

THE TEMPTATIONS OF THE CHURCH

By PAUL EDWARDS

I REGRETTED having to miss the celebrations of the bishop's silver jubilee. I should like to have been present at the ceremony which marks an important occasion in the life of the diocese. And I am sorry I missed the reception.

Not because I have never been inside the Grand Hotel; not because I enjoy spending hours in a large room full of clergy and tobacco smoke; and the food and drink on these occasions have a formal, official, institutionalized flavour which is ungrateful to my palate. But I should like to have heard the toastmaster in action. (Perhaps I should call him the M.C., but I must distinguish the expert who controlled the morning's syntaxis in the cathedral from the adept who directed the afternoon's agape at the Grand.)

This was an occasion worthy of a toastmaster's expertise. There were archbishops, bishops, abbots (I think), protonotaries apostolic *ad instar*, (a pity Charles Dodgson was an Anglican, he could have used one of those), domestic prelates, privy chamberlains and canons. And like Adam naming all the beasts, the toastmaster had to call each ecclesiastical species by that which is its correct address.

St Luke tells us that at the last supper, 'There was rivalry between them over the question, which of them were to be accounted the greatest'.¹ That shows what an undeveloped condition the Church was still in. The anarchic uncertainty of the last supper has been replaced by the strict discipline of ecclesiastical precedence. Were the apostles to come to a present-day formal gathering of Christ's ministers, they could see at a glance 'which of them was to be accounted the greatest', because the seating arrangements would have been very carefully gone into.

The apostles would be intrigued to learn that the question of who 'is to be accounted the greatest' is still a matter of great importance. They would surely be impressed by the sophisticated elaboration of the Church's solution to the problem, the gradations of title, the

¹ Lk 22, 24.

differences of garb, the variations of spoken and written forms of address; and all of it neatly tabulated in books of reference.

Unhappily, Christ's formula was starkly different. 'No difference is to be made among you, between the greatest and the youngest of all, between him who commands and him who serves'.¹ In this matter the Church not only neglects what Christ taught; officially, elaborately, it practises the opposite.

In making this statement, I lay myself open to two charges. First I might be considered a text-thumping fundamentalist for wanting to take Luke's words pretty literally. Secondly it might be thought heretical or at least 'offensive to pious ears' (we differentiate doctrinal perversions as nicely as we grade our prelates) to allege that the Church's official practice can contradict Christ's teaching. It is the second charge which matters more, and I must defend myself. Consider the following:

The cases dragged on for months, which the accused was forced to spend in the dungeons . . . The skill, the adroitness, the careful preparation of pointed questions, the way in which they were framed . . . made sure that once put before the court there was no escape. *In fact, not a single acquittal is recorded in the register . . .* No counsel for the defence was ever present during all these protracted proceedings to explain what he or she meant . . . In a number of cases the incriminating statements had been made ten or fifteen years before . . . in these inquisitorial trials resulting in either loss of life or immuration and confiscation of property, there was no appeal from the court . . . It is the finality and inevitability of judgement delivered which in conjunction with the proceedings make these trials so terrifying.²

Pretty reading! This nightmare was not dreamed up by some aspiring imitator of Kafka or Orwell. The details of these trials are to be found in the inquisitorial register of Jacques Fournier. These trials took place between 1318 and 1325 when Fournier was bishop of Pamiers. He presided over the court. In 1334 he became pope.

We can hope that other bishops sought out heresy with less zeal, or were not so pathologically in dread of it that they preferred to ensure the condemnation of the innocent rather than risk the dis-

¹ Lk 22, 26.

² Cited in the *Times Literary Supplement* for 9 June 1966, p 517. My italics.

charge of the guilty. But Fournier's fellow bishops recognized their 'duty' to be on the watch for heresy, and to take steps to deal with it. The Church has a record of persecution, of persecuting others that is, which stretches over too many centuries; and glib remarks about 'handing over to the secular arm' are irrelevant. Few tyrants act as their own executioners.

Need I prove that persecution is unchristian? Is there anything more directly opposed to Christ's example? Christ gave his life to save others; for most of her existence the Church has been ready to sacrifice the life of others to preserve herself. One hopes that the recent Council in its declaration, *Dignitatis Humanae*, has so established the sanctity of religious freedom that the Church will never again contemplate persecuting unbelievers. But note the following words of the declaration: 'In the life of the people of God . . . there have at times appeared ways of acting which were less in accord with the spirit of the gospel and even opposed to it'.¹ In its more guarded language the Council admits what I with blunter, cruder pen stated above, that the Church's official practice can contradict Christ's teaching.

Does anyone want to quarrel with the word official? The existence, titles and habiliments of monsignori have never been defined, *ex cathedra*, but the Right Reverend and Very Reverend gentlemen would be justly indignant if we said that their status is not official. No Council formally defined the Church's right to persecute. But persecute the bishops did, with the support of the faithful, and considered it their mission to do so. When the Council of Constance condemned Hus as a heretic and handed him over to the secular arm to be burnt alive, this was an official act: as official as the Sanhedrin's handing over Christ to the roman governor.

Yes, the official actions of the Church may violate Christ's teaching. Nor is this so strange. Christ was tempted. He could be tempted to sin because he was human. He could not commit it because he was divine. The Church is also both divine and human; but speaking very untechnically, there is less of the divine in her, much more of the human. The Church has a God-given mission, a God-given guarantee. And it is composed of human beings. The Church may be tempted and may fall. The divine guarantee that 'the gates of hell will not prevail' will prevent the Church's lapse being complete and final. In the long run the Church is indefectible; in the short run (and to us the short run may be uncomfortably long) the Church

¹ *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, 12.

is both temptable and peccable. The temptations of Christ are aimed at him as the Messiah and concern the launching of the messianic kingdom. As the Church is 'the beginning and the seed of that kingdom on earth',¹ it is reasonable to expect the Church's temptations to reflect those of Christ. The first temptation, to turn the stones into bread, has been well summed up as a temptation to a self-assertive and unnecessary display of power'.² For the Church's indulgence in this vice the word triumphalism has been coined, and its symptoms are plain enough for illustration to be waived.

But the first temptation also strikes at a deeper level. This is shown by Christ's reply. He quotes Deuteronomy, which describes God's tender providence for Israel in the desert.³ It is an appeal – again I quote Fr Jones – for 'a calm trust in God'. Christ in the desert makes the same appeal. The Church in the desert of this world needs to remember it and preserve this trust. But, anxious for her children among towering dangers, she can, like any mother, panic.

Persecution comes from panic. Very recently a young mother was prosecuted for cruelty to her child, whose hand she had held in the gas flame. She said that the child was always playing with fire and that she had to teach it not to. Much ecclesiastical repression has the same psychological origin. In her anxiety to protect her children, the Church has often been savage with them and with those who seemed to threaten them. So much ecclesiastical legislation has been panic legislation; the founding of the Inquisition, the establishment of the Index, the imposition and maintenance of the anti-modernist oath. What makes it worse is that measures imposed during a panic sometimes stay for centuries. They tend to become obsessional routines. Mother, having kept her children indoors during an epidemic, will not let them out again. After all, there are always germs about!

Lacking the calm trust in God's care that Christ taught us, the Church can lapse into a neurotic overprotectiveness that keeps her children in an intellectually and psychologically infantile condition. Again at times, like an insecure mother, the Church demands praise, and praise from her children. At these times, any criticism is a rejection of her love and care. To apply another gospel story, the Church can conduct herself like an especially distraught Martha when she should cultivate the composure of Mary, concerned only

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 5.

² Jones, Alexander, *The Gospel according to St Matthew*, p 65.

³ Deut 8, 3 ff.

that she should be hearing the words and wisdom of Christ.

Whereas the first temptation of Christ hoped to find inadequate reliance on God's providence, the second temptation, probing on the other wing (the metaphor is sporting, rather than avian) looks for an over dependence on God's support. 'Cast thyself down to earth . . . they (his angels) will hold thee up with their hands . . .' The Church too can be attacked from either direction. She can be tempted to over-anxiety, as I have shown, or, in the other direction, to an excessive expectation of God's continual intervention.

I would hesitantly, tentatively, suggest that this is sometimes verified in the question of the Church's infallibility. 'The gates of hell will not prevail'. The Church has God's guidance in her mission. God ensures that the Church does not falsify Christ's teaching. But to what extent? In the moral order, the Church can wander from the path Christ has indicated. She will return to it, but it is only in the long run that she is indefectible. It is possible to presume too much on the divine guidance, as Satan suggested that Christ should do. Hence the phenomenon that has been labelled 'creeping infallibility'. Since the definition of the first Vatican Council, infallibility has been more and more invoked by some theologians. This is an unhealthy process. It reaches its extreme when the fact that the holy Spirit guides the Church is interpreted as though every high ranking ecclesiastical decision had his guarantee of its wisdom and expediency. Some years ago, an english ritual was issued which, by reason of the very restricted amount of english in it, was a severe disappointment to the vernacularists. It was suggested that the relevant decisions were the work of the holy Spirit and therefore should be welcomed by all. I still wonder how anyone with any knowledge of history can invoke the blanket guarantee of the holy Spirit for all decisions of the holy See. Ecclesiastical decisions at the highest level have been made under political pressure, for bribes received. They have sometimes been patently unjust, sometimes downright immoral. Are we going to involve the holy Spirit in the death of Hus, the condemnation of Galileo, the condemnation of the Templars, the monopoly of the episcopate by royal nominees? The holy Spirit may have prevented these falls being fatal. This does not convert them into steps in the right direction.

It could also be maintained that the overemphasis on infallibility comes from lack of confidence. We will not trust the providence of God unless we are assured that it is an extra special effort of providence, continually intervening to protect our salvation. Too many of

us are too morbidly anxious in our relations with God. We want the lines of conduct very plainly drawn for us, the areas of wrong conduct clearly marked off. This is not because of our enthusiasm for doing right, because of our love of the good. It springs from fear. We want to be able to prove that we are not guilty. We are anxious to be sure that God 'can pin nothing on us'. We want a well marked path through the minefield of God's wrath. It is in response to this pathological anxiety that moralists work out their elaborate and detailed directions. It has been said that the apostles would be very surprised to be confronted with our system of moral theology, but that the pharisees would have taken to it like ducks to water.

The third temptation, the most spectacular, 'he showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them', also seems the least subtle. Neither of the previous temptations were to unequivocal evil. The third is. 'Fall down and worship me'. Satan invites the Messiah to total treachery. Is the Church open to such a temptation? Can the Church of God be tempted to betray God? The suggestion is vertiginous. But it must still be faced with open eyes. The Church is not the first church. Israel, the first people of God, precedes us. They were a real church, custodians of a revelation, a vehicle for the salvation of the world. And that Church officially rejected Christ and handed him over to the secular arm of Pilate. This thought is all the more painfully disconcerting if we remember that Israel was in some respects sounder at that time than during most of its history. It had freed itself of idolatry. Its standard of ritual observance and external morality was very high. And seven worse devils entered into it; it rejected Christ and clamoured for his death.

The Church is, let me say it once again, in the long run indefectible. It cannot reject or finally betray Christ. But is it wholly immune from the temptation to do so? We have to admit that evils of many kind have invaded the Church. The devils of luxury, sloth, nepotism, power-seeking, have had their not inconsiderable successes. In the fifteenth century this was so plainly true that the more upright were demanding 'reform of the Church in head and members'. But I am suggesting for consideration the possibility that when the Church is freest of the grosser vices, then, like the Israel of the scribes and pharisees, she may lie most open to even graver temptations. When we are seemingly spiritual, a complacent conscience may fail to signal the approach of seven worse devils.

The third temptation is a deliberate perversion of ends and means. Satan offers Christ the world which Christ wishes to gain. But the

means, that he should worship Satan, really spells the complete failure to achieve his purpose. It would mean that the kingdom of God had capitulated to Satan. To confuse aims and means is one of the commonest human mistakes. We can so concentrate on the means that they become ends in themselves, and the original purpose is lost. Steinbeck, in his *Cannery Row* stories, has a character who builds an excellent boat but never takes it down to the sea. We have all met people who so love machines that the machines never do any work for them; the machines are always in pieces, being devotedly serviced. I have seen the elaborate holy Saturday vigil performed in a large city parish before forty-five people. The turnout was disappointing, but we had nothing with which to reproach ourselves. Like dutiful priests we had seen that the ceremonies had been correctly performed. Do we serve the members of the Church, or do we merely service the machinery of the Church? It is possible to work at keeping the ark of salvation in sweetly running order while people drown in the flood. The name of that devil is ecclesiolatry, and we ecclesiastics should fear him.

Ecclesiolatry has a lesser relation, minor but mentionable. I have read that in a coptic church the sanctuary is never cleaned. Whatever is in the sanctuary is sacred and untouchable, including cobwebs, dead insects and bird droppings. Similarly you will sometimes find in a religious house a collection of damaged statues, broken crucifixes and bits of rosaries. They are sacred objects and no one has the courage to dispose of them. The latin language has its uses, but its monopoly of the liturgy was due to the quasi-sacred character which it had acquired, simply because the Church had used it for so long. It would be almost as rational to preserve the old light bulbs because they had once illuminated the sanctuary. The name of this devil, if it matters, is Spurious Sanctification. Because of him, mediaeval religious habits, once contemporary and quite practical, are still worn when they have become quite unpractical and bizarre. You sometimes hear of nuns modernizing their habit. Have you heard of a male religious order doing it?

There is another really hellish devil who incites us to great zeal for souls – for souls strictly. Christ healed sick bodies, fed hungry ones, was emphatic that we should give water to thirsty ones. It would be fairer, I think, to say that Christ concerned himself neither with souls nor bodies, but with people. But this particular devil wants us to be more spiritual than Christ and think in terms of souls. Thanks to him, we have for long attacked ‘immodesty in dress’

which can endanger men's souls, and shown very little concern with all the avoidable hunger and homelessness. This devil alarms us about material progress – poverty, even involuntary poverty, is known to be a better climate for souls. He inspires us to preach sermons denouncing the world of cars, television and washing machines, and helps us to forget that we have all these things in the presbytery. He probably suggested the justification of the slave trade: that it gave many a poor heathen a chance to save his soul by bringing him into contact with the Church. There is one detail in the moral theology books which I attribute entirely to him. The moralists say, and no doubt rightly, that we can take life in defence of our own, and not only in defence of our lives, but our limbs and our property. How much property would have to be endangered to justify us in killing a man? Answer: £100, – one hundred pounds sterling, pre-war value.¹ The state is here much more solicitous about human life than the moralist. This devil can be labelled Sheer-Inhumanity.

There is a pair of very dangerous devils who work as a team. Their task is to rock the Church's equilibrium *vis-a-vis* the state. To render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and nothing more, is a very delicate operation. Devil Lick-Caesar's-Boots tries to unbalance the Church in one direction. When alerted to his dirty work, the Church reacts. Devil Despise-The-Secular-State uses the momentum of her reaction to upset her in the other direction. Let us bring one more devil on to the stage. This particular tempter, like the best of them, starts from an incontestable truth. There is nothing more important on earth than the Church's mission. Does it not follow that the most important people on earth are the Church's ministers? As a man's temporal affairs must be directed to his spiritual end, should not the secular state be subordinated to the Church? And the intellectual life of society similarly? And who can find a better use for the wealth of the world than the Church, with her all-important mission? The name of this devil is Hieratic Megalomania. He is a first class sophist and hard to catch with logic. Show him a crucifix.

All the temptations of Christ can be brought under one heading. They all offer an easier way out. To work a miracle is presumably pleasanter than being very hungry. To impress the crowds in the temple with a miraculous descent from on high would be a splendid gimmick for launching his campaign, and much less laborious than slogging it through the villages of Palestine; and bowing the knee to

¹ Davis, H., *Moral and Pastoral Theology*, vol II, p 126.

Satan might seem a welcome alternative to the passion. Christ consistently refused the easier way. He trod the hard road of asceticism, of patient evangelization, of the crucifixion.

As water takes a downward path, so human nature takes the easier route, and quite sensibly if the easier route leads to its goal. But the Church's purpose is to continue the work of Christ and by Christ's methods. She will always be tempted to choose an easier method which is not Christ's. She will be tempted to persecute rather than be persecuted as Christ was, to amass wealth rather than dispossess herself as Christ did. She will be tempted to dictate rather than persuade, to dominate rather than to serve, to impress with sophistication rather than disarm by simplicity. She will be tempted to ingratiate herself with whatever establishment rules.

And here I must enter a complicated caveat. We live in topsy-turvy times. Throwing stones at the establishment is the acceptable hobby. In fact, the real establishment is the inner circle of those who 'sin not and throw stones' at cardboard establishments. It is very dangerous not to be a member. You may get stoned yourself. If you are a member you may go and strut on the barricades and call yourself a revolutionary. This self-satisfying procedure is very safe, because the *ancien régime* no longer has the forces with which to charge the barricades. Today we all fear being labelled orthodox and the conformist thing is to be an iconoclast.

The Church can hardly remain unaffected by this. Devil Lick-Caesar's-Boots had a good innings in the eighteenth century. But when the old regimes were shattered and replaced by the new nationalist, 'liberal' and often anti-clerical regimes, devil Despise-The Secular-State took over the tempting. The world was becoming more democratic. The Church demonstrated that her authority was not from the people by maintaining the most uncompromising autocracy. The mood of the world was anti-conservative. The Church, whose purpose it is to preserve Christ's teaching in a changing world, conserved almost everything as a matter of principle. Egalitarianism was in the air. The Church demonstrated her separateness from the world by mitigating nothing of the superfluity of her hyper-baroque aristocratic trappings.

That period, thank God, seems to be ending. We have ceased to be gratuitously offensive to the twentieth century. Autocracy must now coexist with consultation; conservatism must be yoked with *aggiornamento*. We have become democratic, liberal, ecumenical, tolerant, social minded, eirenic and terribly interested in technical

advance. We are forgetting our latin, have torn up the Index and love protestants and hindus.

What do we do next? Live happily ever after? I must in these latter remarks sound like the children in the market place, who would play at neither funerals nor weddings. Let me explain why I will neither mourn the past with the conservatives nor drink toasts to the marriage of Truth and Progress with the progressives. The changes wrought by Vatican II are for me a promised land which I had never thought to enter. I would have died happy to see half of them. But I wish that we had taught ourselves to consult the governed because it was the christian thing to do, and not learned it from the world of lay politics. I wish that we had become tolerant before the rest of the world, and not after so much of it. I have a very uneasy feeling that the Church is learning from the rest of the world rather than teaching it. Fortunately, most of the lessons seem worth learning. But I do not care for the thought of the Church trying to keep up with the Jones's in conspicuous liberalism and strident modernity.

What a jeremiah I have become! I who had so much to say earlier about a 'calm trust in God'! Let us leave the wind of change to howl, and return to the peace of the desert, a peace won by the rout of Satan. Christ would not end his fast spectacularly. He would not inaugurate his mission with a miraculous descent in the temple. He would gain his kingdom by austerity, by the steady preaching of his message, by his passion and resurrection. Christ's road is the Church's road. And always all hell will try to divert her. So be it!

This has been a very unpleasant article to write. The Church is Christ's Church. What we have of Christ comes to us from the Church. The Church is our mother and our debt to her is incalculable. The exercise of finding appropriate words to describe her temptations and falls has at times been distressing. This is my apology.

A youngster, where he loves, normally idolizes. To some extent he loves not a person but his own imagined version of that person. Where we truly love, we love someone as they are. A wise mother will be well aware of her son's shortcomings and will love him no less. The adult christian must love, not some imaginary vision of the Church, but his mother as she is – but always with that calm trust in God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who 'loved and delivered himself up for her, that he might sanctify her'.¹

¹ Eph 5, 26.