

# THE CHURCH YESTERDAY AND TODAY

By MICHAEL A. FAHEY

THE APPROACH of the fifteenth anniversary since the promulgation of Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,<sup>1</sup> invites us to meditate reflectively on the mystery of the Church as we experienced it in the past, and also to record our dreams about the Church to come. Those of us in our middle or later years can look homewards to a Church we knew and loved in the decades before the Council. Questions will flash across our mind. Is today's Church the same Church of our youth? Have the recent changes been real gains, or have we not lost something precious in our adaptations? Those of us in our younger years, whose experience with a pre-Vatican II Church is based only on recollections of others, will find it hard to appreciate the peace and well-being elicited by these memories of the Church gone by.

To look backwards can raise feelings of nostalgia; which, in turn, can often lead to a recall that is selective. The people we knew, the homes in which we grew up, even the parish church where we attended Mass — all these have a special aura in our memories. This is why a return to the home of our youth, after a long absence, can be a startling experience. Rooms seem curiously smaller, less bright and appealing. The parish church may seem oddly different: stained-glass windows less artistic, statues less inviting. Travellers to distant countries or shrines often relate that years later their memories have become notably selective. The discomforts of climate, food, sleeplessness are forgotten; what remains vivid in the mind are the consolations, the inspirations, the thrill and beauties of the visits.

None of us in our forties and over will forget the Church of our youth. The experience of our first holy Communion, the solace that came to us at troubled moments in the sacrament of penance, the celebration of Mass in the presence of loved ones, now 'gone before us in the sign of faith'. In our memories the hymns sound

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium* received the signatures of Pope Paul VI and all the Fathers during the fifth session of the Council, on 21 November 1964.

melodious, the message of the preacher clear and inspiring. Even the translations from sacred scripture seem to have been more literary and mellifluous than the infelicities of new versions. Some recall that certain rituals, such as fasting from midnight before receiving holy Communion, seemed to add a sense of expectation and reverence that nowadays is lost.

What we may have forgotten are our individual or corporate temptations to routine, self-satisfaction, haughty isolation from other Christians. Even during the pontificate of Pius XII, we shared the views of the encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, which identified, purely and simply, the Church of Jesus Christ with the Roman Catholic Church. Thus we were slow to recognize the ties of Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants to the Church of Christ; nor did we reflect on our common faith, our shared love for the bible, or even the presence of Jesus Christ in those sacraments celebrated within the rest of the christian family. During the earlier decades of this century, we Catholics had forgotten certain aspects of our own rich tradition. We had only just begun 'to draw deeply from the well' of sacred scripture; and the distribution of responsibilities in the Church was uneven. For a whole host of reasons, most of the laity had a sadly passive role in the liturgical and organizational life of the Church. During this period of our pleasant memories, education in catholic seminaries and schools often had a rather narrow quality, because the catholic community was still recovering from the fears and defensive attitudes occasioned by Modernism and the Vatican's response to it. Even as recently as Pius XII's *Humani Generis* (1950), there were grim warnings of the dangers of a so-called *nouvelle théologie*. Precisely because our memories can and do play tricks on us, it is well to remember how prone we were, in those pre-Vatican II days, to what has been described as triumphalism, clericalism and juridicism.

### *The phenomenon of change*

Our own experience and the collective restructuring that has gone on in the Church during these last decades invite us to reflect on change. To be sure, to speak of 'change' is ambiguous. When a friend tells us that 'there's a big change in so-and-so', we need to enquire further: 'do you mean for the better or for the worse?' If the change is a healthy one, we call it progress, growth, development, emergence or evolution. But change can also be a set-back, seen in negative terms: innovation, alteration, upheaval, substitution, disintegration. Further, there are changes over which we have no

control, such as changes in the weather, and the changes resulting from intentional planning, like the election of a new government, It is planned change that concerns us here. If these changes result from a moral conversion, we have further words at our disposal: renewal, restoration, renovation or updating. Who decides where to situate a 'change'? Every change also includes two aspects. There is the new, visible end-product that differs somehow from what went before. More elusive is the internal motivation which initiated the change, but which is the key to the whole process.

### *Vatican II's reflection on change*

The Fathers of Vatican II were careful to note the undeniable fact of change in our world, and its unusual rapidity. Especially in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4-7, 54), they observed these challenging, rapid changes, and classified them as social, psychological, moral and religious. Yet apart from some references to changes in the divine liturgy, the Council had regrettably little to say about changes in the Church, actual or intended. It is unfortunate that the council fathers did not try to explain to the Church at large what theologians had been recognizing for years: namely, that many elements of church life and doctrine had often changed throughout history. They might well have explained not only the fact that the Church's structures had changed over the centuries; they might also have given reasons for various shifts in dogma, hierarchical institutions, sacramental practices and ways of interpreting the bible.

At the opening of Vatican II, Pope John XXIII had noted in his inaugural address: 'The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing; the way in which it is presented is another'. A month earlier, the same pope, describing the project of the Council, laid certain foundations for the changes that had already occurred and others that were still to come:

The Church is seeking to renew itself in its inner vitality, whereby it represents the treasures of faith and grace, especially to its own members; and in its external vitality, in its ministry to persons in their need of justice and peace, with all the temporal problems of this changing age.

### *Recent changes in the Catholic Church*

Some of the changes in the Catholic Church since the 'sixties are clearly observable by its members, and even to outsiders; but the

most obvious are not necessarily the most innovative. Equally, through this double dimension, the visible re-shaping and the internal motivation, one can perceive the changes in the external institutions without necessarily understanding the inner reasons which brought about the adaptations. Further, those who lack historical perspective will be unaware that some of the innovations are, in fact, a return to older traditions.

I would like to single out seven major innovations in the Catholic Church which have occurred in the last two decades. First would be the changes in the manner of celebrating the sacraments, and especially in the Eucharistic Liturgy: the introduction of the vernacular, the provision of the new Eucharistic Prayers, the return to distributing the 'bread of communion' in the hand, as was the practice in the early Church, the new cycles of readings for the Liturgy of the Word freshly translated from the original languages, new rituals for the sacramental liturgies of baptism, reconciliation, and ordination. The overriding purpose underlying these reforms has been the desire to enhance their intelligibility and to give a new emphasis to their symbolic meanings. The changes were also intended to make more available to the laity a variety of roles previously concentrated in the hands of the clergy. Thus, in very many churches we have seen lay-lectors, auxiliary ministers of the Eucharist, and a fuller participation for all in liturgical prayer.

The second change is the shift of attitude taken by the Catholic Church in its assessment of and relations with other Christian Churches and ecclesial communities. This shift was initially indirectly symbolized by invitations issued to non-Catholics to attend the Council as observers; and the interest, in some cases influential, shown by other Christians in the declarations of the Council. Although the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church states that Christ's Church 'subsists in the Catholic Church' (*Lumen Gentium*, 8), it did not wish to identify exclusively the Roman Catholic Church with the Church of Christ, as Pius XII had done. Numerous gestures of reconciliation occurred after the Council, such as the famous kiss of peace between Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem in 1964, the mutual lifting of the excommunications between East and West, and the papal visit to the headquarters of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Even outsiders could perceive that a gradual healing was taking place, after centuries of estrangement from the Orthodox, and of outright hostilities with the Protestant Churches. All this meant that Catholics were beginning to suspect

that differences between Christians seemed to be rather a question of theological understanding than a matter of faith. These ecumenical developments continue to be further intensified by the deliberations of a fair number of international bilateral consultations, the most dramatic among which is, perhaps, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Consultation. For example, the question of official Eucharistic inter-communion between the Roman Catholic and other Churches is being re-assessed, along with the formal recognition of the validity of ordination to the ministry in other Churches.<sup>2</sup>

A third change in the Catholic Church is the development of episcopal collegiality and the new emphasis on the synodal nature of the Church. The result of the decree on the primacy of the Pope at Vatican I in 1870 had been the growth of a strongly centralized papal process in decision-making: a tendency which overlooked to a large extent the dogmatic fact that all the bishops of the world, in virtue of their episcopal consecration, are divinely commissioned to exercise *episcopē*, 'the task of overseers', concerning the needs not only of their individual dioceses but of the Church universal. This change has, in fact, been formalized in two institutions: the International Bishops' Synod, currently only an advisory agency to the Bishop of Rome, which meets approximately every four years; and the various national and regional Episcopal Conferences, which are assuming an ever greater importance in the life of the Church at more than diocesan level.

A fourth change of direction in the Catholic Church is the visible intensification of its involvement, though more so in some Episcopal Conferences and dioceses than universally, in the struggle for social justice and peace. The ground for this development was well prepared on the doctrinal level by such papal encyclicals as *Mater et Magistra* and *Populorum Progressio*; but the practical issues emerging from this new concern, strongly felt in the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM); and in a milder form in the publications of the United States Catholic Conference and the *Conférence épiscopale française*, have, apparently, been much influenced by the insights of liberation theology, and of a philosophy of education which has stressed the need to heighten the awareness of the Catholic faithful as a whole concerning the roots of social and economic evils, in both the spoken and the written word. One must add, however,

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf *infra*, pp 56-64.

that this phenomenon has led to confusion and dismay among many, who see it as an unwarranted political involvement by the Church.

A fifth notable change has been an official ecclesiastical acceptance that greater diversity and pluralism in church life and theology is legitimate. More and more writers and theologians are taking into account a variety of 'models of the Church', with the result that different ecclesiologies, or ways of viewing the over-all mission and ministries of the Church, are seen as complementary rather than contradictory. The extraordinary development in scriptural exegesis and hermeneutics since the encyclical of Pius XII, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, has enabled Catholic scholars to distinguish out the differing theological attitudes and 'Church-models' in the different books of the New Testament. All this has led to a greater tolerance by the official Church of public discussion of ideas once seemingly at variance with set ecclesiastical view-points. Vatican II itself had taken up positions differing from earlier official teachings: for example, on the questions of religious freedom and of common worship. The result has been open theological discussion of attitudes sometimes seen as provocative and novel: to name but a few, those relating to Christology, the Eucharist, the ordained ministry, the pastoral care of those divorced and re-married. On several occasions, certain of these positions have been repudiated in Vatican publications; but the opposition has not been couched in strong condemnatory fashion, or with the same vehemence customarily employed in ecclesiastical documents some fifty or even twenty-five years ago. When they read about these discussions in the catholic press, many believers become perplexed, and are anxious that matters should be settled and the 'right answer' determined by the competent authority. The basic question, however, is now whether or not there can be or even should be absolute certitude on some of these currently debated issues.

A sixth change that Catholics note in their Church, especially since the Council, is the appearance of new terms: an unfamiliar vocabulary concerning doctrinal and theological issues. Though the non-specialist may not always recognize the radical shift of language or its extent, it remains that many new terms have found their way into the ordinary teaching and preaching of the Church, to the bewilderment of an older generation. Why is it that we read now about petrine ministry instead of papacy, reception into full communion instead of conversion, a general synod instead of an

ecumenical council, of ecumenical marriages instead of mixed marriages, and so on? A partial answer to such questions is that the change in terminology was due to the realization that certain words had been too sharply polemical, too remote from scripture, too triumphalistic or too juridical: possibly, even, too insensitive to the undeniable fact of gradual historical development.

Finally, very significant changes have been taking place in the manner of evangelization, in missionary activity throughout the world. The attempt has been to 'inculturate' the Gospel into the cultural and social values of different peoples. The Council had already insisted that missionaries to foreign lands need to respect and appreciate profoundly the various values that are alive in other cultures. In the Declaration on non-christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*, 2) the Catholic Church explicitly stated, for the first time, that the non-christian religions are in themselves a direct source of holiness for millions of people; and that part of the task of evangelization would be to enter into dialogue with these religious traditions, rather than to oppose and condemn them as erroneous.

This list of seven areas of change in the Catholic Church is clearly not exhaustive; it is merely illustrative of the sort of developments that have taken place. One could also note the emergence of new preoccupations, such as reading the signs of the times, discernment of spirits, development of revelation, hierarchy of truths, and many others. The growth of the charismatic movement, the reorganization of religious congregations, especially those of women, new ways of training future priests, participation of the laity in decision-making: all these have left their mark on the past two decades.

#### *Reserved and cautious reactions to change*

Some convinced and dedicated Catholics view these and similar changes in the Church as disruptive and unwarranted innovations rather than as signs of responsible progress. Such people perceive them not as signs of renewal but rather as a disconcerting toleration of questionable forces: a decline in the standards of authority-obedience; a turning away from self-abnegation; a watering down of doctrines and an unhealthy compromise with the value-system of a secular society; a false irenicism with dissident non-Catholics, stemming from an ecumenism that inevitably results in a loss of denominational identity; a neurotic, restless search in some quarters for change for the sake of change; a lack of appreciation for the accomplishments of the past. These generally negative assessments

are present in varying degrees and intensity among certain bishops, clergy and groups of layfolk in all parts of the world. An outstanding instance is the extreme and hostile small group of worried catholics who have rallied to the cause of the traditionalist Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. To these traditionalists, the main concern is not simply that the latin Church has turned its back on the tridentine latin Mass; it is fundamentally their deep-seated conviction that recent Catholicism has uncritically accepted the secular ideas of the French Revolution: liberty (religious freedom), equality (collegiality) and fraternity (ecumenism). In response to these stark and uncompromising views, the Church at large, from popes to the average church-going lay people, has argued that the traditionalists are not in fact traditionalists at all. Rather they are immobilists who have succumbed to the perennial temptation to fix the Church in one particular, subjectively successful form: to make of one particular 'Church-model' the universal and perennial, in spite of the clear evidence that Christianity has entered a new age.

### *Theological reflections on change*

Theologically, one can argue that the tension about change in the Church today is related to the dialectic between two aspects of her nature. On the one hand, she is rooted in God's once-for-all unrepeatable act in Jesus Christ, which creates for the Church the responsibility to preserve the memory of this unique and normative revelation. On the other hand, the Church lives in eschatological growth, called to be what it has not yet become.

Since her origins, the Church has assiduously guarded that patrimony of tradition, the *paradosis*, handed on from every generation since the life, death and resurrection of her Founder, 'Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday and today and for ever' (Heb 13, 8). Some Christians read the promise recorded in the gospel of Matthew and directed at St Peter, that 'on this rock I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it' (Mt 16, 18), as a special promise of stability and continuity. For them this perception of the Church's indefectibility seems to imply a basic sameness in thought and structure. Otherwise, what would be the point, they ask, of the promise made to Peter? Or indeed of the promise of Jesus at the Last Supper that he would send the Spirit of Truth as guide (Jn 16, 13)? How can one reconcile belief in God's all-abiding fidelity to the Church in every age, with the notion that changes of emphasis in doctrine, liturgy, ecclesiastical structures,



etc., are imperative because some central gospel imperatives are being neglected, or even forgotten, in a particular age?

At the same time, belief in God's constant fidelity needs to be kept in balance with faith in the eschatological nature of the Church. Although the Church, as also the reign of God which she seeks to advance under grace, already exists in richness, there is a sense in which she has not yet fully realized her potential. The Church remains capable of development because her vocation is to grow in grace and holiness. Not only is the Church God's gift; she is also a call to an ever-present responsibility to become something more. This is the point of the passage in the Letter to the Ephesians, which stresses the need for growth in the Church, '... building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith . . .' (4, 12-13). The same letter suggests that just as the risen Christ, now at the right hand of the Father, is growing into a fulness (*plērōma*) as he prepares to hand over the completed work of creation to his Father, so too the Church under grace is now in labour as she grows into fulness.

One of the ways that scholastic theology, and more recently ecumenical theology, has reflected on the tension between the unchangeable and the changeable in the Church, was to distinguish between aspects that exist *iure divino* (elements of God's permanent design for the Church), and those that exist *iure humano* (resulting from human decisions aimed at the ordering of the Church). In ecumenical settings, and with a careful eye towards the development of ecclesial institutions, many are now seeing that what was originally grouped under the umbrella of *ius divinum* results perhaps more appropriately from *ius humanum*.

Clearly, there are definite limits to change in the Church, whatever might be the need for certain adaptations. What can never change is the Church's relationship to the Saviour whose life, death and resurrection makes salvation possible: the Lord's Supper as a memorial of Christ and as focal point of the Church; the importance of baptism into Christ; the special status of the inspired scriptures; fidelity to the moral standards of the New Testament. These and many other features cannot be altered at will without the Church ceasing to be Church. But the Church's vocation to be an intelligible sign or sacrament to believers and unbelievers, a sign of Christ's presence to the world, makes it imperative that its structural forms take on different shapes and dimensions in the course of history.

Uneasiness within a changing Church affords us an opportunity to comprehend more profoundly our personal act of faith. This

faith is not meant to be either a deceptive refuge from the mysteries of God's dealings with humanity, or a well of definitive answers to every conceivable enigma of life. Part of the exigency of the act of faith is a willingness to live with darkness, and with a sense of our own incomplete understanding of the mystery of God and his designs for the world.

*Practical considerations*

One of the specific challenges facing the Catholic Church today, especially those upon whom pastoral office rests, is to help the faithful, particularly those of the older generation, to resolve their confusion, often summarized in the lament, 'This is not the Church in which I grew up'. Such uneasiness is not simply looking home-wards nostalgically towards an idealized past; it is rather a profound malaise. Such discomfort can be as acute as the disillusionment felt by those frustrated at the slowness of officials in the Church to effect necessary changes, simply because 'it has never been done before'.

In the years since the close of Vatican II, several episcopal conferences have addressed themselves to the pastoral problem of change, in well thought-out letters which merit more attention from the world-wide community of believers. Especially noteworthy are the pastoral letters of the Bishops of Ireland, and those of the Bishops of Holland.<sup>3</sup> The challenge to church leaders to convey a new sense of continuity, one based not on structural sameness or close similarities with the past, but on God's fidelity toward the Church, is one of the most crucial tasks in the catholic community today. As Karl Rahner has said more than once, the Church's continuity with the past does not rest upon empirical verifiability, but upon faith anchored in hope. The non-historical, unchanging factor of the Church's existence is fundamentally God's faithfulness through the grace of Christ's Spirit.

To this unchanging element is added a process of adaptive changing that springs from the Holy Spirit's presence in the Church, and from the many charisms constantly bestowed for the further building up of the Church. This Spirit calls the community to discern, communicate, adapt and transmit the gospel of Jesus through different cultures. Just as all men and women are called to share with the Creator in building up creation unto its perfection, so, too, Christians are invited to build up the Church in newness of life.

<sup>3</sup> Cf *The Furrow*, 23 (1972), pp 612-27; *Documentation Catholique*, 73 (1976), pp 620-33.