
Fiddling While Rome Burns

America has been staging one of its displays of revivalism. It must be something extra special for it has indeed induced the magazine *Time* to devote twelve pages to it. Reading about it, the first thought that comes to one's mind is one of sorrow that the Church has done so little towards approaching the people in America. The revival shows additional evidence of that craving for God which is a basic ingredient of human nature. Like the inner fires of the earth, it seems to avail of every sort of outlet that offers itself and it appears in every guise from truth to basest superstition. This latest manifestation parades itself at least as partial truth for it glorifies the Holy Name; it styles itself the 'Jesus People'.

Catholicism cannot soothe itself with the thought that it either stimulated the movement or moved in to capitalise on it. Yet unless something is done to direct those impulses towards Catholicism, it is certain that the movement will go the way of all kindred ones of the past. Instead of being

turned into channels which will serve truth and order, all their prodigious fervour will behave like flood water. Most of it will tend to spread itself out and finally disappear. The remainder of the movement will plunge on into excess. A lot of this will take the form of actual misconduct and immorality by reason of that kink in human nature which causes us to oscillate violently between extremes.

This is where Catholicism could have utilised the situation profitably. It could have attracted to itself much of that effervescent interest and led it into regulation. It could harness the wilder enthusiasm so that it could be turned into motive power instead of exploding harmfully. I feel that the Jesus People will represent another great opportunity missed by us.

Perhaps the excuse may be offered that the Church is suffering from acute indigestion at the moment and therefore is not in good form for enterprise. But I would point out that such moments of trial are likewise times of special grace; and that the kindred crises of the past were always productive of saints and great forward impulses. Why should this not hold for the present time?

The Jesus People are not the only eruption of religious fire which is taking place. What are we to think of the movement which is currently sweeping over the USA and Canada and which calls itself the Catholic Pentecostals? This is a peculiar title to choose because the Pentecostals have been one of the well-established Protestant sects, possessed of much energy and plenty of money. They have been particularly active in South America and have made many converts. Therefore it is strange that Catholics should take the same title.

At first sight one would be inclined towards this manifestation. It comes at a time when the Church is

on the defence, its doctrines attacked, and serious falling away taking place. Therefore, it might be urged that a Catholic movement is to be welcomed which appears to be enthusiastic and which is going ahead. But one would want to look with caution on it. The American hierarchy is regarding it with perplexity. Anything religious which is outside Church authority is of doubtful vintage, and this would apply particularly to a movement which keeps on talking about the Holy Spirit without reference to other Catholic doctrines. At this point may I say that whenever I hear anyone talking abundantly about the Holy Spirit, I always listen anxiously for some mention of the Blessed Virgin who is his inseparable co-operator. If she is absent, it is most likely that he is too.

We must not treat the Third Person of the mighty Trinity as a sort of toy which will dance according to our whims. He has his times and rules which are, so to speak, posted up in the Catholic Church but not elsewhere. If these are observed, we are safe in making a familiar approach to him and hoping for his aid. Otherwise we are not sure. The history of error in the world is proof of the manner in which human fallibility and diabolical intervention can operate where people keep crying out 'Lord, Lord' and believe that the Holy Spirit has come upon them. Every false sect, including the most fantastic ones, has claimed that the Holy Spirit built it. They believe themselves to be directly inspired and proceed to publish the revelations which they are receiving. They indulge in healing, and the speaking of diverse languages is a special feature. This is of course a parody of what took place at Pentecost. But the difference is that the disciples spoke real languages to peoples of other nations whereas these parodies are no

more than meaningless mutterings as has been proved by tape-recording them. The miracle of Babel is renewed, but not of Pentecost.

But it will be objected: Why anticipate that sort of folly from the Catholic Pentecostals? Will grace not save them from such strayings? Nothing will save people if they disregard the ordinary rules, whether these be the rules of Catholicism or of ordinary safety. If people think they are in special relation with the Holy Spirit, they would tend to regard their own ideas as having been supplied to them by the Holy Spirit whereas they may be very much their own thoughts and perhaps worse than that.

The Church is the great safeguard here. It sifts out the wheat from the chaff, the false from the true. Actually, one edition of *Time* contained evidence of that danger. It described young girls belonging to the Catholic Pentecostals as laying their hands upon people to confer the Holy Spirit just in the fashion that a bishop does in confirmation. Now a bishop, by the right and office of the Catholic Church, does bring down the Holy Spirit by the imposition of hands. The privilege does not belong to the ordinary believer. You will see that persons who ape that privilege are presumptuous and it is certain that they will go astray. Perhaps it forms a first step that they are now holding joint meetings with the Protestant Pentecostals – you can guess on what terms!

In the foregoing, one is confronted by an awkward problem. On the one hand the official Church is not mounting anything in the way of a conversion drive, and on the other hand the Catholic Pentecostals are pressing forward with enthusiasm but along dubious paths; they are certain to peter out at some comparatively early stage. Is there no chance of achieving the desirable medium

course where the people will be mobilised towards a conversion movement under the authority of the Church?

I would say that in the Legion lies the potential for such an effort to present the Catholic Church to every individual in the USA – apart from likewise presenting it to every individual everywhere else. But in the main the Legion is being used for purposes other than conversion. Some of those purposes so little concern the real life of the Church that they could be done without. Is it not a pity that such a vital Church principle as conversion is being thus subordinated to what might be called kitchen chores?

This consideration brings to my mind the visit to us many years ago of the then Superior General of the Society for African Missions (SMA), Fr Simon Harrington. In one way it was a complimentary visit. It contained a great praise of the Legion. He said it was a gift from Heaven to the missionary; it gave him the real opportunity of reaching out to those to whom he had been sent. Left to his own unaided resources, he would be powerless to cover the mission-field. The Legion offered the missionary that possibility.

But his complaint was that the Legion was being far too much used for domestic ends and insufficiency for conversion. He had a proposal to make which he wished to have regarded seriously. It was that those domestic purposes should be altogether ruled out and the entire pressure of the Legion put into conversion. He argued that even the search for the lapsed should be sacrificed to the main objective; that the Catholics had already got their chance and probably would get more, and that those who had not got their chance should be served.

I must say that this proposition had its appeal. But our argument to his was that we would find it impossible to

induce the Catholic authorities to subscribe to such a drastic reordering of things. But he still contended that our programme should aim at the ideal and that no praesidium should be set up except on the stipulation that it would do conversion work and nothing else. And to that line he held.

You will agree that a rule to that effect would turn the Legion upside down. Would it leave us in existence at all?

However, was not Fr Harrington right in principle? If we were really at parting of the ways where we must choose between attending to the domestic chores and the seeking of conversions surely we are bound to choose the latter? The Church was not created to be a mere chaplaincy to its own.

Of course the answer will always be the compromise one which we ourselves gave to Fr Harrington: that you must do the one without neglecting the other. But is that a real answer bearing on the problem? It is to be feared that it is not; that it only does lip service to the problem of conversion and that we will continue in practice to concentrate on the domestic needs or, worse still, on petty tasks that are not needs at all.

It used to be suggested that legionaries would require a special type of preparation before they would be fit for such a mass approach to those outside the Church. Nowadays the operations of the Peregrinatio Pro Christo have deprived that argument of force. The ordinary legionaries without any such special preparation have been sent to every type of people with a uniform result.

They have proved themselves sufficiently equipped for the work. They are well received. They find a great deal of goodwill and an enormous ignorance about religion. The only people encountered who seem to have a positive

belief in their own religions are the members of the lunatic fringes.

The legionaries are able to deliver the Catholic message, to interest people, to elicit promises, and definitely to get a certain number of conversions. Truly, as the Gospel says, the fields of the world are white for harvesting.

Take the eminent adventure described in one of the issues of *Maria Legionis* under the title 'A Foray for Souls'. It was to a region where there was no Catholicism and where bigotry might have been expected to be found. Yet see the extraordinary success of the project and therefore the prime need for the same in all places.

Would it be possible to proceed to a radical reorganisation of the Legion throughout America – and elsewhere – on those lines of putting aside for a while the chaplaincy work in favour of going to those outside the Church? Such a manoeuvre might not prove to be as drastic as it sounds for the following reasons: Firstly, a proportion of the Catholics who fall away or are negligent do so because they do not see the Church as a worthwhile proposition. A campaign sparkling with faith and adventure would strike their imagination usefully. Secondly, that campaign would stir up the ordinary Catholics who are good, who practice, but do nothing more. They might lay aside their inertia and join in.

In other words such a campaign would be psychologically astringent as well as being in the first order of necessity. It would be a harkening to that final commandment of Our Lord; 'Go out into the whole world and give my Gospel to every man. Those who believe and are baptised shall be saved.' That peremptory motive is supplemented by the realisation that Mary is the Mother would be unreal if the legionaries do not strive to introduce Mary to every one of her children.

So I ask again: if such a suggestion as to concentrating on conversion, at least for a period, were to be issued, how would it be received by the Legion over the world?

I believe that a large proportion of the legionaries would be either anxious or be more difficult to convince the priests. I think that many of them would respond in the time-honoured formula already quoted: Do the one without doing of the easier work and the continued neglecting of the paramount work of conversion.

In all this it will of course be understood that I am only speculating. I am not challenging the existing position whereby the Legion is strictly under ecclesiastical authority. I believe that it should be and that such is part of its character. No, I am only seeking to analyse the situation. And now I go on to give that situation a wider scope than that of 'convert or not'. I want to relate it to the very existence of the Legion.

The Legion has been insisting on the headship of the priest in its apostolate. Our slogan has been: The priest must have members. As a corollary those members must give obedience and deference to the priest. Another of our watchwords has been that the Mystical Body must work as a whole. In it there must be due subordination and mutual regard. It is on these principles that the Legion is built and it promises a vast harvest if those principles are acted up to. Abundant examples are at hand to justify that promise.

Perhaps it can be said that the legionaries are universally ready to fulfil their part in the co-operation. For the Legion is initially presented to them as that sort of organisation. In entering it, they naturally accommodate themselves to its principles. Nor do they fail in actual practice, which is a wonderful feature because normal human nature

is unruly and exhibits alarming instances of religious insubordination.

A very high authority, seeking an explanation of that easy obedience of the members ascribes it to the legionary devotion to Mary. In return she imparts to them that absolutely essential element of proper religious obedience. Definitely the Legion is not failing in that department.

But sometimes those above the Legion are found wanting in regard to their part of the idea. What is offered is not reciprocated. There is disregard of the biblical instruction that the head must not say to its members: 'I need you not' (1 Cor 12:21). A bishop will not accept the Legion even though it is recommended by the Pope. Parish Priests refuse the Legion though their bishop wants it. Priests disregard the wishes of their Parish Priests in the same way.

Thereby the solemn instruction of Sections 21 and 22 of the Decree on the Lay Apostolate are derided, and the Legion is kept out of great areas of the vineyard with consequent loss of souls of what the Legion automatically gives. Furthermore, it means that all the other deadly 'isms' are effectively at work in those places while the force which would oppose them is excluded. This stages an odious situation. Reduced to rational bedrock, it means that the evil organisations are actually being supported.

That would be a bad case. Ordinarily things would be better than that. The Legion may be let in and then given casual treatment which cripples it. This happens on a wide scale. It is so manifestly contrary to the express wish of the Church as voiced by Vatican II as to make one wonder as to what extent those non-compliant ones regard themselves as bound by Catholic authority.

Can it be that this reluctant attitude on the part of a section of the Catholic authorities which caused the

council to give greater freedom to lay associations? Section 20 of the Decree on the Lay Apostolate seems to link that apostolate to the hierarchy directly and uses a phrase which is peculiar and possibly open to misinterpretation. It speaks of the laity co-operating with the hierarchy in its own way. I have to say that this appears to me quite mysterious because surely the apostolate of the faithful should come fully under the control of the bishops.

This aspect however is academic as far as the Legion is concerned for it does not seek to free itself from episcopal or priestly supervision. The Legion remains satisfied with the position established by its own rules. Here the legion has in mind two things which may in practice be only shadings of each other: Firstly, the keeping of the Legion family united to the body of the Church and to the ordinary channels of that body's authority. Secondly, the Legion principle that the priest is the 'local Christ,' 'Christ on the spot,' the immediate representative of the head of the Mystical Body. In its definitions of its outlook, the Legion has laid great emphasis on that principle which it regards as relating to its very essence.

But in this connection an acute problem presents itself. It is where a priest is adverse to the Legion or where he cannot help it. This can mean in ordinary circumstances that the Legion is not permitted to exist and that it will not be adequately substituted by other apostolic machinery. Indeed some of the organisations which would be set up instead of the Legion would have very little spirituality in them and would only concern themselves with material aims. In any case that place is cut off from what the legionary work could do for it.

I am sure that people will be surprised to learn that such is the position in regard to fifty per cent of the parishes of

Ireland. The Legion is not permitted to exist in them, the reason ordinarily given being that there is no need for it.

To what extent would that Irish proportion be typical of the whole Church? I comment that on the Continent of Europe the position is very much worse. It is hard to find a priest who will interest himself in the Legion. Will things improve in that respect in the future? It is not easy to say. I give you the following as an indication to the contrary.

Douglas Hyde told me that he gave a course to 140 seminarians in London. Every one of them was antagonistic to the Legion. Reason: that it is not relevant to the times. But this suggestion as to non-relevancy is a naïve judgement to pass on one of the most active organisations in the Church which actually afforded a pattern for Vatican II in its legislating; which was unanimously acclaimed by the Council in Session when its name was mentioned; which is already established in 1,900 dioceses or kindred ecclesiastical jurisdictions; and which – more than any other organisation – was pointed to by Section 21 of the Decree on the Lay Apostolate.

These examples of the reluctance of so many of the priests to align themselves with the Legion are not encouraging as to the future. They point to a deepening night rather than to a dawn, to the entry into an increasingly dark tunnel rather than to the emerging from one.

There can be even sadder cases than those viewed above, where an incoming priest shuts down good branches of the Legion. Take an instance which presents the position at its worst. An energetic priest went through a series of promotions. He believed intensely in the Legion and in each new place he established praesidia which performed the double work of awakening spirit in their members

and securing important apostolic results. If even a comparatively few other priests imitated this continuing process, it would not take long to transform a diocese. But what actually happened was that each successor of his promptly on arrival shut down the branches which were there. Under the Legion rules he has the power to do that.

Consideration of that position has produced the suggestion that in a case where for one reason or another, a priest is not available as spiritual director, the bishop himself should assume that office. Of course it would not be possible for the bishop to be present at the meetings but he might be able to give an occasional or token attendance. It would be the duty of the praesidium to keep him in touch with its work and to obtain his instruction in any unusual case.

In practice something like this already obtains in pure mission territory and in home lands where priests are few and areas immense. There are very many cases where a priest has a great number of praesidia, even as much as sixty, eighty or one hundred. He circulates through them and the system is working admirably. This shows the extent to which the legionaries can be developed and there is the sequel of vast numbers of conversions.

In a case just reported (Kapanga in Zaire [Democratic Republic of Congo]) a catechist was sent several years ago to an un-evangelised territory. He was an experienced legionary and he soon assembled classes and prepared them for the Church. He so represented the apostolate to them that almost automatically they became legionaries. Through them he explained the process of conversion and at a further stage the area received a resident missionary. In it there are now 100 praesidia and the conversion of the whole area is in sight.

Has this method no relation to the more advanced places?

In Canada at least one bishop in a region where the priest problem exists is attracted towards the idea of attaching all the praesidia to himself, thus permitting them to exist irrespective of the coming or going of priests and of their personal attitudes towards the Legion. This would put the Legion on a firm footing and enable it to work with continuity. This arrangement would not supersede the normal rule as to spiritual director. If a priest were available as spiritual director he would of course fall into that position as assistant to the bishop.

Could this idea not be applied in all instances where for any reason it is found difficult to give a priest as spiritual director to a praesidium, and where likewise a religious brother or a nun would not be available?

Too often it is supposed that the lay people will not carry on apostolic work unless the priest be in their midst encouraging them. Sometimes this is assumed as truth and prevents efforts to organise a praesidium. That means the permanence of a defective position where the people will not take any responsibility for the needs around them. This could work out disastrously, for there are not enough priests – and never will be – to cover the Catholic problem. If advance is going to be proportioned to the number of priests, it will be negligible. Actually the proportion of Catholics to the world population is a steadily shrinking one. We are losing ground, not gaining it. It is estimated that by the end of this century we will have sunk to five per cent of the total population. This would be a grim commentary on our title of ‘Catholic’ which means universal. Therefore a remedy must be found and the laity must be mobilised. Just to stand calmly surveying that

developing crisis would be to align oneself with the tyrant emperor Nero who sang songs to the accompaniment of his lute as he watched from a high tower the city of Rome burning.

I imagine it would be safe to say that if this problem of the shortage of priests could be solved, it would mean at least the immediate doubling of the size of the Legion in the whole world. The imagination is shaken to think what this would mean an increase of spirit among the Catholics and in conversions among the others. Yet, there it is – waiting to be evoked by a slight adjustment of our formula.

This amendment would be the addition of a sub-head to the formula to the effect that where a priest is for one reason or another not available, the spiritual directorship could be vested in the bishop.

In this there would be no violation of Legion principle. No part of the chain of authority is being left out; we are considering the case of a missing link which cannot be found and which aborts the Church's intentions. What I am suggesting as to be done is the joining of the broken ends so as to permit the legionary machinery to work and to carry spiritual impulses to places at present deprived of them by that absent connection.

In such cases the Legion would find in the bishop its immediate incorporation in the Mystical Body and its subordination to and dependence on Christ the head.

I go so far as to say that what is at stake in this matter is the implementing of the legislation of Vatican II as a whole; not alone in regard to the Decree on the Lay Apostolate but in regard to every other decree as well. For all that legislation is ultimately directed towards the People of God and has in view not merely the reversal of

that diminishing Catholic percentage but the conversion of all men.