

Church's cultural heritage

I have every sympathy with those orders which dispose of goods in the process of downsizing and relocating ("Heritage for sale", 11 February). But I am also concerned at the current haphazard disposal of sacred artefacts and books. The trouble is that we do not know where many of these items are until they appear in the auctioneers' catalogues.

This problem was addressed in a circular "The Inventory and Catalogue of the Cultural Heritage of the Church: a Necessary and Urgent Task" (December 1999) issued by the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church. It goes into great detail on the identification of cultural goods, and how to make an inventory and catalogue, with the object of making their whereabouts known, conserving them and keeping them safe, for use in evangelisation, education and the sacred liturgy. When these goods are identified, they can be put to good use. An example is the Methodist art collection, which tours the country as a powerful tool for expressing the faith.

I have seen objects of great beauty confined in a safe or sacristy for fear of theft. If treated in the above way, their safety would be enhanced, they could be put to greater use and they would continue as the cultural inheritance of the Church of the future.

(Dr) Michael Straiton

Cuddington, Buckinghamshire

In the early 1990s, the then Church Art, Architectural and Heritage Committee of the bishops' conference, under the chairmanship of the late Bishop Mervyn Alexander of Clifton, set up a sub-committee whose brief included the Catholic Heritage Project, whereby inventories would be compiled and procedures established to ensure appropriate care of the patrimony of the Church. Unfortunately, this aim had to play second fiddle to government demands relating to historic church buildings and the setting up of diocesan historic-churches committees.

To judge from recent events, however, notably at Stanbrook, Ushaw and Ramsgate, the matter is still something of a lottery. Dioceses and religious orders need, of course, to have regard to pastoral needs, financial viability and demography, but is not the care of our valuable (and, one hopes, valued) heritage a significant priority? Too often it seems that short-termism and asset-stripping prevail, with unfortunate long-term consequences.

Anthony Rossi

Walsingham, Norfolk

As I understand it from the gospels, Jesus was born in poverty and died in poverty, his garments taken by the Roman soldiers. Why does



the Church, which calls itself Christian, gather treasures and keep them to itself? I thought we were told not to gather treasure for ourselves but to share what we have with the poor and destitute.

Kath O'Sullivan

Oneroa, Waiheke Island, New Zealand

Opportune time for apology

I detect a sobering convergence of reports in last week's issue (11 February). We read the interview with a brave and resilient Marie Collins, victim of clerical sexual abuse ("When the hurt stops and the healing starts"), advice on preparing for Lent from Fr Paul Turner (Parish Practice), and news from Pope Benedict XVI: the seriousness with which he wants the Church to attend to the victims of clerical abuse and his recommendation that Catholics make use of the ancient practice of fraternal correction (The Church in the World).

There are still victims of the abuse of clerical power, sexual or otherwise, who are in need of the healing and closure that comes from a personal apology. Let us hope that, this Lent, representatives of the Church will find the courage that comes from God's grace to say "I apologise; please forgive."

Could there be a better way of living out Christian discipleship and the spirit of Lent? Or will those who still suffer need to exercise fraternal correction to find healing? If they do, let us hope that they will not be shunned as Marie Collins was.

(Professor) Hilmar Pabel

Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

The next Pope

Like Tom Stanford (Letters, 14 January), I am very disturbed that many of the cardinals you identified as *papabile* ("Conclave contenders", 31 December 2011) appear to have no pastoral experience as parish priests. All of them are too removed from the ordinary people and life to really know what is going on outside of their cloistered academic world. In addition, each and every candidate should be thoroughly

investigated for any knowledge or cover-up of any abuse of minors or other affairs. Each should publicly announce what their views and vision are for the people of God, how their life experience and learning contributes to their vision, and, how they will implement the teachings of Jesus Christ, as opposed to fossilised traditions. Hopefully soon the people of God will be able to elect our Pope without it being done for us.

Aileen Lowe

Nelson, New Zealand

Perils of academy status

There is indeed "a revolution in English schools". But it is not quite the revolution that Mike Craven so optimistically describes ("Bring on Catholic academies", *Tablet Education*, 4 February). The creation of academies, whether by "conversion", by force, or by bribe, removes these schools from the protection of the law which has covered "maintained schools" since 1944. The 1944 Education Act created a balance of power between central government, local accountability, voluntary bodies (in effect, the Anglican and Catholic Churches) and the teachers. Education was too precious to be under the control of the minister - as we had learnt from Italy and Germany.

And so the Oxford historian Dr Marjorie Reeves, when invited on to the central Advisory Council for Education (England) in 1946, was told by the Permanent Secretary, John Redcliffe Maude, that her main duty was "to be prepared to die at the first ditch as soon as politicians get their hands on education". The "revolution" is to do precisely that. Each academy and free school is now under direct contract to the person of the Secretary of State, with minimal accountability to Parliament.

We should be frightened for two reasons. First, this creates the most centralised system of education in Western Europe since Germany in the 1930s - or perhaps since Calvin's Geneva in the sixteenth century (and the Church did not like Calvin). Normal parental safeguards, protected under the law, are removed; if they have a complaint, it must be to the contractor, namely, to the Secretary of State. The second reason is that Catholic academies have withdrawn from the legal system which protected their maintained status. This may be fine for the moment. But for how long? As secular voices call for the abolition of faith schools, should we not now be preparing for a future Secretary of State who might heed those voices and, as is in his power, remove the religious status?

The "considerable enthusiasm" for academy status referred to is by no means universal - witness the present struggle by parents to save their community school in east London against the bullying tactics of Government. And this has been the case throughout the

country. What by some is seen as “interference from the town hall” is seen by others as an essential element of local accountability in the balance of power which protects education from an over-powerful state.

(Professor) Richard Pring
Green Templeton College, Oxford

Insights denied

Abigail Frymann’s analysis of Rome’s plan to re-evangelise Europe (“Back to basics”, 4 February) makes depressing reading. Laying the blame on those old canards of materialism and relativism is simply formulaic. The papacy and the episcopate have ignored – forgotten, perhaps – the primary human factor for evangelisation in the Church: that the faith is passed on through our mother’s milk and vocations are nurtured at a mother’s knee. Almost 150 years ago, William Ross Wallace wrote “The Hand That Rocks the Cradle is the Hand That Rules the World”, a poem that praises motherhood as the pre-eminent force for change in the world. Whatever popes and bishops may say, the place of women within the Church is circumscribed by fear and coloured by an ancient memory of the sacred prostitutes of the Canaanite temples. For centuries, women have been denied an effective voice in the day-to-day working and decision processes of the Church.

Given more than 100 years of compulsory education and access to higher seats of learning, Europe’s women may well find little reason to subscribe to an institution which acknowledges them only with lip service or to encourage their children to seek Christ. It is self-evident that Europe needs to cherish her Christian roots and heritage, but growth comes from the roots up, not from the top down.

Joe Norton
Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire

A fraternal correction

Since the Holy Father is encouraging us to revive the joyful practice of admonishing sinners (“Benedict XVI urges ‘fraternal correction’”, *The Church in the World*, 11 February), may I set the ball rolling by pointing out that sometimes the tone of your leaders can be, well, just a little sanctimonious. And even, on occasions, downright snooty. I have every confidence that you will accept this criticism in the charitable spirit with which it is made and set an example to us all by humbly – and publicly – acknowledging it.

John McLaughlin
Birkenhead, Wirral, Merseyside

Culture of convent schools

Sophie Andreae (quoted in your feature “Heritage for sale”, 11 February) speaks of the “enormous contribution that religious orders have made to Catholic life in the last 200 years”. While she was speaking of the material culture

of those communities, their human culture has been critically important, particularly in the education of girls. A major preoccupation of many of the women’s orders recently has been to put their archives in order, and to entrust them to Douai for long-term safe-keeping. I hope some of the sisters coming up to retirement will consider collecting, from those still around, personal accounts of their lives as sisters, for publication or archiving.

However, I am particularly concerned about collecting from lay women, wholly or partly educated in convent schools (non-Catholics as well as Catholics), personal accounts of their experiences as schoolgirls. I am thinking of a sizeable collection of contributions (of say 500–600 words each) to be published in the tradition of Mayhew in the nineteenth century, and mass observation in the twentieth. Former convent schoolgirls who tell me of their interest will be sent a brief set of guidelines. If there is a good response, I will try to find an author educated in a convent school to join me in editing the collection. My email is: socioresearch@btinternet.com.

Anthony Spencer
Pastoral Research Centre, Taunton, Somerset

Happy conjunctions

The Living Spirit is a brilliant column. On 4 February, it made a particularly happy choice by pairing C.S. Song (a good name for a start) with Thomas Merton. They called for laughter and dance when the children of God come together. Merton urged us not to be discouraged or frustrated and not to be too angry with the Church and its officials.

It has long seemed to me that the gifts of the Holy Spirit have the effect of improving their recipient’s sense of humour. That, I suppose, is true humility. Let’s now rejoice that the Vatican’s way of sending a Roman archbishop to Siberia, is promoting him to be nuncio in Washington DC. Perhaps a few other Vatican insiders could be sent to the remotest missions!

(Lord) Hylton
House of Lords, London SW1

No one on call

The grossly overstretched priests of many dioceses must be incredulous at the statement on the back of the “faith cards” being promoted by the bishops’ conference (News from Britain and Ireland, 4 February).

Calling a priest in case of emergency harks back to the days when a parish priest with four curates, in answering such a summons, replied that all the priests were out!

Terry Swales
Liverpool, Merseyside

Alive and flourishing

Two months ago you, published a letter on “Voice of African women” (10 December 2011). Your correspondent wrote, “One of the best authorities on the issue is the late Hugo Hinfelaar”. This man is fully alive! He is my fellow missionary.

(Fr) Hans Peters, Missionary of Africa (White Fathers)
Heythuysen, Netherlands



The living Spirit

The scene is a large dinner party at the house of someone called Levi. Jesus is there with a number of disciples, with you, and also a large number of people you know might not normally be considered suitable guests. In scriptural language these are the tax collectors and sinners. You find yourself looking around: what sort of people does this actually mean for you? Which are the groups of people you find difficult, or whose behaviour you deem unacceptable? Who are the people that our society today shuns? ... And you become aware as you look around of a small group of people who ask one or two of the disciples sitting near Jesus, “Why does he put up with this, why is he spending time with these people?” Maybe you add your voice to theirs. Jesus replies, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.” How do those people look in reaction to that? Maybe Jesus turns and looks at you.

Andrew Walker
On Retreat: A Lenten Journey
(Continuum, 2012)

During the civil wars in Sudan more than two million people were killed and others were forced to leave their homes. Just before independence came, the country’s Catholic bishops offered a novena to help people prepare for change. They wrote: “Jesus’ identity, mission and actions were determined by his experience of sonship. He did not get his approval from external mechanisms, nor from the number of followers, his miracles or his charismatic personality ... His worth and dignity were based on his relationship with God. It was clear to him that he was the ‘beloved son of God.’” ... We can see that Jesus is secure in God’s love, but we don’t always allow ourselves to depend so totally on God. We look for other ways to keep ourselves secure – wealth, for example, status or public praise. On Ash Wednesday and throughout Lent we are called to turn back to God, not out of duty, nor by following rituals and rules for their own sake. We can use the season of Lent to pray, fast and to give and to give to others out of love, trusting in God’s love for us.

Linda Jones in *Light Breaks Forth*,
The Cafod Lent Book 2012
(Darton, Longman and Todd, 2011)

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday

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