

# Whither the Clergy ?

BY FRANK WEST

**A** TREMENDOUSLY big helping has been laid on the plate of the clergy of the Church of England today: a helping sufficient to give indigestion to all but the heartiest of appetites—ecumenicism in all its ramifications, the Anglican-Methodist conversations, the Paul and the Morley reports, new services, the revision of diocesan boundaries, to name only a few. And then there is always the threat that the plate itself may be whisked away from underneath. For the traditional role of the parson in the church and in the community as a whole is being questioned. It is the purpose of this article to inquire into the effect that all this may be having on the clergy themselves and into their ability to cope with it.

The average age of the clergy of the Church of England is higher now than ever before. This is a significant fact with which we must reckon. It suggests that many more priests of the present generation grew up in a church which looked backwards to Simeon and Keble than look forward with John Robinson and Eric James. Not that age alone determines outlook. Bishop Barry was born as long ago as 1890. The hero of his youth who ordained him was Bishop Gore, a tractarian of the third generation. Yet Dr. Barry's latest book *Christian Ethics and Secular Society* displays much more prophetic insight into modern trends in thought and behaviour than is to be found in many clergymen young enough to be his sons. But the majority of the clergy today can only be contemporary in thought and unembarrassed in the present climate of opinion by a deliberate effort of the will and of the imagination—an effort which many of them are clearly reluctant to make.

There is nothing new in tension between one generation and another. It certainly existed a century ago between the elderly clergy of the 'High and Dry' school and the younger clergy who had come under the influence of Simeon at Cambridge or Pusey at Oxford. But in the eighteen sixties and seventies the age range of the clergy was far more evenly balanced than it is today. In a generation in which youth is claiming more and more control over its destinies, the clergy are a very elderly lot.

The reasons for this state of affairs are not hard to find. Many men who would now be in the prime of life were lost to the church during the war years. Metaphysics, according to Dr. Barry, is a 'dirty word' to this generation. There is a general reluctance to look for supranatural explanations for natural phenomena and a consequent tendency to fragment, rather than to integrate, experience. Young people are hesitant about committing themselves far ahead to anything. Does this account for the increasing number of weddings in registry offices even when neither party is debarred by law from marriage in

church? It may account for the fall in the number of adolescent candidates for confirmation. 'Is it possible,' writes the Reverend David Manship, 'to ask a young person at the beginning of his adolescence to commit his adulthood (which he does not yet possess) to God for life?' It may also account for the reluctance of young men at the end of adolescence to commit themselves to a lifelong ministry which seems to offer nothing but an unchanging pattern of work for the next half century. I think we may expect that for sometime ahead vocations will normally come to men who have had time to take stock of their environment.

If most vocations are to come in maturity and not in adolescence, we must expect an older ordained ministry. Already we are beginning to reap the harvest of the panic ordinations in the nineteen fifties, when bishops, foreseeing a disastrous shortage in manpower, were tempted to lay hands suddenly on elderly men on the eve of their retirement from trades and professions. As a result, there is no shortage of incumbents today: in fact there are so many candidates for livings that benefices in town and country which ought to be amalgamated are being kept open in order to accommodate them. The ordination of so many men in their fifties has created a boom in clerical manpower which is essentially inflationary and deceptive.

In a recent interview on television the Bishop of Southwark admitted that many of the older ordinands were of excellent quality. But he also confessed that the majority of the clergy ordained in recent years were not of the intellectual calibre to penetrate the complexity of problems which now confront the church. Dr. Barry prophesied a few years ago that the infusion of mature men with knowledge and experience of the world outside would enrich the ministry by opening the window to a healthy lay breeze which might blow the dust off the shelves of clericalism. The bishop, I fear, was over optimistic. Older men are certainly capable of keeping a parish church going as the majority of the faithful would have it kept going. But their ministry is seldom characterised by the robust laicism which the bishop expected to find in it. Some were ecclesiastically minded laymen with set views before they were ordained. Surprisingly, it is the man who comes to ordination by the traditional path of school, university and theological college, who later in his ministry is most likely to have the urge to turn the church outwards on the world.

It is fashionable nowadays in some quarters to suggest that a whole time pastorate is not only outmoded but actually hampers the mission of the church to the world. But when men are ordained late, sometimes after very distinguished careers, it often transpires that there is a hidden technique required of a parson for lack of which they find themselves very much at sea. Even the Bishop of Woolwich, who is no friend to institutional religion, admits in a book review that, as things are, a Bell of Chichester could not have exercised the influence he did in this country and in Europe, if he had not been a bishop of the church.

Very often it is the ordinands with the greatest ability and the widest vision who change their minds in the theological colleges and decide not to go forward to ordination. The prospect of leadership in

a body which includes within its ranks some of the most conservative elements in the population (albeit some of the nicest) deters them. And of those who are ordained the conservative evangelicals are amongst the most vigorous and resourceful. The Evangelicals have the immediate advantage possessed by people who have deliberately limited their line of vision. Even now, and in spite of assurances to the contrary from Keele, they are not wholeheartedly concerned with the complex secular situations in which the church has to exist. They have found in a sure and largely unquestioning faith that rock-like support which a section of the community will always demand, and this, with marked success, they pass on with zeal to others. They are not interested in coming to grips with the questions which the majority of young people are asking about religion today, largely because they themselves are not concerned with those questions. Nor are they altogether in sympathy with the proposals for the structural reform of the church. Undoubtedly they are suspicious of much that they find in the report, 'Partners in Ministry', because it would put an end to trust patronage on which the evangelicals have depended for more than a century for a foothold within the parochial system. Rather than have this kind of patronage abolished, they would prefer to see it extended. So one of the most vigorous elements in the parochial ministry is lukewarm in its support of structural reform. The radicals, though vociferous and ably led, are still in a minority even amongst the younger clergy.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Arbuthnot Report with its proposals for the review of diocesan boundaries will not be considered here. It must be examined within the context of a demand for more bishops and smaller dioceses generally. What lies behind this demand? The Welfare State under which all the younger clergy have grown up has a bearing on the question. The post-war generation is a product of a precarious affluent society which has its sights set more on limited liability than on the hazards of adventure. It would be idle to deplore the prevailing zeitgeist or to weary oneself and others by comparing it unfavourably with the past. We are no longer at the heart of an Empire and we must reconcile ourselves with the implications of that fact.

The clergy of today expect directions from the bishops more than their predecessors did in the past. We have moved a long way from the days of B. J. Armstrong, the diarist, who a century ago transformed the parish of East Dereham in Norfolk, assuming meanwhile that he could expect at the best the apathy and at the worst the disapproval of the Bishop of Norwich: and from Bishop Stubbs of Oxford who in reply to a long screed about parochial affairs from Charles Gore, the newly instituted vicar of Radley, wrote on a postcard,

My dear Gore, Don't be a bore. Yours truly, W. Oxon:

Today bishops, unlike William Stubbs of Oxford, are not so adverse to accepting the role of nursing mothers of their clergy: in fact they are rather attracted to it. But with all their strenuous efforts to be here there and everywhere in the diocese, combined with attendance in the House of Lords, central committees and trips to the United States,

they find themselves physically incapable of bearing the strain imposed upon them. Hence the demand for more bishops: in fact for a return to the position which prevailed in the primitive church where a bishop literally presided over every congregation. This would require the presence of four resident bishops in Cheltenham, as the Bishop of Gloucester pointed out in a letter to the *Church Times* recently.

Those who make this demand hardly take into account that since the fourth century most of the functions originally performed by a local bishop have been entrusted to the presbyterate. The parish priest shares with the diocesan in an episcopate (my care and thine) which in second century Smyrna was concentrated in the hands of Polycarp.

If therefore, rural deans were raised to episcopal status, the local presbyterate would lose much of the episcopate which in times past it has shared with a more distant diocesan and the psychological effect upon the clergy would be considerable. It may not be entirely frivolous to prophesy that once the glamour of rural deans in purple cassocks had worn off, everyone would discover that underneath the cassock they were the same man as before, but now immersed in a lot more diocesan administration on account of their promotion to episcopal status. It stands to reason that the fewer bishops there are the more seriously they will be taken and the more effective their protection and guidance of the clergy will be. And while protection and guidance are given at a safe distance, the clergy are more likely to be men of independent judgement. We may have to come to terms with the 'limited liability' attitude to life, but there is no reason why the church should encourage it further than it has already gone.

It is noticeable that, with all this emphasis in worship and in church government generally on corporate action, and, as a corollary, a subtle playing down of individual inspiration, the church still makes the most headway when locally it is led by men of independent mind and enterprise, who could also be described as 'characters'. A bishop should still encourage originality in the clergy and not smother it by a well intentioned desire to make all their decisions for them. If there are times when a bishop should chivvy the clergy, there are also times when they should chivvy him. For they are the experts. The bishop by virtue of his position and through close relations with his suffragan, archdeacon and rural deans, can always have a panoramic view of the diocese. He can be the co-ordinator of the varied experiments of his clergy. But the really significant movements in the church bubble up from below. They are not imposed from above.

\* \* \* \* \*

Related to the demand for smaller dioceses and more bishops is the popularity of the Group and Team ministry. The Group idea came into existence originally in the depressed rural areas, first by spontaneous effort at the local level, later by the encouragement of imaginative diocesan bishops. Hence South Ormesby in Lincolnshire. The Group idea has captured the imagination of the planner and plays a prominent part in 'Partners in Ministry'. It is inspired by the conviction, based on a good deal of evidence, that the curse of the

clergy in the past has been isolation and loneliness. It cannot be denied that the isolation of the average parish priest from other parish priests (surely not from human beings!) has bred such unfortunate defects as inability to co-operate, narrow parochialism and possessiveness, to name only a few. Undoubtedly many priests would benefit from the mutual society and help and comfort of a Group. But to convert the Group experiment into the inescapable norm would be a mistake. Most men, even today, do their best work when a large measure of responsibility falls fairly and squarely on their own shoulders. Having seen Group ministries in action, I would describe them as an authentic form of NeoMonasticism which deserves every encouragement. It derives its momentum from the same inspiration which once drove men and women into monasteries. But entry into a group, like celibacy, is a vocation which does not come to all. To enforce it universally, as the Mediaeval Church did with celibacy, would be to invite trouble. The Group idea has been extensively tried out with varying results. Like other great movements in the past, it can create as many problems as it is expected to solve. But it should be extended in town and country alike, so that all who have the vocation may have the opportunity to follow it.

\* \* \* \* \*

As would be expected in a body like the Church of England which has roots deep in the past and which, in common with all other denominations and, indeed, with all religions, has an attraction for people of a conservative turn of mind, the Paul and Morley reports have had a mixed reception, ranging from ecstatic enthusiasm to resentful hostility. I do not intend to comment on the reports in detail—that has already been done enough. I will merely suggest what kind of effect such reports have on the clergy.

Some of the younger clergy and many ordinands as well have made it clear that in their opinion the fate of the Church of England largely depends on the immediate response to these reports. It is suggested that, if they are not speedily implemented, the Church will grind to a halt or even fade away altogether. At the other extreme there are clergy who think that the recommendations in the reports will further frustrate their effective ministry in the Church, by saddling it with an impersonal bureaucracy.

No one can deny that the Church of England is in need of reform and that from time to time an overhaul of its administrative system can release new spiritual forces which otherwise would be contained. The reforms introduced by the government of Sir Robert Peel in the eighteen forties serve as a very good example. If it had not been for them, the Church would have been unable to accept the challenge, even as far as it did, of the Industrial Revolution and the wave caused by the Evangelical and Tractarian revivals might have had difficulty in reaching the parishes. But the reforms of the early Victorian era were accompanied by, though not actually inspired by, those two great revivals, both of which were grounded on a very positive theology, passionately held by their adherents. The Paul and Morley Reports are contemporary with the publication of *Soundings*, in which some of

the most vigorous and outspoken amongst the clergy appear to be as conspicuous for what they question as for what they affirm. I think that history will justify the age of *Soundings* as one through which the Church was bound to pass before it could again press forward. On this generation of theologians has been conferred the privilege, burden and adventure of reappraising in depth the formularies in which the Christian Faith has been enshrined and through which it has in time past been passed from one generation to another. Some of the clergy have leapt at the opportunity presented to them, others, as would be expected, have shrunk from it. Of course, the questioning of formularies should be a continuous process within the Church, but for reasons of history, the burden of undertaking it falls more heavily on some generations than on others. But, as Dr. Vidler acknowledges in the preface to *Soundings*, the Church is not likely to make advances while it is still stock-taking and while the theological turmoil rages.

Therefore, high hopes that an overhaul of the machinery of the Church will in itself bring about revival may lead to disillusionment. Nor have we all got to wait until the reform to the structures has been undertaken. The achievement of the Evangelicals demonstrates that very clearly. It is equally important to avoid saddling the Church with such tight bureaucratic controls that, when revival, based on a more positive theology does take place, it is prevented from having free play by the rigidity of the structure within which it has to operate. The Evangelicals, we must remember, do not like the centralised method of deployment recommended in *Partners in Ministry* and with good reason.

In many parts of the country the parochial system in its traditional form still applies. At any rate, no one has yet got anywhere near finding an adequate substitute for it. It is rather surprising that of all the members of the Morley commission not one represented a locality west of a line drawn from Chester to Brighton. But in those areas of the country which are overtaken by the conurbation, the traditional framework of the church is largely inoperative and it is in these areas that imaginative experiment must be encouraged. Even here such experiments as there have been have hardly produced a pattern which is clearly the right one for the future. But it is important that we should press on with experiment and not be hindered by a lack of flexibility in the structure of the church and by a shortage of free money at the disposal of the Church Commissioners. Clearly a ministry supplementary to the parochial is required to meet the challenge of the new missionary situation, which would attract and absorb young men of vision and enterprise many of whom at the moment are lost to the ordained ministry because there is nothing else beside the traditional parochial round to offer them. Without doubt such experiment would have to be outside the normal system of appointment and freehold.

The manpower available for specialised ministries is in short supply, for work of this nature requires men of a high intellectual calibre. Also the clergy of today are not very mobile. Many of the men who are ordained in early middle age have already spent more than half their life in a particular locality and are reluctant to leave it for parts

of the country unknown to themselves and their wives where cultural variations may present educational problems for their teenage children. Both the Paul and Morley reports urge that clerical manpower should be deployed where it is most needed. But it is just where men are most needed that qualifications which many of the clergy lack are required.

\* \* \* \* \*

The introduction of the new services has proved to be an exhilarating experience for many of the clergy and their congregations. It has caused devout church people to think critically about the meaning of worship, in some cases for the first time since their confirmation. On the other hand, the launching of a new service is an exhausting adventure; for it involves a previous mastering of the subject by the incumbent, explaining it to the congregation, meeting the initial objections and dealing with subsequent complaints. Very often it highlights the difference in approach to Sunday worship which exists between clergy and laity. For the parish priest Sunday comes as a climax to the work of the week; much of what he has been doing from Monday to Saturday leads directly up to it. Liturgy, has always been regarded as the priest's special concern. He has been trained in its techniques and mysteries. He is likely to be aware of its inadequacies. It is for him to adapt it to the needs of the people. But for most laymen and laywomen, Sunday is a day of relaxation from labour. At the weekend those of them who are involved in exacting, responsible and creative work during the week are not psychologically disposed to having another discipline and other pressures and stimuli enforced upon them. Hence the tension that often exists between parson and congregation on Sundays. If the working out of a new service by the clergy 'and congregations committed to their charge' can awaken a greater degree of understanding and sympathy between them, then much will have been achieved.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Anglican Methodist conversations have brought together many separated congregations into a closer relationship of mutual respect, understanding and co-operation, such as has seldom existed before. In the end it will be at the local level, not in the rarified atmosphere of the council chamber, that the success or failure of these ventures will be registered. It is to be hoped that final decisions will not be much longer delayed, for a prolonged period of uncertainty can only undermine confidence all round. Many of the clergy, though not so many of the laity, are ready to abandon prejudices which in the past have kept congregations apart. But nothing is more difficult than to distinguish between principle and prejudice. The restraint required of the clergy today in exercising such discretion that no offence is given to the Methodists is only one of the many strains that is being imposed upon them. It cannot be sustained indefinitely.

So the parish priest perseveres with much on his mind, uncomfortably aware that even if reunion with the Methodists is achieved, new services are adopted, diocesan boundaries revised, the machinery of the

church reformed, he will still be faced with the vast indifference of the populace to the Christian Church. In his weaker moments he will be tempted to retreat from the perplexing situation in which he finds himself and to involve himself in little bits of business of sufficient importance to take his mind off the underlying issues. I hope the ever proliferating committees and councils in Westminster will not add to this temptation by bombarding him with projects, with fancy and high falutin' names, which will either unduly raise his hopes that at last the trick has been discovered, or drive him to despair because he knows he is only being asked to waste his time. Those responsible for these projects should remember that the best things that happen in the church are those that are contrived on the spot and then spread outwards. Schemes imposed from above seldom take root.

So much has been written about the importance of the laity, so much attention has been drawn (and rightly so) to the defects of clericalism that many of the clergy are beginning to wonder if there is to be any place left for them in the economy of the church. The ordination of older men with limited theological knowledge and little experience in the routine care of souls has exposed the fact that there is still a technique in handling a congregation which only training and wholetime ministry can provide. We might hope that, when synodical government has finally given the laity a secure status in the councils and activities of the church, time will then be given to re-stabilising the confidence of the clergy in themselves and in the order into which they have been called. It is sometimes overlooked that when the laity of the Church of England really get the bit between the teeth, as the laity have in the Free Churches all the time, they will need a much abler, better trained and experienced clergy to lead them.