dethroned in 1967 by Rome bureaucrats for saying in this column 'The Church is quite plainly corrupt', has just been given what is now the highest honour that the Dominican Order can give to one of its members. On 6 October the Master General made him a Master of Sacred Theology.

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