

CONOR GEARTY

It is unfortunate that whenever the Catholic Church becomes involved in a quarrel with secular society, it always seems to be the progressive rather than reactionary or conservative actors that the Magisterium has in its sights. This is not entirely the Vatican's fault: its officials have to react to what the local bishops identify as their main concerns and the media can always be relied upon to report the Church's antagonism towards same sex partnerships and the employment of gays with greater gusto than they do any of the Pope's assaults on poverty and illegal warfare. But it is nevertheless important for Catholics to understand exactly why the Church's position on these issues causes such offence to those outside its ranks, especially those who in their concerns about the excesses of capitalism, their support for human rights, and their solidarity with the poor should be strong allies of Rome, not its aggrieved adversaries. The divide is much deeper than the issues on which debate is joined would make it seem.

The starting point for the remarks of Pope Benedict, made as the bishops of England and Wales concluded their recent *ad limina* visit, was his acknowledgement of Britain's high standing as a place with a 'firm commitment to equality of opportunity for all members of society.' It was this reputation that made all the more disappointing 'the effect of some of the legislation designed to achieve this goal' which in the Pope's view had been 'to impose unjust limitations on the freedom of religious communities to act in accordance with their beliefs'. Indeed in 'some respects' he considered that such legislation 'actually violates the natural law upon which the equality of all human beings is grounded and by which it is guaranteed.' For Pope Benedict, '[f]idelity to the Gospel in no way restricts the freedom of others – on the contrary, it serves their freedom by offering them the truth.'

For all its obviousness to Catholics, within this last observation are the two incendiaries with which the argument with secular society is set alight. First the language of freedom is deployed against the very people for whom freedom is an (perhaps 'the') article of faith. Second it is made the servant of a higher goal, that of truth, with which contemporary culture – devoted to the twin processes of individual choice and democratic decision-making rather than any particular substantive outcome – is distinctly ill at ease. It is at this point in the Pope's address that the response of secular society turns from puzzlement to anger. The Pope calls for 'respectful dialogue with other elements in society' but does so in a way that makes absolutely clear his firm conviction that they are (and are bound always to be) wrong. How can a dialogue be respectful if the starting proposition is that one participant is inevitably misguided? Respect must allow the possibility that the discussion can lead to change in either (or both) parties. But this is not conceivable to the Pope.

The task is one of evangelisation not true discussion. It is the responsibility not only of the bishops 'but also [of the] priests, teachers, catechists, [and] writers ... to be attentive to the promptings of the Spirit, who guides the whole Church into the truth, gathers her into unity and inspires her with missionary zeal.' The 'considerable gifts of the lay faithful' should be mustered to play 'their part in the Church's mission.' In engaging in this outreach into the secular world, the Pope is clear that the lay community as well as those in Holy Orders are duty bound to propagate 'the truth revealed through Scripture and tradition and articulated by the Church's Magisterium'. Presumably this extends to politicians, public servants and others in decision-making roles, and as

the Pope made clear in his remarks to the Scottish bishops, no deviation is to be allowed from any of Rome's rulings on any issues. One does not need to be Dr Ian Paisley to detect a whiff of ultramontanism here. It is only less obviously an effort at 'Rome Rule' because of its relative failure, with many of the lay Catholics at whom it is aimed choosing between the Church's dictates and often deciding to put their public duties (to law, to their constituents, to the democratically arrived at decisions of the whole community) first.

The Church's certainty with regard to its own position also misleads it into believing that it is not being heard when all that is happening is that it is simply being listened to (respectfully) but not then being obeyed. The two are not the same, but they are often elided by those who cannot anticipate not being agreed with once they have had the chance to get their message across: it is always tempting to blame the inability of the messenger to reach an audience than to acknowledge that the (truthful) message lacked enough persuasive force. However sympathetic with Church leaders, government has also to consider the consequences of allowing Catholics a special space for their core values, in terms of the precedent it might set for other faiths, however disagreeable their claims to autonomous practice might be (polygamy? patriarchy?). The Church does not have this problem because it knows it is right and the others wrong. A secular polity constructed on doubt has no such option. **It has regularly to manage disputes between competing rights and this means constraining the practice of religious freedom where its exercise threatens unacceptable intrusion into other fundamental human rights (as the Archbishop of Canterbury carefully observed in his controversial but misreported speech on Sharia law in the Royal Courts of Justice). In refereeing conflicts between rights, the state cannot surrender to religious authority the final say over the content of that human rights law – otherwise it would be unable to control the wilder actions of any religious community so long as that conduct could be phrased in human rights terms as defined by the community itself. It would be like allowing the media to determine how far freedom of expression should be allowed to trump the right to privacy.**

The problem for this Pope in particular, both now and in his past life as an important intellectual influence over many years in the Vatican, has been that he seems somehow to regard a democratic society separate from the authority of the Church not as a civilising and virtuous achievement but rather as a concession that his predecessors have had reluctantly to concede. It is because he gives the impression that in a perfect world he would still prefer to be able to rule Britain, ordering religious and lay alike to follow the truth as revealed by the Magisterium, and disregarding the needs of other faiths (albeit very respectfully), that his visit to Britain is likely to be interesting in a number of ways, many of them disconcerting to liberal Catholics who do not have a similar level of nostalgia for the past.