

Letters To The Editor

From the FAITH Magazine July-August 2005

The Tablet and The Pope

Dear Fr Editor,

How refreshing to read your last editorial. At last, a voice to cut through the monotonous, predictable dirge that The Tablet has been subjecting us to for years. John Paul's papacy was immensely fruitful. The remarkable scenes witnessed throughout the world at the time of his dying and death were not the product of mass hysteria or personality cult. If such an enormous, and particularly young crowd gathered to mourn it was not because of his personality, as The Tablet would have us believe, but because of what John Paul represented and the manner in which he witnessed consistently to the truths of the Catholic Faith. That is the point Pepinster and her colleagues, with equal consistency, fail to acknowledge. While she and her predecessors have spent the last twenty years clamouring for the same old issues to be addressed – contraception, homosexuality, women priests, divorce and remarriage etc – an increasing number of young people, who have glided through most of their Catholic education practically untouched by Magisterial teaching, are coming to a knowledge and love of the Faith through other channels (like, for example, the new movements). They find, to their joy and utter amazement, that Catholicism is beautiful and perfectly coherent. Divested of any long-nurtured prejudices, their eyes are opening to Christ's vision of the world as embodied in His Church. And in John Paul these young people had a friend, because it was Christ's vision, not his own, that he tirelessly gave them. Not only that: he explained the Faith, he taught them to be ambitious and he inspired them to be saints. Do they always live up to that teaching? No, of course not. Who does? But where John Paul was encouraging his flock to live up to the exacting standards demanded by Truth, The Tablet was heralding its own paltry little truth, sowing seeds of disenchantment and dissent along the way. John Paul was a Rock and they wanted a lump of malleable dough. Pope Benedict must be a mortal disappointment, as must every pope thereafter. Their arrogance in believing their liberal agenda could enlighten Church wisdom of 2000-years standing and their deceitfulness in encouraging Catholics to think that a pope, any pope, has the authority to reverse doctrine, has cost The Tablet dearly. Its voice of dissent is barely audible. It has nothing of relevance to say to emerging generations of Catholics; and those who once shared their Utopian dream are too tired to listen.

Yours faithfully, Mrs Frances Gallagher

Stanford

Clonskeagh

Dublin Dear Fr Editor,

Sincere thanks for your incisive and inspiring editorial on the life of John Paul II (Faith, May-June 2005). It was an editorial worthy of the man's extraordinary

papacy and the world-engrossing occasion of his death. We are all indebted to his fidelity to his office and his witness. He truly was a great man who inspired many of us to the priesthood. Coincidentally, before reading The Tablet's editorial, I had already preached on the relationship between "the man and the message" but had come to an alternative conclusion to that of Catherine Pepinster: it was precisely the message that inspired the man and made him who he was. As your response brought out, a failure to understand that the teaching of John Paul II was based upon the message of Christ is to fail to comprehend the man himself and, indeed, his popular appeal. It was because he taught the fullness of the truth of Christ in the moral and doctrinal vacuum of modern culture that he attracted so many young people to him; it was because he lived the fullness of that message, even in his dying moments, that all generations and cultures witnessed its authenticity; and it was because he loved with the heart of Christ the High Priest that his teaching and witness resonated in the hearts and minds of so many. How desperately sad it was, then, that The Tablet's editorial should drudge up those old chestnuts of women's ordination, liberation theology, English liturgy and contraception - so 70s! Like a cheesy pop song whose lyrics you can finish-off before you hear the rest of the line, the Tablet was utterly predictable in its analysis of the pontificate of John Paul II. For those of us in our twenties, it simply reinforces the stereotype of the average Tablet reader as a 50s something, lay-looking nun or priest whose dreadful taste in liturgy is only outdone by their appalling taste in fashion.

You are right. Dissent has nothing to offer. It has no vision; and where there is no vision, the people perish. Perhaps the only thing we should all dissent from is purchasing The Tablet! I humbly offer my own example: I do not actually buy The Tablet. I only flick through it when I visit the homes of the aforementioned priests and nuns. Alas, they are getting rather thin on the ground.

Yours faithfully, Fr M.J. Galbraith
St. John the Baptist's
Corstorphine
Edinburgh

Dear Fr. Editor,
Thank goodness for FAITH magazine and its forthright challenge to the prejudices and ranting of The Tablet. Your editorial felt like a much-needed airing in an overheated and fusty room where everyone has been seated for far too long allowing conversation to go in dreary circles. There was something irresistibly comic in the sight of The Tablet, while Catholics and non-Catholics were buzzing with the news of the election of Benedict XV1 and the events in Rome , giving the news one line on its front cover, and then hurrying on to feature an interview with an American nun and her lesbian-and-gay activism! There was this sense of a longing for a retreat into its own comfort-zone, a refusal to recognise the great and dynamic realities of a Church that is always renewing itself and moving forward with history. The Tablet has a

curiously bureaucratic feel to its tone and message, a sort of don't-rock-the-boat mood which obliges its editorial team to assume a commitment on the part of all right-thinking people to an agenda rigid in its political and ethical thinking. It is trapped, as if scared to move, in a circular talking-circle about affirming contraception and homosexuality and the need to create female priests. It won't do. This isn't a discussion about the living Church. The millions of young people who flocked to Rome to honour Pope John Paul – one of the great peacetime movements of population in modern history – went because they loved the message of the man. He had taught them about Jesus Christ, and they loved him for it. If ever there was a group saying "We are Church" this was it. And the banners saying "Santo Subito" had about them something of the air of "canonisation by acclamation" that we are told was a hallmark of the early Church and certainly represented a genuine and heartfelt message that deserved – and got – a hearing. What The Tablet circle need to recognise is that this is no longer the 1970s. A new generation has grown up in the Church – the JP II generation with its own vigour and vision. Perhaps the first to acknowledge this were the writers in the French press in the summer of the Paris World Youth Day, where it was confidently expected that very few people would attend to listen to Pope John Paul or celebrate the message of the Church. It was meant to be a scene of gloom with a modest gathering politely applauding a Pope reaffirming a Catholic message no one really wanted to hear. But the reality was vastly different – hordes and hordes of young people, backpacking from everywhere, thousands upon thousands of them, poured into Longchamps racecourse to sing and pray and to cheer to the echo a Pope with a message that they loved. The "Longchamps generation" intrigued and baffled commentators. But the Tablet-faction didn't want to look or listen. Now, several major youth events later, it's still inward-looking and trying to ignore what is going on. The idea that there is an absolute Truth that is worth seeking and finding, that human relationships in love and marriage are part of a "theology of the body" that is beautiful and important, that God is real and lived among us, that there is a Mass and a priesthood that is directly connected with Him – all this is enormously interesting, dynamic and even exciting. It won't disappear just because The Tablet wants it to do so. Nor can all be suppressed into a box marked "right wing and old fashioned" and thoughts turned inward into the circle of why-contraception-is-all-right-really and when-are-we-going-to-have-women-priests. FAITH magazine offers a coherent, readable, and challenging read that always seems to open up new lines of thought on some aspect of the Faith. But perhaps nothing it has offered in recent months has been quite as useful as its direct challenge to the perceived non-negotiable "Tablet line" on the Church and its future. The truths of the Catholic Faith, cherished by generations, honoured by the sacrifices of martyrs, explored by theologians, are not the private possession of a particular Pope who can change them at will. Nor is the Papacy a political office which launches a new agenda or programme when a new incumbent arrives. It is a means of transmitting unchanging truths, at the service of the Church. Pope Benedict pointed this out, with touching clarity, at St John Lateran in the first few days of his Papacy. He has probably been too busy to write to The Tablet to explain that,

irrespective of the lobbying of a nun with an agenda about homosexuality and lesbianism, he cannot and will not change the teachings of the Church on this or on the other issues on The Tablet agenda. So it is up to the rest of us to point this out instead. Thank goodness for FAITH magazine for doing it so well. Yours faithfully, Joanna Bogle

New Malden

Surrey Dear Fr. Editor, At last someone has had the courage to speak out against The Tablet! Your editorial pointed out that the Church is not about individual personalities (as The Tablet would have us believe) but rather God become Man in the person of Jesus Christ. John Paul II in his Papacy made this so abundantly clear, not only in his humble approach, but also in his courageous action and teaching, when time and again he stood up for the truth. It was precisely the truth of Jesus Christ that the late Holy Father constantly presented to the world in his teaching, a point entirely missed by The Tablet and indeed by other commentators. But then, when the philosophy of our age is that of nominalism, i.e. 'that's what I feel and think, therefore it must be right', is it any wonder that even the Catholic media could be effected by such reductionist ideas. At the dawn of the third millennium, one would hope that editors and the like, would move on from the 'touchy feely church' of the 1970's, instead of being stuck in such a time warp.

Your editorial made abundantly clear the objective truth and reality of Christ that John Paul II presented to the world, and it was precisely because of this teaching that so many young people made their way to Rome for his funeral. I remember hearing several young people say of John Paul '....He was like a Father to us....' and any parent always wants the best for their child, which will include teaching them of the things of God and setting the parameters of how and why they should live according to God's plan. John Paul did exactly that.

Yours faithfully,
Fr. Ian Vane
St. Charles Borromeo
Worthing
West Sussex

Dear Father Editor, Recently my wife and I were very pleased to find your publication online. We have been encouraged in our faith and have found many of your articles very pertinent and relevant to the challenges facing a family today. Having left the Anglican Communion some fifteen years ago we are well aware of the erosion caused by dissent to traditional Christianity. I would ask the Editor of The Tablet to honestly try to imagine the form of the Church her criticisms would favour, and then to look around and see if that church does not already exist. Is it reasonable to expect ordinary parish families to defend St. Athanasius every time they attend Mass? Perhaps they could rightly expect to

attend the liturgy in peace- in the calm knowledge that our Lord's kingdom is not of this world, nor of current politics. Yours faithfully, Brett and Penny Dawe.

Nelson Rd
Longmont , Colorado
U.S.A.

Dear Fr. Editor,

As a young Catholic, I was heartened by your recent Editorial. The Tablet maintains that young people were attracted to the personality of John Paul II rather than his teaching. This is both patronising and incorrect. The late Pope was an outstanding sign of contradiction. His uncompromising stance on issues of faith and morals set him at odds with Western, secular culture. Yet the young embraced him. They did so because they appreciated the challenging and eternal truths he articulated in his words and demonstrated through his work on earth. Why does The Tablet always talk about John Paul's 'policies' as if he were the leader of a political party? Pope John Paul II had no personal, political agenda. He was consistently faithful to the original Mind of Christ, like his predecessors before him: he spoke eternal truths, regardless of their popularity. This is what young people respected and responded to. In an age when we are bombarded with an assortment of supposedly indistinguishable 'lifestyle choices', John Paul II reminded us that we were made to mirror the life of Christ alone. Christ who praised his Father for revealing the truth to the little ones. Yours faithfully, Matt O'Gorman

Dower Avenue
Wallington
Surrey

Dear Fr. Editor,

Your attack on The Tablet (May-June issue) is simply another instalment of the unending "conservative v. liberal" battle in the Church, the view that Church teaching cannot be changed as against the view that, in some areas, it ought to be. Surely one way in which some reconciliation between these positions might be effected is via the notion of "development of doctrine", popularised by Newman. If we could be taken back several centuries (and sometimes not nearly as long ago as that) we would be surprised at some of the teachings which were being propagated by the Church and accepted by the faithful. You referred to the rehabilitation of Galileo; this is one well-known example, where the previous teaching that the earth was the centre of the universe was "developed" as a result of scientific discovery. Another is slavery, once accepted and even commended by the Church and now condemned as a result of a greater appreciation of the rights and dignity of the person. A more drastic example is the interpretation of *ex ecclesiam non salus est*, which Popes and Councils once solemnly proclaimed as meaning that all non-Catholics were damned. The final burying of this teaching at Vatican II has been described by some as "development of doctrine", but to others, myself included, it is simply a change. Another example is the Modernist crisis of a century ago; their ideas on

Biblical criticism were condemned at the time, but are now widely accepted. (Interestingly, the Pope who ended the oppression of the Modernists was Benedict XV.) I am perfectly happy to have teachings which I regard as "changed" to be regarded by others as "development of doctrine". Is this not a way of ameliorating the bitterness which sometimes exists between "conservatives" and "liberals" in the Church? Yours faithfully, Alan Pavelin
Leesons Hill
Chislehurst
Kent

The Catholic Schools Debate

Dear Fr. Editor,

Your are to be congratulated on your editorial (Faith March April 2005) which, at some length, and with intelligence and candour, examines the current position of Catholic schools in Britain . Rightly you point out that there is a crisis and you identify that the crisis has come about because "too much heed is being paid to pleasing the political masters of the moment rather than the interests of the People of God..." It is thirty years this year since I first became a head master of a Catholic maintained secondary schools. The governors then controlled the curriculum, decided their admission criteria for pupils and applied them and appointed all the teaching staff. All this has gone. Catholic governors no longer control the curriculum in maintained schools; we have a national curriculum. They no longer control their own admissions and, for instance, are forced to take in non-Catholics to satisfy a number imposed by the government. Even the right to appoint teachers is now under threat since the government, under the guise of "Diversity and Equality" in practice forbids any real attempt to appoint the teachers ordered by Canon Law, Canon 803 section 2 "formation and education in a catholic school must be based on the principles of catholic doctrine, and the teachers must be outstanding in true doctrine and uprightness of life." Catholic schools, in reality, cannot refuse to appoint practising homosexuals. If a "person" turns up for an interview with a moustache and wearing a dress anyone who asks this "person" what sex (sorry gender) he or she belongs to risks a huge fine. Now it may be that one would think that hostile governments have imposed such appalling laws on schools with Catholic officials fighting to the death. Sadly and incredibly this is not the case. On the contrary, the Catholic Education Service in London , the CES, has enthusiastically pushed the government to limit the powers of Catholic governors. The Freedom of Information legislation has meant that I have seen documents that prove this. For instance, Catholic governing bodies used to decide themselves whether or not to interview parents and pupils before admission. They knew their own business best. Even the Blairite government were willing to accept this and had no proposals to end this until the Church authorities themselves asked them for the change. In Catholic education, as in so

many things in the Catholic Church in recent years “The Fortress is betrayed even by those who should have defended it,” to use St John Fisher’s great and prophetic words.

Yours faithfully,
Eric Hester
Somerdale Avenue
Bolton

Moral Matters

Dear Father Editor,

In the Family Values versus Safe sex debate (last issue), it would be good to see the focus move right away from the safety or non safety of the condom onto the surer, urgent evangelical territory. The Lord longs to nourish us with the love for which we yearn. We need to move through the numerous illusions within our fallen natures into the promotion of those things which fulfill our deepest longing. In the depths of our nature, we long for true unity with others through the only possible way of closer union with God.

Like masturbation, contraception utterly destroys the transmission of emotional loving forces, encouraging all the self centred forces to gather and circulate constantly around ourselves. We need to be very much more open to the procreational purpose of sexuality so that the Loving Creator can convert our mixed up feelings into something more worthy of the name of love. Without this we become increasingly demanding in every direction, more arrogant, bad tempered, aggressive, narcissistic, promoting loneliness and emotional disturbances which lead us rushing towards dissatisfaction, despondency and even despair. The inner conflicts involved in learning the art and craft of sexual self control are increasingly soluble as we move towards love just like as Lord teaches (Mt5.8). The conflicts brought about by ignoring the Gospel, grow greater.

Contraception is one of the most subtle and really big promoters of marriage instability and infidelity. It has disgracefully been promoted into something that is respectable, superior and quite altruistic. Promoters of contraception frequently look down on and scoff at those who avoid such practices. It urgently needs to be shown up not so much for its unreliability as a contraceptive but for the reality that it is. It's a great evil, it's anti friendly, anti love and one of the big promoters of separation and divorce.

Yours sincerely,

Father Bryan Storey,

Tintagel Catholic Church
Cornwall

Dear Fr Editor,

Fr Scott Deeley has done us all an enormous favour by setting out, with clarity and simplicity, his reflections on the Theology of the Body in the teaching of Pope John Paul II, of blessed memory. Nonetheless, when he looks closely at the composition of the sexual act, I believe Fr Deeley's reflections are not unproblematic.

Our late and much beloved Pope advanced Christian thinking in many areas but in the "Theology of the Body", he has, perhaps, taken theology forwards further than on any other front. I write as a man, married and with three children, and I have to tell you that I am moved beyond measure by the profound understanding displayed by Pope John Paul the Great with regard to the place and the effect of the sexual act in marriage. His meditations on the effect of the unitive faculty of this act ring true to my own marital experience and his reassertion of the profound complementarity of the unitive and procreative faculties of sex, make sense not only of the scriptural warrant that "the two shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24) but of the sacramental nature of marriage, in which signs make real what they signify and bring with them God's gift of grace. It is his taking as paradigmatic this complementarity (never one faculty without the other) that represents a transforming contribution by John Paul II and takes Catholic theology into an engagement with the world of sex that presents a sublime alternative to the ridiculous approach offered by modern secular culture and often by "The Tablet". By taking seriously the blessed nature of the unitive within the sexual act, John Paul II presents us with a view of each sexual act as an icon, a manifestation of that Trinitarian love in which the unity of the persons is so real that it naturally gives rise to new life and to personal communion. Here this great Pope successfully overcomes the shallow and empty view of sex as merely a recreational activity of the body, devoid of any lasting meaning and I think that he also opens the way to a view of sex that makes otiose any prioritisation of the procreative over the unitive. John Paul II's vision of sex overcomes the risk that seeing it as being in remedium concupiscentiae and presented as being "always for children" in a pre-fallen humanity, leads inexorably to a descent into prudery and puritanism (the caricature Catholicism beloved of the Church's modern critics both within and without the visible bounds of her communion). He achieves this by the positive assertion that the sexual act, if true to itself (i.e. within the covenantal bond of marriage, open to God's gift of new life and ordered to the unity, the community, the communion of the man and woman), is itself not only good but a blessed channel of grace. Indeed, Pope John Paul II seems to suggest that the uncoupling (no pun intended) of the two faculties actually strips them both of their real meaning, making the act itself almost meaningless and certainly less human. Fr Dermot Fenlon, Cong. Orat. saw this nearly twenty

years ago when teaching Seminarians at Oscott. He encouraged us to mark John Paul II's words closely: that contraception and reproductive technologies were the twin fronts of the assault on human sexual activity that first seeks, in contraception, to alienate the procreative faculty from the sexual act and then, in reproductive technologies, seeks to remove the unitive, leaving a debased and debasing understanding of an act so closely tied up with our understanding of the Sacrament of Marriage that one might sensibly see this assault as a sacrilege. I would add, finally, that, given the incredible procreative inefficiency of sexual intercourse, "sex only for children" does not seem to correspond to observable biological reality. There is no suggestion in Fr Holloway's writings, at least so far as I can find, that he believes that this inefficiency is a result of the Fall. I would argue, therefore, that it becomes necessary to present a view of sex that takes proper account of that biological reality. In the face of this reality, the human sexual appetite, if presented as being properly ordered "only for children" implies an almost continual frustration of that appetite by human reproductive inefficiency, unless the sheer joy and profound communion in one another can be recognised as being equally constitutive of that properly ordered sexual act. I would suggest that John Paul II's understanding of sex, as a single act of unity and procreativity, neither the one without (let alone prior to) the other, offers a view of sex before and after the Fall which overcomes these difficulties. It is, I would suggest, a new synthesis of faith and reason that firmly rejects the contraceptive mentality, that recognises the inherent sacramental beauty of what the Catechism so wisely calls the "marital act" and which overcomes the problems attendant upon understandings that seek to prioritise the one faculty over the other. Yours faithfully, Stephen Morgan

The Long House
West Street
Warminster
Wiltshire