

There is one side to the transformation of the Church going on today which might seem to have a purely liturgical bearing but which in fact goes wider and deeper – the general abandonment of the Latin language. This doesn't just imply the return to an intelligible and genuinely public liturgy but the abandonment of the *lingua franca* of what has been for centuries a clerical world and the moving out into the open and as yet largely uncharted waters of a lay and secular church – a church of the people, fully in the world.

Anti-clericalism is a lot easier to recognize than clericalism and therefore a lot easier to deprecate. Rather than merely deprecating it, however, with its long and ugly history especially in some Latin countries, we would be better employed in finding out to what extent it was justified and in fact at times made necessary by circumstances. It might, for instance, be considered rather significant that the part of Italy where communism and anti-clericalism is strongest, where there are still people who 'baptize' their children in wine out of contempt for the Church's sacraments, is precisely that part which formed the Papal states.

Clericalism is a historical phenomenon and has to be studied historically. It is, of course, a pejorative term and does not refer to the existence in the Church of a section of people called clerics, those who, in the definition of canon 108 of the Code, are 'tied to divine service, having received at least first tonsure'. It might be worth noting, just the same, that the Code itself is a historical phenomenon influenced in its composition by clericalism as can be seen in the fact that, of 617 canons dealing with Persons (as opposed to Things) 574 have to do with clerics and religious and only 43 with the laity.

Readers of the first number of *Concilium* (and of course others) will not need to be told of what has happened to our idea of the Church in the twenty-odd years since *Mystici Corporis*. We think of ourselves as a community, a people on the march, part of that great forward movement which started about 3,850 years ago with God's call to an Aramaean or Hurrian sheik to leave his world and go out on a journey to an unknown destination. We have even, therefore, begun to take the Old Testament seriously, because the image of the community, the nature of its relationship with God, its essential structure, are taken up in the New Testament and seen as mandatory for the community founded by

Christ. It is in the light of this absolute scriptural datum that we ought to assess the particular forms that the cleric-lay division has taken in the history of the Church.

One could hardly be blamed, on observing the disproportion in the Code referred to above, for thinking that the Church was *per se* clerical and that lay people only belonged to it as a sort of third order. In fact, the first two things we are told about lay people in the same Code are: that they have the right to receive spiritual goods from the clergy and that they are generally forbidden to wear clerical attire. The clericalist mentality takes on different forms with various degrees of subtlety. For example, in the way religious vocations are thought of. The supposition is often that the lay person reaches, in certain well-defined but rare cases, a given degree of fervour upon which he becomes automatically a candidate for Holy Orders. Another form would be that of the lay-apostolate (the term is already significant). Is it good enough to think of this as, in the words of Pius XII, 'a means of humble co-operation with the hierarchical apostolate'? It comes through even more clearly, because instinctively, in the request of a Church leader addressed to a gathering of lay people to help him to do his work for God. The change in emphasis in our thinking of the Church has evidently not yet penetrated very deeply into our consciousness – at least as far as this country is concerned.

How, it might be asked, will this change of emphasis affect the cleric-lay relationship in the Church? Few will deny that there is still a great deal to be done here. Thus, a parish priest might have had to re-educate himself and his people – perhaps at gunpoint – to think of the Mass as theirs not his, but is not the parish theirs also? We still think, by and large, in terms of authority and hierarchy instead of service and function. We still freeze everything into fixed forms instead of leaving some room for the Holy Spirit to manoeuvre. More emphasis on variety of function within the community will mean less on the cleric as a person set apart with a distinctive dress, manners, behaviour and the rest. The priest will have to be seen as a person chosen to carry out a function within, not above or apart from, the community, and a function moreover which is nothing but a specialization of that of the community as a whole. He is one of the people, a layman to whom a special job has been entrusted.

It may seem obvious to state that the cleric is not exempt from the general rules which govern psychological behaviour. This is often lost sight of or at least obstructed by a false supernaturalism which denies in practice if not in theory the influence of the ordinary human psychological and environmental forces at work upon the individual. One element which all psychologists would agree is necessary for balance and maturity is the ability to listen to others, to accept criticism, to *remain open*. The opposite to this is fixing the situation at a certain

level, setting up an invulnerable and impenetrable façade. Clericalism (in the pejorative sense referred to) implies a closed system leading to psychic impoverishment and a compulsive and superficial behaviour pattern. When this is sanctioned, as it often is, by a fixist and tabloid morality whose ideal is complete security within the boundaries of the self, you have an ideal prescription for neurosis, which may have something to do with the disturbing number of clerics who suffer from nervous breakdown. This can of course be tragic, but is often the only road to salvation by pulling down a façade which, though resplendent with decorated marble and baroque angelry, can hide an interior in sore need of rebuilding.

It has been said that the Roman Catholic Church today is suffering from a nervous breakdown. If this is true, one step towards a healthier and more integrated future must surely be a rethinking of the cleric-lay relationship. What follows has the limited object of suggesting some lines of thought, presented unsystematically, which spring from a reading of the Scriptures and which might serve as a contribution to that work of rethinking.

There is one thing about the figure of Jesus as presented in the Gospels which, though prominent and obvious is not often emphasized, namely, that he attacked and broke up the organized religion into which he was born. A layman, he condemned the priestly caste and the particular brand of institutional religion it stood for. In the eyes of the representatives of that religion he was a rebel and a heretic and he died, ostensibly, a victim of that same priestly caste.

This explains why nowhere in the New Testament is any individual Christian ever referred to as a priest. The usual explanation of this, that the use of the word would have created confusion with the priesthood of the old order, is only half of the truth. Much more important is the insistence that no new caste arise in the community to take the place of the old. For the Christian, there is only one priest, *ever, at any time*, and his priesthood is not that of a cult-functionary but of mediator, for priesthood is concerned above all with our being present to God – and this, in the last analysis, has taken place, continues to take place, through Christ in heaven in the presence of the Father 'always living to make intercession for us'. All Christians share in that priestly office as 'a kingdom of priests, a holy nation' (Exod. 19: 6) while some are called to mediate it in a special way but always as recapitulating the function of the whole community.

What, however, the gospels are at pains to emphasize is the prophetic aspect of the mission of Jesus. As a prophet he is anointed with the Spirit and with power. He prepares for his ministry by a period of indeterminate length in the desert where the prophets had always been at home. Like Amos, he comes from the desert to the apostate city to

speak out the words he found within him.<sup>1</sup> He is certainly represented, especially by Matthew, as a rabbi with his *talmidim* following behind him at a respectful distance, but even more clearly as a prophet who associates others in the charism of his vocation. There is evidently no room for a power-structure – this is expressly repudiated in the saying about the greatest being the least – or a priestly caste holding the reins of power. In the Old Testament period and in antiquity in general priest-hoods were hereditary, no doubt due to the necessity of looking after a religious sanctuary. It is obvious, however, that hereditary succession of this kind rules out completely the direction of the Spirit; it is automatic not charismatic, and the result is usually the building up of a power-élite. Clericalism in the history of the Christian Church has had ways of its own – nepotism is only one example – for supplying the equivalent of hereditary succession. This strikes at the heart of the Church considered as a Spirit-filled community, for the principle which *forms* the community and makes it what it is has to be present *in the whole group* not just a part – ‘Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets that he might put his spirit upon them!’ (Numbers 11 : 29).

The struggle between Jesus the layman and the priests makes us see his mission as one of liberation, in the first place from an impossible spiritual burden and a routine which had become to a great extent void of inner meaning. What is important is the movement of the Spirit from within, not conformity with a rule from without. In incidents like the eating of the grains of wheat on the sabbath and various sayings about the complicated food laws then binding, the perceptive among the disciples began to detect a new principle in operation. The priestly theology held to a fixed sacred order which was *there*, which was established and imposed from above and into which each individual had to fit like a chip of marble in a mosaic. It was a fixed established order applied to every detail of the daily round throughout the whole of life to the grave and beyond. On the moral side, each act was isolated and absolutized. The new principle, on the contrary, introduced a flexibility into human conduct and relationships. It flowed directly from the great prophets of the old order whose charismatic impulse – they were above all men of the Spirit – gave them a deeper insight down to the roots of moral conduct. It gave people room to breathe and feel their humanity.

It will be obvious that clericalism is the child of this priestly *Weltanschauung* evidenced in the Scriptures. The clericalist religion is, in the phrase of Père Congar, a religion without a world, to which the natural reaction is that men build a world without a religion – or without *this* religion at any rate. And it is, I think, arguable that it was against *this* more than anything else that the modern world – during the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the emergence of the modern state

<sup>1</sup>Etymologically prophet means ‘out-speaker’ rather than ‘fore-teller’.

system, rebelled or, better, simply turned away. It is, at any rate, significant that it was just at the time when clerical Christianity was at its apogee, when it was most triumphalist, that the new thought-forms of today, in particular the dynamism of time and history, were being discovered and applied.

This presentation of Jesus as prophet bears directly on the tension within the community which he founded between the prophetic and priestly elements. It is not either – or. Both are essential, constitutive, given the kind of society which the Church is. But it is just here that the mistake is usually made of identifying these two elements with, respectively, the laity and the priesthood. On the contrary, *both* belong to the community as a whole. It is a *sacrificial and sacerdotal society insofar as its members, once baptized, share in the priestly office of the Head and express and actualize what their membership means by the act of self-offering*. It is also a prophetic society because it is 'built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles' (Eph. 2: 20) and must remain open always to the deeper insights of the Spirit no matter from which immediate source they come. This is already something rather different from the clericalized Church which has been for too long and for too many the *only Church in sight*.

With all our (justifiable) enthusiasm for our new ecclesiology, we Roman Catholics have not always been gracious enough to acknowledge the debt of gratitude we owe to those outside our communion. No one will want to deny that the emphasis on the Church as People of God derives from a deeper and more exact study of the Old Testament which has, until recent decades, been carried out almost exclusively by scholars other than Roman Catholic. The groundwork was put in by means of studies like those of von Rad on Deuteronomy which enabled us to see the structure, the inner dynamism behind the community-idea and how this was taken up into the New Testament which sees the Church as the new Israel of God. It is in the light of this received, canonical idea of the community that we have to assess the cleric – lay division.

It is above all by reading Deuteronomy that we can best grasp the real scriptural idea of community. It comes to us in the form of the liturgical address of Moses to the laity gathered together *as a church*. *The church of Israel, or the church of the Lord* which is Israel is not an abstract idea. It means Israel insofar as it realizes itself, its real identity, in coming together in plenary gathering to renew the covenant. The starting point for the New Testament theology of the *ekklesia* is simply the Greek translation of the word used in Deuteronomy. The principle of unity is the shared feeling of community; one ingathered people with one history and the heirs of one definitive experience of God's power and grace. There is here no religion at second hand accepted blindly from the priest as a sacred oracle. There is, above all, no refusal of moral

responsibility as a community by accepting off-the-peg morality from a caste to which the custody of morals has been entrusted. They stand four-square before their God within the covenant, conscious of their free response and the responsibility which this brings – shown in the fact that they freely take upon themselves the curses by which – however distasteful they may be to us today – the covenant was sanctioned, as indeed all covenants were at that time.

There is also here a strong insistence on the Word of God. The community lives by listening to that Word and obeying it (there is just one word in Hebrew for both these actions). The fact that Jesus quotes three times from this book in the temptation scene shows us that the temptation is represented as directed not just against Jesus but the Christian community also – supernatural gimmickry instead of grace, considering God as *available*, getting leverage instead of listening. We do not need more than a passing acquaintance with ecclesiastical history to realize how real in fact is this temptation for a priestly-organizational society and it was against this, or something very like it, that the reformers of the sixteenth century protested. It is no accident that the bitter polemics of the Reformation period centred so often on the Old Testament and it is still perhaps not entirely superfluous to insist that listening to the Word as a community is in the long run the only corrective against falling prey to the dangers that beset a cultic, sacerdotal society.

One of the theological focal points of debate at the Reformation was the relation of priest and prophet in the Old Testament. For the reformers (and for very many still today) the protest of the prophets against what one author calls 'the levitical corruption of Israel's religion'<sup>2</sup> was absolute and unconditional. There was no room for both – one or the other had to go. So, for example, the first revelation made to a prophet on Canaanite soil which has been recorded is a condemnation of what has always been regarded as one of the least attractive characteristics of a priestly caste – venality, the 'three-pronged fork system' (see 1 Samuel 2 : 13). Throughout the history we read of these prophetic eruptions into a closed world of cult, sacrifice and piety, challenging the basic assumptions upon which the whole thing is based. When we come to the prophets whose disciples have preserved their utterances for posterity the impression is overwhelming – are they not doing what one of his disciples praised Freud for doing in his time, opposing religion in the name of ethics?

I hate, I despise your feasts,  
I take no delight in your solemn assemblies,  
Even though you offer me burnt offerings  
I will not accept them . . .  
But let justice roll down like waters  
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5)

<sup>2</sup>H. Schultz, *Old Testament Theology*, Edinburgh 1892, 36.

When you come to appear before me,  
 Who requires of you this trampling of my courts?  
 Bring no more empty offerings!  
 Incense is an abomination to me . . .  
 Your appointed feasts my soul hates,  
 They have become a burden to me,  
 I am weary of bearing them! (Isaiah 1).

God is weary, God is sick and tired of that endless charade.

Whether or not, as has been supposed, the prophetic protest remained entirely without effect,<sup>3</sup> their predictions certainly came true, which no doubt explains why they were retained in the scriptural canon by the priests responsible for the final editing of the Old Testament, to whom their pronouncements on sacrifice and the sacrificial system could hardly have been entirely pleasing. Apart from this, however, it would be a mistake to think of the priestly and prophetic as absolutely antithetic in the Old Testament. Ideally, the starting-point of the former was the consecration of the whole of life and time to God. Unfortunately, however, as so often happens, the practice did not measure up to the ideal. The emergence of a theocratic state after the Exile allowed for the ascendancy of a priestly caste increasing all the time in numbers, wealth and influence. The union of spiritual and political power under the later Maccabees led to a situation like that which can be studied after the Constantinian peace. It brought with it a religious ritual and sacrificial system cut off from life, as well as depreciation of the Word of God and submergence of the old, canonical idea of the holy community. The priest held his office not as servant, representative, mediator, but because he had mastered the complicated ritual by which God was placated, he had learnt which levers to pull and when. The fire on the mountain out of which God spoke had been damped down.

Perhaps the most eminent historian of Old Testament religion in recent years, and one certainly not insensible to the positive value of the priestly ideal found there, has summarized this process of devaluation very well and we are no doubt invited to think also of a more recent history. Professor Walter Eichrodt writes:

'It is also the priesthood which can provide *the most serious obstacles to the development of a healthy religious life*. A rapid florescence of the priestly class is precisely what encourages it to separate itself from the community and become a caste, thrusting itself between the secular and religious life of society and proving instead of a mediator more of a hindrance to direct intercourse with God. The caste's lust for power makes use of its control of worship to bring the congregation into complete dependence on the priest for the satisfaction of its religious needs, and

<sup>3</sup>As maintained, for example, by Robert Pfeiffer, 'What did Jehovah require of his worshippers? The people answered "sacrifice" the prophets said "rectitude"', *The Books of the Old Testament*, 55.



because the cultus is thus compelled to subserve the acquisition of moral and material power, it deteriorates, becoming exclusively secularized and losing its religious content. Furthermore, the high value set on tradition turns into a rigid adherence to forms long superseded, stifling any new religious growth; and for this reason the influence of religion on the shaping of public life is either directed along false lines or completely neutralized.<sup>4</sup>

The same author singles out two characteristics of the priestly theology in its period of decadence: construing morality as obedience to positive injunction rather than in the first place personal response (and, we might add, emphasis on the nature of the act performed to the exclusion of the intention, what goes on in the mind and will); failing to distinguish between truly moral and merely ritualistic requirements. When he goes on to speak of the crippling of spontaneity we are again, no doubt, meant to think of a period rather nearer to our own day:

'Hard on the heels of a crippling of the element of spontaneity in religion follows the degradation of God's ordinances of grace into a mechanical system of priestly techniques; and in place of a reverent obedience, finding in cultic experience the spur to joyful self-surrender, comes the desire to activate the resources of divine power to one's own advantage and a presumptuous confidence in one's ability to manipulate God's salvation.'<sup>5</sup>

Coming to our own day, it would be a brave man who could affirm that the Church has preserved this element of spontaneity, that she gives it much positive encouragement. One would not have to be too cynical to wonder indeed how much could survive in her ministers and therefore in those 'in authority' after a dozen or more years of conditioning of the kind prescribed since about the sixteenth century. And it is hardly a consolation that other Christian bodies have a similar problem; one recalls the bitter complaint of a Lutheran pastor in New York last summer, after the official discouragement of the exercise of healing and glossolalia, that the institutional churches always fight shy of the prophetic and unpredictable.

It is, at any rate, no accident that the consolidation of a priestly class after the Exile and down to the time of Christ coincided with the absence of prophetic witness. Both the priestly and prophetic elements, as we saw, are constitutive of and necessary for the covenant community and the tension between them – which is there to stay – must not be dissolved in one or other of the two poles. The legalism, conservatism and almost obsessive fixism of the priesthood of the Second Temple resulted in the submergence of the old, canonical idea of the holy community, dividing it into priestly and learned on the one side and laity

<sup>4</sup>W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1961, I, 465.

<sup>5</sup>*Op. cit.* 434.



and unlearned (the 'am ha'arets) on the other. The centre had been lost. For Jesus the centre was no longer the temple and its attendant clergy but the community itself, whole and entire, indwelt by the Spirit, the community which was his body (John 2: 21). Writing such as we find in the Epistle to the Hebrews had the purpose of making sure that another caste should not arise to replace the one which was then on the point of disappearing in the smoke of the burning temple, and it speaks in terms which are still mandatory for us today. In the sacrificial death of the Lord, the one priest, then and for all the age of the Church, we are invited to see the hour 'when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him'. (John 4: 23).

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## The Prophetic Church

'The office of the Church is prophetic as well as priestly; she has to preach the faith as well as establish the sacraments, and of that Church the laity are as much members as are the clergy. The Church, whether in its priests or in its people, has admirably responded to the priestly obligations of the altar . . . But what of the prophetic office? The teaching and practice of the faith? . . . We want, all of us, lives lived in the high altitudes of the Spirit, above prejudice and partisanship, yet applied to the realms of national development and international justice. We need to have, above the quibbles of casuistry as to murder and freedom, above denunciations that are merely uncharitable and unfair, a detachment of spirit that shall be free, idealistic and Catholic'.

Bede Jarrett, O.P., from 'The Voice of the Church in Modern Problems',  
*Blackfriars* December 1922