

Comment

I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it. who know just where they stand, who know what they hold, and what they do not, who know their creed so well, they can give an account of it, who know so much of history they can defend it. I want an intelligent, well-instructed laity . . .

J.H. Newman

On 5 October, some days after this is being written, *Veritatis Splendor*, the latest papal encyclical will be promulgated. The development of the 'informed leak' has been one of the plagues of modern politics. The calculated disclosure of selective information to the press has seriously damaged many a British ministerial career in the last decade. The allegations that some bishops and certain theologians may have leaked embargoed copies of the pope's encyclical on the moral life reveal a most regrettable twist in ecclesiastical affairs. One Church correspondent has suggested that a prominent European theologian deliberately revealed some passages of the document in the hope of stopping it. This may very well have been the intention of many of the 'leakers'. It seem odd that the one who is accused of the unjust silencing of theologians should be the target of a similar unjust manoeuvre on the part of other. If it is wrong to inhibit the freedom of expression of certain theologians whose views seem to be at variance with the *magisterium* why is it acceptable to subject the pope to the same treatment? Moreover, if, as has been frequently asserted, the pope's views are at variance with the majority of his flock, could he not be seen in the category of a minority and should not his rights be respected? In one of his controversial works, written in 1851, John Henry Newman complained that his non-Catholic opponents liked to emphasize freedom of thought, 'but towards us they do not dream of practising it'.

If, as is often claimed, the Vatican authorities are not interested in dialogue or debate why is it that the major European newspapers and Catholic periodicals were presented with advance copies of the encyclical? Might it not be that some informed comment and educated debate was to be encouraged? Behind the lamentable and chaotic presentation of this encyclical, for which the Roman authorities, whose press relations often leave something to be desired, are not to blame on this occasion, there lies the broader question of how it is possible to present the substance of the Catholic faith in the modern world.

It has to be recognised that the mass media form one of the principal means of general education in Western European society. Cardinal Ratzinger has observed that, 'the representation of the world by the mass media makes a bigger impact today on consciousness than does personal experience of reality.' Many Catholics, as well as those amongst whom

they live, will obtain a proportion of their knowledge of contemporary dogmatic debate from the newspapers. The presentation of the world by the mass media is often at variance with that projected by the Catholic Church. In the cutthroat world of newspaper publishing a great deal of emphasis will be placed on soundbite theology; the most skillful theological pundit is not always the most reliable. Limitations of space and the nature of the readership will often determine the presentation of religious matters in any particular journal; but then newspapers are not Catechetical instruments. Catholic Christianity can no longer presume on a common experience of the faith in a society which offers the traditional supports of common Christian values. It has to establish itself as an intelligible and viable spiritual and intellectual way of life in an unstable world. In such an environment one of its first tasks will be the education of its own people.

When John Henry Newman wrote his *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England* in 1851, he addressed them to the Little Brothers of the Oratory. His aim was not only to inform and educate the lay members associated with his congregation but, through them, to attack the prejudice and ill-informed speculation about Catholicism which abounded, even in sophisticated English circles, at the time. He described this prejudice as a 'stain on the mind'. Papal encyclicals are highly-nuanced documents written in quite specialised language. They need interpreters to present them in a challenging and engaging way. It is just these mediators who are lacking in the contemporary climate. The avoidance of engagement in debate is to prematurely silence the voice of the Church in the world.

Catechesis faces the difficult task of presenting the organic wholeness of the Christian faith in a world with many philosophical and ethical language-systems. Serious engagement with problems relating to key forms of interpretation such as the historical and the dogmatic cannot be shirked. The question of the relation between experience and faith, a relationship which was firmly explored by the Protestant theologians of the last century, continually reappears in contemporary Catholic debate. It is this question which lies behind much of the disquiet expressed at the tone of *Splendor Veritatis*. Yet, the encyclical attempts to present an organic view of the moral life, stressing that to believe is to realise true life. It reasserts the necessity of the strictly dogmatic component in moral theology.

A pressing problem within the Church is the polarisation of opinion. A remedy for this is an emphasis on catechesis and a docility in respect of the truth which should penetrate all those who embark on the search for eternal life.

Eternal life is that they know you, the true God, and the One whom you have sent, Jesus Christ. (Jn. 17:3)

AJW

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