Thinking Round a Recent Book

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THE VATICAN ORACLE. *By Brocard Sewell*

(Duckworth: 50s. net).

IN this book is to be found a genuine attempt, on the part of a sincere and sensitive Catholic, to come to grips with the causes which have provoked the present crisis in his Church and which might, as he does not shrink from admitting, result in the irretrievable fragmentation of what, not so long ago, seemed like a crackless monolith, all too easily confused by the complacent with that Rock against which the Gates of Hell never could prevail. Now the visible signs are otherwise, and the consequent revulsion from a false sense of security has not rendered their task easier for those, in the Church, who wish to arrive at an impartial diagnosis of the disease from which it is suffering, such as must needs precede any consideration of possible remedial action: the present book's chief purpose is to provide material for such a diagnosis and, in this respect, one can say from the outset that even those who do not share all the author's views on particular points will still find here much to help them think clearly and this, in itself, is a useful service to have rendered at the present juncture.

Though the operative factors behind the present crisis can in large measure be defined in terms of their historical antecedents—the book is rich in apposite historical data—it must also be recognized that, in a more far-reaching sense, it is an intellectual crisis that Western Christians are now having to face, one affecting the nature of proof in the context of faith and, parallel with this, the nature and scope of the traditional authority both in itself and, more particularly, as vested in the person and function of the Roman Pontiff. In the author's opinion, considerably distorted views of what the "Petrine primacy" implies have prevailed in the Western Church since relatively early times, though with more oscillations of emphasis than is commonly supposed by the historically uninformed; nor does the author consider the attempt of the first Vatican Council of 1870 to impart a watertight definition to the idea of "infallibility" (itself a not very happily chosen term) to have resulted it anything but added embarrassment for those for whom the Pope's specific functions in the Church needed to be presented, not merely as a matter of personal loyalty, but also as something objectively intelligible within the general framework of Christian tradition: hankering after a fool-proof criterion that will automatically show the degree of authoritativeness attaching to any particular Papal pronouncement at a given time is not an intelligent attitude to take up in regard to the providential action of the Spirit whereby the Church's teachings are kept in the line of truth and away from error. The quality of infallibility does indeed pertain to tradition in the deepest sense, and this quality can also be attributed legitimately to the organs of tradition, but only on condition that *a mechanical* character be not read into this attribution, as the Roman juridicism has too often tended to do.

In fact, the view the author takes both of the original promise given by Jesus Christ to St.

Peter and of its ulterior implications as affecting the Apostle's successors in the see of Rome approximates very closely to the interpretation the Eastern Orthodox Church has given to this particular sacred charge; from this standpoint the enactments of two Councils ranked as "oecumenical" by universal consent, namely those of Constantinople in AD 381 and Chalcedon in 451 by which the status of the various Patriarchal sees was canonically defined, do not need adding to and this definition applies also to Rome, whose traditional primacy is not being called in question, but only an overloaded interpretation of that same primacy.

Throughout his book, Father Brocard Sewell expresses the view that in most, if not all the matters at issue between the Latin and the Eastern Churches it was the latter who took the sane view of the Roman See's traditional privileges (but also of their limits) and the Westerners who were the innovators in straining the Roman primacy into meaning far more than that word actually implies. This does not mean that the author rejects the Papal claims *in toto* as the Protestant Reformers did subsequently—in his view, the Pope does have a special part to play which the word "primacy" appropriately expresses; he would gladly see Rome relieved of some obsessive historical encumbrances, but not deprived of that which belongs to her traditionally.

Here some may ask: why is it that Father Sewell, having come round to a position hardly differing from that of the Orthodox East, does not simply adhere to the Orthodox Church, as a number of Catholic priests have done in our time, and carry on from there? Why hang on to the vestiges of an allegiance which, by comparison with the conventional Latin view, has worn very thin? Those who argue thus have misunderstood Father Sewell's own position and a closer examination of the present book would explain why. For Father Sewell, the *integral* Christian tradition is now, and has never ceased to be, represented by the Latin and the Eastern Churches inseparably, and it is there that the ultimate Christian allegiance is due. In a more local sense he remains firmly a Western Christian; to label himself an "Easterner" would amount to a denial of the integral Church now as much as a one-sidedly Latin view would have done in the past. In the mind of the author there is never a question of a *de jure* schism having taken place, but of a series of historical bickerings that have gradually hardened into a *de facto* state of separation leaving the seamless garment of Christ nevertheless unparted for those "who have eyes to see" beyond the surface of events.

The author is not the first to have pointed out that the mutual excommunications pronounced by the Papal Legate and the Byzantine Patriarch in 1054 never engaged the totality of the faithful on either side, for whom the quarrels in high places (no new thing in the Christian world) did not affect their own participation in the full sacramental life of an unbroken Church. It was the scandalous sack of Constantinople in 1204 by the professed Crusaders, cleverly egged on by the Venetians from commercial and expansionist motives, which more than any other single event rendered an East-West reconciliation virtually impossible, thus creating in Christendom that appearance of permanent rift we have all grown up with. Despite appearances the Church has remained *one in principle*—Father Brocard Sewell insists on this: one is not justified in speaking of "two churches". From which it follows that, thanks to the canceling out of the 1054 censures by Pope Paul VI and the Oecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras at their meeting in 1967, this principle of unbroken unity takes on, despite past happenings, a renewed and effective importance which, as the author eloquently pleads in his concluding chapter, may well prove to be the key to Christian renewal in the face of a militant materialism that threatens all religions alike in their very existence. It is here that the author would have his fellow-Christians place their hopes, banishing from their minds any thought that this means a surrender of West to East

or vice versa: to take cognizance of a reality can never be anything but a victory for the Spirit and for those who submit to Its guidance.

If his reviewer has not misinterpreted his thoughts, the above sums up the author's focal thesis, on which this book ultimately stands or falls.

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Besides its several well documented chapters dealing directly with the question of authority and its exercise in the Roman Church formerly and lately, the *Vatican Oracle* also contains two important sections devoted respectively to the Christian Ministry and to Monasticism as providing a formal framework for the Contemplative Life—though without claiming to hold a monopoly of the latter, be it added in passing. In two final chapters the author resumes his central theme of the reciprocal need for both East and West to share in any regenerative effort in the Church such as might give grounds for genuine hope; it is this twofold contribution, so he argues, which would again after centuries of one-sided development allow one to speak of a "Catholic" consensus in the full and unqualified sense of the word. There are some in the West, and doubtless also in the East, who will jib at such a statement; but even so, I think the objectors would stand to gain by a careful study of Father Sewell's arguments even if this led them to a different opinion as to the best way to deal with the Christian crisis and its consequences. I have even heard a fear expressed by some that a too close *rapprochement* with the West at the present juncture might only have the result of infecting the East itself with disorders it had escaped hitherto; but can it hope to escape them much longer by merely keeping aloof? The pull of the modern secularist civilization is all in the direction of a diluting of the Christian message, as a prelude to its eventual abolition. On all sides one finds the same anti-traditional, anti-metaphysical, anti-contemplative bias gaining a hold over the minds of men; the Christian East is not without some troubles of its own, as Father Sewell observes somewhere with good reason. If these troubles (political pressures apart) are not yet as acute as those of the Western Church this is cause for thankfulness but certainly not for self-complacency, since the same disintegrative tendencies are threatening all alike and none can say that they will not gather sudden momentum in places which previously had seemed relatively immune. The only effective means of defense is a keen and vigilant sense of intellectual discrimination of a kind not commonly to be found in either East or West; to exercise this virtue consciously at all times is certainly the best preparation for the more testing days that lie ahead.

Here it will not be inopportune to point out that, by comparison with the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodoxy has remained not less, but far more conservative in respect of its doctrinal and institutional expressions, a fact which goes with less "activist" attitudes generally; it is the juridical and rationalistic bent of the Roman mentality that has given to Western Christianity its rather cut-and-dried authoritarianism on the one hand and, on the other, a certain restlessness which breaks out from time to time in the form of uncalled for innovations. In Orthodox parlance "innovation" *(neeterisinos)* is always a term of reproach: not the least of the accusations leveled at the Latins during the period of mounting East-West tension was their proneness to innovate, whereof the famous *Filioque* clause interpolated in the text of the Nicene Creed—the Orientals say the "Symbol" of Nicaea—provides a typical example. Apart from any question of whether or not the added words could be explained in a manner that would be

doctrinally acceptable, it was the mere fact of imposing an *innovation* on the prototype of all Christian dogma which most gravely offended the feelings of the Easterners; in their eyes, the innovating impulse carried with it a latent inclination in the direction of error which rendered it condemnable; the personal intentions of those who presume to tamper with time-hallowed traditional forms remain secondary to the offence of innovation in itself—in Orthodox countries such is still the popular mood in all such cases.

It must however be admitted that in quite recent years certain innovating tendencies have begun to be discernible also in the Orthodox world, notably among the Greeks (far less so among the Russians) though few are prepared to admit the fact because the bias of popular feeling still runs so strongly the other way. Nowhere is this feeling more apparent than in the sphere of Liturgy where the splendid archaism of the Byzantine liturgical forms is especially valued as a perpetually renewed token of traditional continuity and therefore also as a powerful safeguard for the Faith. Changes of the kind that are now playing havoc with the Roman Mass would be unthinkable in an Eastern setting; to suggest such a thing would be to court a popular uprising—which all goes to prove that there is such a thing as a healthy conservatism, one that is perfectly reconcilable with traditional adaptation wherever such is really called for. The ease with which the changes in the Mass have been imposed in the West is not a healthy sign, for it indicates a passivity versus innovation that can only go with a weakening of the traditional instinct at all levels within the Church.

It almost passes belief that the shapers of Church policy should have chosen this most critical moment in its history in order to scrap what was probably the greatest single asset of coherence in the Catholic world, namely the familiar form and language of the Mass, thus compromising all the feelings and habits that centuries of worship and prayer had built up round its celebration. When one thinks of all the immense advantages inherent in the fact that any Catholic attending any church of the Latin rite in any country throughout the world was immediately made to feel at home without the least need for adjustment, one simply cannot imagine what went on in the minds of those who pushed through these gratuitous innovations—here the Orthodox term applies with literal force. What they seemed intent on ignoring was the fact that a liturgical language, hallowed by tradition, has a stable *resonance* to which the souls of the faithful become attuned; *lex orandi* is something that cannot be disturbed without serious risk that *lex credendi* will also be detrimentally affected, so delicate is the balance of factors making up a life of piety; in his *Appendix B* on the Liturgy Father Sewell has assembled a number of telling quotations illustrating this point, to which I should like to add an example drawn from recent experience.

Not long ago while wandering in the Alps I happened to talk with a peasant woman who was a member of the choir of her parish church in one of the high-lying villages. I asked her which she preferred, the old Latin or the new French words: she answered without sign of emotion but also without hesitation, "Why, I like the Latin better. You see it has something about it one misses with the French". What this shows is that ordinary people of simple but deep piety keep a sense of the *numinous* which "experts" called in to sit on Papal commissions have long since outgrown. The Orthodox, provided they go to church at all, nearly always have this sense and this is one of the secrets of their steadfastness in worship: but after all, it is not the common Catholic people who asked for these changes, which were wished on to them by sophisticated minds anxious above all to appear "progressive" and "democratic" in the bourgeois sense of these senseless words; their obsessive stressing of the *collective* aspect of things in opposition to the essential *solitude* of life in the Spirit well shows whose favor they were out to buy. The most

pathetic illusion of these innovators is their belief that by this means they will attract back the young and arrest the flight from religion. What they fail to see is that whatever has the effect of further weakening the traditional instinct can only accelerate that flight. The only way to attract people to any cause, especially young people, is to make great demands of them, thus showing that one values their aspirations at a high price. No one was ever won over by playing down to his or her weaknesses; to play down to people is always instinctively sensed by them as a sign of disrespect and this, where religion is concerned, can only increase their alienation.

It is worth pausing to scrutinize the kind of arguments put forth by those who wish to justify their new-fangled arrangements regarding church worship, in which a supposedly collective interest is invoked as the one and only consideration of importance: this point has already been mentioned once. Roughly speaking, these arguments amount to this: For centuries the minister officiating at Mass has been a man set apart, offering (so they say) a solitary sacrifice to which his congregation remained largely passive, and much the same applied to the parish priest when exercising his other functions. Now this separative trend has to be reversed; the celebrant must address himself first and last to his hearers, as co-celebrants. Whatever might suggest a hierarchical superiority as attaching to his person must be played down to a minimum. Likewise people must be got to abstain from various old-established gestures now considered "outmoded"--this applies especially to such gestures as symbolically imply an attitude of awe: fear of God is "out"; kneeling to receive the Sacrament betokens an attitude of servility which may perhaps have suited our rather naive forefathers but hardly becomes the "adult" men and women of the Space Age. A Christianity in process of being "demythologized" cannot stomach these things any longer; it is not "wonder" we want from our people, but a feeling of brotherhood towards other men through which alone the Christ-like ideal may be realized... and so on *ad nauseam.* Most of this may sound like nonsense, but such is the fashionable thinking of the moment and few dare to hold out against it.

The tendentious sentimentality attaching to this way of thinking is not the end of the matter, however, since the data which provide its point of departure are themselves highly contestable: this indiscriminate attribution of a culpable passivity to the congregations of the past simply is not true; neither historically nor psychologically does it agree with the elementary facts of human experience.

To take first a feature of the Mass which is often cited because of its ulterior implications, namely the position of the priest in relation to the people, whether with his back mostly turned, that is to say, as used to be the case or else facing, as imposed under the latest arrangements. If the altar, symbolically speaking, is the seat of the Divine, then the priest facing towards the altar was deemed to be speaking and acting on behalf of his people while leading them towards God. Obviously to face towards them is also a possible attitude giving rise to a different symbolism—precedent for this is not in question. What however is totally false is the argument that would make the position facing towards the people one of greater communication than the other; the motives invoked in favor of such a belief are demagogic, not symbolical.

And secondly, concerning the alleged passivity of the congregation under the old arrangements: does silent prayer or meditation, does simple repose in one's own being while in the presence of God (how few of us accomplish this much!) indicate a passive attitude? Silent prayer is in fact the most active of all acts for the Christian, unless it be silent worship; though there obviously can be no objection to people joining in certain responses (e.g. those at the start of the Canon of the Mass, which go back to earliest times) or to their singing the Creed (to its

Plainchant tune) or to any other such acts of sonorous adoration, it must be made clear that those who choose so to join in the service are not participating more closely than those of their neighbors who prefer to witness the Mysteries silently and on their knees in intimate communion—if anything it is these who will be the more active participants.

But surely, some will object, there must often have been people whose silence was merely a cloak for inattention; they came to church out of convention, because this was the rule, but far from praying, they simply let their minds wander among worldly thoughts. All this is a truism; inattention is an all too common human failing.

No one can say, however, that such inattention is commoner at Catholic (or Orthodox) services than at Protestant ones where the element of vocal participation is at its maximum; the latter factor is irrelevant to the argument. The essential point is: God's Grace is ever present, but *we* are absent—here is the whole religious problem of mankind, and all the expedients, public or private, recommended by the saints or by the Church in her ordinary teachings have it as their aim to foster attention and, if possible, to render it unceasing.

The experience of the Orthodox Church can here provide a particularly convincing testimony, and all the more so since the author himself has shown such keen appreciation of Eastern attitudes and practice in many other connections.

In churches of the Eastern rite congregational services of the kind familiar in the West are practically unknown; participation is "passive" as far as joining in responses, hymn singing etc., are concerned. Yet no one who has attended an Orthodox liturgy can for a moment remain in doubt as regards the high average of participation on the part of the people; admittedly occasional inattention and chatter is to be met with in Greek churches at times, never in Russian; but by and large the congregations share in the Liturgy with evident delight and this is true even of quite small children. Since in most Orthodox churches there are no seats, excepting a few for aged or sick persons, members of the congregation are free to move about as they please, kissing the icons or lighting candles before them, frequently crossing themselves and, in Russian churches, making prostrations when so minded. Otherwise everybody stands. Services tend to be long; no one asks for shortened versions of the type prevalent in the West, where the purpose in view is to meet the needs of those who wish to hear Mass on days other than Sunday. In the East, the full length Liturgy remains the focus of Christian life by universal consent and I think it is not going too far to say that participation in it is active in a way that the West would have found it hard to match since some years. Those who felt that the Latin Mass had come to lack something might usefully have studied what happens in Russian churches before embarking on their ill-judged reforms, since this might have given them ideas as to what a genuine liturgical reform might consist of and how it might be promoted. Without copying the Russian model directly (which would be senseless, as the Latin rite is all it should be as regards both form and content), there was still something to be learned concerning the *manner* of conducting the Liturgy so as to leave room for spontaneity while preserving order—to reconcile these two interests sums up the liturgical art.

There is no doubt that a Russian liturgy provides the perfect type of Christian participation in the double sense of discipline and freedom—freedom that is spontaneously disciplined and discipline that is free from too set controls. If this applies to the congregation it also applies to the celebrants; this all comes so naturally to them that it seems as if a Russian priest or acolyte could never put a foot wrong in this respect. In great Latin churches one has often attended

impressive services, where the homely disorder to be found elsewhere was noticeably absent—too noticeably perhaps, since performance sometimes has been a little too reminiscent of Company Drill at Wellington Barracks: this is not said in scorn, but because one feels that here Russians have something precious to teach the West. It is their particular glory to have achieved the perfection of Christian worship: who then can say that multiplication of set responses etc., is necessary for an active participation in the Mass? Here are all the signs of sharing, of uninhibited joy in what is going on, of a unanimous recollection associating old and young, men and women, ministers and people. In a sense the Russians can be called the most Christian of Christians today; if in their home country the Church has had to pass through the fire, that is where a Christian revival, should it occur, might be expected to start.

However, this matter of the relationship between priest and people raises a question of principle that does not stop short at church services. Nowadays it is far too readily assumed that a position of hierarchical superiority recognized as attaching to a function (i.e. the priestly function) and expressed by various outward signs such as a special dress etc., constitutes a barrier hindering communication in either direction: this is really the crux of the innovators' argument as outlined above. Individual defects apart, does this assumption rest on any solid grounds in logic or experience?

The answer is that hierarchical differences—differences of "caste" as a Hindu might say—provided they be intelligible and not arbitrary ones, can help to promote communication, not the opposite. Particular respect on the one side answers to pastoral care on the other; neither of these attitudes runs counter to love, and still less to truth. It is in fact the existence of such hierarchical distinctions together with their implications which make it possible for individually imperfect men to exercise functions for which, by definition as one might say, "fallen" man as such is unworthy. This is the characteristic position in any traditional community such as the Catholic Church; it is only a weakening of the traditional bond which causes people to value the relation of priest and parishioners, or any analogous relationship, no longer in terms of respective vocations implying different attitudes to and fro, but in a merely individual sense according to which Father O'Leary is a man of limited capacity and his people have now found this out and won't accept his authority, any longer. Once this state is reached everything becomes a matter of likes and dislikes and mostly the latter. A man of very modest powers invested with a traditional status can offer much to his hearers, many of whom may be his intellectual superiors; a man who is both personally gifted and learned but lacks the traditional aura will too easily be written off even by those whose intelligence is far below his own.

Speaking for myself, I very much doubt if an average decent Rector in a Catholic parish, or an Anglican parish for that matter, has in the past been anything like as cut off from his people as the new thinkers affect to believe. It is in the nature of things that extreme types should be rare: both saintly souls and villains are to be found in the ranks of the clergy, but a relative mediocrity is bound to prevail here as in every other profession. To exercise so exalted an office the aid of tradition is indispensable; it is his voicing of a traditional (i.e. objective) element that makes acceptable the Vicar's humble attempts at preaching the Word, for eloquence as such is a subjective talent granted only to the few and it would be unrealistic to expect things to be otherwise. These are points which the author seems to have overlooked when discussing the question of sermons in church, past or present; the criteria he applies take an individualistic turn for the most part. He says it is hard to understand the fact that many recorded medieval sermons read boringly yet evidently appealed to audiences of the time. One can only repeat: insofar as

those old preachers made themselves mouthpieces of tradition even in a relatively routine way, they had a power to convince far in excess of their own meager capacity. This illustration may be extended to cover many other activities of a priest.

It came as something of a surprise to find the author making considerable concessions to the kind of thinking criticized above, since in regard to the new liturgical and scriptural texts his own comments are by no means lenient; he deplores their flatness by comparison with the ancient versions as also the disappearance of the Gregorian chant in favor of indescribably trivial forms of music designed to pander to all that is most vulgar and sentimental in the human soul: another step towards religious suicide. Given this clear position, one cannot help a feeling of paradoxical inconsequence when one comes to the passage where the author sketches the form that a Mass might take when celebrated in a private house by a part-time priest—a proceeding likely to become frequent if the falling off in the number of priestly and monastic vocations continues at its present rate. The only apparent way out, as Father Sewell reasonably argues, is to provide a shortened course of training open to men who feel a strong vocation to the sacred ministry while being willing to earn their own livelihood in other fields. Their readiness to devote their weekends to the central service of the Church, and other spare time when possible, will be the measure of these part-time priests' devotion. Where one is minded to join issue with the author, however, is for needlessly going out of his way to create an artificial atmosphere of informality by excluding from his type-Mass whatever might serve to dignify the occasion or make of it a recognizable parallel with what would take place in a church.

That the conditions themselves would impose their own simplifications is evident enough; an improvised service held in someone's living-room need not differ all that much from what commonly takes place on board ship, if a Catholic priest happens to be traveling by sea on a Sunday. Simplification of a ritual can come about in a perfectly natural manner without losing any of its intrinsic solemnity thereby; an affected simplification is quite another thing, for it savors of parody. To say, as some have done, that after all the Last Supper itself was but a simple meal taken in common, or that in the Catacombs during the early centuries celebrations of the Eucharist must have been of the simplest—all this does not get us very far both because the parallelism is far-fetched and also because no account is taken of the passage of time with all the modifications in regard to forms and attitudes that this is bound to bring; insofar as these modifications embody an organic experience of the Church in action they cannot be written off as mere accretions without significance, for most of them have a positive value. The day the Christian Church finds itself again facing the kind of conditions that called the Catacombs into existence—, not an impossible state of affairs in the world as it is going—, on that day the sacred liturgy will automatically undergo a reduction to its barest essentials; meanwhile there is no reason to anticipate on events which may come about sooner than we suppose.

In connection with the domestic Mass it is worth instancing the fact that in Tibet prior to the Chinese Communist occupation every home however humble had its consecrated corner where, at the family altar, a visiting Lama or monk could be asked to celebrate a rite or teach or lead the family in worship. Why could not many Christian homes do likewise, in which case the practical needs of the domestic Liturgy would be permanently met without the part-time priest having to do otherwise than say his Mass in the normal way? There is no need in all this for a self-conscious "mateyness" taking itself for Christian fellowship; compared to such a devaluation even the most crusted of conservatisms would be preferable, though evidently falling short in respect of the saving intelligence.

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Chapter V of the *Vatican Oracle,* dealing with Monasticism, is a particularly happy one: while avoiding a too romantic appeal Father Brocard Sewell puts the case for the Contemplative Life with heartfelt eloquence; a number of well turned quotations collected from many directions serve to reenforce what his own Carmelite heart has prompted the author to say. He deals firmly with the common prejudice that would have us believe the monastic life to be a selfish or lazy flight from responsibility, and he shows how a life of recollectedness and prayer in pursuance of "the one thing needful"—the unitive love of God—is a service done to all men both by the example it sets and also in a more direct sense, inasmuch as the love of God contains the love of neighbors "eminently", as cause contains effect. The monastic life, when truly achieved, causes this "love within love" to radiate in all directions and, in so doing, it becomes the living exemplar of self-hood subdued, insofar as selfhood is *ego,* and of selfhood fulfilled, insofar as this reveals the presence of the Divine at the center of each being.

Obviously, only saints find this total effacement of self in Self; regarded as an institution of the Church the Contemplative Life can but provide a framework and set a pattern. All this is brought out by the author in a few words, while he also offers passing warnings against certain dilutions of the monastic ideal that have become conventional, such as the rather too comfortable "poverty" which, by many young aspirants, is felt as an obstacle to their entry into one of the Monastic Orders. In this connection I think the author would be interested in a practice commonly followed in the Theravada Buddhist countries of Burma and Siam, namely for young laymen to spend a certain period as temporary monks, wearing the yellow robe, shaving their heads and keeping the Rule strictly under supervision by fully ordained *Bhikkus* in their local monastery; on completion of the appointed period the young men return to the lay estate in order to follow whatever profession happens to be theirs. A result of this experience, however, is that these people will never be quite like laymen again; the Order will have laid its imprint upon their souls in a manner difficult to efface altogether. One could well imagine some such system finding a place in the Christian Church, thus leading to a rekindling of that contemplative fervor which is the greatest need of Christian society today, when an unbridled activism is threatening to erode all truly human qualities.

At the end of this chapter the author mentions a point often missed by those who regard monastic life as being primarily a withdrawal from the world—which it is in a sense, but not in all senses. He remarks that under some circumstances a man wedded to contemplation may feel impelled to issue from his retreat in order to associate himself with some particular activity which will temporarily require his presence in the world, such as dealing with some crying evil of the moment. The author might have added that, in that case, his contemplative experience, far from unfitting that man for effective action, will on the contrary be found to have endowed his capacity for action with a fresh dimension, by drawing on latent powers which contemplation itself accumulates and releases; one could also speak here of the power of prayer. The lives of saints offer many examples of this kind of contemplative excursion into the Active Life and this, for the person concerned, will in no wise imply a lowering of his spiritual sights.

In the last two chapters of the *Vatican Oracle* the author again takes up his main thread concerning the exercise of authority in the Church in order to draw certain conclusions of a

provisional kind—with the crisis as yet far from resolved, he could hardly hope to do more. Of particular importance for his argument are the proceedings of the reforming Council of Constance held in A.D. 1414-18 to which a whole Appendix is devoted. As we know, the attempt to get the authority vested in general councils recognized as over-riding, even to the point of deposing an erring Pope if need be, did not really get off the ground despite influential support at the time: it is the contrary view that won *de facto* acceptance in the Western Church. Nevertheless the author gives his reasons for considering this question as still pending in a *de jure* sense, chief of which is the fact that ever since the rift between the Eastern and Roman points of view became virtually unbridgeable a normally constituted Council has never actually met, the Easterners being absent; this of course applies to Constance as to all other purely Roman-orientated gatherings. The author therefore accepts the view that the last council to merit the epithet "oecumenical" in an unqualified sense is the second Council of Nicaea in A.D. 787 and this is also the position of the Orthodox. On this assumption, it would be reasonable to argue that the question of where exactly the limits of Conciliar and Papal authority respectively lie is still an open one, despite all that has happened since in the West, so that to discuss it further does not violate any traditional rights.

In connection with Constance and after, the author several times mentions the decree *Frequens* of that Council, in which it is stated that Councils should be summoned at regular intervals and this, as the author sees it, would be a highly desirable thing: presumably, the recent emergence of the idea of "collegiality" could be taken as a cautious move in the same direction. Whoever now wishes to invoke the precedent of *Frequens* by way of readjusting the balance of Catholic authority must, however, be sure and take note of the following point: if the idea of the Conciliar authority were in its turn to become the subject of legalistic fixation on the same lines as the Papal function in 1870, it would not be long before it too became a cause for embarrassment to its own sincerest advocates; a fixation of "democratic" appearance might well prove unwieldy and divisive in ways the advocates of the older conciliarism could never have imagined. Machinery for better and wider consultation could doubtless help the Church at the level of practical affairs, but this must not be confused with the special (and providential) function attaching to an oecumenical council as such.

The persuasive power of that function lies in the fact that its intrinsic reality—the Church's protection from error by the Holy Spirit at times of doctrinal emergency—is not amenable to juridical, and more especially to quantitative, criteria such as the number and representative range of its attendance and so on. The Oecumenical Council next following Nicaea I, that of Constantinople in A.D. 381, was a fairly small gathering of mostly Greek bishops, whereas the Arianizing Councils of Ariminum and Sirmium were impressively large gatherings—packed assemblies are notoriously well attended. In fact, though in the long course of the Church's history Councils have been many and various, the "oecumenical" status of any one of them has only been determinable *a posteriori;* it is tradition operating freely in its own season that has confirmed the fact that here, and not there, the Mind of the Christian Church has expressed itself in the plenary sense.

It is undeniable that the Christian civilization of Western Europe in the Middle Ages (distressing features notwithstanding) had a genuinely traditional structure with the forms of the Latin Church providing its spiritual clothing and its idiom of expression—no one looking at Gothic, and still more at Romanesque art can possibly doubt the fact; but it is also true to say that the force of Christian tradition was often vitiated to a greater or lesser extent by a too juridical

and moralistic bent inherited from pre-Christian Rome; our author's sympathy for the Orthodox Church with its predominantly Greek Patristic background partly arises from an instinctive perception that such was the trouble in the West. Assuredly human beings are fallible beings, half corrupted before they start—the doctrine of the Fall expresses the situation clearly—and this inevitably affects their institutions: a perfect society or government or church is not a possibility at the level of (fallen) human existence in this world; even the sincerest attempts to remedy surrounding injustices and sufferings at any given time will largely consist of choosing the lesser evil. One therefore has to distinguish between a sacred tradition regarded intrinsically and its workings through the agency of men; even at the best of times a certain gap between professions and performance is bound to occur and should be duly allowed for.

Nevertheless it is empirically right for one's mind to invest the traditional institutions, dogmatic, ethical and other, with relatively absolute authority (if such a contradictory expression be permissible) matching the intensity of faith. Given the intellectual precaution mentioned above it can be said of tradition in the Christian world that it is the providentially endowed regulator of the Church, whereby the original Revelation is perpetuated across time as a stream perpetuates its parent spring across the land; while the spring, for its part, perpetuates the rain from heaven—the divine Grace—that keeps the whole circuit in being. Thus tradition is continually at work carrying out its providential mission of spiritual balancer, confirming this or eliminating that, and ever adapting the original message so that it may remain intelligible to each successive generation involved in the current of change: one is speaking of adaptation, not betrayal either of the essential truths or of the characteristic forms with which those truths have become clothed traditionally, thus providing men with a coherent dialect of the Spirit. So long as a given religion remains in existence these forms will persist: allowance has to be made for the natural process of change, while excluding any affectedly revolutionary attitudes. As for legislative precautions against error in both the doctrinal and the ethical fields, these have their place in the Church and are indeed unavoidable wherever there is organized religion under any traditional form; it may be added that an over-anxious multiplication of safeguards can create its own dangers, by putting genuine vigilance to sleep under a blanket of fictitious immunity.

It is tempting to speculate on what might have been the destiny of the great Christian heresies (or what eventually became such) had they arisen in an Indian setting. Typically, a heresy has its point of departure in some aspect of truth which, by dint of unilateral stressing, begins to oppose itself in an irreducible manner to some other aspect of truth, equally necessary; till finally contact is lost with the metaphysical principle in the light of which the two aspects in question would ultimately find their reconciliation. It is moreover evident that a too rationalistic turn of mind will tend to hasten this result because of its proneness to reduce every question to one of "either... or"; such a mentality is almost bound to become heresy-ridden (and therefore also obsessed with a fear of heresy) just because it lacks the means of arriving at a genuine synthesis embracing terms that remain opposed at another level of perception: a want of spiritual "skill", as a Buddhist would say. This kind of intellectual deficiency easily explains why heresies have teemed in the Greco-Roman world, while remaining comparatively exceptional happenings in the Indian world: in fact they began to multiply there also after a Western-type education got a hold on Indian minds during the XIXth Century with disruptive results.

A potential heresy (every partial truth could become such) will never become actualized so long as it does not develop to the point of denying some other aspect of truth which is complementary to the one it wishes to bring out. It can ignore the latter more or less completely

and offer itself as a quasi-independent doctrine and it can even be critical in regard to various other views always provided explicit denial be avoided—this is the Indian attitude. It is therefore easy to imagine how Hinduism, for example, faced with an Arian or Monophysite or perhaps even a Lutheran view in its early stages, might have found a way to seize on whatever was positive there in order to make of it yet another *darshana* or viewpoint within the framework of Hindu orthodoxy, thus enabling that view to be turned to good account for the benefit of those human temperaments to whose spiritual needs such a view was particularly suited.[1] This does not mean, however, that Hinduism is prepared to tolerate any view whatsoever: power to reject what is incompatible with its own premises belongs to every revealed tradition, be this even something undoubtedly inspired but providentially alien in a vital respect (as Buddhism was for Hinduism), and *a fortiori* any downright error.

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Those who have already read the *Vatican Oracle* may wonder why this review turned full-scale article has made no mention of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* which provided the author with a test case from which to develop his argument in the first place. The fact is, he has discussed the ethical and social aspects of birth control with great thoroughness; little purpose would be served by recapitulating his various points here. Assuredly, this question also carries with it some much wider implications, both because of its obvious bearing on the problem of mass proliferation of the human species and its consequences, and also inasmuch as it inserts itself logically in the cardinal question of the proper (or improper) relationship of Man to Nature. This has all along been Christianity's weakest spot and it might well be found, could we see far enough, that many of the troubles which now afflict us have their roots in an initial failure to integrate the Natural Order in the Christian perspective, with a consequent imbalance that is still waiting to be righted.

To give an inkling of what happened it may be pointed out that when Christianity emerged as victor from its protracted struggle with paganism, a violent reaction set in against what had come to be regarded, rightly or wrongly, as a divinisation of physical phenomena; a certain anti-natural bias was thereby imparted to Christian feeling and thinking that has persisted ever since.

That many Christian saints have enjoyed a far more positive outlook on Nature is not in doubt. The Desert Fathers, the Celtic hermits, St. Francis and many others passed their life in primordial harmony with their environment and its non-human inhabitants: the precedent is there only waiting to be cited and applied; but exoteric commentators have been slow to profit by it, when they have not been at pains to discount it altogether with the aid of pseudo-theological sophistries summed up in the all-too-familiar dictum "these animals do not feel, they have no soul". If it be thought by some that the Renaissance, when it came, could have pointed the way to an eventual synthesis of the Christian and the Natural Orders thanks to the Hellenic, and especially to the Platonic ideals it recalled to the attention of the West, all one can say is that this overrated revival did not in fact lead to any such result; the metaphysical insight of a Meister Eckhardt would have been needed to bring this about, but the mood of the time was not inclined that way.

The Renaissance mind was frantically fruitionist, out-goingly adventurous, combining

extreme refinement and extreme toughness in a manner hard for us to imagine; it is not on such a soil that will readily grow the intuitive type who has only to behold a flower or an ant in order to find himself in the presence of God. This is the intellectual stuff architects of synthesis are made of. What the Renaissance did was to give vast impetus to human interest in all the things of Nature while setting the stamp of profanation upon them and this, for Europe, was the decisive factor. From that time on, the Natural Sciences moved right outside the orbit of Christian consciousness: the joint effect of a previous Christian negativism versus Nature and of giving free rein to what the medieval theologians called *turpis curiositas* was a net view of the created Universe that saw in it nothing but an illimitable field for exploitation from any and every motive, be it the most trivial or base. In this picture Nature herself figures in the role of the enemy to be overcome we enter the era of successive human "conquests", Everest yesterday, the Moon today, what next tomorrow? In such a vision of the world what room is left for pity, humility, contemplation? Yet there are not wanting Christian leaders who identify themselves with just this point of view and who even claim it for Christianity as its historical outcome; which is only true inasmuch as without the decay of Christianity such a view would not have come to be and that, such being its origin, it still bears recognizable marks of that which it now denies.

This explaining of the facts, however, does not make it any less sad when one finds churchmen utterly unobservant of such matters as the wholesale ravaging of God's creation, land, sea and air together, and the disappearance of so many forms of life (the rarer and lovelier, the worse the danger), to say nothing of the almost total elimination of beauty from human life itself as industrialism and urbanization creep on their all-devouring way. Few are prepared to connect these sacrilegious happenings with the essential question of what Man owes to God in return for his existential prerogative as central being and, in function of this and not apart from it, of what he owes his neighbors, human and non-human, having regard to the divine quality which each reflects in its own unique way, thus acting as a witness of God's presence without which the world becomes so much the poorer. That our author is not a victim of this mortal blindness is proved, among other things, by several remarks made in passing where he alludes to the inhuman treatment of helpless animals in the interests of Space research or from other similar motives; these remarks of his bespeak the anguish of a fervently compassionate heart, the heart of a Christian man for whom divine, and therefore also human, mercy remains unfragmentable by any subterfuge of "double-think".

On this sympathetic note our survey of a most thought-provoking book can appropriately be ended. If comments on the whole have been noticeably mixed in character, this fact corresponds to the many oscillations of viewpoint apparent in the *Vatican Oracle* itself; for it is evident that two currents of thought have converged in the author's mind, the traditionally Christian and the liberal-humanitarian, without its ever being quite decided which was to have the upper hand. The author himself in his Introduction disclaims both the "progressive" and the "conservative" label in order to take up his stance, at least in intention, at the *Extreme Center* (his own word); but the question can be asked, how far has this intellectually demanding intention been fulfilled? A clear-cut answer to this question is not easy to find: quite frankly, were someone to try and find the answer by feeding all the relevant passages culled from the 216 pages of the book into a computer, it is difficult to see how the author could avoid being classified among the "progressives" despite his own disavowal of the epithet. But then, the statistical findings of a mindless robot are not the same as the considered opinion of a living person (fallible as he cannot help being) and for this reason Father Brocard Sewell's reviewer wishes it put on record

that he rejects the above summary classification. Admittedly, the conservatives have a rough time of it from Father Sewell's pen, yet I suspect that his own heart is not too far removed from them; the modernists are treated by him with indulgence, and sometimes with approval, yet his own feeling for the Eastern Church is anything but modernistic.

In a way, it could be said that the author is living the very crisis he has set out to investigate his own apparent uncertainties are the uncertainties of a Church that has reached a crossroads. To go forward or back, to the right or to the left, this is the question? But to find the Extreme Center, has one to go anywhere?

This is surely the most pressing question for us all.

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[1] Like Hinduism, Buddhism has given birth to a large variety of schools (ill described as "sects") each of which corresponds to a difference, not of doctrine, but of method *(upāya).* The anti-conceptualist bias that has characterized the Buddhist tradition from its inception requires that whatever differences may develop within its fold should be judged, not in reference to set principles, but empirically in relation to the sole purpose of delivering beings from suffering by directing them towards Enlightenment: beings being diverse, so must their paths be diverse, herein lies the justification for the co-existence of methods which, at first sight, might well seem incompatible in terms of a single orthodoxy. Take for instance *Zen* and Pure Land *(Jōdō)* Buddhism, to give them their Japanese names: could two ways be more opposed in appearance? *Zen* provides the most extreme example of a "self-reliant" *(jiriki)* way; it admits of no other motive but the firm intention to realize "the Kingdom of Heaven within you". *Jōdō,* on the other hand, is as exclusively wedded to the idea of "other-reliance" *(tariki),* one could also say to "the Kingdom of Heaven without". Its primary postulate is the helplessness of the human *ego:* only the Grace of Amitabha Buddha avails, this is our life-line to which we must cling, and this we do through the *nembutsu,* the unremitting invocation of Amitabha's saving Name. Yet both these schools have their anchorage in the same fundamental teachings of the Buddha, they belong to the same orthodoxy and make no sense outside it—a fact which modern exponents of *Zen* often try to forget. These examples show how far divergences can go without detriment if the parent tradition be strong enough to contain and situate them.