"A Church in dire need"

by John Haldane

Beset by secular critics, the abuse scandal, a decline in Mass. attendance and a fall in vocations, the Catholic Church in Britain is suffering a crisis of confidence. It is a moment, says a leading Catholic intellectual, for a bold initiative.

In 2005 I wrote an article in The Tablet entitled "The waiting game". In the course of it I proposed that "the most significant aspect of the Catholic mind in Britain is the sense of people waiting for things to happen". Seven years later this remains the case, but now the Catholic mind is more confused, its mood more anxious and its concerns more urgent.

In the sixteenth century, an effort was made by religious reformers to purge Great Britain of Roman Catholicism. Two centuries later, an intellectual movement, the Enlightenment, launched a new anti-religious polemic, then directed not against the Church of Rome in particular but against Christian Churches generally.

More recently, this second revolution has been invoked by commentators and others keen to complete the work of de-evangelisation, and it is largely targeted on the Catholic Church. The immediate casus belli are first, the Church's opposition to gay marriage and second, and of longer standing, the existence of (state-supported) Catholic schools. Insofar as other Christian Churches are generally less clear in their position on gay marriage and other neuralgic social issues, or are explicitly liberal with regard to them, and since they are less involved in or committed to denominational education, it is perhaps unsurprising that the secular attack is focused on Catholicism.

But there is, I think, another reason, which is that there is a new popular anti-Catholicism, possibly a folk memory of the scandalous legends promoted by Protestant polemicists, but independently of that it is prompted by the frequently renewed disgrace of clergy abuse.

The upshot is that the Church is challenged from above by liberal secular humanists in the press, the professions and among the political class; and from below by a population that has come to associate Catholicism with priestly child abuse compounded by deceitful protection of the perpetrators. Now, with the revelations about Jimmy Savile, the association is reaching beyond the clergy to the laity.

There is little point in trying to counter this, other than by example. The association of perversion and corruption will remain for the next 20 or 30 years. Protesting that the incidence of abuse by priests is statistically not much different to that of other groups who have contact with children will not help. If priestly formation, sacramental service and prayer do not bear finer fruits, then this only encourages the sense of gracelessness, and the possibility of godlessness.

There is need of a better response, made necessary also by the collapse in vocations. Until the 1960s, the priesthood was, for many, the only viable route to education, non-manual employment and social standing. That has all changed and while there has been a marked improvement in the quality of, now often late vocations, there was a long period during which a decline in the numbers presenting themselves for priestly formation led to the admission of problematic candidates, escapees from the challenges of reality.
Whether measured by adherence or participation, the Catholic Church is in decline. The causes include quite general factors that have taken a similar toll on other forms of association, such as political parties, trade unions and clubs: multi-channel TV, computer games, the internet and socialising fuelled by cheap alcohol.

But there are also specific influences, including a loss of contact with the clergy and a loss of trust in them, plus lifestyles among the laity that are clearly at odds with Catholic moral teaching and which lead to avoidance of the Church. Along with this decline in numbers has gone a rise in materialism marked at one level by an implicit adoption of a general consumerist culture, and at another by the politicisation of religious thought and behaviour. The latter comes in two forms: "conservative" and "progressive" and although each opposes the other, they are united in seeking recognition and influence. The "conservative" version is nostalgic and slavish; the "progressive" variant is faithless and craven in its desire for secular acceptance.

These dispositions often display corruption of conscience, excusing among one's own what one would condemn in one's opponents, an inordinate dependence upon real or conceived approbation, and a lack of charity with regard to the motives and actions of those with whom one disagrees.

There is also, more profoundly, a displacement of the attention that is due to God being given to moral causes: the "conservative" battling against abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality; the "progressive" campaigning against world poverty, gender inequality and traditional sexual morality. Pelagianism always was, and remains, the principle Catholic temptation.

A great deal could and needs to be said about these tendencies, but for now I wish to return to the matter of the priesthood and Church leadership. As regards the latter, it is essential that the laity plays a greater role not in the guise of para-clerics but because of its education, expertise and experience - and on account of the fact that it constitutes the bulk of the Church. On a vessel battered by rising waves, leaking along its length and underskilled and undermanned, it is worse than foolish not to call able bodies to the bridge.

So far as the priesthood is concerned, I shall compensate for brevity by directness. The time is overdue to admit married men to (shortened) formation and ordination. The faithful laity face the prospect of fewer churches and yet fewer priests. The priests themselves are service-weary and often confused, anxious and unwilling to address personally problematic matters. Whatever the challenges of securing a change, and then of implementing, it, priests and people have a common interest in making the case not for allowing clergy to marry but for admitting the married to the clerical state. This implies two routes: celibates and married, with no opportunity for marriage or re-marriage once ordained (as is the case with permanent deacons), and, for reasons of exclusive commitment, only the celibate should be bishops.

This is not a case of simply increasing the number of clergy, nor is it an easy way to solve the decline invocations, Rather, a married contingent can better resemble and reassemble the faithful and speak to people of what they know about their needs and difficulties. Married priests could also speak to celibates from within the brotherhood of the ordained. Even if it were only for the sake of providing a compelling argument against this proposal, the matter should be addressed as the Synod of Bishops, currently gathered in Rome, reflects on the challenge of the New Evangelisation.

The crisis deepens and still we are waiting. Let it not be said of the synod, "We hear men speaking for us of new laws strong and sweet, Yet is there no man speaketh as we speak in the street."