

Comment

As Frei Betto sees us

Frei Betto, the Brazilian Dominican writer, has been in Britain. It is not often that a liberation theologian comes here who has been quite so closely involved with the things he writes about. In 1969, during Brazil's military dictatorship, and soon after becoming a Dominican, he was sent to prison for four years for 'revolutionary activity', and since then he has spent a lot of time as an animator of base communities in slum areas of Sao Paulo, and as an adviser to a trade union. But the collection of letters he wrote from prison has sold well even outside Latin America, and his account of his conversations in 1985 with Fidel Castro about religion has now been translated into 27 languages. We asked him to write about how he saw us and this is what he said ...

The French are unjustly accused of visiting other people's countries solely to confirm their prejudices; but in my brief visit to Britain I have been gratified to find the British are less close-minded and more critical than I had imagined. Mind you, I cannot say that I know them well, after two months of scholarly enclosure in Cambridge. During these two months I have made tourist trips to London and Oxford; I have only seen the rich parts of the country. Nevertheless, I have had interesting contacts with the Catholic and Anglican churches. I have shared a meal with worker-priests, I have spoken with people in Christian Aid, Cafod and CIIR, I have spent time with student Christian groups in Cambridge, I have talked with teachers of theology and priests. From these brief contacts I have formed some impressions which I would like to share with the readers of *New Blackfriars*, at the invitation of the Editor.

It seems to me that there is a deep anxiety in Christian circles in Europe, including England. Something has come to an end: Christendom, of which the only thing that remains is the cathedrals, for visiting by tourists. The cultural and political hegemony of the Church and the religious ideology which once impregnated social values with a certain Christian viewpoint—these have gone. *And still nothing new has begun.* We are living in a time of impasse, a period of searching and perplexity. Some people are rushing around, fighting strongly in defence of orthodoxy, like voices crying in the wilderness. Others are trying to create an alternative space where the faith can be lived outside the permanent control of the magisterium, outside ecclesiastical structures. The fact is that this anxiety is deep in the bowels of the Church, which is

afraid of losing its social privilege and at the same time does not want to be 'the Church of the Establishment', legitimating an intrinsically unjust economic order, because it knows that the wealth of the First World is gained by the misery of the Third.

The Church is an old woman always pregnant with herself: the new model of the Church is always born from the old. Possibly liberation theology, which has aroused so much interest here in Europe, can contribute to this process, raising a central question: What precisely must Europe free itself from? What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ in this situation, which, materially speaking, is apparently quite satisfactory? It is, of course, evident that London, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow have many unemployed and poor. But in this country there is a more generalized problem than poverty, one which presents a big challenge to the mission of the Church: this is a pagan nation! Certainly people use the name of God, but they do so idolatrously, to legitimate injustice and to justify their consumerist 'freedoms'. So the Church has to redefine its pastoral priorities, responding to the challenge of a wide evangelization which will certainly not be realised just by conventional means like television and schools. Now the matter is more serious: *all* Christians ought to be committed to this task (and that will demand a profound clericalisation of the structure of the Church) and the Church should try to recover an evangelical style adequate to the announcing of the Word of God (by which I mean in particular the Beatitudes). This *metanoia* will lead the Church to rise as a sign of the living saving presence of Jesus Christ.

So what is needed is a less rich and bookish and vertical Church, a more missionary and communitarian Church, one in which the liturgy as a celebration is transparent to historical liberating events and is a communitarian expression of the experience of God of the Faithful. Mysticism has always been a dominant feature of the British Christian tradition. Now we must try to restore it, but not as an 'emigration' from secular reality, but to live it as the leaven of the masses, so that the evangelical life of Christians is opposed to the 'time-is-money' mentality of the bourgeois spirit.

I think that in Britain only by accepting the loss of its stability (which is hardly different from that of the bourgeois institutions) will the Church be able to gain hearts and minds for the Kingdom.

FREI BETTO OP