

Editorial

Is the Church of Rome gaining or losing in influence? This may seem an odd question to ask, but a recent book by Dr William Oddie, *The Roman Option* (Harper Collins 1997 £16.99), has brought the matter back into the corridors of Church politics, and a number of recent articles in the press have highlighted it further. Dr Oddie, it will be remembered, was once an Anglican clergyman of the strict Anglo-Catholic variety, who left for Rome when he saw the ordination of women coming into view. Both before and after that event, he has been a consistent critic of liberalism in the Church of England, and he now believes that the Roman option is the only logical one for 'Catholic minded Anglicans' as he calls them. At first he believed that the vast majority of people who could be so described would accept his logic, especially once women were ordained, and that their mass departure to Rome would bring about a fundamental realignment within English-speaking Christianity generally. But this scenario has failed to materialize and Dr Oddie has been forced to revise his prediction. Now, although he still thinks that they will get there in the end, he has been forced by events to accept that things will move much more slowly than he once thought.

What can be said for Dr Oddie's thesis, and does it matter? No doubt there are a number of 'Catholic minded Anglicans' who have gone to Rome or who are heading in that direction, but Dr Oddie cannot conceal the fact that the overall numbers are very small. In the whole of England, not more than a thousand people (including clergy and laity alike) have actually taken that route, and it seems improbable that there will be many more in the foreseeable future. Roman Catholic figures point to a downward trend in the number of adult conversions, which are now running at about five thousand a year, so at best the Anglican influx has helped to slow the decline without being able to reverse it.

More significantly, the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales is losing its grip over its regular membership, and at a growing rate. Secularization, which for a long time was resisted by a community used to bucking the general trend, has at last caught up with it. Furthermore, nobody knows how many ex-Catholics there are in the Church of England (not to mention the different free churches), but they may well outnumber those who have gone the other way, even if their journey is not catalogued by Protestant journalists in the national press in the way that their Catholic colleagues report movements in the opposite direction.

What is certain is that the number of ordinands training for the Roman priesthood has declined to the point of crisis, and that there is little hope of

relief from Ireland or Italy, which now have similar problems of their own. In a few years time, it is very possible that the Roman Church in this country will be a flock of sheep without shepherds, and that the despised Anglican option will appeal to more and more of them. For as secularization grows, so does the demand of the laity for a voice in Church affairs, and once that happens, a degree of 'protestantization' is almost inevitable. The days when the Catholic laity paid their dues and kept their mouths shut are over, and the hierarchy is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain its control of the system.

A further problem is that Anglican converts of the Oddie type are an albatross around the Roman Church's neck, not the much needed shot of new blood which they themselves like to imagine they are. Dr Oddie's book makes it quite clear that he went to Rome for negative reasons – his disgust with the Church of England – not because he saw anything particularly compelling in Roman doctrines which a 'Catholic minded Anglican' could not legitimately hold. Emotionally and psychologically it is obvious that he is still very much in the Church of England, since if he were not, he would never have written this book. He must not be surprised if he discovers that his new Church does not particularly want him, and indeed, he is honest enough to record the fact that many of his fellow converts have been treated less than generously.

The simple fact of the matter is that Rome is deep in its own long-term crisis, which the facile triumphalism of Anglo-Catholics 'going home', as they put it, can do nothing to change. Anglo-Catholicism has always been a fantasy of sorts, and at the moment Rome does not need fairy tales. In traditionally Catholic countries it has lost control almost everywhere, particularly in Latin America, where evangelical Protestantism has gone, in some countries, from almost nothing a generation ago to by far the largest body of active worshippers, and may soon be able to claim a majority of the population. Does Dr Oddie seriously think that he can reverse this process by taking the Duchess of Kent on tour in that part of the world?

Nothing betrays the insularity of the English mind more than the apparent ignorance among converts in this country that the Church they have recently joined is in reality sinking fast – and that they are doing nothing to help it. Unprejudiced readers of Dr Oddie's book will conclude that charity and humility are not Catholic virtues, at least not among the sort of people he represents, and this will surely alienate most of them from what he is proposing. A man who can regard Dr Eric Kemp, the Bishop of Chichester, as a weak-kneed liberal who kowtows to the radical agenda inside the Church of England, is obviously living in a world of his own, which few others will want to join. Many Catholics (as he is honest

enough to admit) have already expressed their disapproval of his views, including such prominent people as Lord Longford.

Sadly for Dr Oddie, and for the thousand or so people who think like him, the way they have chosen is a cul-de-sac. The Church of England certainly has its problems, and on that score we may agree with much of what Dr Oddie says, but turning down a blind alley is not the way to solve them. As a Church, we need to get back to Scripture and the gospel message, not get tied up with ecclesial structures which are rapidly losing their relevance in a secular age. Perhaps Dr Oddie and his friends will eventually see this for themselves and come home again, to the Church where they really belong.

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