

Photo by Philip Kennedy OP

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Introduction

Herbert McCabe died in hospital in Oxford on 28 June 2001, a few weeks before he would have been 76. The large congregation at the funeral, the many condolences received by the Prior of Blackfriars, and the obituaries in the national press, indicated something of the respect in which he was held as a preacher and lecturer, as well as the affection for him as a human being among his many friends. A year on, it seemed appropriate to remember Herbert in the journal which he edited with such flair and some controversy — most famously, he contended, in the February 1967 issue, that the Catholic Church is 'quite plainly corrupt', that this fact 'would, on the whole, be taken for granted by English Catholics', but that this is no reason for ceasing to be a Catholic: on the contrary, 'It is because we believe that the hierarchical institutions of the Roman Catholic Church, with all their decadence, their corruption and their sheer silliness, do in fact link us to areas of Christian truth beyond our own particular experience, and ultimately to truths beyond any experience, that we remain, and see our Christian lives in terms of remaining, members of this Church'.

Shocking as this sounded at the time, to 'progressives' still imbued with the heady optimism of the Second Vatican Council as well as to 'conservatives' for whom the principle of *ecclesia semper reformanda* could never be applied to the Roman Catholic Church — both minorities, as Herbert suggested — what he wrote is no different from what John Henry Newman was writing, admittedly in private letters, during the First Vatican Council ('Such scandals ... I thought we had too many vigilant and hostile eyes upon it, to allow even the most reckless, tyrannical, and heartless ecclesiastics, so wounding, piercing religious souls, so co-operating with those who wish the Church's downfall', see *Letters* XXVI, 280-1). That there is a longstanding theological tradition that takes corruption in the Church for granted, vastly more extensive and much more ferocious in its language, was documented by Hans Urs von Balthasar in his famous monograph 'Casta meretrix' ('Holy whore'), first published in 1960 in a collection of his essays on the nature of the Church, significantly entitled *Sponsa Verbi* ('Spouse of the Word'). (Not that Herbert ever read a single word of Balthasar or, I guess, much of Newman either.)

Herbert published only three books: *The New Creation* (1964),

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lectures on the sacraments that he gave to students in university chaplaincies up and down the country; *Law, Love and Language* (1968), lectures given at the University of Kent in Canterbury, arguing that ethics is 'a kind of literary criticism of human behaviour, seeking not so much to classify it as right or wrong as to explore its significance, trying to discover what "love" means'; and *God Matters* (1987), reprinting sixteen papers most of which appeared in this journal since 1972 and some seven sermons.

'Few theologians equal McCabe's great good sense, philosophical brilliance, and theological profundity', as Stanley Hauerwas has noted (see *In Good Company: The Church as Polis*, 1995, page 217). While this is a judgment that none who know his work would contest, it has to be said that the published evidence is relatively meagre. True, there is at least one graduate student (not a Dominican) who believes that there is already enough in the public domain to consider embarking on a doctoral dissertation. Herbert left a very considerable *Nachlass* which should yield two or three more books in due course. The first, *God Still Matters*, edited by Brian Davies, is due to appear presently. On the whole, therefore, it seems premature to commemorate Herbert in a set of studies concentrating on his own theological achievement. His detailed work on St Thomas Aquinas, in particular, remains to be published and, given its centrality in all his thinking, it will need to be absorbed before McCabe's theological profundity can really be explored.

It seems best, then, to remember Herbert in these two issues of the journal (July/August and September), with essays on topics that interested him greatly, such as the three or four directly engaging with St Thomas, but also with contributions that would have confirmed his belief in the ultimate rightness of Catholic theology (over against John Zizioulas), and his love of the Dominican Order (Yves Congar, Patrick Primrose) — not to mention Terry Eagleton's poem in memory of Herbert's friend Pat Hanrahan.

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