THE MODERN ILLUSION

By MICHAEL M. WINTER

IT IS WELL KNOWN that Cardinal Newman foresaw the need for a theologically educated laity, but a century after his time we still have not achieved it. What is the likelihood of our realizing the ideal in the forseeable future? Since Newman's time, a number of auspicious influences have materialized, while there is one complex of factors which inhibits it. Before analysing these strengths and weaknesses in detail, it is useful to make clear that we are dealing, not with the theoretical acquisition of academic theology, but with the education of the laity in such a way that they will be able to integrate theology with the living-out of the Church's mission.

The first positive factor which was absent in Newman's day, but which has been realized adequately in our own time, is the acceptance of the layman's integral place in the life of the Church. From the time of Pius XI up to the documents of Vatican II, it has been made clear that the lay person is an actor in the liturgy, not a spectator; a worker in the mission, not just a passenger in the clergy's boat. In short, baptism makes him an integral member of the Church in all aspects of its life. Without the acceptance of this presupposition, a lay-man's aspiration towards theological competence could have been dismissed as amateurism.

The next new factor which is equally important for healthy theology is the absence of the Inquisition, the thought-police, or whatever agency it might be which would regulate the intellectual processes. It is now widely acknowledged that the extent of censorship and similar procedures seriously inhibited Catholic theology in the post-Tridentine period. On this matter I will limit myself to the english scene. Here we have an interesting situation. It was thanks to a few lay people that free speech has come. As far back as the 'thirties, it was the attitudes and activities of, for example, Frank and Maisie Sheed, and Michael de la Bedoyère's style of editorship of the *Catholic Herald*, which created the experience of free and open debate on religious matters. It has been reinforced by such factors as the financial and editorial liberty of such newspapers as this.

Where the clerics cannot sack the editor, or cut off the financial backing, publications are free to state the truth. This is rather a negative way of viewing the matter. As the laity have entered the field of theological writing and publishing, they have brought with them the normal presuppositions of the secular and academic world: namely, freedom to investigate and state the truth as they perceive it. As Cardinal Newman also perceived, this is in no way incompatible with a Church which teaches with an authoritative magisterium. To put it bluntly, although the clergy may be reduced to silence, the laity cannot be gagged. The most recent example of this has been the Gallup Poll Survey of Catholic Attitudes published in the early months of this year.[1] Ever since 1969, the National Conference of Priests have been asking the hierarchy to authorize scientifically conducted surveys to assist in the planning of pastoral work. These requests were steadily refused, with such explanations as that the time was not yet ripe, or that money was not available. The laity suffered from no such obstacles. It was Catholic academics in the university world who planned and obtained the financial backing for the operation which has now produced the first satisfactory sociological survey of the Catholic body in this country.

Is this liberty likely to cause harm to the Church? Frankly, no. If the laity should concoct ideas which are at variance with the Church's teaching, then the bishops and clergy must enter the lists and debate with them through the ordinary channels of communication. Plenty are available, including the pulpit and pastoral letter. The period of debate may be confusing for those who yearn for the memory of the dogmatic monolith; but ultimately truth will prevail. If truth and falsehood are displayed side by side, it is only a matter of time before the former is accepted. Open debate is a safer course for the cause of truth than the policing of intellectual processes.

Another new factor in the quest for lay theology has been the simple practical fact of the availability of tuition. For this we turn first of all to the universities. For many years theology has been taught at most british universities, but until recently few Catholics studied it there. For reasons which are not altogether clear, there appears to have been a change in the climate of opinion, and an

[1] Michael Hornsby-Smith and Raymond M. Lee, *Roman Catholic Opionion: a Study of Roman Catholics in England and Wales in the 1970s* (Department of Sociology, Surrey University, 1980).

increasing number seem to be studying divinity at university level. In England, probably the entry of Heythrop into the University of London has had something to do with this. For more than a decade, this college has been an integral part of the university, teaching Catholic theology and enabling its students to sit for the various theology degrees awarded by the university. In a somewhat similar way, at the universities of Cambridge, Kent, Bristol and Durham, a variety of arrangements have been organized either ecumenically or denominationally, so as to ensure the presence of a specifically Catholic contribution to the theological programme of those universities. As these arrangements are described in detail in one such instance elsewhere in this issue, I will not delay to expatiate upon them further, except to say a word in favour of denominational theology.

Personally, I have no reluctance about maintaining the self-identity of Catholic theology. Basically it means starting from a number of presuppositions which other Christians may not share, such as the normative character of the decisions of General Councils, and the still more important status of the Canon of Scripture. I know that this is a disputed question, but I am fully persuaded that there is something distinctive in a theology which is constructed upon total personal commitment to those two sources, instead of regarding them as the objects of somewhat detached academic investigation.

Few people would dispute the importance of teaching theology in universities in such a way that lay people, as well as clergy, can obtain degrees in it which are acknowledged throughout the nation. Unless it is institutionalized seriously at this level, there is a danger of its remaining a hobby, which would attract cranks and dilettantes, or be left merely on the margins of Church life.

In addition to universities, it is also possible to study theology at colleges of education; and there is now a whole range of correspondence courses and evening classes for adults which are organized in various dioceses. The diversity and availability of these courses varies greatly from place to place, and they operate best only in large cities.

While considering the availability of theology for the laity, there is one important and untapped source which deserves consideration: namely the seminaries and the training houses of religious orders. None of these institutions is overcrowded, and there would seem to be no insuperable obstacle to admitting lay people to the lectures. One could reasonably demand some kind of qualifying examination

(similar to university entrance requirements) to ensure that their presence did not lower the standard of the studies. Possibly, the staff would not have time to give them tutorial supervision, but as long as lectures continue to be the mainstay of teaching, the presence of lay people would not increase the lecturers' burdens. In seminars, it is certain that the presence of lay-people would enhance the quality of the discussions.

Before moving on from the factors which can advance the layman's quest for theology, there is an intellectual limbo which must be traversed on our way to the consideration of what it is that inhibits its acquisition. The limbo in question is the apparent failure of the Catholic schools to produce lay people who could be described as theologically literate. Possibly it is too much to ask of institutions whose pupils leave them at eighteen. It is arguable that the problems of real theology demand an emotional and intellectual maturity stemming from an experience of life and its demands which cannot be expected from students below the age of eighteen, and who are in the necessarily restricted environment of school. This in turn gives rise to a host of other questions: for example, by what right do we suppose that catechesis and theological training are the occupations of childhood (and therefore of school) rather than adult years? And if that is so, what exactly do we expect from the Catholic schools anyway? It is useful to note here that in March 1980, the conference of Catholic chaplains to universities passed a resolution pointing out that the Catholic school system has never been subjected to a systematic evaluation, and asking that the National Pastoral Congress should initiate some serious assessment of the work.[2] These questions are all the more important in that, for the last century, the major proportion of our resources in money and manpower have been devoted to the schools at the expense of every other department of the Church's mission.

With all these sources of theological expertise actually operating or as yet untapped, we ought to be well placed for achieving what the Council's Decree on the Laity described as 'solid doctrinal instruction in theology, ethics, and philosophy.'[3] Yet somehow it

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[2] The National Catholic Pastoral Congress — the first of its kind — of the Church in England and Wales, was held in Liverpool, 3-5 May of this year. Cf *The Tablet* (London), 10 May 1980, pp 464-67, and 17 May 1980, p 471.

[3] *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 29.

does not seem to be bearing fruit. Why is this? At the start of this article I mentioned that there was one complex of factors which inhibits the layman's theological life, and the time has now come to analyse it in detail: it is the parish and its concomitants.

As far back as the 'forties and beyond, it was recognized that the parish was unsuitable for high grade theological study. The need was met by bodies outside the parish organization, such as the Aquinas Society and the Newman Association, which catered for Catholic university graduates. These were comparatively rare, and would not be found in sufficient numbers in any one parish to establish viable study groups or classes. This is no longer the case. University graduates exist in substantial numbers in any average parish in Britain; yet still the parish does not seem able to utilize their talents or educate them in theology. Perhaps it is too big or wrongly structured. Somehow it does not seem able to gather people into interest-groups, where common preoccupations such as race relations, economic affairs, trades union politics or marriage would seem to be the natural starting points for serious theological reflection.

Personally I think that the problem goes even deeper. By its very constitution, the parish is structured to perform nothing more than a holding operation. It became the setting of the eucharistic community in the middle ages, when the conversion of Europe had been achieved, and when the intellectual currents were flowing elsewhere. Parishes are successful when their priests break out of the prescribed structures. Left to itself, the inherent dynamic of the parish continues to be nothing but a holding operation. It can even defuse the reformed liturgy, even though the celebrant prays in English facing the congregation. It does not automatically lend itself to education, not even of children: significantly that activity is entrusted to the school. If a parish does not possess a school, then the catechetical programmes are usually deplorable. I do not say any of this as blaming anyone. The phenomenon is simply the consequence of allowing the normal dynamic of the parish to pursue its natural course.

At this point, the education of the parochial clergy must be considered. Among the priests in England, at any rate, it is well known that those who have been really well-educated are for the most part in religious orders, and are not engaged in parish work. There is an element of anti-intellectualism among the parochial clergy, and a widespread inability or reluctance to give a creative

lead to the better-educated among the laity. Thanks to the opportunities of university education, many parishes now have a substantial group in them whose education has been much better than that of their priests. Andrew Greeley has drawn attention to the same phenomenon in the United States. In a recent article he has highlighted the fantastic educational advances of the American laity.[4] Whereas the Catholics in the U.S.A. number twenty-five per cent of the population, they are almost forty per cent of the college-attending population. This is a remarkable achievement; but the obverse is disquieting. Greeley states:

> The new intelligentsia is likely to complain about the poor quality of sermons, pastoral care, or liturgical performance (a major item of concern among the well-educated laity) and of youth work, but they have learned to expect nothing in the way of social or sexual teaching from the Church, and not much in the way of inspiring ministerial service. . . . The problem is one, rather, of wasted resources, lost opportunity, unused talents. . . . The parish clergy, the local hierarchy and national staffs of the American Catholic Church want nothing to do with the emerging intelligentsia, be it academic, artistic, or literary. Bishops and priests are threatened by intellectuals, artists, and writers.[5]

Does this criticism apply to Britain too? Personally I think that it does. Admittedly, no investigation has inquired into it as thoroughly as that of Fr Greeley, but there is one pointer from the English Gallup Poll Survey which is devastating. The response to the question about the Second Vatican Council (page 211) showed that half the people who were interviewed had not heard of it.[6] Whatever interpretation one puts on that comment, I think it is a clear pointer to the lack of theological inspiration on the part of the parochial clergy.

This leads naturally to a consideration of the quality of the theological formation given to candidates for the priesthood. Published statistics are non-existent, but from casual enquiries and personal experience it seems clear that only a small minority of the students in the diocesan seminaries have come from university, or possess the qualifications for entry thereto. This in turn can develop into a negative form of anti-intellectualism rather than in the pursuit of creative alternatives, like running youth clubs. An example of this occurred a few years ago, when a play was produced in a seminary with the help of students from a local university. A

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[4] Published in *The Tablet* (London), 22 March 1980.
[5] *Ibid.* [6] *Roman Catholic Opionion* . . . p 211.

number of the seminarists thought that this was too highbrow, and refused to join the audience.

It is ironical that the distinctive features of the parish system seem to compound its weaknesses. The person with all the power is the parish priest, and not the assistants. And because promotion is by seniority, and not by ability, it means that the vast majority of parish priests currently in office completed their studies before the Council: some indeed before the second world war. In pre-conciliar days, and before that, the intellectual formation was bad; yet it is the products of that system who are now in the key positions throughout the land. The first weakness of the system was isolation. The seminaries had no contact with universities, other seminaries, or religious orders. There was no external examining body, nor any systematic inspection. If a student felt dissatisfied with the intellectual stimulus of the seminary in which he was studying, he did not have the right to go elsewhere. I did hear of one man who transferred to another seminary; but most students considered it prudent not to suggest such a course in case it prejudiced their chances of getting ordained.

The staffing of the seminaries suffered from similar problems. Whereas universities can count on recruiting competent staff by advertising the posts in the journals which are read for this purpose by aspiring academics, the Church denies itself this kind of source. Career planning is excluded from the priest's life, allegedly lest the selfish pursuit of his own ambition should conflict with the disinterested service of the Church's mission. (Personally I think that the stark dichotomy is false, but it is the background against which the dioceses have staffed all the institutions up to the present.) The bishops make the decisions about who will teach in the seminaries; and the candidates thus selected are sent to various places for further studies after ordination. The consequences are sometimes grotesque. One can think of seminaries which for years have lacked qualified teachers in basic subjects, and where no one is in the pipeline to fill the posts. At other times, priests have been ordered to teach subjects in which they are not competent. I knew of one conscientious man who was directed to study Canon Law, which he did competently; he was then commanded, in virtue of the same concept of obedience, to teach philosophy in a seminary. (He had never done parish work either.) A few years ago I made a brief visit to the *Ecole Biblique* in Jerusalem, and learnt that no Englishman was studying there from any diocese or religious order. At the same time,

I knew from a friend who taught there, that there was no english student at the Biblical Institute in Rome. Since these are two most obvious places in which to train lecturers for Scripture, one wonders how the english seminaries are going to give adequate formation in biblical studies to future priests. I am not criticizing individual bishops or seminary rectors: it is the system which is at fault. It is totally unrealistic and a caricature of the concept of obedience to thrust so many decisions on the bishops. Much more initiative from below must be permitted if the seminaries are to be staffed by priests who have satisfactory intellectual formation, and adequate pastoral experience in the work for which they are training the students.

A few lay people and nuns have recently started teaching in seminaries; but this should not be regarded as a substitute for providing properly qualified priests. For obvious reasons, the bulk of the teaching should be done by priests who have had direct experience in parishes of the way of life for which the seminarists are being trained. It is the same with the civilian instructors at military academies. Soldiers must be trained mainly by soldiers, and the same holds true in the Church.

Over and above these lesser questions of parish structure and the training of the clergy, there hangs a much more disturbing question. Is the present pattern of parish work likely to attract the services of the kind of young man who will be able to give theological leadership to the more intelligent among the laity? If a man really aspires to create a more just society (and those who do not ought not to enter seminaries), will he not be discouraged by the image of the parish clergy's work?

As we survey the changes which have taken place in the century since Newman voiced the wish for a better educated laity, significant changes have taken place. Thanks to educational reforms in the western world the Catholic laity have entered tertiary education in their rightful numbers, and have begun to move into the advanced study of theology. The Vatican Council has enunciated all that could be desired, at the theoretical level, to promote their advancement in the theological and missionary life of the Church. The flowering of so much promise is inhibited at the institutional level. We still have not carried out the structural reforms which are needed if the theological insights of the Council are to be effective. In this case, the theological life of the laity is still inhibited by the parochial system and its concomitants, such as the way in which the secular clergy are trained.