

Comment

I see from the British press (for I write this from on holiday among the delightful hills of County Clare) that the National Conference of Priests is once more coming in for criticism. People are saying that it is not representative of the diocesan priests of England and Wales. This is because the majority of these priests are a very silent majority indeed; most of them simply do not bother to vote, with the result that, for example, Canon Beausang could announce—as he offered his resignation—that of the 365 priests in his diocese (what do they do in leap year?) only six had actually voted for him. There are several things that can be said about this: in the first place if the NCP is not a representative body it will do until one comes along; where exactly would we find a *more* representative voice for the priests of this country? Shall we try the 'Association of Catholic Priests' which devotes itself to extreme reactionary propaganda? In one sense, of course, there is a clear answer: the bishop is there to represent the whole of his church, this is what he is ordained for, to be the sign, the sacramental sign, of the unity of his people in the Spirit. There is, however, a good deal of difference between ordained (or for that matter baptised) with a certain mission and actually fulfilling it. To take an example not wholly at random, anyone who supposes that the Bishop of Down and Connor actually represents the views, attitudes and needs of his flock should have a word with the people of Andersonstown. In any case the bishop is there to represent all his people whereas the NCP is something more like a priests' trade union (and one with a more than usually minuscule attendance at its branch meetings). The second thing to be said of the NCP is that democracy does not come overnight or by decree, it is built on the firm belief of the people that they have the right and the power to make decisions about their own lives. Now this belief is not something that has been conspicuously fostered in the formation of Catholic priests. For the most part they have been nurtured in an extremely authoritarian atmosphere and many of them have learnt painfully that whatever you do or say in the end They make the decisions. It would be very strange if these men were suddenly converted to the notion of a democratic organisation in the Church. Think how long it took for parliamentary institutions to develop in England—after some centuries and a civil war the way in which that great champion of democratic liberty John Wilkes got into Parliament was by paying £11,000 to the 300 people who voted for him. Of course the NCP is not as representative as anyone could wish, but without it how shall we ever arrive at a democratic church? No one I suppose regards the National Conference as a sufficient condition for democracy but it is at least necessary.

The third thing to be said is that even when the majority of priests become aware of their responsibilities and take part in electing representatives, the result will be no more democratic than the British Parliament if it does not rest on democratic institutions at the local level and from these institutions it is going to become increasingly meaningless to exclude lay people. An autonomous democratic self-governing clerical élite could be as irrelevant to the needs of the Church as many of the present hierarchical structures. Nevertheless the NCP is an obvious step in the right direction.

The NCP will, however, be taking steps in the wrong direction if it concentrates on purely administrative matters; priests are preachers or they are nothing, and it would be good to see rather more concern with what they are supposed to preach than they have so far shown. There is no doubt that a discussion of directly theological matters would be regarded as even more dangerous and subversive than talk about the election of bishops but our theology is not so healthy that it can safely be left to professional theologians. It seems a pity if, as was reported, the discussion of Catholic schools turned almost entirely on problems of finance and organisation rather than on what these schools are supposed to be doing and teaching. It was interesting to hear from one university chaplain that there was no notable difference between the religious commitment of students from Catholic schools and from others—this has certainly been my own experience amongst students—but of course those who enter universities represent a rather specialised sample of school-leavers. It would have been even more interesting to hear from those pastorally concerned with the rest of the population. Again the very important pastoral question of those whose marriages are stable human institutions which could not, without cruelty and injustice to the children, be broken up but which are not recognised by the law of the Church does not seem to have been discussed in depth. A real concern for people trapped in this situation such as was shown by several speakers should surely have led on to some attempt to rethink or reformulate the theological tradition concerning marriage and the life of the Church. It is not that we could expect an entire theology to emerge from such discussions or that the NCP should issue doctrinal decrees, but without the insights of people actually engaged in preaching the gospel in such situations our theology will either remain stagnant or become a mere academic game. Here too the NCP though not sufficient is certainly necessary.

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