Comment:
One day's news

Sometimes you think of cancelling the papers. Even in the best of the British newspapers, there is often nothing but exaggeration of trivial events.

The name of the game is 'rubbishing'. The royal family, the Scottish Executive, the Tory Party, the President of the United States, the Prime Minister — every day, in our newspapers of 'record' and 'analysis', these people are ridiculed. The Countess of Wessex piffles unwarily to a journalist conning her into thinking him a sheikh, and the monarchy is threatened. Half the people polled in the streets of Glasgow have never heard of Henry McLeish. The only election William Hague need worry about is the one for his successor. George W. Bush likes to be in bed by 9.30 pm. Tony Blair has 'taken personal control' of the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. And suchlike.

Yet, stories are still told with restraint and objectivity. This past month, alas, the Catholic Church has been too newsworthy. In The *Times* of April 17, for example, all on the same page, there were three stories of Catholic interest. Part of the wall in Rome that was restored and enlarged in AD 274 at the behest of the Emperor Aurelian collapsed, having been 'cleaned as part of preparations for the Vatican Holy Year 2000'. Secondly, a longer story, over the Easter weekend Christiana Ejembi, a warrant officer's wife in married quarters at the Sam Ethnam air force base in Lagos, 'went to the toilet about 5am and was shocked and overwhelmed by fear with the appearance of the Virgin Mary'. Officials at the air base have had to set up heavy security to control the crowds. The Virgin has reappeared every day, entreating housewives to have faith in God and asking that only three people be allowed in the lavatory at a time.

Then, thirdly, there was the big picture of Sister Julienne Kizito, clutching a large shopping bag, with three young lawyers looming over her, as she and another nun, went on trial in Brussels, accused of helping Hutu soldiers in April 1994 to massacre 6,000 Tutsis who had taken refuge in the health centre of their convent in Rwanda. They are accused, among other things, of bringing jerry-cans of petrol to help the Hutu soldiers to set fire to a garage in which 700 Tutsi refugees were burnt alive.

Belgian law empowers courts to judge war crimes no matter where they were committed. Rwanda, assigned to Belgium at the end of World

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb06475.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

War I, was administered as part of the Belgian Congo until independence. Most of the people are Catholic. Links with Belgium remain strong, financially and economically of course; but also ecclesiastically, through missionaries from Belgium and Rwandan clergy and religious educated at Belgian universities. The two nuns, aged 36 and 42, left Rwanda n July 1994 when a Tutsi-led government took power. For the last five years they have lived with the Benedictine nuns at Maredret, near Maredsous, the Benedictine monastery south of Namur.

All three stories were told quite dispassionately. No *post hoc propter hoc* principle was hinted at in the first story: it wasn't the Vatican's Holy Year that caused the wall to collapse. Experts in Rome were quoted, next day, insisting that it did not fall down as a result of the cleaning. Reading between the lines, of course, we nod our heads: we have all heard of 'restorations' that end in disaster.

As for the Virgin Mary appearing in the window of Mrs Ejembi's 'private lavatory' — well, the neutral and deadpan tone in which this story was told was the best way to make most Catholic readers of *The Times* squirm. 'Housewives, have faith in God, and don't let more than three at a time into the bathroom': why are the 'messages' so often so uninspiring, not to say banal and bossy? (It might make Anglican bishops who want 'intercommunion' think twice: what do you get involved with when you get closer to Roman Catholics?)

Whatever the guilt of the nuns, and the businessman and the university professor who are in the dock with them, this dreadful was told with complete objectivity. Expected to last two months, the trial will bring 50 witnesses from Rwanda to give evidence, including the local Hutu militia leader who has signed a confession to the crime, allegedly implicating the nuns.

At least, we may note with relief, no one is saying that the massacres of Tutsis in Rwanda had anything to do with the religion either of the victims or of the perpetrators. These crimes were not like the massacre at Srebrenica in July 1995, when 7,500 men and boys were killed, mainly because they were Muslim. But you don't have to know Belgian priests who once ministered in the Congo, or to have celebrated Mass with Hutu nuns exiled in Belgium, to shudder with horror at the catastrophic failure of the Catholic Church in Rwanda.

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