New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01507.x

Comment: *In memoriam Marcus Lefébure*

The most dramatic event in this journal's 90 years existence was Fr Herbert McCabe's dismissal as editor, at the Master of the Order's behest, days after the February 1967 number appeared, in which, granting that the Church is 'quite plainly corrupt', Herbert contended this could never be a good reason for leaving, as Father Charles Davis had just done.

It's difficult now to reconstruct the hullabaloo. Charles Davis (1923–1999), the best-known Catholic theologian in Britain, had just left the Church. He had recently published *God's Grace in History*; and been appointed to a chair in theology at Heythrop College, then in Oxfordshire. His departure shook many Catholics deeply; it was hyped in the newspapers. Herbert's editorial was too paradoxical, anyway for the Dominican authorities in Rome. Were they going to close down the journal? Vehement indignation in the press at the injustice to Herbert was matched by ferocious incredulity that a Catholic theologian could agree that the Church is 'corrupt'.

But the journal survived: P.L. signed the editorial in August 1967. Marcus Lefébure — Pascal as he then was, we all took religious names — had become editor. To one angry correspondent in *The Guardian* he replied: 'I cannot but profoundly sympathize with the rending of his loyalties and with the deep distress he, Mr Charles Davis and other personal friends of Fr Herbert McCabe feel, especially as my succeeding to Fr McCabe's position is for me a matter of religious obedience'. Marcus was 34, just completing formal studies at Blackfriars, Oxford, and looking forward to pastoral work. He was to edit *New Blackfriars* for three and a half years — until Herbert was finally reinstated, with effect from October 1970 ('As I was saying before I was so oddly interrupted, ecclesiastical authorities can behave in some fairly bizarre ways').

Marcus moved to Edinburgh, where he stayed until leaving the Order in 1985 to get laicized. During these years he edited the volume on injustice in the Blackfriars *Summa*; he was English editor of *Concilium*; with Dr Hans Schauder he published two books on counselling; he chaired the counselling agency Wellspring; and he created the congregation – the 'parish of election' — at 24 George Square, many of whom remember him with gratitude and affection. (He returned to Wellspring in 1991 until he retired in 2000.)

Marcus Lefébure died on 20 April 2012, after years of cruelly destructive Parkinson's disease. The eldest of five, his parents were

© 2012 The Author. New Blackfriars © 2012 The Dominican Council. Published by Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2012, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA
https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01507.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

naturalised British subjects, Catholics from Vienna. After school at Stonyhurst he read law at University College London and at Trinity College Cambridge. He qualified as a barrister at Gray's Inn. For a thesis in Paris comparing the power of the State in French and English law he was awarded a doctorate. Then, in January 1958, he entered the Dominican novitiate at Woodchester. He was ordained priest in Oxford in July 1965. In those days we had two years of further study, before taking up some preaching or pastoral ministry.

Was it wise to plunge Marcus into the maelstrom of 'the McCabe affair'? Perhaps others were considered, even sounded out and refused? He did a good job, as a riffle through the numbers he edited would show. He wrote over 30 editorials, on a wide range of subjects. But the first (August 1967) voiced his sense of being a divisive figure:

> It is no good pretending that nothing has happened. I should not be writing here if it had not. And this fact alone will already be as disquieting for many as it may be hopeful to others. The almost automatic expressions rise of themselves: reaction or balance, capitulation or adjustment, compromise or peace-making, stoolpigeon or mediator, feeble or meek?

For many readers, including fellow Dominicans, it was dishonourable to have accepted the editorship: capitulating to, rather than defying, mindless authoritarianism.

Marcus, towards the end of this first editorial, offered this programmatic vision of *New Blackfriars*:

> The review, then, is for all those who are committed to the pains and venture of growing with the Church, or, rather, of *being* the new Church growing and discerning its direction, and who are yet neither so sure of their way that they will not listen to others nor so insecure that they will not expose themselves to the contradiction of argument.

He concludes as follows:

> we must face the fact that debate, argument, probing discussion— acrimonious even at times, until we learn mutual respect and manners — can no longer be limited to improvements of the present state of things; they are part of the dark and confused groping to a quite new state, negotiating and mediating the transition.

Catholics, as a glance at gossip and controversy on the web would confirm, indulge in mutual demonization that goes far beyond a tolerable degree of disrespect and bad manners. Marcus, of course, had something more in mind than 'improvements of the present state of things'. For him, back then, the Church was engaged in a 'dark and confused groping to a quite new state' — how accurate or prophetic was such a judgment?

Fergus Kerr OP

© 2012 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2012 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01507.x Published online by Cambridge University Press