

To most of our contributors and many of our readers Charles Davis' decision to leave the Catholic Church must have come primarily as a personal shock. He is known and loved by so many of us that it seems almost unseemly to discuss the event in public rather than by private letter. However, his own dignified and candid public statements (his initial announcement to the press conference and, especially, his article in the *Observer*) have, as it were, given his friends permission to discuss, if not his choice, at least the reasons which seem to him to justify it. It could not, in any case, have been a private event: it is the most important thing that has happened in the Catholic Church in England for half a century. If this Church cannot contain her foremost theologian (and only a quite special theological ignorance and frivolity could see him as 'lightweight') then we must look again very hard both at the Church and at the theology.

First of all, though, it is worth thinking about the probable effects of his action. There are likely to be two opposite reactions, neither of which need become fully articulate and both of which may co-exist in the minds of many Catholics. The first is to feel that there must be something wrong with 'progressive' theology if it leads such a man to leave the Church. The second is to feel that there must be something wrong with the Church if he cannot stay in. Because of the first, progressive theologians are liable once more to come under suspicion, but the second might just possibly lead to a real examination of conscience in the Church. If this latter effect should come about we need not be unduly worried about the first. There was in any case something a little unnatural in the respectability that progressive and original theologians suddenly acquired during and immediately after the Council. A new elite of 'right-thinking people' was gradually forming, and the need to be in tune with this orthodoxy was beginning to stifle critical judgement. There were signs, even, of a rather brutal and triumphalist radicalism which could be just as indifferent to persons and to truth as could episcopal authority. There are a certain number of people who could jump off the bandwagon without doing the cause of theology any harm.

Brian Wicker has rightly compared Charles Davis' departure to a martyrdom, an act of witness, 'In him the Church looks at itself from the outside, and understands from that perspective the depth of its own corruption.' (*Guardian* January 5th). It may, however, be

doubted whether even witness on this scale, a shock of this magnitude, will really shake the complacency of the Church in England. It is, unfortunately, more likely that Catholics will convince themselves that this is a 'personal tragedy', that (with the friendliness that characterises Catholicism in England) they will feel compassion for Charles Davis, think vaguely that he must have had some difficult times with the authorities – and leave it at that.

If we are to go beyond this reaction we shall have to take more seriously the reasons he gives. 'The official Church is racked by fear, insecurity and anxiety, with a consequent intolerance and lack of love.' 'There is concern for authority at the expense of truth, and I am constantly saddened by instances of the damage done to persons by the workings of an impersonal and unfree system.' These charges seem to me to be very well founded and their truth would, on the whole, be taken for granted by English Catholics. The Church is quite plainly corrupt: a Cardinal selects Christmas as the occasion for supporting the murder of Vietnamese civilians; the Pope alleges that the Church's teaching is not in doubt about birth-control; the Congregation of Rites has just asserted (*Times* January 5th) that a family communion celebrated in a private home and followed by a meal is a practice 'alien to the Catholic religion,' while nearer home and more comically, a Bishop has expressed the fear that Catholics who sing carols in Anglican churches are endangering their faith and morals. This is the kind of thing we have come to expect of Cardinals and Popes and Bishops and Curial Congregations. It is for that very reason that Pope John and Cardinal Bea and Bishop Bekkers startle us so much. But to say this too cheerfully may be to evade the issue. We have grown accustomed to seeing the Church like this; so accustomed that we are surprised when a man gives it as his reason for suddenly leaving the Church – almost as though he had seen it for the first time. We have lived with this truth so long that we have perhaps forgotten how scandalous and horrible it is: like people who live with racial discrimination and slavery. We have to ask, in fact, whether we are those who, as Charles Davis puts it, 'remain Roman Catholics only because they live their Christian lives on the fringe of the institutional Church and largely ignore it.' I think not; but in order to defend a position which is that of many Catholics who would ordinarily have been thought more 'radical' than Charles Davis and who have no intention of leaving the Church, we must look more closely at this phrase, 'institutional Church.'

Consider a few institutions: Spode House, the Newman Theology Groups, the Union of Catholic Students, the Young Christian Workers, University Chaplaincies, the Catholic press including even *New Blackfriars*. None of these are exclusively for Catholics but no sociologist would hesitate to describe them as Roman Catholic institutions. It is within institutions such as these that a great many Catholics nourish their Christian lives. It is not true that merely

because the dynamic of their lives is not derived from sermons or 'religious education' that it therefore comes from outside the institutions of the Church. To think so would be to betray a clericalist view of what counts as a Catholic institution. If there is a group which is characteristically on the fringe of the institutions of the Church in this sense, and which largely ignores them, it is the Bishops. Nonetheless without the overall and relatively impersonal structure of the hierarchy these Roman Catholic institutions could not exist. Nobody in England expects to be guided and encouraged in his Christian life by pastoral letters – it is a matter for gratified astonishment when these have any theological content at all; this is not what we have come to expect of our Bishops. Perhaps in some more adequate Church we could ask for more, but at the present time in England they provide merely an administrative context within which the really vital and immediately relevant institutions can exist. That the established hierarchy is also a hindrance to these groups is only too obvious and only to be expected. A dialectical tension between the framework of the Church and its points of growth seems to be a condition of Christian existence.

It is one thing, however, to talk of a dialectical tension implied in the very idea of an historical Church, and quite another to excuse the corruptions and follies that are peculiar to our own time and place. What does not need to be endured indefinitely is the special irrelevance of so much of the behaviour of Church officials. Alongside the actual agony of growth in the Church there seem to be these men playing a private game amongst themselves in which the moves are directives and prohibitions and the players score points for formally going through the motions of docility or of repeating the orders correctly. It seems to me that we should treat this game as we do the phantasies of adolescence of any of the other ways in which men escape from reality; we should combine a firm determination to get rid of it eventually with a certain tolerance of it while it is being played. While Church authorities are occupied with these domination games they are neglecting their true role. It would be quite unrealistic to expect them to be sources of enthusiasm and original thought but it is their basic task to be the link between such sources, the framework within which they are kept in balance. To maintain this balance they must, of course, speak with authority, the real authority that comes with understanding and concern and listening to others; the authority that sees itself not in terms of power but as a service to the community, the channel of communication by which each part of the community is kept in touch with the whole, a whole that extends through time as well as space.

I have not found this point better expressed than in a passage which I use with some reluctance because it may seem unfair to quote a statement which its author perhaps would now repudiate. It

is from Charles Davis' preface to Rosemary Haughton's magnificent book *On Trying to be Human*:

'When honesty means the dominance of personal reference as a criterion of truth, then the content of Christian tradition is accepted in so far as it is personally meaningful and personally liberating. Ultimately, however, this makes one a prisoner of a limited experience . . . Fortunately the great tradition of Christian teaching and the thought of the great masters of Christian theology and spirituality have been handed down to us by generations faithful to authority when much in what they passed on was not to them personally very meaningful.'

It is because we believe that the hierarchical institutions of the Roman Catholic Church, with all their decadence, their corruption and their sheer silliness, do in fact link us to areas of Christian truth beyond our own particular experience and ultimately to truths beyond any experience, that we remain, and see our Christian lives in terms of remaining, members of this Church.

One final point. If history can teach us anything, then we should have learned from the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation and the slow difficult process of healing that we call the Ecumenical movement that the concept of 'leaving' the Church is not as simple as it looks. Roman Catholics no longer see the reunion of Christian Churches in terms of a 'return' or a 'submission' of other Churches to the Church they have left. We recognise that however disastrous such separations may be, they have their place in the mysterious plan of God, that perhaps certain Christian insights could never have been achieved without the painful cycle of a separation followed on both sides by a groping towards reconciliation. A condition for bringing good out of the evil of schism is that both parties should repent, re-examine their positions and be ready to learn from and be forgiven by each other. It is not absolutely out of the question that the Roman Catholic Church in England should discover how to do this; it is not out of the question that Charles Davis should find himself with us once more in an altered and more human Church.

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