

POSTSCRIPT

By GEORGE EARLE

YOU POOR DEVILS! You've been at it 2000 years and you don't know the answers yet'. This remark of an unbeliever to a priest friend, who had taken him out to dinner, came back to me as I read through the papers in *Supplements* 22¹ and 26. Parents, teachers, even priests, headmasters and bishops, who used to speak with such authority, too often sound like ill-prepared examination candidates. Parents, already burdened with their own work, worried about rising prices, trying to maintain minimal standards of decorum in a dance of the dervishes, are told that they must forget the vestiges of faith left over from their childhood and start all over again. Teachers, hard pressed by heavy time-tables and difficult classes, trying to keep pace with developments in secular subjects, are told that they must be theologians and saints, knowing precisely what they believe and why, living their faith to the full and communicating it to the most resistant pupils. Headmasters and headmistresses, presiding over schools which are too large for comfort, rapidly and unsatisfactorily reorganized, find that they are being asked to do the impossible: their schools must replace the family and the parish, while evolving into radical, alternative societies.² Bishops, no longer young nor fit, with little educational experience in classroom or administration, discovering that there are too many teachers and children here and too few there, suddenly confront the ultimate question: Why?³ Is there a shred of evidence that the products of catholic schools are any better than the products of non-catholic schools and that we are spending our money wisely? Do we really know what skills and attitudes are going to be needed in the unfamiliar pilgrim Church when these boys and girls are over 40? Do we feel too much like crimean generals puzzling over the deployment of polaris submarines? What we all need is a ray of hope.

I found hope in the conferences which gave rise to the papers in *Supplements* 22 and 26. When I read Fr Yarnold's 'Introduction' to *Supplement* 25,⁴ I remembered what a variegated lot we had been: men and women, religious and lay, headmasters and junior members of staff, specialists and non-specialists, parents and celibates, governors and staffs, dioceses and religious orders, Scotland to Kent, conservative and progressive, teachers of boys and girls, of the very clever and the mildly handicapped. We only lacked the token non-catholic. We were a small group and contained the right mixture of old friends and new ones; thus we could settle quickly into a family sense of ease

¹ *Supplement to The Way*, 22, *Religious Education* (Summer 1974).

² Konstant, Edwards and Keane, *supra*.

³ *Theology and Education*, ed. Nichols (London, 1975), p ix.

⁴ *Supplement to The Way*, 25, *God and Mary* (Summer 1976).

with and appreciation of one another; a small group, but nevertheless in contact with roughly 10,000 young people, their 20,000 parents and 500 teachers.

There was more to the group than a set of curious accidents. We all had this in common and we knew it explicitly when we came to Mass together: we had all been called by Jesus Christ to be his friends and to do his work.⁵ At the 1975 conference we were reading the last two chapters of John's Gospel and the first chapters of Acts. It was easy to identify ourselves with the small, vulnerable, frightened band of early christians, acutely aware of the Lord's absence, given the power to recognize him, as Mary, John, Thomas and Peter did, in each other and in our pupils; to proclaim the Resurrection as a fact about Jesus's triumph over evil and death and about the joy, the peace, the forgiveness, the unity, the courage and the faith we experienced in our communion with the risen Lord.⁶ We knew ourselves to be a fellowship of the Holy Spirit, proclaiming in our worship and practising in our lives, however inadequately, what Jesus had done and does. In other words we knew ourselves to be the Church, and if anything we were a shade less surprised than Peter and his friends.

To be the Church: to live consciously and contentedly with other members of the Body of Christ; our diversity-in-unity, unity-in-diversity, had helped us to experience what it feels like to be the Church.⁷ In a similar fit of absence of mind we had stumbled across another facet of the Church: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.⁸ We who had been so far away had been brought home.⁹ The distant Jesus of history and heaven was in our midst.¹⁰ We could now rejoice in this reconciliation. We knew the balanced interchange between thought and feeling,¹¹ no longer weighed down by hydrocephalic intellect or the surplus fat of mindless, uncritical emotion. We recognized that prayer needed embodiment in action, and that action needed to turn spontaneously to God through the prayer and action of Christ.¹² Each individual was idiosyncratically himself or herself, contributing to the group, enriched by other unique individuals and by the multiform combinations which the group could create;¹³ thus we avoided the extremes of solitariness and herd behaviour, which have bedevilled man's collaboration for so long. We were both inward and outward looking, attentive to and respectful of each other, jointly concerned about our pupils and their world. We were functioning

⁵ Jn 15, 1-17; 14, 12. Mt 28, 16-20.

⁶ Cf Stanley: 'Revitalizing our Prayer', in *Supplement to The Way*, 19 (Summer 1973). Konstant and Nichols, *supra*, referring to a community of faith.

⁷ Rahner, K.: *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (London, 1964), p 74, writes: 'Ultimately only one thing can give unity in the Church on the human level: the love which allows another to be different, even when it does not understand him'.

⁸ 2 Cor 5, 19, which goes on: 'and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation'.

⁹ Eph 2, 13.

¹⁰ Mt 18, 20; 28, 20; Jn 20, 19.

¹¹ Nichols, *supra*.

¹² 1 Cor 10, 31; Eph 5, 1; 6, 18; Gal 5, 6.

¹³ 1 Cor 12; Rom 12.

independently, with a sense of responsibility for our part of the Church, while in no way thinking of ourselves as a breakaway movement in opposition to the authorities or anyone else in the Church. If it is hard to believe in this idealized picture, it is only fair to say that we had some grasp of the distance between what has already been achieved by Christ and his saints, among whom we desire to be numbered, and what has still to be achieved.¹⁴ We could distinguish between rock and sand,¹⁵ reality and illusion, well-founded hope and justifiable anxiety about our future, Christ's fidelity, strength and goodness, and our own obvious weakness, infidelity and wickedness.¹⁶

To be the Church: God in Christ reconciling us; to be sent by Christ to reconcile others. Growing in understanding of what we were and what we had to do, it was only natural for Fathers Hackett and Keane to speak to us about the double challenge in front of us: the one stressing how we must challenge our pupils, the other how we must ourselves be challenged.

Jesus was angry as he looked around at them, but at the same time he felt sorry for them, because they were so stubborn and wrong.¹⁷

How foolish you are, how slow to believe everything the prophets said!¹⁸

Have I been with you for so long and yet you do not know me, Philip?¹⁹

The gospels are full of misunderstandings. Christ challenges us in our complacency, our self-interest, our apathy, our man-sized views.²⁰ However obtusely and falteringly we follow Christ, we have to learn with the craven band of first disciples, who abandoned him and fled,²¹ that:

No pupil is greater than his teacher, no slave than his master, so a slave should be satisfied to become like his master.²²

If the world hates you, you must remember that it hated me first.²³

When our self-esteem goes through the mincer once again,²⁴ we are probably suffering no more than our master at Nazareth,²⁵ and much less than our master in his unjust trial and execution.

They called the apostles in, had them whipped and ordered them never again to speak in the name of Jesus. The apostles left the council full of joy that God had considered them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. And every day in the temple and in people's homes they continued to teach and preach the Good News about Jesus.²⁶

¹⁴ Phil 3, 12-16.

¹⁵ Mt 7, 24-27.

¹⁶ 2 Cor 12, 9-10; 13, 3-4.

¹⁷ Mk 3, 5.

¹⁸ Lk 24, 25.

¹⁹ Jn 14, 8.

²⁰ Mk 2, 14-17; 4, 10-12; 8, 31-33; 10, 35-45; Jn 2, 21-22; 4, 5-35; 6, 59-66; 11, 11-16 etc.

²¹ Mt 26, 56.

²² Mt 10, 24-25.

²³ Jn 15, 18.

²⁴ Edwards, *supra*.

²⁵ Lk 4, 16-30.

²⁶ Acts 5, 40.

To be the Church: to be with Christ reconciled and reconciling; to be with Christ challenged and challenging. In a slender postscript I have no desire to present a newly-slanted ecclesiology, even though this branch of theology is often woefully neglected. I want rather to come back to my starting point: 'You've been at it 2000 years and you don't know the answers yet'. For so long we have been asking: What are the answers? I would like to change the focus to: *Who* should be asking the questions and trying to provide the answers? Put in the context of theology and education we could ask: Who should be working out 'the theological basis of our activity in the field of education'?²⁷ The answer sounds so simple: '... the Bishops' Conference ... with the help of experts in various branches of education ... asked twelve theologians'.²⁸ These then are the three groups of specialists who are going to answer the fundamental questions about religious education: bishops, theologians, educational experts. 'We lack a sufficient grounding in philosophy and theology to make valid judgements' (i.e. about bricks and mortar, agreements, reorganization, teacher training places and administration), but 'there can be no question of the emergence of a definitive theology of education'.²⁹ Why does Sister Maureen expect her three mice to be so blind? Perhaps because she knows that they are that old familiar wolf, the totalitarian Church,³⁰ in yet another disguise.

Father Konstant took me a step further when he distinguished between the jobbing gardener and the biochemist, the teacher and the theologian.³¹ The jobbing gardener is just as important as the biochemist and can be just as wise and articulate. This encouraged me to take two more steps. The first was to realize that the jobbing gardener and the biochemist are exercising their skills *for us*; to help us to become more sensitive, relaxed, appreciative, complete people. We have all suffered from the gardeners who want to keep us off the grass, the librarians who want their books to stay on the shelves, the managements and unions, whose seasonal wars remind them that they are kings, heedless of the damage they do to the peasantry. The Church must be different, for Jesus said to Peter: 'Feed my lambs ... feed my sheep'.³² 'The one who

²⁷ *Theology and Education*, p ix, 'Foreword' by Sr Maureen Hurst.

²⁸ *Ibid.* ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p ix-x.

³⁰ Cf Rahner, K.: *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, p 49, for the important distinction between the 'absolute character' and the 'totalitarian view' of the Church: 'Such a conception would be totalitarian if anyone were to think, explicitly or tacitly, that the Church is not liable to err in any of her actions, if it were supposed that all living impulses of the Church can and may only originate from her official ministers, that any initiative in the Church is only legitimate if it springs expressly or at least equivalently from above and only after it has been authorized, that all guidance of the Holy Spirit always and in every case affects ecclesiastical office, God directing his Church only through her hierarchy and that every stirring of life in the Church is a mere carrying out of an order or a wish "from above"'. Such a false totalitarian view inevitably equates office and charisma, if any importance is left to this latter. But this is just what is not the case. For there are charismata, that is, impulsion and guidance of God's Spirit for the Church, in addition to and outside her official ministry'.

³¹ *Supra*.

³² Jn 21, 15-17.

plants and the one who waters really do not matter. It is God who matters, for he makes the plant grow . . . we are partners working together for God and you are God's field'.³³ The bishop, the theologian and the educational expert must watch the sheep, the plant and the field, because they are God's people, *all* of whom are called to share God's life.³⁴

The second step is to ask: Is it helpful to liken the theologian to the biochemist? We have come to regard theologians as remote guardians of historical knowledge and philosophical systems and to pay them exaggerated respect. These are the men who 'work directly on the sources of christian faith, the Bible, the Fathers, Tradition, the Magisterium; by the use of whatever linguistic, historical, and philosophical tools are available, the content of the faith is systematically formulated'.³⁵ I am not denying that there should be full-time theological specialists, wielding the necessary historical, linguistic and philosophical tools. I am asking them to remember that they are working for us, that we, their customers, are often right, and that, because some of us are wise, holy and articulate, we too can claim to be theologians.

The holy People of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office. . . . The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. . . . For, by this sense of faith which is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, God's people accepts not the words of men but the very word of God. It clings without fail to the faith once delivered to the saints, penetrates it more deeply by accurate insights, and applies it more thoroughly to life. All this it does under the lead of a sacred teaching authority to which it loyally defers. It is not only through the sacraments and Church ministries that the same Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the People of God. . . . Allotting his gifts 'to everyone according as he will',³⁶ he distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts he makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks or offices advantageous for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church. . . . These charismatic gifts, whether they be the most outstanding or more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation, for they are exceedingly suitable and useful for the needs of the Church.³⁷

We need to distinguish between academic theology and the theology of the People of God:³⁸ two theologies which could be mutually helpful, stimulating and respectful. When the People of God think and talk about the dimensions

³³ 1 Cor 3, 7-9.

³⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 3, 4, 9-17, 30-42.

³⁵ Nichols, K.: in *Theology and Education*, p 111.

³⁶ 1 Cor 12, 11.

³⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

³⁸ Corresponding to the popular or charismatic element in the Church; cf Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, p 73 and passim.

of their religion,³⁹ they are likely to highlight not so much the doctrinal element, but rather the word and deed of Christ, who is, who was, and who is to come⁴⁰ (the mythological dimension in Smart's misleading terminology); what Christ does for us and what we do for him, the experiential dimension. The other dimensions, social (including hierarchy and institution), ritual, ethical, doctrinal — express, support and regulate these central dimensions. The perfectly reputable task of popular theology is to pray, think, speak, write about, and base our discernment, decision, action upon, 'our faith in God our Saviour, in Jesus of Nazareth, faith in a man's salvation by God in Christ'.⁴¹ This is 'the mental elbow-room or living space' in which we must interpret for ourselves, and so speak to our pupils in 'graspable and meaningful terms'.⁴²

The fairy story is almost over. We had crawled to these conferences as caterpillars, earthbound servants of the hierarchy, worried about what the theologians were up to these days. At a magic hour we looked at ourselves and found that we had changed into butterflies; fragile creatures, but capable of flying for ourselves; no longer needing to borrow the wings of academic theologians; recognizing ourselves in the New Testament and saying what it felt like to be the Church of St Monica's or of St Xavier's, of this diocese or of Britain, in 1974 and 1975.⁴³ Nervous about our unaccustomed flight, it was reassuring to hear Paul's words: '... each one has the special gift that God has given him, one man this gift, another man that ...'⁴⁴ All of you then are Christ's body and each one is a part of it'.⁴⁵

'You are so very different from my first husband', says Mrs Poskitt. 'Yes, I am', says Mr P with dignity: 'I'm alive for one thing'.⁴⁶ When parents, teachers, pupils, governors, meeting together in small family groups,⁴⁷ strengthened by prayer, study, thought, and each other's special gifts, can speak with similar dignity to bishops, theologians and educational experts, then we shall have a theology of education. Bishops, theologians and experts will find that, in spite of occasional family rows,⁴⁸ it is far more invigorating to have partners who are alive. 'Each individual part of the Church contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church. Thus through the common sharing of the gifts and through the common effort to attain fulness in unity, the whole and each of the parts receive increase'.⁴⁹

³⁹ Nichols, *supra*.

⁴⁰ Apoc 1, 8.

⁴¹ Butterworth in *Supplement to The Way*, 22, p 39.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p 40.

⁴³ Rom 16, 1; 1 Cor 1, 2; 16, 1, 19; Gal 1, 22; Col 4, 15; 1 Thess 1, 1; 2, 14 etc.

⁴⁴ 1 Cor 7, 7.

⁴⁵ 1 Cor 12, 27.

⁴⁶ Pinero: *The Magistrate*.

⁴⁷ We need to renew, from countless passages in the bible, our sense of solemn meeting or sacred assembly, whose reality is Christ (Col 2, 17), and of our kinship with Christ, whose brothers and sisters we are; e.g. Mt 12, 46-49.

⁴⁸ Rahner, K., *op. cit.*, pp 73-83.

⁴⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 13.