

## The Same Again, Please

By Evelyn Waugh

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It is unlikely that the world's politicians are following the concluding sessions of the Vatican Council with the anxious scrutiny given to its opening stages in 1869. Then the balance of Power in Europe was precariously dependent on the status of the Papal States in Italy; France and Austria directly, Prussia indirectly, and the Piedmontese kingdom particularly, were involved in their future. Even Protestant England was intent. Gladstone had his own, personal, theological preoccupations and was in unofficial correspondence with Lord Acton, but Lord Clarendon, the Foreign Minister, and most of the Cabinet studied the dispatches of their agent, Odo Russell (lately selected and edited with the title of *The Roman Question*), and pressed him for the fullest details. Manning was privately dispensed of his vow of secrecy in order that he might keep Russell informed. Queen Victoria ruled as many Catholics as Anglicans, a section of whom in Ireland were proving increasingly troublesome.

The Council, as is well known, adjourned in dramatic circumstances which seemed to presage disaster. Subsequent history confirmed its decisions. The Paris Commune obliterated Gallicanism. Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* alienated all respectable support of the dissident Teutons. All that Odo Russell had consistently predicted came about in spite of the wishes of the European statesmen.

The consultations, resumed after their long recess and dignified by the title of the Second Vatican Council, are not expected to have the same direct influence outside the Church. The Popular newspapers have caught at phrases in the Pope's utterances to suggest that there is a Prospect of the reunion of Christendom. Most Christians, relying on the direct prophecies of Our Lord, expect this to occur in some moment of historical time. Few believe that moment to be imminent. The Catholic aspiration is that the more manifest the true character of the Church can be made, the more dissenters will be drawn to make their submission. There is no Possibility of the Church modifying her defined doctrines to attract those to whom they are repugnant. The Orthodox Churches of the East, with whom the doctrinal differences are small and technical, are more hostile to Rome than are the Protestants. To them the sack and occupation of Constantinople for the first half of the thirteenth century—an event which does not bulk large in the historical conspectus of the West—is as lively and bitter a memory as is Hitler's persecution to the Jews. Miracles are possible; it is presumptuous to expect them; only a miracle can reconcile the East with Rome.

With the Reformed Churches, among whom the Church of England holds a unique position, in that most of its members believe themselves to be a part of the Catholic Church of the West, social relations are warmer but intellectual differences are exacerbated. A century ago Catholics were still regarded as potential traitors, as ignorant, superstitious and dishonest, but there was common ground in the acceptance of the authority of Scripture and the moral law. Nowadays, I see it stated, representative Anglican clergymen withhold their assent to such rudimentary Christian tenets as the virgin birth and resurrection of Our Lord; in the recent prosecution of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* two eminent Anglican divines gave evidence for the defence, one of them, a bishop, in the most imprudent terms. Another Anglican dignitary has given his approval to the regime which is trying to extirpate Christianity in China. Others have given their opinion that a man who believes himself threatened by a painful death may commit suicide. Aberrations such as these, rather than differences in the interpretation of the Augustinian theory of Grace, are grave stumbling blocks to understanding.

It is possible that the Council will announce a definition of the *communicatio in sacris* with members of other religious societies which is forbidden to Catholics. Rigour is the practice of some dioceses, laxity of others. There is no universal rule, for example, about the celebration of mixed marriages. On the other hand, some French priests, in an excess of 'togetherness,' are said to administer Communion to non-Catholics, an

imprudence, if not a sacrilege, which can only be reprobated. The personal cordiality shown by the Pope to Protestants may well be the prelude to official encouragement to co-operate in social and humanitarian activities, which would remove the bitterness from a condemnation of association in the sacraments.

The question of Anglican Orders is unlikely to be raised, but it is worth noting that the conditions have changed since their validity was condemned. Then the matter was judged on the historical evidence of the Reformation settlement. But since then there have been goings-on with *episcopi vagantes*, Jansenist Dutch and heterodox eastern bishops, with the result that an incalculable proportion of Anglican clergymen may in fact be priests. They may themselves produce individual apostolic, genealogical trees, but the results will be of little interest to the more numerous Protestant bodies to whom the Pope's paternal benevolence is equally directed.

A Catholic believes that whatever is enacted at the Council will ultimately affect the entire human race, but its immediate purposes are domestic—the setting in order of the household rudely disturbed in 1870. There are many questions of great importance to the constitution of the Church which do not directly affect the ordinary Catholic layman—the demarcation of dioceses, the jurisdiction of bishops, the setting to contemporary uses of the powers of the ancient religious orders, the changes necessary in seminaries to render them more attractive and more effective, the adaption of missionary countries to their new national status, and so forth. These can safely be left to the experience and statesmanship of the Fathers of the Council. But in the preliminary welcome which the project has enjoyed during the past three years there has been an insistent note that the 'Voice of the Laity' shall be more clearly heard and that voice, so far as it has been audible in Northern Europe and the United States, has been largely that of the minority who demand radical reform. It seems to me possible that many of the assembled Fathers, whatever their own predilections, have an uneasy feeling that there is a powerful body of the laity urging them to decisions which are, in fact, far from the hopes of the larger but less vocal body of the faithful.

I speak for no one but myself, but I believe I am fairly typical of English Catholics. The fact that I was brought up in another society does not embarrass me. I have been a Catholic for thirty-two of what are technically known as my 'years of reason'; longer, I think, than many of the 'progressives'; moreover, I think that a large proportion of European Catholics, despite their baptisms and first communions, are in fact 'converts' in the sense that there came to them at some stage of adolescence or maturity the moment of private decision between acceptance and rejection of the Church's claims.

I believe that I am typical of that middle rank of the Church, far from her leaders, much farther from her saints; distinct, too, from the doubting, defiant, despairing souls who perform so conspicuously in contemporary fiction and drama. We take little part, except where our personal sympathies are aroused, in the public life of the Church, in her countless pious and benevolent institutions. We hold the creeds, we attempt to observe the moral law, we go to Mass on days of obligation and glance rather often at the vernacular translations of the Latin, we contribute to the support of the clergy. We seldom have any direct contact with the hierarchy. We go to some inconvenience to educate our children in our faith. We hope to die fortified by the last rites. In every age we have formed the main body of 'the faithful' and we believe that it was for us, as much as for the saints and for the notorious sinners, that the Church was founded. Is it our voice that the Conciliar Fathers are concerned to hear?

There are three questions of their authority which sometimes come to our attention.

One is the Index of Prohibited Books. I have been told that its promulgation depends on the discretion of the diocesan bishop. I do not know if it has been promulgated in my diocese. It is not at all easy to obtain a copy. When found, it is very dull, consisting largely of pamphlets and theses on forgotten controversies. It does not include most of the anthropological, Marxist and psychological theses which, uncritically read, might endanger

faith and morals. Nor, as is popularly believed, does it include absurdities like *Alice in Wonderland*. There are a few works, such as Addison's Essays, which one expects to find in any reputable home and several which are compulsory reading at the universities, but in general it is not a troublesome document. Sartre's presence on the list provides a convenient excuse for not reading him. But there is an obvious anomaly in preserving a legal act which is generally disregarded. I think most laymen would be glad if the Fathers of the Council would consider whether the Index has any relevance in the modern world; whether it would not be better to give a general warning of dangerous reading and to allow confessors to decide in individual cases, while retaining particular censorship only over technical books of theology which might be mistaken for orthodox teaching.

A second point is the procedure of ecclesiastical courts. Most laymen spend a lifetime without being involved with them, just as they live without acquaintance with criminal proceedings. Cases of nullity of marriage are, however, becoming more common and much vexation and often grave suffering is caused by the long delays which result from the congestion of the courts and from their laborious methods. The layman does not question the authority of the law or the justice of the decision; it is simply that when he finds himself in doubt, he thinks that he should know in a reasonable time his precise legal status.

Thirdly, it would be satisfactory to know the limits of the personal authority held by the bishop over the laity. No vows of obedience have been made. Not in England, but in many parts of the world it is common to see a proclamation enjoining the faithful 'on pain of mortal sin' to vote in a parliamentary election or abstain from certain entertainments. Have our bishops in fact the right to bandy threats of eternal damnation in this way?

As the months pass and the Council becomes engrossed in its essential work, it is likely that the secular press will give less attention to it than it has done to its spectacular assembly. The questions for discussion are a matter of speculation to all outside the inner circle but there is a persistent rumour that changes may be made in the liturgy. I lately heard the sermon of an enthusiastic, newly ordained priest who spoke, perhaps with conscious allusion to Mr. Macmillan's unhappy phrase about Africa, of a 'great wind' that was to blow through us, sweeping away the irrelevant accretions of centuries and revealing the Mass in its pristine, apostolic simplicity; and as I considered his congregation, closely packed parishioners of a small county town, of whom I regard myself as a typical member, I thought how little his aspirations corresponded with ours.

Certainly none of us had ambitions to usurp his pulpit. There is talk in Northern Europe and the United States of lay theologians. Certainly a number of studious men have read deeply in theology and are free with their opinions, but I know of none whose judgment I would prefer to that of the simplest parish priest. Sharp minds may explore the subtlest verbal problems, but in the long routine of the seminary and the life spent with the Offices of the Church the truth is most likely to emerge. It is worth observing that in the two periods when laymen took the most active part in theological controversy, those of Pascal and Acton, the laymen were in the wrong.

Still less did we aspire to usurp his place at the altar. 'The Priesthood of the Laity' is a cant phrase of the decade and abhorrent to those of us who have met it. We claim no equality with our priests, whose personal failings and inferiorities (where they exist) serve only to emphasise the mystery of their unique calling. Anything in costume or manner or social habit that tends to disguise that mystery is something leading us away from the sources of devotion. The failure of the French 'worker priests' is fresh in our memories. A man who grudges a special and higher position to another is very far from being a Christian.

As the service proceeded in its familiar way I wondered how many of us wanted to see any change. The church is rather dark. The priest stood rather far away. His voice was not clear and the language he spoke was not that of everyday use. This was the Mass for whose restoration the Elizabethan martyrs had gone to the scaffold. St. Augustine, St. Thomas à Becket, St. Thomas More, Challoner and Newman would have been

perfectly at their ease among us; were, in fact, present there with us. Perhaps few of us consciously considered this, but their presence and that of all the saints silently supported us. Their presence would not have been more palpable had we been making the responses aloud in the modern fashion.

It is not, I think, by a mere etymological confusion that the majority of English-speaking people believe that 'venerable' means 'old.' There is a deep-lying connection in the human heart between worship and age. But the new fashion is for something bright and loud and practical. It has been set by a strange alliance between archeologists absorbed in their speculations on the rites of the second century, and modernists who wish to give the Church the character of our own deplorable epoch. In combination they call themselves 'liturgists.'

The late Father Couturier, the French Dominican, was very active in enlisting the service of atheists in designing aids to devotion, but tourists are more common than worshippers in the churches he inspired. At Vence there is a famous little chapel designed in his extreme age by Matisse. It is always full of sightseers and the simple nursing sisters whom it serves are proud of their acquisition. But the Stations of the Cross, scrawled over a single wall, are so arranged that it is scarcely possible to make the traditional devotions before them. The sister in charge tries to keep the trippers from chattering but there is no one to disturb; on the occasions I have been there I have never seen anyone in prayer, as one always finds in dingy churches decorated with plaster and tinsel.

The new Catholic cathedral in Liverpool is circular in plan; the congregation are to be disposed in tiers, as though in a surgical operating theatre. If they raise their eyes they will be staring at one another. Backs are often distracting; faces will be more so. The intention is to bring everyone as near as possible to the altar. I wonder if the architect has studied the way in which people take their places at a normal parochial Mass. In all the churches with which I am familiar, it is the front pews which are filled last.

During the last few years we have experienced the triumph of the 'liturgists' in the new arrangement of the services for the end of Holy Week and for Easter. For centuries these had been enriched by devotions which were dear to the laity—the anticipation of the morning office of Tenebrae, the vigil at the Altar of Repose, the Mass of the Presanctified. It was not how the Christians of the second century observed the season. It was the organic growth of the needs of the people. Not all Catholics were able to avail themselves of the services but hundreds did, going to live in or near the monastic houses and making an annual retreat which began with Tenebrae on Wednesday afternoon and ended at about midday on Saturday with the anticipated Easter Mass. During those three days time was conveniently apportioned between the rites of the church and the discourses of the priest taking the retreat, with little temptation to distraction. Now nothing happens before Thursday evening. All Friday morning is empty. There is an hour or so in church on Friday afternoon. All Saturday is quite blank until late at night. The Easter Mass is sung at midnight to a weary congregation who are constrained to 'renew their baptismal vows' in the vernacular and later repair to bed. The significance of Easter as a feast of dawn is quite lost, as is the unique character of Christmas as the Holy Night. I have noticed in the monastery I frequent a marked falling-off in the number of retreatants since the innovations or, as the liturgists would prefer to call them, the restorations. It may well be that these services are nearer to the practice of primitive Christianity, but the Church rejoices in the development of dogma; why does it not also admit the development of liturgy?

There is a party among the hierarchy who wish to make superficial but startling changes in the Mass in order to make it more widely intelligible. The nature of the Mass is so profoundly mysterious that the most acute and holy men are continually discovering further nuances of significance. It is not a peculiarity of the Roman Church that much which happens at the altar is in varying degrees obscure to most of the worshippers. It is in fact the mark of all the historic, apostolic Churches. In some the liturgy is in a dead language such as Ge'ez or Syriac; in others in Byzantine Greek or Slavonic which differs greatly from the current speech of the people.

The question of the use of the vernacular has been debated until there is nothing new left to be said. In dioceses such as some in Asia and Africa, where half a dozen or more different tongues are spoken, translation is almost impossible. Even in England and the United States where much the same language is spoken by all, the difficulties are huge. There are colloquialisms which, though intelligible enough, are barbarous and absurd. The vernacular used may either be precise and prosaic, in which case it has the stilted manner of a civil servant's correspondence, or poetic and euphonious, in which case it will tend towards the archaic and less intelligible. The Authorised Version of the Bible of James I was not written in the current tongue but in that of a century earlier. Mgr. Knox, a master of language, attempted in his translation of the Vulgate to devise a 'timeless English,' but his achievement has not been universally welcomed. I think it highly doubtful whether the average churchgoer either needs or desires to have complete intellectual, verbal comprehension of all that is said. He has come to worship, often dumbly and effectively. In most of the historic Churches the act of consecration takes place behind curtains or doors. The idea of crowding round the priest and watching all he does is quite alien there. It cannot be pure coincidence that so many independent bodies should all have evolved in just the same way. Awe is the natural predisposition to prayer. When young theologians talk, as they do, of Holy Communion as 'a social meal' they find little response in the hearts or minds of their less sophisticated brothers.

No doubt there are certain clerical minds to whom the behaviour of the laity at Mass seems shockingly unregimented. We are assembled in obedience to the law of the Church. The priest performs his function in exact conformity to rule. But we—what are we up to? Some of us are following the missal, turning the pages adroitly to introits and extra collects, silently speaking all that the liturgists would like us to utter aloud and in unison. Some are saying the rosary. Some are wrestling with refractory children. Some are rapt in prayer. Some are thinking of all manner of irrelevant things until intermittently called to attention by the bell. There is no apparent 'togetherness.' Only in heaven are we recognisable as the united body we are. It is easy to see why some clergy would like us to show more consciousness of one another, more evidence of taking part in a social 'group activity.' Ideally they are right but that is to presuppose a very much deeper spiritual life in private than most of us have achieved.

If, like monks and nuns, we arose from long hours of meditation and solitary prayer for an occasional excursion into social solidarity in the public recitation of the office, we should, unquestionably, be leading the full Christian life to which we are dedicated. But that is not the case. Most of us, I think, are rather perfunctory and curt in our morning and evening prayers. The time we spend in church—little enough—is what we set aside for renewing in our various ways our neglected contacts with God. It is not how it should be, but it is, I think, how it has always been for the majority of us and the Church in wisdom and charity has always taken care of the second-rate. If the Mass is changed in form so as to emphasise its social character, many souls will find themselves put at a further distance from their true aim. The danger is that the Conciliar Fathers, because of their own deeper piety and because they have been led to think that there is a strong wish for change on the part of the laity, may advise changes that will prove frustrating to the less pious and the less vocal.

It may seem absurd to speak of 'dangers' in the Council when all Catholics believe that whatever is decided in the Vatican will be the will of God. It is the sacramental character of the Church that supernatural ends are attained by human means. The inter-relation of the spiritual and material is the essence of the Incarnation. To compare small things with great, an artist's 'inspiration' is not a process of passive acceptance of dictation. At work he makes false starts and is constrained to begin again, he feels impelled in one direction, happily follows it until he is conscious that he is diverging from his proper course; new discoveries come to him while he is toiling at some other problem, so that eventually by trial and error a work of art is consummated. So with the inspired decisions of the Church. They are not revealed by a sudden clear voice from heaven. Human

arguments are the means by which the truth eventually emerges. It is not really impertinent to insinuate one more human argument into the lofty deliberations.