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The Priest in Conflict

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Review Article

*The Priest in Conflict**

CHARLES DAVIS' "A Question of Conscience" was published during the summer of 1967. It is necessary reading for any priest whose apostolate is with the educated; any priest could well read it with great profit to self. Yet for months it was sought in vain in the Catholic bookstores in Manila. Only in May could the writer locate a copy and then only in the Methodist Bookstore. Catholic booksellers do a disservice to the Church in seeking to limit the circulation of so important a book by neglecting to handle it.

"A Question of Conscience" will readily lead on the priest reader to a salutary examination of conscience. Did I and do I by my dishonesty, by my selfishness, by my discontent make it impossible or difficult for men beset by doubts to see in the Roman Catholic Church the visible sign of Christ's presence in the world? Or because of a sentimental attachment to obsolescent social, liturgical, aesthetic or philosophical patterns and structures am I opposing the accommodation of the Church to an emergent epoch? With purged conscience the priest reader can meet the challenge of the book to test the foundations of his faith to discover why he must remain faithful rather than follow Davis into apostasy.¹

*A QUESTION OF CONSCIENCE. By Charles Davis. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967. 252 pp.

¹ The term "apostasy" is used technically with no pejorative connotations exactly as used by Charles Davis himself. Cf. page 25.

The author begins with a personal history, a detached analytical account of his break with the Church. The narrative is at once too long and too short, too explicit and too reticent. Enough is told to raise unpleasant questions but not enough is told to suggest happy answers. To the question, for example, of how it felt to be outside the Roman Catholic Church, the author answered: "It is as if I had rejoined the human race." Even granting that the Seminary must have been a constricted and constricting world, the reader must still wonder what manner of man is this who can live well on into middle age alienated from the human race. The anecdote could have been omitted; once told it cries for an explanation.

In his apostasy Davis found a new sense of happiness. He sees a cause of this in his taking possession of himself by a radical decision. He generously admits that another man faced by the same question might opt to remain in the Church by a similar act of self-possession in an equally radical decision. But a question obtrudes. Does he mean to tell us that his apostasy was the first such radical decision of his life? The text suggests an affirmative answer. The reader may charitably withhold judgment but he deserves to be told either more or less.

Davis sees as a second cause of his new sense of happiness his risking living with a wider and constantly receding horizon, the risk of intellectual freedom. The now ineluctable historical approach to truth necessitates freedom, a freedom he judges to be irreconcilable with the Magisterium either as actually exercised or as self-understood. No admission is made here, that another might interpret his own failure to effect reconciliation as indicative of subjective incapacity rather than of objective irreconcilability.

But at any rate the heroics of this risking are unintentionally humorous. If they must be introduced let it be said that among theologians is the constant share with the apostate the adventure of allowing themselves to be carried forward to new horizons, confident in the guidance of the Spirit as

manifested in the created thinking of Christians in communication with one another.

The third cause of his new sense of happiness Davis finds in his union in intimate love with an individual person. He professes admiration for, and movingly defends, the Christian ideal of celibacy. He disapproves of present legislation in this but his marriage was certainly not a protest against such legislation. Nor was marriage a motive for his leaving the Church. Nowadays a priest can marry without so drastic a step.

Even if the woman of his choice had been unwilling to follow him out of the Church and to marry him, he would still have apostasized. It was simply a question of belief and unbelief; conscience compelled apostasy. Yet if I interpret the narrative correctly, Florence was, in the language of the Schools, the "*conditio sine qua non*" of his apostasy. If Charles Davis had not met Florence Henderson and had not been able to envisage building a new life in a union of love with her, if apostasy had held out prospects only of the harsh loneliness of a solitary existence, Davis would never have confronted rejection of the Roman faith as a real option. It was love that gave him the strength, courage and light necessary even to consider the option.

Davis insists that marriage within the Church would have served his purpose no better than celibacy. Such a marriage would not have meant what he wanted it to mean. What purpose was this marriage to serve? What was this marriage to mean? The marriage of Christians is a sign of the union of Christ with His Church. This marriage was to serve as the sign of the separation of the groom from the Roman Catholic Church. Is this not a diminution of the sacramental sign, and diminishing the principals whether agent or patient. Better had the author written no more about his marriage than his earlier statement to the press. A charism for lucid theological expression is not the literary genius necessary for the worthy treatment of the affairs of the heart.

The second part of the book and the longest gives us a history of the author's religious opinions. As a witness who could know whereof he speaks, Davis makes a charge which should give us all pause. He tells us that "not a few" have for many a day not fully believed in the Church, taken its teaching authority seriously, nor paid much heed to its dogmas. "Many" Roman Catholics have escaped from the pressure of a rigidly dogmatic Church by remaining uncommitted in regard to any definite doctrinal statement, at least in regard to any of the distinctively Roman dogmas.

How many are "not a few"? How many are "many"? No mathematical approximations are given but some are identified as priests. Any at all are too many. Let each reader ask himself if even inadvertently he has been among the pretenders.

Davis weighs the two traditional apologetic arguments to which he once gave assent, which he taught as a seminary professor and now finds wanting. In the pages of the New Testament and in the earlier centuries of our era he fails now to discover the Roman Catholic Church we know to-day with its priestly caste, its hierarchy and its Primacy. And so he judged the biblico-historical argument worthless.

Then Davis experienced the Church as a zone of untruth, unlove and unhappiness. The evidence is soberly presented. If he presumed that the reading audience would be able to document the charges for themselves, he did not err. The mere presence of corruption in the Church did not trouble faith, but his vision of the structures of the Church as the cause of such corruption. If such structure be unchangeable, the Roman Catholic Church cannot not be corrupt and ever self-corrupting. Such a social entity cannot be to the world the visible sign of the faith, the hope and the love of Christ.

Herein lies the challenge of the book. If a reader is in substantial agreement with Davis on the facts presented as evidence, why does he not follow the author into creative disaffiliation? One cannot simply wait for the professional theo-

logians to solve all the problems. Each reader must discover or rediscover reasons for constancy, the answer must be personal and immediate.

No one can judge the biblico-historical evidence in a vacuum. One judges in accordance with one's answer to a previous critical question. That is: "How detailed a blueprint of the Christian community as we know it in the nineteen sixties are we justified in looking for in documents that are nearly nineteen hundred years old?" This reader judges the specifications evidently expected by Davis to be unreasonable. The adumbration of the Roman Catholic Church of our experience, which one encounters in the pages of Scripture, is all that and even more than one would expect to find in documents so remote.

And we can go on knowing the Church of our experience as self-authenticating because we reject the indemonstrable premise with which Davis interprets the facts of experience, namely, that the unchanging structures of the Church are the cause of the evils experienced. Actually the structures of the Church have never ceased to change nor could we stop the evolution even if we wished. The survival of the community in time will always require some administrative structure. That structure will always furnish an occasion for evil since only men can man the structures. But the cause of the consequent evils is the perverse heart of man. If the Church of Christ is to have men as members, it cannot be otherwise.

Whoever can give his assent to the mystery of the Incarnation should not boggle at the mystery of the actual Church. If the Eternal Word took to Himself the restrictions of our humanhood, not merely of human nature in the abstract but all the limitations of one particular human nature, if He initiated a work of salvation so involved in history as most Christians believe, then nothing untoward we discover in the unfolding of such a work should take believers by surprise. The Incarnation is an incomprehensible mystery but everything stupid or malicious we encounter in the history of, or in our contemporary experience of the Church does help our

weak intellects to measure out a larger area of the ultimately immeasurable, the infinite condescension of the kenosis.

Davis' description of the relations between faith and truth is worthy of long meditation by every educated Christian. Here is the portrait of the "gentleman", such as the Church sorely needs and never more than to-day. But is the realization of so high an ideal a fair test of the credibility of the Church? A community of such men would rightly command the admiration of all; it would be an aristocracy of intellect and culture.

But salvation is for the unlettered as well as for the scholar, for the moron as well as for the genius. God has chosen those who are nothing at all to show up those who are everything. How can a stupid man to whom God has given all unmerited the Faith, hold on to and defend that grace? By openness? Impossible. He can hold his privilege only as a prejudice. He will use the only weapons of defense that ignorance knows: the refusal of dialogue and even repression.

The Church is only now awakening from a period in which the theological sciences languished. There was for long a dearth of great Divines and an honorary Doctorate confers no knowledge of Divinity. Given the quality of the many called by Divine Election to membership in the Church, can we expect of Divine Providence that only the wise will arrive at positions of authority in the Church? God's ways may be unsearchable in this regard but they have been consistent. The creature and the Christian cannot demand another dispensation.

No more than Davis have we the answers to many troubling questions, questions to which only a few years back we had glib, pat and supposedly satisfactory replies. "Had they deceived us or themselves the quiet-voiced elders, bequeathing us only a receipt for deceit?"

A typhoon is beating upon the bark of Peter. It does not feel as seaworthy as we thought it was. We can make out the figure of the Captain on the bridge. Glasses to his eyes he tries to peer through the storm and night. And we

thought the boat was equipped with radar. Shall we heed the cry from one of the crew: "Take to a lifeboat". That is a counsel of despair.

Our questions have raised the storm. What is the Church? Where is the Magisterium? How can we recognize the voice of the Magisterium? The storm is our great opportunity, the questions are a summons, this can be an age of unparalleled theological exploration.

"We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time."

ARTHUR F. SHEA, S.J.