

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Meaning What We Say

Christianity is passing through a tough time in this country, as it has in the whole of Western Europe, and now will be in Eastern Europe too. We can talk endlessly about the causes: the painful identification of the Church of England with the Establishment, which meant that the two disastrous World Wars which wrecked the Establishment also ruined the Church: the four hundred years of deep freeze after the Reformation which separated the Catholic Church from the culture around it, and (in places like England) made it a kind of protective ghetto; the Second Vatican Council, which blew away the protective walls and let in the force of the world's culture, which in so many ways we were ill-equipped to encounter: those would be some of the factors I would identify.

### How It Feels To Be Christian

One of the things we should ask ourselves is how our own faith fits our way of life. Fifty years ago we Catholics took it for granted that we differed from the world around us. We went to a special Church, which worshipped in Latin and drew its inspiration from ancient ritual and a mighty international history, now represented by the Pope; we marked ourselves out from others by our devotion to Sundays, by our fasting and refusal of meat one day a week, by our denominational schools, and by our live social community, which enabled us by and large to avoid marrying outside the Church, and to preserve the Catholic atmosphere even when we were having a pint or going to a dance. People who took a great interest in the Liturgy could enter a whole world of expertise, with their bilingual daily missal; there were devotions in the evening, Benediction and Stations of the Cross, processions in the open air, the famous Whit Walks of Lancashire, and so on. The separateness of the community was enhanced by its enormous proportion of immigrants: Irish people and priests predominated, still with live roots in the Old Country; to go to the Church or its Social Centre was like a return to those roots. Now all this has changed. Gone is the Latin ritual,

with its silent congregation; gone is the foreignness, and the close social community it engendered. Gone are the fasts and abstinence. People no longer assume that their children will attend a Catholic school, settling for the nearest or the most successful. Marriage has become overwhelmingly mixed, with the consequence that families no longer call themselves Catholic - and often aren't; devotion to Sunday Mass has therefore suffered tremendous inroads, easily yielding place to trips of one sort or another, or simply to the delight of staying in bed. Evening devotions died of the television, as did social events; and as for processions and other public manifestations, they were shelved as bad taste. Ecumenism was mistaken for the statement that religions are all the same, and one is as good as another, and anyway God doesn't like your being bored in Church any more than you do. You don't need to go to Church to pray, and God is quite happy if you do your best and don't kick the dog.

### Certainly, Sir

People who live in that etiolated kind of faith still get quite shirty if you tell them they aren't Catholics. They have given nobody permission to say that, and if they want to get married (unlikely) or baptise a baby (likely) or use the Church school, hall, or car-park, they will stoutly maintain their Catholicism. It's just that they also reserve the right to say what Catholicism means, and it doesn't include coming to Church, (unless it's Christmas), confession, living according to the moral teaching of Christ, or bothering with belief. Life is, after all, too short, and we aren't thank heavens religious maniacs. If you look at the statistics, people still ask for Baptism and Burial, and as little as possible in between. Now, I don't spend much time talking about hell fire. But I do believe in judgment, and I would guess that a careful reading of today's Gospel ought to start some concerns in that frame of mind which has assumed that the buying of a ticket at the

beginning is enough to ensure the Kingdom  
of Heaven at the end.

*Fr Philip*