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Owen F. Cummings

Remembering Charles Davis

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Some bishops, many priests and religious left their canonical situations in the years following Vatican II for a complex nexus of reasons. It seems to me utterly reductionist to find some entirely common factor for this exodus. Without a doubt some felt that the Council did not go far enough, or were disappointed that the discipline of clerical celibacy was not abandoned, or encountered a new-found freedom of personal expression that they had not experienced before. The reasons, circumstances and situations are many and complex, but what is clear is that, in many cases, they going impoverished the Catholic Church, not only numerically and pragmatically but also in terms of theological leadership. This is certainly the case with the English priest-theologian, Charles Davis. Hans Küng in the second volume of his memoirs writes of Davis: “Davis would have helped the Catholic Church community most had he stayed in it.”¹

Ordained in 1946, Davis moved on to the Gregorian University in Rome for two further years of theological study. He taught systematic theology at St. Edmund’s College, Ware from 1952 to 1965, and then at the Jesuit Heythrop College, Oxfordshire, the latter not yet having moved to London as a constitutive college of the University of London. He was also the editor of the respected journal, *The Clergy Review*. Many of the popular yet substantive essays Davis contributed to this journal later were drawn together in a successful book, *The Study of Theology*, published in 1962. In the interface between systematic theology and liturgical theology he wrote two influential books, still cited, *Liturgy and Doctrine* (1960) and *The Making of a Christian* (1964), a study of the sacraments of initiation and their theology.

Davis left the church very publicly in 1966. His erstwhile colleague the Scripture scholar Hubert J. Richards notes that when Davis made the decision to leave the priesthood and the Catholic Church, it caused a great stir: “An announcement that Cardinal

¹ Hans Küng, *Disputed Truth, Memoirs II* (New York and London: Continuum, 2008), 30.

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Heenan (the Archbishop of Westminster) was doing the same would not have been met with more incomprehension, shock and sadness.”² A journalist for the English newspaper, *The Guardian*, compared Davis’s leaving the Catholic Church to John Henry Newman’s leaving the Church of England a century before.³ Davis married Florence Henderson, a Catholic student of theology at Bristol University.

Within six months of leaving, in 1967, he wrote a book, *A Question of Conscience*, an apologia for his departure.⁴ “Point by point he analyzed the malaise which, he now revealed, he had long felt about the Catholic Church. For him it was no longer a credible embodiment of God’s grace, but a real obstacle to Christian truth and love. All he could recommend in such a situation was... ‘creative disaffiliation’...”⁵ This creative disaffiliation was described by Davis at the time in these words: “I remain a Christian, but I have come to see that the Church as it exists and works at present is an obstacle in the lives of the committed Christians I know and admire. It is not the source of the values they cherish and promote. On the contrary, they live and work in a constant tension and opposition to it. Many can remain Roman Catholics only because they live their Christian lives on the fringe of the institutional Church and largely ignore it. I respect their position. In the present confused period people will work out their Christian commitment in different ways. But their solution was not open to me; in my position I was too involved. I had to ask bluntly whether I still believed in the Roman Catholic Church as an institution. I found that the answer was no.”⁶

Davis’s apologia is wide-ranging, covering a host of issues that had become controversial in the immediate post-Vatican II period, for example, contraception, authority, papal infallibility. He never, so it seems to me, descends to acrimony and attack on individuals. The book is eminently respectful. At the same time, there is an honest recognition of the frustration felt by many Catholics. This is how he describes it: “The sad fact is that the pattern of doctrine, law, ritual and government imposed upon the Roman Catholic Church no longer corresponds to the genuine and ordinary sense of people today. Even inarticulate Catholics sense this, so that a hidden tension pervades their life. For the same reason many, especially the young, leave the Church, without being able to give

2 Hubert J. Richards, “Charles Davis, An Obituary,” *The Tablet*, 6 February (1999), 190.

3 Geoffrey Moorhouse, cited in “A Theologian Defects,” *Time*, December 30, 1966.

4 Charles Davis, *A Question of Conscience* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1967).

5 Hubert J. Richards, op. cit., 190.

6 Charles Davis, op. cit., 7.

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any precise reason for doing so.”⁷ The question why Catholics leave the church is a huge question, involving many different factors. But Davis is surely pointing to something of enormous importance, indeed, the importance of which has only increased since 1967 when he penned these words, that is, the gap between the formal expression of Catholicism (doctrine, law, ritual and government in Davis’s terms) and the ordinary experience of many Catholics. It is extremely difficult to talk with conviction in general terms about the experience of large numbers of people, but the gap between the church and experience to which Davis refers, has to do with existential freedom. “To anyone who acknowledges... the fundamental importance in personal development of a complete openness and fidelity to truth... (there is the challenge of) the crippling effect upon persons of the present institutional set-up... Prisoners of a narrow, intolerant system, they, too, become narrow and intolerant. Only those who shake off the pressure of the institution and manage largely to ignore it are able to release the full expansive dynamism of Christian love.”⁸

Davis’s real protest was about “institutional man... the total identification of the person with the institution.”⁹ Of course, people may become prisoners of their institutions, may become full of narrowness and intolerance, but there is no *a priori* need to shake off the pressure of the institution by leaving it. Many continue to find ways of struggling to remain within the institutional church even as they experience a certain pressure to conform in every aspect to the institutional demands, as it were. This becomes necessarily a matter of personal choice, however, and that choice must be respected. Davis, along with so many others in the years consequent upon Vatican II chose to leave. Others chose to stay as faithful but critical reformers. That choice too must be respected. Respect then as now is key. Where it is lacking polarization occurs, described by Davis in 1967 as follows: “That Catholics should turn upon one another, engage in continual bickering and complaining, and in calm debate can be difficult but it is not surprising. It is the normal effect of confinement. And the excessive noise and excitement raised by the present renewal is due to the narrowness of the mental environment.”¹⁰

It needs to be pointed out that Charles Davis was not simply concerned with the externals of ecclesial reform. He recognized the absolute need for holiness if any reform was to be successful.

7 Ibid., 12.

8 Ibid., 79-80.

9 Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB, “Interview with Charles Davis,” *National Catholic Reporter*, February 28, 1997.

10 Charles Davis, op. cit., 14.

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In the ferment of Vatican II he wrote: “(Ordinary Catholics) come to talks by speakers like myself. They hear about the new liturgy, about the new understanding of the layman’s role, about collegiality, about the Church and the world, about a thousand and one new and exciting ideas. They are duly impressed. But who will speak to them quite simply about God, as of a Person he intimately knows and make the reality and presence of God come alive for them once more?... Before such need, how superficial, pathetically superficial, is much of the busyness of renewal. We reformers know so much about religion and about the church and about theology, but we stand empty-handed and uncomfortable when confronted with the sheer hunger for God. Holiness is less easily acquired than fluency in contemporary thinking. But people who after listening to our enthusiastic discourses, quietly ask us to lead them to God are, though they do not know it, demanding holiness in us. I fear they may find everything else but that...”¹¹ Interviewed by the American Benedictine, Sr. Joan Chittister in 1997, and asked for what he would wish to be remembered, Davis answered, “I want to be remembered for having had a spiritual influence.”¹²

It would be all too easy to dismiss Charles Davis as a significant theologian because of his departure from the Catholic Church. His ongoing attempts to think through the claims of Christian faith in the context of modern philosophy and theology --- including especially Bernard Lonergan, Jürgen Habermas, George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, to name but a handful --- witnesses to his passion for God-in-Christ, and perhaps also his passion for the church, but from a position less located in its structures.¹³ Davis had long admired Lonergan, had contributed a paper to the first Lonergan Congress in Florida in 1970,¹⁴ and had absorbed Lonergan’s view of cognitional structure. It could be argued that while he engaged with the philosophical thought of Jürgen Habermas and other critical theorists in his books *Theology and Political Society* (1980) and *Religion and the Making of Society* (1994), nonetheless it was Bernard Lonergan who provided him with the epistemological and foundational apparatus for his explorations in theology. This passage from Davis could have come straight from Lonergan’s *Insight, A Study of Human Understanding* (1958): “If, as I should agree, objectivity is the other side of authentic subjectivity, then

11 Charles Davis, “A Hidden God,” *America*, January 29, 1966, 173.

12 Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB, op. cit.

13 See especially the final chapter in Charles Davis, *What Is Living, What Is Dead in Christianity Today?* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 106-127.

14 See Davis’s essay in Philip McShane, ed., *Foundations of Theology: Papers from the International Lonergan Congress 1970* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), 60-75.

the requisite for genuine, objective knowledge is the purification of the subject, the unrestricted openness of the subject without inhibition or closure to reality.” The following passage is entirely in agreement, even verbal agreement, with Lonergan’s *Method in Theology* (1973): “Faith is the fundamental religious response. It is the orientation towards mystery or unlimited reality accepted or assented to in a self-transcendent response or movement of unrestricted love. This faith-love is divine revelation in the primary sense of the presence of the divine reality in our minds and hearts.”¹⁵ And, of course, the Lonergan influence in theology was well under way in Canada when Davis arrived.

Davis moved to Canada and taught theology and philosophy of religion first at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, and then at Concordia University, Montreal. He continued to publish as a theologian, although Hans Küng may well be right when he says that “his numerous new books by no means attract the same interest as his old Catholic ones... so that his publications hardly find any response in the Catholic Church.”¹⁶ In the main, this is probably true, but theologians of the caliber of the University of Cambridge’s Nicholas Lash continued to read Davis and to refer to his later books: *Christ and World Religions* (1970), *The Temptations of Religion* (1973), *Body as Spirit* (1976), *Theology and Political Society* (1980), *What Is Living, What Is Dead in Christianity?* (1986), *Soft Bodies in a Hard World* (1987).¹⁷ Lash also had a hand in having Davis appointed to the prestigious Hulsean Lectures at the University of Cambridge in 1978.

Davis returned to the United Kingdom after his retirement, and was living in Edinburgh, where his daughter Claire was pursuing a doctorate in theology. He returned to the Church. In retirement he produced, while suffering from Parkinson’s disease, his final book, *Religion and the Making of Society* (1994). He died on January 28, 1999, the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, surrounded by his family and friends, after a final celebration of the Eucharist.

A MESSAGE FOR TODAY?

In the spring of 2018 to a gathering of several hundred Catholic priests from across the United States in Santa Fe (New Mexico) Bishop Robert McElroy, the Bishop of San Diego, said, “This is a wonderful time to be a Catholic.” The bishop was fully aware of the raft of challenges and problems facing the Catholic Church and

15 Charles Davis, *What Is Living, What Is Dead in Christianity Today*, 114-118.

16 Hans Küng, op. cit., 30.

17 For a limited but helpful critical response to Davis’s theology, see Marc P. Lalonde, ed., *The Promise of Critical Theology: Essays in Honour of Charles Davis* (Montreal: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1995), especially the essay by Lalonde.

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especially in the United States. While he was entirely right to insist that this is a wonderful time to be a Catholic – the Holy Spirit is always with the church guiding us into the fullness of the truth – a large number of Catholics don't feel like this. Many Catholics are walking away from the church – I don't say "leaving the church" because I suspect that for many it is not an intensely reflective, deliberate decision to leave. For whatever reasons many do not experience a vital and health-giving correlation between their lived experience and the church. As I read him, that was more or less the situation of Charles Davis, that is, he no longer experienced the church as vital and health-giving. A growing number of younger Catholics, including theologians, find themselves in a similar situation. In their judgment, the vitality of the church is being sapped by retro trends such as the growing use of *Summorum Pontificum* (the Roman rite of the Mass before the Missal of Pope Paul VI), the rigidity and, in some measure, the clericalism of some younger priests, and the adversarial stance of some church leaders against change – think, for example, of the criticisms of Pope Francis's *The Joy of Love*. And it's not only the young. A senior priest, ordained in the 1960s and committed to the renewal of Vatican II, said to me recently in respect of these retro trends, "I'm not going to be pushed out or pushed aside, it's my church too." Perhaps remembering Charles Davis can be an encouragement to those who feel "pushed out" not only *not* to leave the church, but to stay and gently and patiently work for needed changes.

The distinguished church historian Eamon Duffy in a very fine sermon before the University of Cambridge in 1992, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," makes the following point: "To name the significant dead is always to offer an account of ourselves. In a recognizable sense, every human community, from the family to the nation, chooses its own ancestors, or at any rate, chooses those whom it will remember and publicly acknowledge."¹⁸ To remember the dead is a very Catholic thing to do. In choosing to remember Charles Davis among the significant dead may be saying something about myself, or about the church at this time, but it seems to me to be no bad thing.

18 Eamon Duffy, *Walking to Emmaus* (New York and London: Continuum, 2006), 19.