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# Hope among thorns

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Essay

In the English Catholic church, cardinal archbishops of Westminster tend to punch above their weight. One of those who punched hardest was Basil Hume. It was to this Benedictine monk that the nation came to look for spiritual leadership, and that same quality was recognized internationally -- including by the American and European bishops.

Hume received a number of invitations from the United States. The last one asked him to address a meeting of the bishops? conference in Tucson, Ariz., in June 1999. Shortly before, in April, he learned that he had advanced cancer, so would not be able to go. Instead he videotaped what he wanted to say, and it was played to the bishops? assembly on June 18, the day after his death. This last testament from beyond the grave is as pertinent now as it was then.

According to the Second Vatican Council, Hume noted in his address, bishops were the vicars of Christ in their dioceses. They also had ?supreme and full authority over the universal church,? in communion with the pope. At the same time, the council saw the pope as more than ?simply the first among equals.? The task for today was to live out these perspectives side by side.

In this light, Hume reproved the papal civil service for thinking of themselves too highly. ?Some of us would have been surprised by the form and tone of some letters from curial offices. There are concerns about the manner of some episcopal appointments and the length of time taken to make them. Not all appointments have been satisfactory. There is often unease about the way in which theologians and their writings have been investigated. There can be a sense of frustration at not having been consulted on issues which are important to us as local bishops.?

Anthony Howard, who quotes this last passage in his authorized biography, *Basil Hume: The Monk Cardinal* (Headline Book Publishing, 2006), suggests that the criticism was ?strikingly more forthright than anything he had previously said.? And Hume had not finished. What of the relationship between the Roman curia and the pope? ?It is true, of course, that members of the curia act in the pope?s name. But do they always act with his acknowledgement and agreement?? He sometimes received letters from them, he went on to say, that made him feel as though he were ?a naughty schoolboy caught doing something unacceptable.?

It is the pope and bishops who govern the church, not the pope and curia. It would be good, Hume thought, ?if the pope were to call together all the presidents of the conferences of the world every two years or so, so that he could hear directly their collective advice.?

He commended bishops? conferences as ?a genuine expression? of shared government. He noted that doctrinal declarations by such conferences could be published without reference to Rome if the contents were approved unanimously. This provision had been intended by its authors to hobble the conferences, but Hume turned it on its head as a proof of how important the conferences were. Of course, he pointed out, unanimity was hard to achieve when conferences were as big as that of the United States. ?Without prejudice to the individual rights of a bishop,? he suggested, the unanimity requirement should favor ?the subordination of one?s own opinion for the sake of the greater good.? It could be ?a serious failure? on the part of a bishops? conference if it simply reflected ?the divisions that might well exist within the Catholic body.?

George Hume (Basil was his name in religion) was born in Newcastle upon Tyne in the north of England in 1923. His father, a distinguished physician, was a half-Scottish nominal Anglican, his mother a devout French Catholic, the daughter of an army officer. George was educated by Benedictine monks at Ampleforth College in Yorkshire and in 1941 entered the monastery there. He took his solemn vows in 1945. The Benedictines sent him to read history at Oxford and theology at Fribourg in Switzerland, so his formation was much wider than that received by secular priests in the English seminary system. In 1951 he was ordained a priest. In 1963, with the Second Vatican Council in full flow, the only 40-year-old Hume was chosen by the monks, then numbering more than 150, to be their abbot.

There is always disruption in the wake of any council, and Vatican II was no exception. Hume often said that he had found Ampleforth just as demanding as Westminster, if not more so. A perceptive account of the challenges he had to meet is given by Dominic Milroy, a fellow monk and former headmaster of the abbey school, in *Basil Hume: By His Friends*, edited by Carolyn Butler (Fount, 1999). Referring to the book?s title, the cardinal wryly, and unfairly, remarked that if this was a book by his friends, he would hate to read one by his enemies. (Hume had a touch of vanity.)

Milroy explains that Hume set himself at Ampleforth to accomplish a transition to the perspectives of Vatican II while preserving a strong sense of continuity. It tested him. There is a story of a member of the monastery paying a call on the abbot. Hume invited him to have a drink. He needed it, he said. He had been visited by three monks that day, each of whom wanted to explain to him why he should resign.

In *Basil Hume: Ten Years On*, edited by William Charles (Burns & Oates, 2009), the headmaster of the school

while Hume was abbot, Fr Patrick Barry, draws attention, as does Howard, to the official portrait of Hume painted by Derek Clarke in 1973. Despite the strong, capable hands, it shows a man who, in his own words in his farewell address to the monks before he left them for Westminster, had in the last few years ?known a darkness to life.?

He nevertheless succeeded ?pretty well,? says Milroy. In a period when many communities, secular and religious, fell apart, his did not. There were defections from the monastery, inevitably, but they were comparatively few -- at most, Howard reckons, 10 percent of its members in the 10 years after Vatican II.

And so to Westminster in 1976. Here again Hume set himself to achieve transition along the lines of Vatican II while preserving a sense of continuity. And again he did ?pretty well.?

Emblematic of his approach was his response to Mother Angelica?s visit to London in 1996. He was surprised that the conservative organizers of this incursion into his diocese had not informed him, and after the American TV evangelist had finished her slick performance, he delivered his own address to their ?Faith of Our Fathers? conference.

With courtesy and a smile, the cardinal severely critiqued the conference?s prescriptions. The transmission of the truths of the faith to young people, he warned, would never be achieved simply by learning: The hearts and minds of the students had to be won. Undoubtedly their teachers had made mistakes, but they needed ?our understanding, help and guidance, and certainly not public condemnation.?

He deplored a tendency that has worsened in the following years: ?The spirit of the Pharisee lurks in each one of us, myself included, tempting us to sit in judgment on others and even to seek to exclude them from the church.?

He reiterated that bishops were vicars of Christ in their dioceses and co-responsible with the pope for the universal church. Therefore it simply was not Catholic, he said, ?to express loyalty to the church without including loyalty to one?s bishop.?

He touched on the liturgy, of course. He once told me that he feared that giving Communion in the hand had diminished the recipients? reverence. He did not like guitars at Mass and pop-style hymns were not his favorites. He had reservations about the way the Tridentine rite had been supplanted, as Howard notes.

Nevertheless, again Vatican II was his touchstone here. There was a long way still to go, he told the London conference, ?to realize the vision of what the liturgy should be as understood by the fathers of the Vatican Council.? Mass must always be ?well prepared so as to take account of the culture, age, needs and circumstances of those present.?

He never gave any ground to the liturgical ultratraditionalists. He thought their spirit was schismatic.

But if transition to Vatican II was one hinge of his thought, continuity was the other, and here it would be progressive opinion that he would be wary of. I experienced his disapproval myself on the occasion of *The Tablet*?s 150th anniversary in 1990. Hume was critically supportive of the journal?s work, and was willing to preside at a thanksgiving Mass in Westminster cathedral. Shortly before, however, I had given an interview to a national newspaper in the course of which I observed that since marriage was a sacrament celebrated by the couple concerned, the lay voice on such subjects should be given a greater hearing in the church. I thought this was true, but the cardinal believed he had detected a divisive and anticlerical tendency. He tore up his prepared sermon and substituted another, in which he asked whether ?the Catholic press? (read ?*The Tablet*?) had been sufficiently converted.

Howard asks: How much of a reformer was he? A simple answer is not possible, because Hume?s makeup was

complex. He used to say that while his head was progressive, his heart was conservative. In Butler?s book, Cardinal Carlo Martini, then archbishop of Milan, drew attention to Hume?s ?multifaceted, free and spiritual personality.? You could never be sure in advance, Martini wrote, what he would think or say.

If Martini had ever become pope, how different everything might have been. As things turned out, Hume had to rein back the promptings of that progressive head. In my personal opinion, he would have been more happily fulfilled if he had not had to do so, and the church in England and Wales today would be better equipped at the debating table of secular opinion. There is no doubt, however, that despite falling Mass attendance and diminishing vocations, as everywhere in Western Europe, Hume was successful in establishing this church as a force on the national stage. It could no longer be said to be ?the Italian mission to the Irish.?

At his installation Mass in Westminster Cathedral in 1976, Hume had announced a different episcopal style from that of his predecessor, Cardinal John Heenan, a prince of the church. In words taken from St. Augustine of Hippo, Hume announced that he intended to be ?a bishop for you? and ?a Christian like you.?

He remained always the monk, carrying himself with the disciplined austerity of someone set apart, but he deeply shared the human condition. ?You cannot look into the eyes of a starving child,? he remarked after a visit to famine-struck Ethiopia, ?and remain the same.? The church historian Michael Walsh asserts in *The Westminster Cardinals: The Past and the Future* (Burns & Oates, 2009) that Hume, more even than his famous 19th-century predecessor Cardinal Henry Edward Manning, was committed to ?providing services for the dispossessed.?

He knew about loneliness -- ?that most common affliction of priests,? he called it. He had embraced celibacy as enabling a special gift of the self, but he was frank about the cost. ?On one occasion,? Bishop John Crowley recalls in Charles? memoir, ?he said how much he missed the sense of being uniquely held in someone else?s affection. His faithful prayer life gave him a lot of resilience, but it could not of its nature provide the same kind of emotional intimacy as, for example, a good marriage. I remember him telling me that on his first Christmas Day in London, when all the public duties were over, and everyone else had gone home to family or simply disappeared from view, he wandered across to the upper library of Archbishop?s House and cried there like a child for sheer loneliness.? He was one of the very few church leaders on record as having called publicly for the ordination of married men.

For 23 years he was archbishop of Westminster, which he thought too long, and in the final years was plagued by attacks of depression. At the end, however, as reported in Crowley?s funeral homily, which is reprinted in Charles? book, Hume found that his prayer was ?amazingly sweet, full of consolation.? Then, in his own words, ?the curtain came down.? But, he said, ?I wasn?t worried, because I knew what was behind the curtain.?

He talked to the English about God, and about being human. A speculation about the soul before its Judge ran deep with him. In one of his meditations on the crucified Lord gathered up by his literary executor, Liam Kelly, in *Seven Last Words* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2009), Hume puts it this way:

We shall approach,
trembling
nervous no doubt
but reassured and at peace
as we tell the story
of our lives which only
he can understand.

His episcopal motto says it all: Spes inter Spinas, ?Hope among Thorns.?

*John Wilkins is the former editor of* The Tablet, *the British Catholic weekly newspaper.*

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