

The Catholic Church on the Eve of the Millennium

Talk Given by Dr Eamonn Duffy on Wednesday 27th October 1999 to the International Conference on Benedictine Education.

Fr Christopher asked me to offer something which might have relevance for Benedictine educators contemplating the end of this century and millennium, and looking forward to the demands of the next.

I want therefore to reflect with you on Catholic identity, Catholic tradition, and the relation between them for the future. And I want to begin with two novels.

The first is a story first published in the USA in 1959, Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. It is a science fiction novel, about the rebuilding of world civilisation after a new dark age, brought on by nuclear war. In the aftermath of that war the world had turned its back on technology and science, and most of the scientists had been lynched. The novel focusses on a Roman Catholic Religious order, the Order of St Leibowitz, which had arisen out of conflict dedicated to the preservation and copying of the remnants of the world's scientific learning: monks in the great desert fortress monastery (somewhere in Arizona I would guess) copy and illuminate elaborate symbolic diagrams which, we realise but they do not, are electrical circuit charts and machine blue-prints. As the world had collapsed in nuclear ruins, the church survived, though Rome was liquidated and the papacy is now established in New Rome, somewhere in America. The monks preserve Christian civilisation in a world roamed by cannibalistic desert mutants and ruled by robber barons. But in due course there is a new Renaissance, and a new scientific revolution, in which the monastery's precious scientific archive plays its part: however the world makes all the same mistakes, and once more human pride and sin precipitate nuclear war: as the novel closes, the monks of St Leibowitz set off for the stars in a spaceship aboard which are a group of cardinals who will elect the next pope: behind them, nuclear winter once more descends on the world of the fifth millennium.

Miller's book, one of the best Science Fiction novels ever written, is a witty and moving meditation on the difference between knowledge and wisdom, and on the relation of the Church to human culture, as that relationship was understood in an essentially Augustinian framework, in the era of Pius XII but also of Christopher Dawson. Everything in the novel changes, except the desperate sinfulness of the human heart, and the ancient of abiding certainties of the church and her liturgy: at the end of the fourth Millennium the liturgy is still in Latin and the forms of the monastic and Christian life are exactly as they had been in 1959, down to the bishop's buskins. Miller's grand vision of the collapse and flux of human society through millennia betrays not the slightest premonition of the flux and transformation which, in 1959, the year of the novel's first publication, was about to

Badia Primaziale S. Anselmo
Piazza Cavaleiiri di Malta, 5
00153 Roma (RM)

Tel: +39 06 57 91 252
Fax: +39 06 57 91 374
www.anselmianum.com



transform the Catholic Church itself: for Miller, the church was the one certain constant in a world perpetually falling apart.

My second novel is David Lodge's "How Far Can you Go?". Published in 1980, it is the most painfully funny evocation of what it was like to be a young University-educated Catholic in Britain in the 1960's and 70's. It opens with an early morning mass set in the gaunt London church of our Lady and St Jude (hopeless causes, a nice touch!) on St Valentine's day 1952, attended by the group of London University students who will form the dramatis personae of the book. Most of them are the products of intensely Catholic backgrounds, soaked in and acquiescent to the minutiae of Catholic teaching and sub-cultural peculiarity, (hinted at in the depressing grey drizzle through which they have struggled to mass), and the opening pages of the novel read like a crash course in some of the more exotic features of Catholicism as then understood - in half a chapter we are introduced to transubstantiation, holidays of obligation, works of supererogation, the difference between mortal and venial sin, the Rosary, plenary indulgences, purgatory, and the almost permanently tormented state of a pubescent young Catholic male's conscience.

The novel culminates a generation later with the televising of an experimental mid-seventies Easter Vigil, organised by a group called COC ("Catholics for an Open Church") in which whiterobed charismatic nuns dance on a College playing field as the sun rises, a Latin American theologian in a combat jacket preaches revolution, and a voice-over by a well-meaning but slightly bewildered young priest, soon to leave the priesthood for a PhD in sociology and marriage to a secretary, expresses doubts about the resurrection. An anonymous commentator - is it Lodge himself? - sums up the changes which the book has chronicled.

"Many things have changed - attitudes to authority, sex, worship, other Christians, other religions. But perhaps the most fundamental change is one that the majority of Catholics themselves are scarcely conscious of. It's the fading away of the traditional Catholic metaphysic - that marvellously complex and ingenious synthesis of theology and cosmology and casuistry, which situated individual souls on a kind of spiritual Snakes and Ladders board, motivated them with equal doses of hope and fear, and promised them, if they persevered in the game, an eternal reward. The board was marked out very clearly, decorated with all kinds of picturesque motifs, and governed by intricate rules and provisos. Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, Limbo. Mortal venial and original sin. Angels, devils, saints, and Our Lady Queen of Heaven. Grace, penance, relics, indulgences and all the rest of it. Millions of Catholics no doubt still believe in all that literally. But belief is gradually fading. That metaphysic is no longer taught in schools and seminaries in the more advanced countries, and Catholic children are growing up knowing little or nothing about it. Within another generation or two it will have disappeared, superseded by something less vivid but more tolerant."

"How Far Can You Go?" is of course fiction, but its analysis of the psychological, social, and intellectual upheavals which underlie the comic dilemmas of Lodge's characters, caught in the flux of modernity and the dissolution of inherited Catholic certainties, is very shrewd, and still touches a nerve. Lodge's point, returned to in a number of his books, is that the Catholic metaphysic was inseparable from the tight web of Catholic practice. Apparently timeless certainties, the "Faith of our Fathers" dimension of Catholicism, had actually turned out to be part of a package deal, wound into and in part dependent for credibility on a set of cultural practices and attitudes which have now gone or are going as irrevocably as the demise of the dinosaurs. This Catholic culture was vivid, and often endearing - it is evoked in the football scores of the Catholic youth-clubs in South London in

the 50s in Lodge's novel *Therapy* - "Immaculate Conception 2, Precious Blood 1 Perpetual Succour 3, Forty Martyrs, nil", but it was part of the life of a community whose history of disadvantage and discrimination, and whose strong (almost 50%) first, second or third-generation Irish component, combined to give it a distinctive and strongly defined sense of separate identity, one of whose most effective means of growth was by the conversion of the partners in "mixed marriages". In Lodge's admittedly highly-coloured portrayal, Catholicism on the eve of the Council was not a set of opinions one adopted, it was a community and a way of life one signed up for.

But it was a way of life which, though it seemed immemorial, was actually a cultural construct, the product of a network of specific circumstances. In the 1950s, it was in England at least a community on the crest of a wave of self-confidence and success. The Catholic Church throughout Britain was one of the principal beneficiaries of the Butler Education Act of 1944. In the twenty-five years after the Second World War Catholic schools, into which the community poured heroic quantities of effort and money (arguably to the detriment of other equally crucial aspects of its life), would be transformed, and a swelling wave of pupils from the Catholic schools would flood on into the Universities: (in Northern Ireland, admittedly a special case, these new graduates would include a future Booker Prize nominee and a Nobel Laureate for literature). The Community itself was growing, the estimated Catholic population of England and Wales moving rapidly towards 4,000,000, baptisms topping 100,000 a year, adult conversions (many of them by people "marrying in") touching 15,000. The seminaries and religious orders were packed, and ambitious new building programmes were adopted to accommodate the boom.

Yet despite all that, the Anglophone Catholic Churches in England, Ireland, America and Australia, as Miller's *Canticle for Leibowitz* suggests, were by and large ill-prepared for the Council. Most of their post-war leaders were practical men, whose intellectual culture was culled from second-rate Roman text-books, for whom theology was a bore, and for whom liturgy was rubrics, something one memorised from the pages of Fortescue-O'Connell. In England, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, John Carmel Heenan, was not unrepresentative - a gifted man and a charismatic pastor,

He was, however, on his own admission someone who "had never had a serious doubt in his life" and he was temperamentally and intellectually ill-equipped to steer the community through the theological white water of the sixties and early seventies.

The Council profoundly changed the orientation of Catholic theology, ecclesiology and spirituality in a number of ways. The whole tone of its documents, and the fundamental decision to produce no new definitions or anathemas, was in itself a decisive break with what one may call the tradition of the Vatican Jeremiad. This was the spirit of confrontation, the repudiation of non-ecclesial culture, which had characterised the public utterance of the Church for more than a century: and which is summed up in documents like the *Syllabus of Errors*, in which the teaching office of the Church is understood primarily in terms of the condemnation of error, rather than the positive encouragement of truth. The shift to the vernacular in worship reintroduced into Catholic liturgical and devotional experience a decisive element of regional variety which was bound to have theological as well as pastoral implications, however carefully policed it might be. It also introduced in an acute way the question of the meaning and value of tradition - an issue I shall return to presently. Finally, the Conciliar process itself - the meetings between the bishops of the world, and between their theologians, the sense of the shared labour of the whole church and not simply the central organs of

the Papacy to discern and proclaim the Catholic faith which comes to us from the Apostles, the public experience of the whole Church, pastors and people, engaged together in learning and in changing - all this decisively and permanently shifted Catholic perception of the nature of the Church, and the role of the magisterium within it.

The Council then, left us with a very different sort of Church, far more responsive to lay expectation, far more theologically alert and diverse. Yet there were and are those who believed that this amazing and Spirit-led experience should have produced a far greater and more decisive conversion of hearts, minds, and structures, a root and branch rebirth of the Church in a "New Pentecost". If the Church was more responsive to lay expectation, that lay expectation was itself growing, and a great deal more vocal. When, not very surprisingly, a heavily clerical and authoritarian institution, its clericalism embedded in the code of Canon Law, failed to transform itself at once into a place of dialogue and partnership between laity and priesthood, sharp disillusion set in.

The sense of the failure of the years since the Council to deliver their promise - "Whatever Happened to Vatican II?" - has persisted among many of those old enough to have shared in the initial euphoria of reform in the white heat of the Conciliar years themselves,

One prominent and persistent theme of the liberal critique of the present state of the Church has been its failure adequately to absorb the characteristic values and institutions of democracy

dialogue, consultation, accountability. The pressure for greater involvement of women - and maybe their eventual ordination - derives some of its force from "democratic" rather than strictly theological arguments. Yet for many, this process of accommodation has gone disastrously too far. Those of you from outside Britain will have different experiences to bring to bear on all this, but the Catholic Church in this country is now far more at ease in the culture than it was on the eve of the Council: Catholics are to be found at every level of English life, a visible Catholic presence is mandatory at all solemn state occasions, and the once all-pervasive cultural anti-catholicism has receded. A significant indicator here is the widespread acceptance in the media and in the academic world of "revisionist" accounts of the reformation: in popular perception, the Reformation no longer seems the key stage in the creation of a British identity, but a far off battle long ago, and outside Scotland and Northern Ireland, the Reformers, as often as not, are perceived as Paisley-like men who broke a lot of lovely statues.

Yet there are many who view this rapprochement with the establishment with dismay. In "The Two Catholic Churches: a study in Oppression", a powerful and controversial book published in 1986, the (then) Dominican Antony Archer suggested that the transformations of the Church in Britain after Vatican II were a betrayal of the working class to whom on the eve of the Council the Catholic Church had unique and privileged access. The advent of a vernacular liturgy and forms of Christian involvement which placed a premium on discussion and activism, had, he thought, merely taken control of the Church away from the clergy and handed it to the articulate middle classes, who had every interest in making the Catholic Church as much like the Church of England as possible - and that, with the co-operation of a newly, professionalised clergy, was what Archer thought had happened. The Church had opted for power, acceptability and talk, and in the process had abandoned its proper constituency among the powerless and inarticulate.

Archer's attack on the actual outcome of the Conciliar reforms in England was launched from the left: he was not opposed, to change, but disliked the form the change had taken. On the right, there

were those who, quite simply, thought the faith had been betrayed, that ecumenism and doctrinal deviation were the poisoned fruits of liturgical change, and that the Council, if not the cause, was at least the occasion for a disastrous collapse of Catholic value, which had to be reversed. This point of view was less fiercely and divisively expressed in England than elsewhere, but their case drew strength from the fact that in the years since the Council the English church's post-war boom has been steadily evaporating. Though the nominal Catholic population continued to grow, the real indicators of Catholic practice began a downward spiral in the early seventies, which has continued and grown steeper, bringing the Church in this country into line with the Catholic church elsewhere in Europe. In the immediate aftermath of the Council, in England as everywhere else in the West, there was an exodus from the priesthood and (especially) the religious orders, and recruitment to the seminaries dipped. In 1968 there were almost 5,000 secular priests in England and Wales, and 2,762 ordained male religious. 1998 statistics indicate just over 4,000 secular priests and 1682 religious, with the age-profile of serving priests steadily worsening: cobwebs gather in the corridors of the seminary extensions of the early sixties. Perhaps more significantly, Mass attendance has declined: the latest figures are just over 1,111,000 each week, not much more than a quarter of the estimated Catholic population, while baptisms have shrunk to 67,000 a year, and marriages, once one of the community's principal means of recruitment, have declined to 15,500, very much less than half the 1958 figure. Onceflourishing Catholic organisations like the Children of Mary or the Union of Catholic Mothers, have nose-dived, and the religious orders, especially the active or "Apostolic" orders founded in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, have been decimated.

My figures here are derived from the English experience, but the trends they exemplify are widespread throughout the western world, and you will be able to fill them out from your own contexts. These apparent symptoms of decline are of course open to a host of interpretations. Many of them are clearly aspects of wider social change which has little to do with Catholicism as such, and even the more spectacular manifestations of decline are by no means unprecedented. Monastic recruitment has always fluctuated with shifts within the culture. The religious life seemed in near-terminal decline in England in the late fifteenth century, in France and Germany in the eighteenth century. By contrast, the nineteenth-century saw an extraordinary blossoming of religious orders, unprecedented in the whole of Christian history. Many of the missionary, teaching and nursing orders founded then were patently a Christian response to particular social conditions: they recruited young men and women from backgrounds in which economic, social, educational and, it needs to be noted, sexual opportunity were rather limited. Quite apart from any spiritual considerations, which I would certainly not wish to minimise, the religious life then, as still in the Third World, offered economic security and educational betterment for people who frequently could not have expected much in the way of economic or domestic security, and provided a culturally respected and worthwhile outlet for untapped energies and abilities. The emergence of alternative forms of opportunity as a result of the educational and social transformation of the developed world in the last couple of generations is almost a sufficient explanation for the collapse of at least the more recent and activist forms of the religious life. On this reading, the virtual disappearance of members of the post-reformation religious teaching and apostolic orders from the Catholic classroom is sufficiently accounted for and justified by the vast increase in the number of qualified lay teachers.

Almost, but not quite. The shrinkage of Catholic institutions is clearly part and parcel of a much broader unsettlement within Western society. It is not merely Catholic marriages, for example,

which are in decline, but, it would seem, the institution of marriage itself. The moral pattern imposed by the Church (slowly and with enormous difficulty) on European sexual behaviour and family structure from the early Middle Ages onwards, a process greatly stepped-up and increasingly effective after the Council of Trent, seems now to be collapsing. Later than most of the rest of the churches of the West, the Catholic Church is increasingly confronted with the need to evolve a *modus vividness* with these apparently inexorable social trends, one which can be lived by ordinary people with integrity. Marriage is above everything else a social institution, and if the Catholic Church is not to decline into being a sect for the saintly, ordinary Catholic couples cannot realistically be expected to live lives untouched by the social and sexual expectations and mores of the culture as a whole. As every priest and bishop knows only too well, the tragically large and growing number of Catholics in irregular unions is both an indicator of the way in which the values of society shape the lives and perceptions of Christians and also, in pastoral terms a ticking time-bomb, which by one means or another is going to have to be defused if it is not to decimate the Catholic community and, more importantly, deprive thousands of people of the support and light they need.

The Church of course is called to transform cultures, not merely to accommodate itself to them. A Christianity whose moral and social behaviour is not much more than a sanctified version of even the best secular morality of the culture is clearly in trouble, especially when that culture itself patently lacks any consensus about an agreed (much less an objective) code of morality, and in which the fundamental moral good is the market "virtue" of choice. The experience of other Christian Churches, in which this process of cultural accommodation is more advanced than in our own, is not encouraging on this score. That perception certainly informs the tough pastoral line adopted by the Vatican on issues of family and sexual morality, as it does the more general stiffening of Roman attitudes towards doctrinal and organisational diversity within the Catholic Church which has been so notable and growing a feature of the pontificate of John Paul II. For the last twenty years and over a wide range of issues, the Vatican has increasingly used the weapon of authority to attempt to halt what it sees as a process of secularisation within the Church. This response is part of a wider conservative analysis of the plight of Christianity at the end of the millennium, which sees in the "liberalisation" of Catholic doctrinal and moral attitudes since the Council a disastrous capitulation to the secular values of the Enlightenment. For the Vatican, of course, these developments represent a distortion of the real teaching of the Council. At its most hard-nosed, however, this conservative analysis sees the root of this accommodation within the Conciliar documents themselves, especially in "Gaudium et Spes" and the "dialogue with the world" which "Gaudium et Spes" initiated and legitimated, and which has provided the theological rationale for some of the most notable developments in theology and in Catholic social and political involvement over the last generation. All this despite the fact that the present pope was one of the key figures in the drafting of "Gaudium et Spes".

The attempt to close down particular lines of thought by the simple exercise of authority, ecclesiastical muscle in the service of uniformity, has an unhappy history in this century. In our society, in any case, it has little chance of success, and no Catholic in their right mind would want a rerun of the anti-modernist witch-hunts which were encouraged by Pope St Pius X, or the unedifying harassment of great (and holy) theologians like de Lubac and Congar which disgraced the later years of the pontificate of Pius XII. One of the dispiriting things about the publication a year or so ago of "Ad Tuendum Fidem" and the accompanying commentary from the CDF has been the likelihood that it will trigger yet another game of ecclesiastical cowboys and indians, in which opposing elements

within the church demonise each other, and in which the exercise and acceptance of authority on the one hand, and the preservation of theological integrity on the other, are perceived as being at odds. In such opposition, there is a tendency to describe those who call for the strong exercise of authority, and the end of debate, as "traditionalists", and that usage should alert us to something which has gone badly wrong within the Church since the Council.

Any Catholic who lived through the 1960s and 70s will recall the orgy of destruction of the immediate past which took place in the name of the Council - the gutting ("reordering") of venerable buildings, the destruction or discarding of vestments, statues, pictures, the scattering of libraries - precisely the aspects of Catholicism which, in Miller's *Canticle for Leibowitz*, are used as potent symbols of the Church's stability in the midst of the flux of the saeculum - "stat crux dum volvitur orbis". This sort of psychic evacuation is really a form of exorcism, and it is a feature of any cultural revolution. It may be that something of the sort was a necessary act of liberation for a community which had inherited a past that sat heavy upon it, inhibiting fresh development. The surest way of damning and dismissing any idea, institution or emphasis in those years was to say that it was "pre-Conciliar", as if the Council had invented the Gospel, and as if the test of Christian authenticity was radical discontinuity with the Christian past. Of course, much that was then discarded was indeed worthless or tacky, and much that posed as "traditional" was in fact the product of the quite recent past. It is now possible to see, however, just how wholesale and indiscriminate this communal repudiation of the past was, and in a Church which claims to set, a high theological value on tradition and continuity, this is a mystery which needs explanation.

It is a mystery, because by and large in the past Catholic theologians advocating change, even radical change, have been as anxious to invoke the notion of tradition as have those seeking to maintain the status quo. At the heart of the "New Theology" of De Lubac, Congar and the other theological midwives of the Council, was a passionate call to rediscover the tradition. They set about freeing the church from the narrow straitjacket of a debased nineteenth-century neo-scholasticism by opening up the riches of the deep tradition of the Church, in the scriptures, the liturgy, the Fathers. For them the past was, not a sterile cul-de-sac to be escaped from, but an inexhaustible well of Christian experience and wisdom, which liberated theology and the Christian imagination by demonstrating how diverse, subtle, endlessly inventive the Church has been, and is called to be, in her journey through time.

Within ultramontane Catholicism, however, the notion of tradition had been in danger of narrowing to mean little more than the current Roman theology. Pio Nono's notorious 1870 aphorism "I am the tradition", was a telling reflection of the day-to-day reality of an increasingly powerful central authority, which strangled Catholic theology (and episcopal teaching) for a century. Most of the citations in the (rejected) draft declaration of faith drawn up for the Second Vatican Council by the Holy Office under Cardinal Ottaviani, for example, were from the writings and speeches of Pius XII and his immediate predecessors: no church document earlier than the Council of Trent was cited, and there were no quotations from scripture. Tradition had shrunk from being a cathedral of the spirit to a store-room in the cellars of the Holy Office.

The Conciliar reforms did a great deal to correct this sterile and authoritarian notion of tradition, to recover a sense of the variety and richness of the Christian past as a resource for the Christian present. But a good deal of the emphasis in liturgical, theological and catechetical work since the Council was without a solid grounding in theology, and represented a search for immediacy or

authenticity of experience, rather than attentive encounter with the diversity, depth and wisdom of the tradition. The effects of this are evident in any hymnbook, but they are visible even in the texts of the liturgy themselves. The Collect at Mass for Trinity Sunday, for example, resoundingly declares that , in sending into the world "the Word of Truth and the Spirit of Sanctification", God "has declared" ("declarasti") his own wonderful mystery - the whole prayer is an address to God praising him for his amazing and gracious self-revelation. Characteristically, the ICEL version switched this emphasis round, from God's self-giving, to our receiving - "declarasti" was "translated" not as "you have declared" but "we come to know".

The equation of tradition with external and oppressive authority, the dead hand of an unmeaning past, meant that the implementation of Conciliar reform often took the form of the stripping away or abandonment of the externals of Catholicism. It was widely felt that we had fiddled around with rules and regulations too long, when what was needed was largeness of spirit, a focus on essentials. At the time, it seemed easy to tell them apart, to eliminate the inessential. It became a widely accepted axiom that no observance could be truly sincere and meaningful if it were obligatory. As a result, some of the most ancient and eloquent expressions of Christian identity were simply abandoned as so much unmeaning lumber. Though the obligation to perform some penitential act on Fridays remains in theory, for example, in reality Catholics are now without any meaningful discipline of fasting and abstinence, a break with universal Christian practice for two thousand years, and with the practice of Israel for centuries before Christ. Christianity's most ancient and resonant communal act of identification with the passion, of solidarity with the hungry, and of acknowledgement of our own frailty , became a mere devotional option, and in practice has all but disappeared.

The effective abandonment of fasting and abstinence as a communal observance rather than a private option was just one example of the sort of "ritual decentering" which has characterised the life of the Church in the years after the Council. That decentering is certainly a contributory element to the more general loosening of the Catholic community's hold on Christian value, and its accommodation to the secular world around it. Social anthropologists like Professor Mary Douglas in her marvellous and seminal book "Natural Symbols" sounded the alarm about the naivete of this retreat from symbol, and emphasised the indispensable role of external observance in the maintenance of religious value-systems, but it is a warning which has gone largely unheeded. The Church has increasingly accommodated itself to the rhythms, and hence the beliefs and values of the society around it, with such apparently benign measures as the shrinking of the ritual calendar, the displacement of holidays of obligation to the nearest Sunday, and the desacralisation of Sunday itself. All these moves can be perfectly sensibly justified in terms of practicality and convenience. But their cumulative effect is the elimination of more and more of the remaining expressions what one may call ritual resistance without which it seems impossible to maintain the larger counter-cultural values of Catholic Christianity, in what the pope has called a culture of death.

And it is here, it seems to me, that a monastically rooted and inspired education has at this turn of the millennium a prophetic value for the Church, the importance of which can hardly be exaggerated. Our culture sets an enormous value on the quick fix, the instant delivery of information, the packaging of everything in bite-sized - or sound-bite sized - parcels. Anything complex is too complex, anything difficult is too difficult, anything which does not yield its meaning immediately is fit only for the scrap heap.

it is my conviction that these assumptions have entered disastrously deeply into the mentality of the Church too: they pervade much of our thinking about preaching, catechesis, the structure of the liturgy itself, and they are the opposite of the ruminative, meditative work of the monastic liturgy, and the practice of *Lectio Divina*, the slow, reflective brooding over the tradition, which must surely underlay the education offered in monastic schools. The Church has never needed so urgently the sort of deep grounding in its inherited wisdom, seen not as a straightjacket but as a resource-pack. Over the last few years I have been much concerned with reflection on the recent history of the liturgy, and I hope you will forgive me if I take five minutes to illustrate what I take to be the crisis of tradition in which I believe the Church find itself by looking at an aspect of the dumbing down and silencing of the tradition in a place which affects every single practising Catholic, the prayers of the Mass.

Let us take as an example the beautiful collect for the eleventh Sunday in ordinary time

Deus in te sperantium fortitudo, invocationibus

nostris adesto propitius,

et, quia sine te nihil potest mortalis infirmitas,

gratiae tua praesta semper auxilium,

ut, in exsequendis mandatis tuis,

et voluntate tibi et actione placeamus.

This is an architypical Roman prayer, with its massive insistence on the trustworthiness of God, and the corresponding frailty of human nature, and its paradoxical combination of an insistence on

our helplessness without grace , with a call to the service of God in will and in action. The version Archbishop Cranmer made for the Book of Common Prayer captures its meaning and movement almost perfectly.

O God, the strength of all them that put their trust in thee,

mercifully accept our prayers;

and because through the weakness of our mortal nature

we can do no good thing without thee,

grant us the help of thy grace,

that in keeping thy commandments we may please thee,

both in will and deed:

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And here, by contrast, is the version in the missals currently in use.

Almighty God, our hope and our strength,

without you we falter.

Help us to follow Christ and to live according to your will.

The inadequacy and inaccuracy of this as a translation almost beggars belief, but there is more here than ineptitude. At every point in the prayer the insistence of the original on the impotence for good of unaided human nature, and on the primacy of grace, is weakened or downright contradicted. God is not "the strength of them that put their trust in thee", but, much more vaguely, "our hope and our strength": strength is not seen here as proceeding from hope, but they are parallel qualities. The stern insistence of the original that without God "mortal frailty can do nothing" - "nihil potest mortalis infirmitas", becomes the feeble "without you we falter". Grace is no longer even mentioned, the strong phrase "auxilium gratiae" becoming simply "help us", while the reference to the following of the commandments is edited out, being replaced by a phrase about "following Christ" which has no warrant in the original. The insistence of the original that the external following of the commandments, under grace, can become not merely an external obedience, but a means of pleasing God "both in will and in deed", is thus totally lost, the pairing of our actions and will becoming blurred into an unfocussed reference to the will of God. In short, a magnificently balanced Augustinian meditation on the dialectic of grace and obedience becomes a vague and semi-pelagian petition for help in case we falter.

Behind many of these changes you can see quite clearly the influence of some of the more facile aspects of the theological ethos of the late sixties and early seventies. Even when these tendencies don't go as far in a pelagian direction as in the examples I've just been considering, they are ubiquitous, and the overall effect is the emptying out of the theological tension which is so creative and exhilarating a feature of the ancient Roman collects. Take finally the Gregorian prayer which is now the collect for the twelfth Sunday of ordinary time.

Sancti nomini tui, Domine,

Timorem pariter et amorem fac nos habere perpetuum,

quia numquam tua gubernatione destituis,

quos in soliditate tuae dilectionis instituis.

This is a wonderful prayer, one of the most carefully balanced of all the collects of the Missal, but for that very reason, it is fiendishly difficult to translate. A rough translation might run as follows

Grant us, Lord, not only a constant fear of your Holy Name,

but also a constant love of it

for you leave no-one without your guidance

whom you have firmly established in your love.

There are several weaknesses in my version: "Grant us" does not sufficiently convey the starkness of "fac nos habere" - "make us to have", with its strong insistence on God's initiative and the overwhelming nature of his grace, which always achieves his ends. In addition, the word "gubernatio" is far more eloquent in Latin than "guidance" is in English. The latin word is primarily associated with the helmsman of a ship, so that a better version might be "you leave no-one rudderless" - the whole image is one of rescue from aimlessness and loss by God's steady hand at the helm, or the contrast between the solid grounding which the love of God gives us, in contrast to the aimless rise and fall of a ship adrift. Nevertheless, I hope my version brings out some of the excellencies of the prayer. As will be evident, it turns on a play between the concepts of love and

fear, and behind the prayer there hover a whole host of biblical echoes - Psalm 111/9-10, "Holy and terrible is his name, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom", 1 John 4, 16-18, "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God ... there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear", Ephesians 3/17 "being rooted and grounded in love", and so on. Notice, it is absolutely essential for the meaning of the prayer that both fear and love should be explicitly played off against each other, for the prayer moves from the fear of God's holy name, to the greater and more wonderful reality of the love of that name, that is, of God himself, and to the fact that our salvation, our sense of direction and of being held and guided by God, springs not from fear, appropriate as fear might be before the majesty of his Name, but from his saving mercy in establishing us in his love. With all these points noted, let us turn to the 1973 version.

Father, guide and protector of your people,
grant us an unfailing respect for your name,
and keep us always in your love.

Once again, this is a fiasco: the translators have sabotaged the prayer because they have clearly shied away from the idea of the fear of the Lord. This unpleasant concept is simply not allowed into the prayer, becoming instead "unfailing respect", a laughably limp rendering. Impeccable liberal sentiments are at work here, ushering away the notion that God might be fearsome, blinding the translator to the power of the prayer, which urges its hearers to pass beyond fear, to the real foundation of our hope, the love of God. In what appears to be a foolish attempt to tidy up the prayer by getting rid of unpleasant pre-conciliar notions like the fear of God, the translator has missed the profounder theological insight and poise of the original, which goes beyond well-meaning liberalism to a wondering sense of the graciousness of God who establishes us, beyond all fear, in his love. The result in the translation is a prayer of stupefying blandness and emptiness.

I have dwelt on these prayers because they seem to me prime examples of the multilayered depth and richness of the Christian tradition. These prayers do not and were never intended to yield all their meaning on a single hearing: their effect is organic, slow-release, they yield their wisdom only as they are repeated year by year, reflected on, prayed. But the ICEL versions go instead for vague, slick and shallow equivalents, easy to grasp and by the same token barely worth grasping.

And that seems to me a paradigm for the difference between a Christian understanding of wisdom and the quick-fix, media-dominated communication culture we inhabit. I do not know how we persuade or prevent ourselves and our children from swapping their birthright of wisdom for a mess of instant access pottage, but I am certain that to do so should be one of prime objectives of any Christian educator.

The monastic life seems to me, among other things, a standing witness against the forces which produced translations of this sort of vacuity, this substitution of faddish theological correctness for a more demanding and prayerful encounter with the tradition.

Modern Catholicism is strong on civilisation and decency. But civilisation and decency are not enough for any Church. We are a community, I think, increasingly without a common centre or a common sense of direction.

The church on the eve of the Council was narrow, but it drew strength from its narrowness. That narrowness and strength in England as elsewhere was the product of a unique blend of

circumstances - reformation history, Irish immigration, ultramontane clerical formation: it cannot be recovered or repeated, and nostalgia is a poor fuel for a march into the future. We need now to find a new source of strength which does not close down our horizons. The likely social realities of the twenty-first century - the breakdown of the traditional family structure and of monogamous marriage, the growing disempowerment and probable redundancy of more and more people in the global economy and the pressures of the market, the reshaping and rethinking of the role of women - are not forces outside the Church: many Catholics already live with these things. If the Church is to find a Christian response to these issues and energies, it needs more than decency and pragmatism. It needs a stronger sense of its own identity, it needs to re-establish its contact with its own deepest resources. We need a liturgy which preserves the gains of the Council - the vernacular, greater intelligibility, greater lay participation, deeper and deeper encounter with Scripture - but which is not only expressed in worthier language, but which transmits the distinctive wisdom, poetry and challenge of Roman Christianity. If as Catholics we are to witness to and live out Gospel values, in a world increasingly bewildered and sceptical about such values or any values, we need an educational ideal to match that wisdom: we have to develop a shared attentiveness and asceticism, not as a devotional option but as part of the fabric of Christian believing. We need to foster a common vision, and one which can be articulated in and shared with the culture at large. Here in England at any rate Christianity is being systematically squeezed out of the public domain: a good indicator here is BBC programming for the great Christian festivals, which are increasingly ignored, or marked by programmes challenging or satirising Christian belief. We can only halt that process if as a community we have something to say which is worth hearing. We cannot, in Lodge's sense, recreate the "Catholic metaphysic": if we are to survive as a community, however, and deserve to survive, we need to be able to explain to the culture at large, and to ourselves, just who we are and what we stand for.

That sense of identity cannot be supplied by the exercise of authority: in a family, you cannot maintain unity, love and shared purpose by kicking people into line. A common mind and heart come from the shared exploration of a common inheritance, and the shared pursuit of a common hope. And so, above all, as a community, we need to recover a sense of the value of *lectio divina* not as an arcane hobby for intellectuals and monks, but as the prayerful engagement of the whole community with the Gospel, and as the distinctive form of Christian thinking.

Tradition is not orders from above, or the status quo, a code of law, or a body of dogma. It is a wisdom, embodied in a complex tissue of words, symbols, law, teaching, prayer and action, a way of life which has to be practised before it yields up its light. The Church of course has to engage humanity at the coal-face, people living, struggling, suffering, muddling along, its tasks are above everything else practical ones. If we have learned anything in the thirty years since the Council ended, however, it is that action must grow from deep spiritual and theological roots if it is to remain Christian action. Our society is impatient of reflection, unwilling to wrestle with difficulty, insistent on instant intelligibility, instant results. It wants its knowledge in sound-bites, it wants its uplift in soothing Classic-FM style snippets, it sees religion as a comfort and a crutch. This dumbing down has been at work in the Church too, and has not always met with much resistance. To recall the Catholic community to the shared labour of living the tradition, attentive to its wisdom, open to its fresh possibilities, has always been the vocation of the sons and daughters of St Benedict. It seems a good item on a Christian agenda for the twenty-first century.