

Defender of the Faith

An outstanding Roman Catholic priest of today is the Abbé de Nantes, philosopher and theologian. In France this once *obscur curé de campagne* is now *un grand personnage*, the leader of the most dynamic traditionalist movement in the French church, and the founder of a flourishing religious community with a daughter-house in Québec Province, Canada. In Rome the Abbé's name grates harshly on the ears of the Sovereign Pontiff, whom he accuses of heresy, schism, and scandal, and is feared in the palace of the Holy Office. But in England his name is as yet little known, at least as compared with that of the other traditionalist leader, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, whose Society of St. Pius X is well established here, and has a church in London. The English Catholic press is careful to mention the Abbé's name as seldom as possible; perhaps because the editors of three weekly papers think that the notion of someone accusing the Pope of heresy is more than their readers could stand. Yet such a challenge is not without precedent. For instance, in the 14th century Pope John XXII was accused by William of Ockham and others of heterodox teaching about the beatific vision, which he said would not be granted to the blessed in heaven until after the general resurrection. Another of this pope's accusers was a Welsh Dominican friar, Thomas Waleys, a biblical scholar of considerable ability. For his temerity he was confined in a papal prison in Avignon, where he suffered many things. However, he was lucky enough to end his days as a suffragan bishop in the diocese of London. John XXII stuck to his affirmation; but on his deathbed he admitted he was wrong, and recanted.



The Abbé de Nantes preaching a retreat at the Maison Sainte-Thérèse in Canada.

Who, then, is the Abbé de Nantes? Georges de Nantes was born in 1924, and was ordained priest in 1948. He was admitted to four academic degrees, and was for ten years a professor of philosophy and theology. Then, at his own request, he was assigned to a country parish in the diocese of Troyes, where, with the approval of his bishop, he founded a religious community, the *Petits Frères et Soeurs du Sacré-Cœur*. From the beginning of Pope John XXIII's Second Council of the Vatican he detected in its proceedings, and finally in its decrees, tendencies that he judged to be contrary to sacred tradition and a threat to orthodox doctrine. After the Council was over he took up a position of public dissent from and opposition to the conciliar decrees, because of which he was "suspended" by his bishop, and inhibited from preaching and hearing confessions. (A disciplinary measure of this kind holds good only within the

diocese where the sentence is pronounced. It is of purely local effect, and has no force elsewhere). But in taking this step it would seem, as the Abbé has always maintained, that the bishop was wrong, since the decrees of Vatican II as promulgated lack the usual canonical formularies by which conciliar acts are affirmed as binding *de fide*. Furthermore, John XXIII had made it clear from the beginning that this was to be a pastoral council – something altogether new in the history of the Church – not concerned with definitions of doctrine.

The “thrust” of the Vatican II decrees was inspired – for by then Good Pope John was dead – by Pope Paul VI (G.-B. Montini), a disciple of the liberal Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose influence on contemporary Catholic thought the Abbé deplores. Karol Wojtyła, the Polish Pope John-Paul II, has all along proclaimed himself a disciple of Paul VI, whose work he is pledged to continue.

The Abbé de Nantes’ *gravamina* against the Second Vatican Council and Popes Paul VI and John Paul II are spelled out by him in two books: ***Liber Accusationis Primus*** (Paul VI) and ***Liber Accusationis Secundus*** (John Paul II). His accusations may be summarised in these words addressed to John Paul II: “*It has to be said plainly: your religion is no longer that of the Catholic and Roman Church. Yours is the religion of man who makes himself God, and not the religion of God the Son, who became man for us.*” In other words, the religion of secular humanism with Catholic external trappings.

Can this possibly be true? one asks, when one hears of the matter for the first time. It seems unlikely. Is the Abbé de Nantes just another eccentric cleric with a bee in his bonnet and a personal grievance? One might be tempted to think so, and to dismiss the whole matter as of interest to no one outside France; but if one takes the trouble to read the two ***Libri Accusationis*** it very quickly becomes clear that this explanation will not do. Each of these documents is a very formidable indictment, which cannot be so easily dismissed. The indictments are based on the two Popes’ encyclical letters, allocutions, and miscellaneous philosophical and theological writings, which are quoted from *in extenso*. The two books have enjoyed a very wide circulation, with editions in several languages: French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, etc.

Karol Wojtyła is a philosopher by profession; but his words, at least in their English language editions, are of an almost impenetrable density for anyone who is not himself or herself a professional philosopher. (Perhaps even for some of them?) But this has not discouraged M. de Nantes from studying these writings closely, for he has the intellectual training and equipment to enable him to do so.

The Pope’s encyclical letters are heavy going and of inordinate length, and are little read by either the clergy or the laity. However, because of its subject-matter the encyclical ***Laborem exercens*** has attracted a certain amount of attention from “left-wing” Catholic intellectuals, and others. The French Catholic newspaper *La Croix* commented that the history of philosophy could provide striking analogies in respect of the Pontiff’s philosophy of work, notably in the writings of Marx and Engels. And a writer in the magazine *Je suis Français* remarked that Karol Wojtyła’s philosophical masters are mostly German; Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Marx, Heidegger, and Max Scheler. Now, no one is going to say that each of these philosophers may not have something to teach us; but one need hardly be surprised if a writer with such masters should develop in his own thought a markedly “*immanentist*” and humanist line of thought. We also know that in his younger, pre-clerical days Wojtyła was greatly influenced by the “*anthroposophy*” of Rudolf Steiner, and later by the thought of Teilhard de Chardin. A fairly heady brew would be the likely product of all this.

The Abbé also charges, again citing chapter and verse, so that anyone can verify what he says, that John Paul II destroys the unity of the faith; and, through a novel doctrine of “*collegiality*”, weakens the hierarchic structure of the Church. Further, his doctrine of “*the rights of man*” conforms to the principles of 1789 and the doctrines of the French Revolution; ideas hitherto always reprobated and condemned by the Church.

Another accusation is that the Pope has sanctioned and fostered a profound change in the traditional

understanding of the Mass. This is not the place to make any comment on these charges: in any case, not being a professional philosopher or theologian I would prefer not to do so. What I can say, however, is that, having studied carefully both the first and second ***Liber Accusationis***, I find it hard to understand how anyone could fail to see that the Abbé has presented a powerful *prima facie* case that requires to be answered.

Very similar charges are made in the solemn ***mise en garde*** addressed to the Sovereign Pontiff by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and Bishop Antonio de Castro Mayer on the occasion of the extraordinary synod of bishops held in Rome in 1986. Lefebvre represents many thousands of traditionalist Catholics all over the world; de Nantes several thousand in France and Canada principally. There are a number of other smaller, traditionalist groups, some of whom are confirmed ***sede-vacantists***; i.e. they believe that the present Pope is so far gone from orthodox belief that he must be considered as no longer pope. Both the Abbé and the Archbishop strongly dissent from this position. The Abbé has certain reservations about Monseigneur Lefebvre's movement; principally because the Archbishop ordains new traditionalist priests, and may possibly consecrate a new bishop, so that the succession may be preserved after Lefebvre's death. These de Nantes believes to be acts contrary to proper canonical order. In his own community he has a number of young men who have completed their studies for the priesthood, and they could reasonably be presented to Lefebvre for ordination. The Abbé prefers that they should wait until, eventually, the position of his movement, ***La Contre-Réforme Catholique***, is regularised.

The discovery, or alleged discovery from time to time of heterodox teaching in the pronouncements of popes should surprise no one. Papal pronouncements of that degree of solemnity which is believed to enjoy divine protection from error are of the last rarity. Such vaticinations are seldom, if ever, found in allocutions and encyclical letters. The only matter for surprise in the present context is the scale and frequency of the allegedly erroneous propositions.

What is of particular interest, though, is the way the Vatican has chosen to handle the matter, about which practically nothing has appeared in the British press, secular or religious.

The Pope himself has taken no public notice of the Abbé's indictment, copies of which have been presented to all the cardinals in curia. The two volumes of indictment have enjoyed an immense circulation all over the world; and most bishops will have seen at least the second one. The Pope has remained silent, and no cardinal, bishop, or other theologian had come forward to offer a rebuttal on the Pope's behalf. Why not? The charges are so serious, and are now so widely known, in spite of the Vatican's blanket of silence, that a reply is absolutely necessary if the Pope's reputation is not to suffer more than it has done already.

But although no attempt has been made to rebut the Abbé's charges, various steps have been taken against M. de Nantes personally; but these have fallen short of excommunication. Again one asks why? Presumably because he could not, today, be excommunicated without due process of law, and the Vatican may well be afraid of the impression the Abbé might make on the general public were he to conduct his own defence at a public trial in an ecclesiastical court. Not only has he a very sharp mind and great learning, he is also a powerful and eloquent speaker.

So the Abbé remains *unexcommunicate*; but in 1969 the Holy Office declared him "*disqualified*": a sanction hitherto unknown to canon law, and one which its recipient described as "*sanction exorbitante du droit, sportive plutot qu'ecclésiastique*".

Between 1978 and 1983 de Nantes addressed a series of letters to the Pope, and when no replies had been received from the Vatican to any of them their text was made public. Then, on 25 March 1983 the Abbé wrote to inform the Holy Father that on 3 May himself, two or three members of his community, and a few other friends would present themselves at the Bronze Doors of the Vatican Palace for the purpose of placing in the hands of the Pope, as supreme judge in matters of faith and morals, or of his accredited representative, a copy of the second ***Liber Accusationis***, with the urgent plea that he would study it and,

in due time, pass formal judgement on it.

When the time came, the Abbé and his supporters were not admitted to the presence of the Pope, but were received by the Dominican cardinal Jerome Hamer, Secretary of the Holy Office (now camouflaged under the name of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith). The cardinal refused to accept the proffered volume, and would not even receive a copy for the library of the Holy Office. (But it is known that a copy is there now.) The Secretary then told the Abbé, quite simply, that before he could be officially received, or given any consideration whatsoever, he must first retract all his errors. Yet some time before Cardinal Hamer's appointment to the secretaryship all the Abbé's writings had been carefully examined by a committee set up by the Holy Office for that purpose, and had been pronounced free of error - except on one very small point, which M. de Nantes had already himself detected and corrected.

In any case, if errors there were, the Abbé could not withdraw them until they had been pointed out to him; which they never have been, to this day. The situation therefore remains unchanged.



The Abbé de Nantes, surrounded by his brothers and by members of the CRC, making their way towards the Holy Office, on 13 May 1983, to present the second Liber.

The writer in the magazine *Je suis Français* spoke of the “immense work” accomplished by M. de Nantes in the fields of metaphysics, theology, and science, and said that his writings on these subjects are “monuments of reflection and erudition”, notwithstanding their occasionally violent language and “excès de plume”.

The notion of his excommunication seems to have been set aside; perhaps some less direct way will be found to discredit him in the eyes of those - the greater part of the Catholic faithful - who have not studied the matter from its beginning. In fact, attempts have recently been made, in Paris and elsewhere, with the tacit connivance of Cardinal Lustiger, to represent the Abbé and the **Contre-Réforme** movement as a sect fallen away from Catholic unity, and now outside the Church. Recently the English Roman Catholic bishops, in their reply to a questionnaire received from Rome, listed the CRC among the religious cults and sects now present in England. Fortunately, the intervention of a senior bishop who knew the real facts was sufficient to get this error rectified.

It is difficult to see how the affair will end. John Paul II seems no more likely to give way than was John XXII. The Abbé certainly will not give way, short of an “**infallible**” ruling from the Pope himself. If the next pope is another John Paul I (Papa Luciani) it is conceivable that he might insist on the Decrees of

Vatican II being subjected to a close scrutiny, with a view to their revision or reinterpretation so as to make certain their conformity with traditional doctrine. For it is in the decrees of the ***néfaste concile***, as the Abbé calls it, that the root of the trouble lies. The possible shortcomings of the encyclicals and allocutions of one particular transient pontiff are of less significance.

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