

TABLET

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A time for comprehension

A year is a short moment in the life of the Church. She is not like a secular government whose achievement or failure can be set against a policy or programme and judged accordingly. Primarily, she is the sacrament of this world: an outward sign of inward grace. It is possible to point to her activities but their ultimate effects are of the supernatural order and beyond our means of reckoning.

This intangible principle of life may only be grasped in the act of faith. In this there is no difference between the most learned and the most ignorant. To make our souls is to make harbour and this is the Church's only proper concern.

Once this fundamental principle of a common rule of faith is grasped, the fears and mutual distrust of various groups within the Church may be relegated to a level where they may be stated without threat of mutual excommunication. Most of our internal differences appear as absurd and irrelevant to the outside world today and will so appear in the light of eternity.

This is not to suggest that fundamental truths are relative. We do not ignore the fact that our faith was brought to us by a Person, teaching with unique authority and seeing to it that the gift of life and faith should be transmitted by his chosen people — a Church guaranteed against fundamental error. Indeed, it is only within this common ground that discussion can usefully take place — so long as it is a searching for ever deeper knowledge of a truth revealed.

So much is truism, but it has to be repeated as it is so often ignored and has been conspicuously so in the year just ended. The last twelve months have witnessed a hardening of attitudes, the adoption of fixed positions in a spirit that is more sectarian than sacred.

The year began with the announcement of the Synod and ended with its findings. In the intervening months a good deal of discussion went on about its main themes: justice and peace in the world and the priesthood. Draft documents were submitted to the episcopal conferences and, as we reported at the time, came in for reasonable criticism. It ranged from the observations of the bishops of Oceania on the justice and peace document to the views of the Latin American bishops as well as the US National Federation of Priests' Councils and other groups on clerical celibacy. Nobody could say that the Church was dead. She was in fact so articulate and active that it proved to be a difficult task for an editor, week after week, to give some fair representation of what was going on within the limited space available.

The answer of the Synod on clerical celibacy was definite on the questions as put. Its affirmation represents a valid tradition which has borne great fruit in exemplary lives from the earliest centuries. We believe and trust that this tradition will be maintained. It is not, however, the only tradition and necessarily the only way for the future. We recognise this in acknowledging the Oriental tradition and should now also accept the views of conferences of Catholic priests in various parts of the world which were not in fact fairly represented at the Synod.

Alongside the preparations for the Synod there was another confrontation — of a centralising legalistic approach and an empiric and exploratory one — over the draft for a Fundamental Law of the Church. There were not lacking highly qualified voices against the very idea of such a law and it was almost a dead letter by the time that it was presented to the Synod. There will doubtless be efforts at resuscitation but the witness of the people of God was very clearly against this kind of legalistic