

Comment

To be a bishop today is a more demanding, difficult, and perhaps, humanly speaking, more thankless and dangerous task than ever before.

(Paul VI to the Italian Bishops 6 December, 1966)

The feast of the Visitation saw the consecration of the new cathedral at Brentwood. It has been variously criticised as an expensive luxury, an architectural pastiche that will not stand the test of time and a distraction from the problems that face the Church in the world of today. Many people would think that at 2.3 million pounds the diocese was getting a bargain, whatever Mr Quinlan Terry's merits as an architect. However, the success of his riverside development at Richmond, the proposed plans for the neo-classical precinct around St Paul's Cathedral in Pater Noster Square and apparent popular support for the Prince of Wales' architectural views, suggest that nostalgia is back in fashion.

The building itself is a parable of recent theological developments. The original, small, nineteenth century gothic building, shorn of its mid-seventies extension, has been transformed into the Blessed Sacrament chapel and now hides behind the uncompromisingly classical basilica filled with light and adorned by gilded chandeliers. Clearly this is no simple antiquarian fantasy but an attempt to incarnate an ecclesiological vision. The episcopal throne, the altar and the ambo are arranged along an axis allowing for the eucharistic community to be gathered round them on three sides. It is an arrangement that would have been broadly recognisable to Augustine and his congregation in Hippo. In reaching into the richness of the patristic tradition it attempts to realise the theology of the episcopate developed at Vatican II; a theology which aimed at redressing the imbalance between the petrine and episcopal ministries. Each bishop acts not as a vicar of the pope but as a vicar and ambassador of Christ entrusted with the fullness of the ministry of sanctifying, teaching and governing the people of God. Brentwood cathedral will 'work' as a building when the bishop, seated on his throne, presiding at the altar or attentive to the word proclaimed from the ambo, celebrates the liturgy with his people. The very prominence of the bishop's throne, in which no one else may rightly sit, will draw attention to the fact that for most of the time it will be vacant. The bishop, as with most bishops today, will be absent and busy about those manifold tasks which threaten, as one well-known theologian wryly commented, to turn them into 'mitred bureaucrats'. Paradoxically, Brentwood cathedral by presenting a strong and authentic ecclesiological vision shows how far we are from realising it.

Much is made these days of the crisis of priestly identity. A decline

in vocations, the explosion of ministerial activity amongst lay-people, dramatic changes in the sacerdotal profile, an uneasiness about notions of office and hierarchy and a drift towards ministry as service and care, have led many people, priests and lay, to question the specific mission and task proper to the priest. There appears to be no shortage of vocations to the episcopal ministry, there are more bishops and auxiliary bishops in Britain than ever before, but perhaps this conceals a crisis in the episcopal ministry; a crisis of identity and function which is more apparent in some parts of Europe, like Switzerland, Germany and Austria, than here.

Of the 2217 speeches made during Vatican II 311 were concerned with the role of the bishop in the Church. It was the achievement of Vatican II to restore the ordinary and immediate pastoral authority of the bishop in his diocese. The pre-eminent duty of the bishop is to preach the Gospel. The bishop's task is to be an evangelist. Given the size of our dioceses and the multiplicity of administrative, economic and management tasks that fall to the bishop, little time remains for the study and leisure necessary for the work of preaching and teaching. Increasing reliance is placed on theologians and specialist advisers who help the bishop to master his brief. Pastoral duties, parochial celebrations, the administration of the sacraments are left increasingly to auxiliary bishops. The presbyters of the diocese, who are supposed to form an 'intimate sacramental brotherhood', and to be amongst the bishop's trusted counsellors and valued collaborators, often have no ready means of access to their bishops. Their principle contact is the large number of documents in brown envelopes issued by a diocesan staff of professional advisers and vicars general charged with a variety of responsibilities. Thus, deanery meetings become less an expression of the collegial nature of the presbyterate ministering in a particular area and more an assembly of professional care-persons, clerical and lay, who spend their time discussing the latest plans for pastoral renewal issuing from the diocesan curia.

The alleged crisis in the presbyteral ministry disguises a much graver crisis affecting the equilibrium of the sacrament of order itself. It is a crisis of identity in the episcopal ministry. Many of the lamentable divisions that have arisen in some European dioceses stem from the problems uncovered by the architecture of Brentwood's new cathedral. Until some of these questions are resolved many of the arguments about the nature of ministry, including those relating to the ordination of women, will seem only slightly relevant. In many ways we are in danger of subverting the sacrament of orders and of effectively replacing the episcopate with the diaconate. The episcopal throne is indeed a siege perilous.

AJW