

## Comment

It is good to see that Pope Paul has resisted all efforts to make the Pope the President of the Catholic Church. There had been a whole lot of proposals for reforming the machinery by which the Pope is chosen and most of them had meant an extension of the electorate. There was the suggestion that the Synod of Bishops should take part and even that all the bishops throughout the world should have a vote. All these ideas give the appearance of being progressive and democratic; they would seem likely to produce a man more representative of the Church throughout the world and one more readily acceptable as the leader of a world religion. In fact they provide a classical example of the difference between the reformism of the 'progressives' and a really radical approach to the problem of Church structures.

What is needed at this level in the Church is not more parliamentary democracy but some much more critical questioning of the role that has come to be attributed to the papacy in this century and for some time past. To criticise this role is not to suggest that it was pointless in the past, it is to ask whether it is relevant to present conditions and whether it might not be a positive nuisance in the future. Almost without noticing it we have drifted into seeing the Pope as something like the Chairman of a multi-national corporation or something like the President of the United States or something like the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches.

For different reasons he is not, or should not be, like any of these. He does not, or should not, run the affairs of the Church on behalf of a small group associated with her—as a company is run on behalf of its shareholders. He is not, and ought not to be, the Chief Executive of the Church. Again, when the Secretary of the WCC, as he occasionally does, reminds us that he is not a 'Protestant Pope' he is himself underwriting a view of the papacy that made a lot more sense in the high Middle Ages than it does today. But in any case it is not, or ought not to be, the function of the Pope to administer an organisation or to co-ordinate relationships between various churches. The Pope, moreover, is not, or ought not to be, spiritual Secretary of the United Nations: it is not his job as Pope to provide a platform for international debate and the expression of conflicting opinions. He is, and should be, Bishop of Rome.

It is his first and fundamental job to preside over the Church of Rome, Italy, and to provide pastoral care for those who belong to that church. For this reason Pope John's visit to the Ara Caeli prison was a more significant (and more papal) journey than Pope Paul's visit to the United Nations. Together with a number of other attempts to reform

the local church in Rome it represented John's new and radical understanding of what the papacy is about.

This Church of Rome, Italy, provides (so we Roman Catholics believe) both a centre of unity and a touchstone of orthodoxy for other churches throughout the world. When we say it is a centre of unity we mean that a man may know whether his local church is an actual expression of the Church of Christ by finding out whether or not it is in communion with the Church of Rome, Italy. When we say it is the touchstone of orthodoxy we mean that any Church may know it is departing seriously from tradition if the teaching to be found in her is obviously contrary to what is preached as the gospel<sup>1</sup> from the Church of Rome, Italy. It is the business of the Pope to foster his church like any other bishop, to prevent stagnation and formalism and to preserve her from fashionable heresies. It is no part of his essential task to make wide-ranging pronouncements on any and every matter that may trouble the consciences of Christians throughout the world. In his essential task we believe the Pope to have the especial assistance of the Holy Spirit so that, whatever else may befall her, the Church of Rome, Italy, will never be either in schism or heresy.

In view of all this it was sensible of the Pope to restrict the election of the Pope, at least formally, to the cardinals of the Roman Church. (*Romano Pontifici Eligendo*, Nov. 1975, Sect. 33.) The fact that these cardinals are nowadays drawn from throughout the world reflects the recent drift of the papacy towards being an imitation world power, and, of course, the international organisations and structures that have clustered around the papacy, particularly during this century, will not easily be dismantled. Probably only bankruptcy, consequent upon the current capitalist recession, will halt the Parkinsonian spread of Vatican Bureaucracy. We may, however, expect that in a few decades all this international apparatus will be seen to have become as outdated as the Papal States and as irrelevant to the real current function of the Pope. (The historical analysis of the growth of the papacy by Eric John which we will be publishing in a series of articles starting next month will, I think, provide convincing grounds for this view.)

Pope Paul's decision, then, whatever 'conservative' motives may have lain behind it, has left the way open for a tactful withdrawal of the papacy from the grandiose illusion that it sits on top of a world Christian pyramid to the humbler reality that it is the rock (normally hidden) as the foundation of the Christian Church.

H.McC.

<sup>1</sup>This phrase 'preached as the gospel' seems to me to cover all that is essential in the Vatican 1 definition of papal infallibility—the residue is mere triumphalist legalism.