The Conversion of England and Catholic Culture

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Fr Aidan Nichols is an English Dominican who became a Catholic (from Anglicanism) in 1966 and was ordained priest ten years later. His pastoral experience has been mainly as a chaplain to students in Edinburgh and Cambridge. Otherwise, his life has been spent teaching and (especially) writing. His books have been on a variety of theological topics but the general aim is to make available the historic richness of the patrimony of Catholic doctrine, as expressed in different ages.

The reason I was invited here today is the small book that was published earlier this year: *The Realm*, of which the subtitle was *An Unfashionable Essay on the Conversion of England*. This applied to the English situation some of the ideas I'd already put forward in a larger but less noticed effort, *Christendom Awake. On Re-energising the Church in Culture*, in 1999. This morning I want to offer some practical tips about sustaining Catholic culture, notably in the family, after, that is, I've outlined the contents of the more recent and shorter book. First of all, however, perhaps I could say a word or two about how I came to write it.

I suppose the principal reason was dismay at the decline, by most quantifiable criteria, of the Catholic Church in England which I joined from an Anglican background in 1966 when I was 17. In an historical perspective, what distresses me most is the gradual liquidation of the advances made during the nineteenth century Catholic Revival, the 'Second Spring'. At a cost that was, often, heroic, the Victorians succeeded in building up, in an atmosphere of public hostility, a remarkable network of parishes, monasteries, other Religious houses, schools and charitable organizations, all in the direct service of the Catholic faith in a supernatural spirit. How much of this will be left in fifty or even twenty-five years' time? Indeed, in certain respects, how much is left now? Bishop Patrick O'Donoghue of Lancaster, in his frank assessment *Fit for Mission?: Church*, also published this year, asks his readers, 'Have you hope enough to face with me the reality of our Church [in England and Wales, that is] fairly and squarely?'[1]

There was also a subsidiary reason for writing *The Realm* and that was anxiety about the general condition – beyond the Church – of English society and its prevailing *mores*. Specifically, I was worried that the dismantling of what we can call a metaphysical frame for life, which began in fact in the Victorian era, is making it increasingly difficult to transmit a morality of virtue. The ethical consequences of de-Christianisation – secularization – have only emerged in my lifetime. A morality of virtue is being replaced by an ethos of self-interest, and this, quite apart from its social disadvantages, wears away the imaginative texture of life, leaving people who have fewer self-generated resources with no obvious life-aims beyond affluence, as signaled by the usual markers: house, car, life-style. This subsidiary consideration was saved, I hope, from mere moralizing by being linked with patriotism – which at least gives it the cachet of the

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[1] P. O'Donoghue, *Fit for Mission? Church. Being Catholic Today* (Lancaster 2008), p. 6.

unexpected, at any rate outside the football stadium. It is humiliating for an ancient nation such as England, which has produced saints and sages, and generated institutions intrinsically apt to promote virtue, from medieval almshouses to the Indian Civil Service, to be reduced to this.

In the book, then, my opening chapter links an analysis of the causes of the decline of Catholicism to the more recent 'identity of England' question, itself caused by the re-emergence of the Celtic – or more or less Celtic - nations through devolution and the advent of the European Union. The sub-title, 'An Unfashionable essay on the Conversion of England', relates chiefly to this linkage. In English Catholicism, outside of a restricted circle best represented by the - now much diminished – Guild of Ransom, it is unfashionable to propose the conversion, or rather re-conversion, of England to Catholic Christianity. It is doubly unfashionable to suggest that the avoidance of the imperative to convert England has been a central factor in precipitating the slide into apathy and non-practice of many English or Anglo-Irish Catholics over the last forty years. It is triply unfashionable – compounding the felony, then – to insist that restoring this imperative (re-convert England!) to the standing it enjoyed in the period when I myself was taking instruction as a convert is the proper way for the Catholic Church to insert herself into the present debate about English identity and the future of its institutional underpinning. (Should there be an English Parliament, or English sittings of the Westminster Parliament, and so on.) Given all this unfashionableness I was rather surprised when *The Realm* was reviewed favourably in *The Tablet* but a presentation of some of the ideas in the Catholic Union's annual Craigmyle Lecture three weeks ago drew a suitably indignant response from a letter writer to the next issue.

My most original – probably, come to think of it, my only original – argument consists of a comparison between the Anglo-Saxon conversion and now. The example of the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England shows, I maintained, the efficacy of a missionary scheme which combines representatives of the indigenous population with canny outsiders. To convert or re-convert a culture one needs both the long and indeed instinctive familiarity of the native, along with the more detached and objective critical gaze of the newcomer. In contemporary English Catholicism there is a 'native' community consisting of the descendants of recusants, converts and the anglicized Irish, along with a pot-pourri of recent, or fairly recent, immigrants from many parts of the world. As a reservoir for mission, that recreates the successful Dark Age formula. Contrast the Church of England, for which it is difficult not to follow national trends wherever they may lead. Contrast the Orthodox Church in England, which remains too bound to other ethnicities to have much inner feel for the situation.

In the second chapter of *The Realm* I argue that England is historically inseparable from Christianity. Here my chief witness is St Bede, whose *History of the English Church and People* shows how the genesis of the idea of England is inseparable from the conversion – even if the English nation had not yet acquired its own State form, an event usually dated to the dynastic union achieved under King Athelstan in 927. To put it rhetorically, England was born in the waters of Baptism. It came to natural life, sociologically, as it entered supernatural life, sacramentally. The inability to disengage the identity of England from its ecclesial context – the covenant community of Baptism – means that a memory of the metaphysical will always haunt the English soul.

The baptismal covenant within which the corporate life of the English took shape has left its mark in the commendation of virtues and virtuous practices at different levels – for example, in the classics of English literature, in the principles of the common law, in the sense of co-responsibility implied in the structure of Parliament, and in the concept of a covenanted people under God which permeates the rite of induction of the sovereign, the Coronation. I point out that, unlike France, England has never drawn a line under its *ancien régime*. Its institutions can be interpreted in the light of their pre-modern history without any suggestion of counter-

revolution. Recurrent waves of Anglo-Catholicism in the Church by law established – the Church of England – underline this. This is still, formally speaking, a Christian society and will continue to be so unless a change in our constitution supervenes. I believe we should affirm the remnants of Christnedom here, to which the throne and the established Church are crucial, and build on the assumption they create: namely, that people in England are at least residually Christian until proved otherwise. Whatever our doctrinal criticisms of Anglicanism, the throne and the established Church are, in Newman's term, 'breakwaters against infidelity'. Even in their present weakness, they guard important elements of the Christian past. They slow down the process of secularization until such time as – hopefully – the Catholic Church can genuinely renew its spiritual force. So here I part company with 'post-Christendom theorists' who say that the Church should accept the status of just one community among others. And I depart equally radically from the positively *anti*-historical stance adopted by Tony Blair in a widely publicized speech about faith in contemporary Britain, given here at Westminster cathedral in April of this year. In his *Principles of Catholic Theology* Joseph Ratzinger wrote:

> Humanity and historicity, intellect and history,
> are inextricably related. The human spirit creates
> history; history conditions human existence... It
> is as memory that intellect proves itself *qua*
> intellect; memory generates tradition; tradition
> realizes itself in history... for without the
> necessarily trans-temporal relationship of
> person to person, humanity cannot be awakened
> to itself, cannot express itself...[2]

In effect, I am applying that piece of Teutonic prose to the concrete case of the people of England.

In the third chapter of *The Realm*, 'The needs of the nation', I point out that it is not for the State to legislate into existence some new morality – or non-morality, for that matter. Rather its work is to serve the morality of the civilisational order of the nation whose State it is. What we have seen in recent years is secular elites using the legislature to inculcate a morality (or, as I say, non-morality) of a very different kind, and utilizing such public instruments as Ofsted, the education inspectorate, or the Equality and Human Rights Commission, a government agency, as well as the BBC, to bring into line schools, charities, and, through the role of television in the household, the opinions of ordinary citizens.

In any case, the schism between private and public life typical of liberalism – liberalism says that, privately, I can choose any values I like so long as I don't do harm to other people – renders the State powerless to point to, much less defend, an objective common good, as distinct from mediating between the preferences of the vocal, as interpreted by elites, usually metropolitan. No great civilization, surely, can be formed on such a basis. Indeed, if we can credit the historian Christopher Dawson, writing in the 1940s, no great civilization has ever been formed without some metaphysical or religious principle to animate it. Pluralism, which is the communitarian alternative to liberalism, can do no better here than can liberalism. Liberalism treats the community as atomized individuals. Pluralism, a. k. a. multi-culturalism, treats it as atomized groups. So for a national community, pluralism suffers from the same defect as does liberalism: it is inherently incapable of defining a common good, or mobilizing people at large with a view to attaining it.

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[2] J. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (Et San Francisco 1987), p. 87.

In the fourth chapter, 'Critics of the culture', I call to the witness-stand a variety of twentieth century commentators - from T. S. Eliot to J. R. R. Tolkien – who have addressed the disintegration of the cultural system of the community as a whole. Here my main aim is to show that a Christian intelligentsia, or what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called a 'clerisy', has at its disposal enormous intellectual, moral and imaginative resources which can be brought to bear in a many-faceted way. By contrast, the secular liberalism that wants to strip the public square of religious claims from whatever quarter carries a two-fold price tag: first, increasing exhaustion of substantial moral capital (as distinct from the notional variety represented too often by the self-regarding discourse of rights – 'I know my rights', etc.), and secondly, a shrinking of the metaphysical imagination which, under the reign of secular liberalism, will no longer be able to advert to the spiritual aspect of existence in a way that has corporate resonance – as distinct from exceptional individuals (or families) striking out alone. Reality TV, in its moral and imaginative poverty, exemplifies some of the grim results than can be expected. In this fourth chapter, , 'Critics of the culture', incidentally, I also renew an opening to alliance with the Catholicism-compatible elements of Anglicanism already implied in chapter 2 which considered lessons taught by the past story of England. During the next decade shall we see the passing over of classical Anglo-Catholicism from communion with Canterbury to communion with Rome? Though its constituency is shrinking and ageing (as of course, immigrants aside, is likewise our own), its accession would strongly boost the indigenous, as distinct from cosmopolitan, character of the English Catholic Church.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, I set out a programme for what I call 'integral evangelization', which covers three elements – intellectual, mystical and institutional, since, as the lay theologian Friedrich von Huegel noticed in early twentieth century London, people live with the life of the mind (what he called the intellectual), the life of the heart (what he called the mystical), and the life of the social self (what he called the institutional). Under these three headings, I consider what the internal renewal of the Catholic Church in England might mean – as an adventure in ideas through the claims of Christian philosophy and a rich dogmatic vision communicated by much improved catechesis (hence 'intellectual'), a re-enchanting of the Liturgy, which is our primary induction into the nature of prayer (hence, the 'mystical'), and a re-focussing of Catholic institutions, from family, through school to health-care agencies, on an approach to existence informed by the intellectual and mystical facets of revelation.

At the same time, I suggest that the institutional side of the Church should also include addressing even a decayed Christian State, such as we have in the United Kingdom, in an attempt to let it hear what we can term the 'voices of creation' – voices which are in different senses both presupposed and sustained by the historic revelation. Indeed the Church is already doing this - compare the recent debate in Parliament over the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill. However, materialism in both the consumerist and the philosophical senses of that word, makes it hard to hear those voices. That is why the witness of the Church to the human good has to be accompanied by the Church's revival as a public force which politicians will ignore at their electoral peril. We have a huge fight on our hands, to appeal to the latent Christianity of the English people, so as to defeat the secularism which, as Cardinal Ratzinger put it in an interview with the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* in 2003:

> is beginning to turn into an ideology that
> imposes itself through politics and leaves
> no public space for the Catholic and
> Christian vision, which thus risks becoming
> something purely private and essentially

mutilated.[3]

So, to turn all this into counsel, with an eye especially on the youngest generation among us; on the basis of *The Realm*, my message to parents is: bring up your children on a Catholic Christian view of English history. That means explaining to them that England was born as a Catholic country; that it developed with a Catholic culture for a thousand years; that it entered into a spiritual crisis in the middle of the sixteenth century when its life was cut off from its roots, though not absolutely, thank goodness, not in every respect; that a valiant minority kept the flame alive, often at the cost of persecution, sometimes of death; that in the nineteenth century they enjoyed a second spring, when the hope of the return of England to her ancient faith came alive again; that in the second half of the twentieth century owing to apathy and increasing secularization this hope receded, and so now it is time for us in the twenty-first century to pick up the torch again.

We have considerable cultural resources for doing this. I mentioned a number of them in my earlier book, *Christendom Awake*, although to some extent making the idea of culture central to that book was so as to have a hook on which to hang my thoughts about a large variety of questions in modern Church life, including topics like ecumenism and the pro-life movement. And neither of those, it might be thought, come immediately to mind when the word 'culture' is mentioned. However, other topics I deal with in *Christendom Awake* are more à propos. Other aspects dealt with which come to mind more readily when we are thinking of the resources available to the Catholic family are the following;

First, a Catholic culture is a moral culture. The lives of the saints, and of other really good people in the history of the Church, are filled with examples of the moral virtues, as lived, as put into practice in action. If morality is more caught than taught, then familiarity with the lives of the saints, in all their human vividness, is a good way to catch it. For this one needs something like one of the versions of Butler's *Lives of the Saints* though perhaps not the most recent version where virtues out of favour with our secular contemporaries are, in some cases, played down.

Secondly, a Catholic culture is a devotional culture. It encourages, that is to say, the personal love of God, God the Trinity who in his philanthropy, his loving-kindness to man, became man and suffered for us. Daily prayers, and special prayers for the great liturgical seasons, build up such a devotional culture in our homes. So do holy images, whether one does this in a Latin way, by making a little unofficial altar, perhaps, with a crucifix and images of our Lady and the saints, or in a Byzantine way, by having an icon corner and a lamp or even an incense-burner in front of it. Cheaply produced icons are readily available, or one could make one's own out of postcard reproductions or from digital photographs of icons in books. As in the Eastern church, one could alter the arrangement of such icons to highlight the major seasons and festivals as they come along. Whether images are verbal or visual, they all help to re-direct the heart and the imagination towards God and his saving work.

Thirdly, a Catholic culture is an intellectual culture. As someone once remarked, an unintellectual salvation means an unsaved intellect. A culture that is moral and devotional but abstains from the intellectual may well be left behind by an adolescent in middle school or preparing to go to University. That means that the present (1992) *Catechism of the Catholic Church* should be a reference work to hand when some point of doctrine or discipline comes up, and someone asks, Why do we believe this, or Why do we do that. The 2005 *Compendium of the Catechism* is easier to use, if one is not accustomed to thumbing through indexes in a big book. It won't necessarily explain why we believe what we believe but at least it will say what it is we believe when we are believing it – and that is a good start. So also will the excellent little book *Credo*, even shorter than the *Compendium* and equally lavishly illustrated from the sacred images

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[3] Cited in T. Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith. The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford 1983).

of East and West. Produced by two young English secular priests in 2007 it is published by the Catholic Truth Society. In general, though regrettably they are nowhere near as cheap as once they were, the new run of CTS pamphlets are highly to be recommended. When complete they will cover almost every issue an enquiring youngster is likely to come up with.

So that is my second counsel - after the one about the Catholic history of England. It runs, seek to develop a Catholic culture in your home: morally, devotionally, and intellectually. In so doing, you will take further the conversion of England, almost without realizing it.