

Whither? or Wither?

A Newman Association for the Church of the 21st Century

This article attempts to address some of the issues presently facing the Association. The solution to its problems will not all be easily found but found they must be if the Association is to survive, let alone flourish, and the efforts of both Council and Circles in this direction deserve our thanks and our support.

The topics I have tried to cover are less disconnected than might appear, since the Association can only have a meaningful existence in the context of the wider Church. Outside of that, it has no *raison d'être*.

An Intellectual ministry

May I begin by declaring my firm belief that it was not only a great pity but also a great mistake to have changed the aim of the Association from that of promoting Newman's ideal of an educated, theologically informed, reflective and articulate laity, to that of "promoting greater understanding of the Christian faith and the application of its principles to the contemporary world.". The latter could be said to be the aim of any Christian association. The Newman tries to achieve it through an essentially intellectual ministry.

Another mistaken change of direction has been the move away from the notion that the Newman was the natural place for the Catholic graduate and professional person. Of course this is not openly said and everyone, I am sure, would welcome a return to the state where it was normal for young graduates to move from the Union of Catholic Students to membership of the Association. Admittedly, not all Catholic graduates did so, but a sufficient number did for their absence now to be painfully felt.

The existence of a Newman circle in university towns, and especially when the links between the University Catholic Society and the Newman were strong, undoubtedly played a major part in encouraging this other "graduation". Nor was this at the expense of involvement in and contribution to the active life of the parishes in which the members lived.

Since Vatican II

Vatican II undoubtedly brought about many welcome improvements in the life of the Church here in England and Wales. The level of education of the diocesan clergy is generally higher than it was fifty years ago, with graduates the norm rather than the exception, and we cannot but be grateful for the valuable contribution made by converts from the Anglican clergy. The introduction of the permanent diaconate has, by and large, enriched the life of parishes, while the increasing number of extraordinary ministers of the sacraments has made an enormous difference to the lives of the sick and housebound. Another liturgical advance, a return in fact to ancient custom, is the widespread, if not yet universal, practice of exchanging the peace at Mass, whether by embrace or handshake. The anomaly of a chaste and vestigial kiss of peace between two or three celibate male priests, and then only at High Mass, is finally ended.

On a different level was the setting up of Parish Councils as a means of implementing the Council's desire to bring about genuine dialogue within the Church. Admittedly not every parish in the country has one and where they exist they function with

varying degrees of success, the reasons for which deserve separate treatment. Sadly, deanery councils are far fewer, diocesan councils number only three and there is as yet no national council. There has been no shortage of encouraging messages from the bishops but with little or no follow-up. In the early 1970s there was a Lay International Congress which met only once.

The 1980 National Pastoral Congress of England and Wales led to the Bishop's Report entitled *The Easter People*. Despite stirring phrases like "the Church that speaks its mind", it was followed by a resounding silence, while a National Conference on Education was promised but never took place. The Bishops' document, *The Signs We Give*, on collaborative ministry, despite its merits was not followed up, largely it seems for want of genuine leadership and good interrelationship skills among clergy and bishops. (see Ianthe Pratt, *The Search for Renewal over Fifty Years, The Newman*, issue 79, January 2010).

Protesting voices on these and other matters have from time to time been raised, but generally speaking even the dissenters have been obedient to the episcopal will, and this despite the precedent established at the Nuremberg trials that obedience to authority is no defence against the charge of wrongful action or inaction. Changes could have been brought about if graduates and professional people had organised themselves into a vocal and active body. Sadly, save in a few instances, they failed to do so, yet it is evident that the Bishops listened and acted in the McCabe affair in 1967-68, and after the large-scale Teach-In over freedom of speech quoted in Pratt (Journal, *loc.cit*). For all that, Charles Davis's criticism in 1967 that the Church valued authority more than truth remains valid, and the continuing practice of appointing to the episcopate only those who appear likely to toe the Vatican line in all matters, with its consequent effect on the recruitment of clergy, is bound to fill a critical laity with dismay if not despair.

The Journal

The Newman, the Association's journal, has many excellent articles and deserves to reach a wider readership, especially in the national Catholic Press. Good though it is to know that it is sent to the editors of most if not all Catholic newspapers and journals, I would suggest that it would be valuable to send them also a personal letter highlighting the interesting items in *The Newman* which are not to be found elsewhere and saying how pleased we would be if they could quote these items with the appropriate attribution to the Association.

Anyone who remembers the days when we had a central office in Portman Square will agree that it was a hive of activity which the Association has sorely missed. If is unrealistic to hope that benefactors may be found to provide the cost of premises, has the Association exhausted all other possible solutions? It would only take one person to run the office with voluntary support from members, to the great benefit of the Association.

Recruitment

Membership is low (less than 1,000) and the suggestion in the President's report that it is satisfactory sounds little short of complacent. How young graduates are to be recruited remains a major problem. I am not alone in thinking that the 30-year-old graduate is more likely to appreciate the value of the Newman than do those aged 21. The latter tend to be impatient of the formalities of committees and constitutions, etc.,

and prefer small house groups to anything larger. They are also concerned with starting a career and all that goes with it. At thirty they are likely to be more settled and to recognise both what the Newman could give them and what they could give to the Association and the Church. But how do we identify and reach them, other than by word of mouth and the journal?

The Graduate in the Parish

In an article I wrote for the *The Newman* a few years ago, (*The Redeemed Intellect*, issue 76, January 2009), I referred to the university chaplaincy as “The Last Chance Saloon.” Over many years of association with undergraduates I have frequently thought that for Catholics at the university their experience of the Church there - chaplaincy Mass, Catholic Society activities (increasingly directed towards the poor, the homeless and the aged), probably a fair degree of autonomy in the organising of things and certainly a very collaborative relationship with their pastor, etc. etc. - is almost certainly still, for many, very different from life in their home parish, and indeed in whatever parish they will move into when they leave. And I have thought, also not for the first time, that doubtless university chaplains could usefully talk to their undergraduate flock about the different atmosphere they may well encounter in whatever parish they frequent after graduation. This is not simply in order to prepare them mentally or emotionally for the change, but to equip them to deal positively with it.

So far, nothing very original in all that, I agree. But then I have gone on to muse that with the steady increase in the numbers of Catholics attending university since the 1950s, and therefore with more and more young Catholics having experienced a level and quality of community religious life (in the broadest sense) quite different from, and arguably superior to, what they had hitherto encountered, one would expect to see some effect on parish life across the country, and in Church affairs generally, as well as in public and civic life. From my fairly limited experience in this part of the world I see very little evidence of any significant or measurable contribution, though no doubt it must happen in some places.

It seems to me a matter of particular interest and importance in view of the ever-decreasing number of clergy, and of the opportunities for positive responses to the challenge of all this in the next millennium. It is uncomfortable but salutary to observe that the Third World has seized these opportunities much better than we in Europe have done. In the light of this, all the hand-wringing and despair in the pastoral letters of some former diocesan bishops is all the more depressing and shocking.

Adult education

That said, it must be recognised that, at diocesan and national level, many university-educated Catholics have made a significant contribution as advisors, commission members, Church employees, adult educators, etc. Some years ago, our national chaplain, Fr. Fabian Radcliffe, wrote an article for *Priests and People* entitled ‘*A Church for Adults*’. Without wishing to reduce the importance of the catechesis of children, I think we are increasingly in a situation resembling that of the early Church – e.g. the Christians in Corinth - while retaining to a great extent the *habits* of an age when all the faithful were treated like children. And after all, the raising of children aims at helping them to become fully adult, not at their remaining infantile. I am reminded of something Herbert McCabe said all of fifty years ago, about the liturgy being for adults

not for children – I oversimplify of course.

There is in the Church a need for real adult education, which means among other things, equipping the clergy with at least a basic knowledge of the theory and practice of adult education. It may be too much to hope that time and resources can be found to equip clergy in post, but it is surely a must for those in training.

Before I retired from university teaching I had the good fortune to supervise a Ph.D. student, Sheila Hunter, whose thesis, *Adult Christian Education: the role of the clergy and authorised lay ministers* (it was written from an Anglican perspective) concluded that “the current (1994) theological education for lay and ordained ministers does not adequately prepare them for their role as educators of adults and that in spite of the initial clarity which ministers displayed concerning the purpose of Christian education, subsequent planning, implementation and evaluation of adult Christian education in the parishes is such that it is unlikely to meet, in any consistent way, the life-long educational needs of Christians”. I thought at the time that the potential spin-off of her thesis for all churches, not least our own, was enormous. Sadly, nothing seems to have come of it.

Dr Hunter went on to make some recommendations for improving the situation, one of which was the restoration of the status of the teaching ministry in the Church which was recognised in the New Testament, in much the same way as the healing ministry is now recognised (in some areas). Another was for lay and ordained ministers to train together (entirely or in part) which would also enhance the notion of shared ministry and increase the level of communication and cooperation between trainers and between trained. There are signs in our own Church that the various gifts which individuals bring to the life of the Church should be given recognition as a ministry. (Cf St Paul on the varied gifts of the members of the Church as parts of the body of Christ) As clergy numbers shrink, perhaps this is an opportune time to consider ways in which the notion of a shared ministry and increased levels of communication and cooperation between the ordained and the laity could be fruitfully developed.

Finally it is worth mentioning another, related, issue. When I was lecturing in education I was struck by the increasingly wide acceptance of the idea that education is concerned essentially with developing the *rational* capacity of humans, which I suspect was due to the influence of the educational philosophers Hirst and Peters. When applied to moral education, for example, it implied that only the highly intelligent could be good. While we want an educated laity, as Newman did, we also want a good (i.e. saintly) laity, which doesn't depend entirely (if it depends at all) on the level of schooling they have had. Indeed, one of the problems which adult educators are well aware of is that of adults whose basic education (literacy included) is minimal. Perhaps the skills required to educate them are even more necessary but also more difficult to acquire.

Philip Bagguley

Philip Bagguley is a former chaplain to the University of Nottingham and the Nottingham Newman Circle, and a retired lecturer in education in the University of Nottingham.

Author's Note: I have drawn upon a number of valuable ideas and comments made at various times by Anthony Spencer (director of the Pastoral Research Council), Eric Poyser (a former president of the Association) and Fr. Fabian Radcliffe O.P., our national chaplain. To them I extend my thanks.