

Comment

Cardinals are odd fish however you look at them. The historical development of the institution, in its earliest stages, remains extremely obscure and controverted. The beginnings lie in the clergy of Rome: the parish priests of the various city churches, together with the deacons who had care of the poor in the original seven districts. Cardinal-bishops apparently only came later, when the pope needed representatives with more august status to send on diplomatic and other business.

In 1059 Pope Nicholas II started his brief reign by holding a synod to settle the question of how popes were to be chosen. For many years past, papal elections had been manipulated to their advantage in the prevailing power struggles by the great Roman aristocratic families and the Holy Roman Emperor. It was now determined that the election should normally take place in Rome and that the candidates should be drawn exclusively from the local clergy. Cardinals themselves would continue to be elected by the clergy and people of the city, but the cardinals alone were henceforth to elect the new pope. By the end of the twelfth century, bishops from outside Rome were being made cardinals. By this time, also, they were nominated by the pope.

In the ups and downs of papal fortune during the Middle Ages the 'head' of the Catholic Church was often effectively the college of cardinals. In 1586 their number was fixed at seventy. It was 1958 before this rule was changed, when Pope John XXIII abolished any upper limit. For the past hundred years, especially with the rise of the modern papacy, a substantial minority of the cardinals have held the chief administrative jobs in the Vatican offices (although by no means always the most influential posts). Of the rest perhaps half have been retired diplomats, enjoying the mellow round of liturgical and gastronomic rituals that Rome reserves for good and faithful servants. That leaves the occupants of the most prominent sees around the world: very busy pastors, seldom able to visit Rome except when there is a crisis or a papal election. Very occasionally, in modern times, a maverick appointment is made. In 1879, when he was two years short of his eightieth birthday, John Henry Newman was made a cardinal — belated reparation no doubt for the years of being calumniated, but also a symbolic act of vindication of which the repercussions have never ceased to echo.

He has himself ridiculed the comparison, but in fact the recent appointment of Henri de Lubac as a cardinal has many similarities with Newman's case. Eighty seven this year, he will have been a Jesuit for *seventy* years come October. Since 1962 all cardinals have had first to be ordained as bishops: but de Lubac refused to

go through with a ceremony which could have had no pastoral effect. He is also well over the age limit for cardinals to take part in a papal election (and you never know when one may become necessary). He will not be placed at the head of any Roman dicastery, or even be required to live by the Tiber. There can be no doubt, then, that this entirely unexpected and quite 'unnecessary' choice expresses the Pope's own admiration for one of the finest theologians alive.

His first book – *Catholicisme: Les aspects sociaux du Dogme* – appeared in 1938. Against the background of the inveterately individualistic piety then current in France Henri de Lubac set himself the task of bringing out the "social aspects" of Catholic doctrine. During the War he helped to write a clandestine journal that tried to save Catholics from the worst effects of the corruption of conscience in Vichy France. He initiated *Sources chrétiennes*, which has become the standard edition of the Fathers of the Church, east and west, thereby opening up to generations of Catholic students the neglected riches of the patristic and early-medieval eras. His own contribution was to rehabilitate Origen: always a 'suspected' author. In *Corpus Mysticum* (1944) he sought to do justice to Amalarius of Metz, and in *Surnaturel* (1946) he sharpened his interrogation of the neo-Scholastic account of the Middle Ages. He brought upon himself vigorous opposition from certain Dominican theologians of the Thomist Old Guard. In 1950 he was stopped from teaching in the Jesuit study-house at Fourvière and had to live elsewhere. Coincidence or not, he was generally regarded as one of the principal inventors of the "new theology" so bitterly attacked by Pope Pius XII that year in the famous encyclical *Humani Generis*. De Lubac then wrote a series of essays on Buddhism. In 1960 Pope John XXIII made him a member of the pre-conciliar theological commission and he had to spend the two unhappiest years of his life trying to stop the commission from drafting texts for the bishops to approve which would finally lock the Catholic Church back into the narrowest kind of neo-Scholasticism imaginable. It amazed him too, in 1962, when it turned out that the majority of the bishops, finally confronted with the question, did not want to put the clock back. It is no secret that Henri de Lubac contributed a great deal to the composition of the Constitution on Divine Revelation. In 1962 also he published a defence of the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, one of his dearest friends but also the great *bête noire* of papal theologians for many years past. There is no way of honouring Henri de Lubac, at this late date, which does not also endorse the massive and astonishing shift within Catholicism that he, and a thousand others, prayed and studied and suffered to bring about.