

Comment

A meeting to remember

'Anodyne'. 'A perfect example of painless surgery'. These were fairly typical early press assessments of the final report of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops which met recently in Rome. They were unjust.

It is a comment on what has happened to us and what has happened to the Church of our times that we find it extremely difficult to believe that a document which was approved unanimously by all the members of the Synod and was accepted without reservations by the Pope—one which was not the product of bitter conflict and deep intrigue—could possibly be anything but a puff, something so innocuous that it would be a waste of time to read it properly. This periodical has often criticised Church authorities for not reading some serious theologians seriously; it would be easy to tumble into the same mistake. The Synod's final report is in fact a document that anybody interested in the life of the Church should read.

Mind you, as Cardinal Hume said in his press briefing when he got back from Rome, the Synod, in its evaluation of what Vatican II has contributed to the life of the Church, 'contented itself with broad impressions and with fundamental concepts'. The Report does not confront any of the big divisive issues in the Church which have been written about so much: the authenticity of theology of liberation, the method of appointing bishops, the role of women in the Church, the celibacy question, the Church's teaching on sex. But its silence on these issues does not mean that it has nothing important to say; in any case, surely to expect the Synod to pull out of the hat answers to these questions is a rather curious kind of paternalism?

While looking for omissions, it is easy to underplay what the Synod *has* spoken about. It unambiguously and irrevocably accepts the importance of collegiality, including that form of it which is the Bishops' Conferences (attacked by Cardinal Ratzinger last year in his famous interview, the one we discussed in our June number). 'The collegial spirit is carried to concrete application by the Conferences of Bishops. No one can doubt their pastoral usefulness, indeed their necessity in present-day circumstances'. There is no room for the resurrection of the notion of exclusive centralization of authority. And it goes on to say: 'Because the Church is a communion, there must be sharing and co-responsibility at all levels'.

We also see the 'preferential option for the poor' being spelt out. There is no nonsense about the need to turn one's back on the world, politics and all that. 'We must understand as integral the Church's saving mission in relation to the world', says the Synod. 'Although the Church's mission is spiritual, it involves promotion of human

progress even in the temporal field.... False and useless oppositions as, for example, between spiritual mission and service for the world are to be discarded and ignored'.

One major concern that comes through in the final Report is the assertion that the Church is part of the Good News, not a mere institution: '... a partial reading of the Council has caused a one-sided presentation of the Church as a merely institutional structure, deprived of its mystery. Perhaps we are not free from all responsibility for the fact that young people, in particular, regard the Church critically as a mere institution. Have we not put the idea into their heads by talking too much about reforming external Church structures and too little about God and Christ?' This stress on the Church as 'mystery' is right and proper, and very close to what we find in the New Testament. It is a shift away from the individualism of nineteenth-century exegesis, which for so much of the time sought the significance of Jesus in a person abstracted from the whole story of salvation. It is the whole event of Christ's life, death and resurrection, Pentecost and the emergence of the Church that is the event of our salvation.

The Synod goes on to root this sacramental aspect of the Church in the fact that the Church is a *koinonia*, a 'communion', Here is the key notion in the whole document, which goes on to recognise that unity includes pluriformity. ('Pluriformity is a genuine richness and involves a completion, it is true catholicity; but the pluralism of deeply opposed positions leads to dissolution and destruction and the loss of identity'.) But the problem that the Synod faces, and is surely *the* unresolved problem of the Synod, is: *what precisely is legitimate pluriformity?*

The Synod all the time is looking back to the Council, but Vatican II will not provide the answer to this particular question. When John XXIII opened the Council there was a lot of optimism about the problem; in fact, at times it hardly seemed a problem: 'For the substance of the deposit of faith or body of truths which are contained in our revealed doctrine is not identical with the manner in which these truths are expressed, though the same sense and meaning must be preserved'. This is a gorgeous thing to say, but we, a generation later, have to ask: what does it mean? This confident supposition that our words can be different and yet our ideas can be the same is just not good enough.

Here is not a problem of the Church alone, but of the whole of our western culture. All over our society we see the difference between pluralism and relativism obscured and unsolved. The solution cannot be reached simply intellectually—as if the problem were just a matter of sorting out ideas. In the Church arguably we will find grounds for our unity in the common recognition of ways of life which are *holy* and which bring liberation, and it is significant that the need for a growth of holiness and fervour in the Church is one of the major concerns of the Synod.

Vatican II will not underplay the importance of religious

commitment, but it badly overestimated the spiritual vitality of the Church of its time. During the last couple of decades we have seen the 'arrival' of the Third-World Church (two-thirds of the Synod's members were from the Third World), we have seen the Church as a whole come to recognize the seriousness of the challenge of secularism; we have seen the largely unexpected emergence of the New Right (and, in some places, the return of the not-so-new Right). There is no doubt that these developments have led to a whole range of sometimes fairly subtle shifts of attitude in the Church, discernable here and there even in the Synod Report, in spite of the fact that it kept firmly to the language of generalisations. Why, in the West, have the young not 'bought' the Church of Vatican II? Why, mainly in the Third World, are millions of people baptised Catholics drifting into sects (some of them dominated by an ideology of the Right which is a travesty of all that Christianity is supposed to be about)? The Synod's call for renewal is not just a pious gesture.

What form might be taken by the renewal it does not specify. Surely crucial, though, is that notion of *communio* so favoured by the Synod. It is a model of the Church which by extension also ought to set the pattern both for our relationships with the wider world and for the shaping of our own lives. Being a Christian means being a 'whole person', a participator in the life of the incarnate Lord, but, looking around, there appears to be a remarkable lack of this 'wholeness'. Some socially-committed Christians have suppressed the religious dimension in their own lives and in their relationships with others. With that dimension absent, what is the future of their social commitment going to be like? Any livelier than the future of the religion of the man full of fervour but careless of his fellow human beings? The Christian conflict with the social Darwinism of the New Right is not a fight for justice solely; it should also be seen as a fight to preserve the idea of Christian 'wholeness' and to preserve the principle of *communio*, two things badly in need of protection in our generation.

A new—and genuinely popular—spirituality rooted in the Synod's vision of the Church could lead us towards the unity the Synod speaks of but can only give us hints of how to find it. We should not criticise the Synod for not doing what it was not set up to do. No, what should be troubling us is that the Synod's members themselves and Church people in general are (if reports are anything to go by) more negative about what the Synod achieved than they should be.

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