

Dear Father Conrad,

A small – and truly ‘domestic’ – postscript to what’s happened to Fr Herbert and *New Blackfriars*. So much has already been said about ‘the McCabe affair’, so many words have apparently been wasted over it, that this is now essentially a time for silence, a time for putting words in their place.

Among these (some 6,000 of them) is the last of a series of articles I’d written for *New Blackfriars* under Fr Herbert’s editorship, and for the withdrawal of which I have asked.

As Fr Herbert – despite the impressive concern within the *laos* he served, and despite his own acknowledged ‘exemplary behaviour’ – has not been reinstated as editor, I feel it is worth recording, as an example of his own conduct, the lengths to which he had gone to dissuade me from making this gesture of withdrawal, lest such withdrawals should harm the journal and his Order. Indeed, finding me reluctant to accede to his request, he put me under every conceivable pressure of friendship to secure a return of my article to the journal from which he had been expelled. In the end, with many misgivings, I agreed; and the article (originally due to appear in April) was to be published in the June number. Meanwhile, however, it has become clear that the authorities of the Order to whom Fr Herbert is bound by solemn religious vows are repaying this kind of loyalty – which vastly exceeds any mere legalist satisfaction of his obedience – by effectively standing, not by their distinguished violated member, but by the original act of violation – and this after every opportunity for cool reflection and conscientious stock-taking in the light of the deeply felt discussion within the Catholic community as a whole. In this sense, the time for words has passed. Those, like myself, not bound by the kind of specially contracted obedience that binds members of the Order must now finally say their own Yea or Nay in simple obedience to ordinary human perceptions and loyalties.

It is natural that those who have written for *New Blackfriars* and know many Dominicans

personally, should have a deeply rooted affection and respect for the Dominican Order. They will not cut themselves off lightly from the privilege of this association. But the issues are too crucial to warrant politic makeshifts or compromises. Makeshifts and compromises are, after all, what this whole business of ecclesial ‘corruption’ is about. Of course, all human life is subject to such corruption, especially institutional life – as Acton knew. Above all, there is the constant pressure towards institutions’ false self-awareness – that corruption of consciousness through which makeshift and compromise perceive themselves almost as instituted sanctities in their own right. The Church’s case – as of subordinate, derivative institutions within the Church – is special only in that the Kingdom she announces, and carries in her womb, is thus compromised at its source.

Each of us, in his own way, is no doubt, alas, involved in this compromising of the Kingdom. Nevertheless, with this compromising there can be no compromise. Institutional self-preservation, as Brian Wicker recently pointed out, constantly verges on idolatry, most especially where the Church is concerned. The case of the Church under Hitler should give pause to those in authority today, who assume that it is, above all their task to preserve worldly respect at all cost, and to defend the Church’s authority by sheer enforcements of authority. It is not just that worldly respect cannot, as a matter of fact, be secured or regained by such means, and that the time when ecclesiastical authority could ride in triumph through Christendom has gone for ever: it is, even more, that the world of today, with its radical, unacknowledged hunger for the Kingdom, cannot see the incorruptible Body we compromise, does not encounter the Presence whose charisma we hold in trust.

It is not mistakes, even the gravest, that do the most damage. It is the failure to confess, and redeem, them that festers within the people of God. Was it Franz Jaegerstaetter, the lonely, inconvenient prophet, or Jaegerstaetter’s ecclesiastical superiors who preserved the Light of the World in the German Church? Is that

Church served by the present failure to confess his inspired lonely rightness – and therefore the wrongness of his superiors at the time; and therefore, well what, therefore, are the implications for present Catholic attitudes towards nuclear arms? Or for the statement of a Cardinal who chose Christmas as the moment to declare his support for what is being done in Vietnam by his nation?

More than anything else, the Church needs to learn how to learn where it has been mistaken, and to learn to confess, and turn away from, its mistakes. In theory, this process is well on the way since the Council; in practice, the *New Blackfriars* episode is a precise register of where we have really got to. There are a couple of passages in *Dr Zhivago* which seem to me distressingly to the point:

‘One day in October Yury said to Lara:

“You know it looks as if I’ll be forced to resign from my jobs. It’s always the same thing – it happens again and again. At first everything is splendid. – ‘Come along. We welcome good, honest work, we welcome ideas, especially new ideas. What could please us better? Do your work, your research, struggle, carry on.’”

“Then you find in practice that what they mean by ideas is nothing but words – claptrap in praise of the revolution and the régime. I’m sick and tired of it. And it’s not the kind of thing I’m good at.”

“It’s time I got out. I’ll stay on at the hospital until they throw me out, but I’ll resign from the Institute and the Health Department. I don’t want to worry you, but from time to time I have a feeling that they might come and arrest me any day.”

“God forbid. It hasn’t come to that yet, fortunately. But you are right. It would do no harm to be more careful. As I’ve noticed it, whenever this régime comes to power it goes through certain stages. In the first stage it’s the triumph of reason, of the spirit of criticism, the fight against prejudice and so on.

“Then comes the second stage. The accent is

all on the dark forces, the false sympathisers, the hangers-on. There is more and more suspicion – informers, intrigues, hatreds. You are perfectly right that we are entering on the second stage”.’

We cannot leave the Church (this, in fact, was the central, crucially ignored exhortation of Fr Herbert’s article, as Fr Provincial has pointed out). ‘Lord, to whom should we go?’ Nor are we arrested, these days – all that was stopped long ago by the modern world as it emerged. In the present situation of the Church, men like Fr Herbert are merely stripped in public by dignitaries of the Church of the modest dignity of continued recognition of their ‘good faith’, pushed hither and thither, in and out of offices to which they have given their lives, and denied a return to the tasks in which they have distinguished themselves, so that no mistake needs to be confessed, or redeemed, by the authorities to whom they remain loyal.

Again and again, during all this upheaval, it has been said that all this is a purely domestic issue within the Dominican Order. What I have said indicates, I hope, why I can find no plausibility in this suggestion. In any event, so far as lay participation in *New Blackfriars* is concerned, I for one would not care to continue as an *au pair* in a family that conducts its affairs in this manner. It would be sad if *New Blackfriars* declined or disappeared. But sad things are sometimes necessary. And there are even more important things; just as there are even more important things than the survival of the Church in any particular part of the world at any moment of time.

Perhaps the authorities responsible for what has occurred may yet find it in their hearts to ‘turn again’. In Cromwell’s famous words, I beseech them in the bowels of Christ to think it possible they may be mistaken. And, if they are mistaken, to feel it possible to redeem their mistake.

Yours, etc.,

The University, Liverpool

Walter Stein.

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