

REVIEW

Paul Crittenden, *Changing Orders: Scenes of Clerical and Academic Life*, Blackheath, NSW, 2008, viii + 374 pp.

Paul Crittenden's memoirs will be of interest to many of his friends and associates. He has a wonderful memory, and these pages are full of relevant detail. They should also be of interest to cultural historians, because in assembling that detail they build up a revealing picture of a critical phase in the history of the Catholic Church and of Australian society. This is not an *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. It is irenic, detached and charitable. That makes for a somewhat bland tone, but the attentive reader will find it reassuring, evincing a determination to give a fair and balanced picture of the institutions with which the author has been so closely associated.

In saying this, I must declare my interest. Crittenden is a close friend and colleague of mine. We come from similar backgrounds and, with an interval of ten years or so, the trajectory of his career closely resembles mine. We both spent many years as priests of the Archdiocese of Sydney and even longer working in the Department of General Philosophy in the University of Sydney. Obviously, I would like to interest readers in the book, but at the same time I am interested in the opportunity to establish my own perspective on the changes in which we have both been involved.

In our youth Australian society generally was extremely conformist in every important respect. We kidded ourselves about having a larrikin streak but, like jesters of old, acceptable larrikins knew where to draw the line. Australians exhibited a colonial, somewhat vulgarised variant of Victorian respectability, especially in family life. Still, for the most part the demands of respectability were not seen as arbitrary restrictions. The great emphasis was on security, and the importance of conformity to what were referred to as 'the demands

of society' lay in the sense of security that the general acceptance of those demands underpinned. One knew where one stood and what one was expected to do.

Paul Crittenden paints an interesting picture of growing up in a family that was comfortable within the prevailing constraints. In those days even relatively strict parents allowed children, particularly boys, a surprising amount of freedom, as this account of the Crittenden family bears out. Hobbies, sports, amusements and casual work offered opportunities for initiative and independence that the more cosseted children of today might envy.

When it came to the choice of a career the assumption was that one was committed for life to a profession, a trade or an employer. The important thing was job security. Changing jobs was a matter of failure or irresponsibility. Advancement was primarily a matter of seniority. Academic qualifications were irrelevant. What mattered was experience. So it was not unusual for thirteen- or fourteen-year-olds to be quite settled on what they wanted to choose out of the limited range of choices open to them, and they usually knew what they were doing, as did Paul Crittenden when he entered the seminary. Most careers were clearly predictable. Everything conspired to keep it that way.

Crittenden is very conscious of the ways in which our lives are shaped by institutions, seeing them primarily as the indispensable vehicle in which values, practices and aspirations are transmitted and developed across generations. He sees the institutions of the family, the church and the university in which he grew up and worked as far from perfect, but by no means as a dead weight on the individual, much less as forces of evil. For my part I have been much more inclined to attempt to stand outside the institutions in which I have worked and assess them by standards that they might not acknowledge.

Crittenden is very critical of the arbitrary discipline of the seminary, which he entered two years before completing high school. The main rationale of the monastic regime to which candidates for the priesthood were subjected was that the church needed to be as certain as possible that they were thoroughly reliable. No newspapers or

secular magazines, severe censorship of books, no radio or record player, no personal food or drink, no smoking, no visiting another student's room, and hardly any contact with externs, not even with family, during term time. All of this was enforced with inquisitorial strictness. He mentions the prohibition of 'particular friendships', code for homosexual relationships, which certainly did occur from time to time. Even the studies that were the professional training of the budding priests were to a great extent a trial they were required to survive.

To a large extent people survived such a regime in much the way that sailors or soldiers used to survive their training, through the camaraderie of shared resentments and the prospect of eventual liberation. But what was supposed to sustain them was a devotion to Christ the crucified. The constant theme of priestly piety was that the priest must be 'another Christ', sacrificing himself willingly for his flock, taking on the salvation of the world. So I was taken aback to read that 'it is difficult to recapture the spirit of one's religious life and inner feelings from that time. My fundamental commitment was to be a good priest, one who combined a genuine spiritual life and pastoral orientation with the prospect of a mainly academic career in the Church.' (p.150) That was a sensible, responsible, acceptable interpretation of the priestly vocation. But the rhetoric suggested a more grandiose vision, a mission to convert Australia to Catholicism, to take upon oneself the evils of the world, to strive to be a saint. There was an inevitable tension between the approved path of humble and diligent obedience to the voice of the redeemer speaking through the authority of the bishops, and the challenge, exemplified in the lives of so many of the saints, to break out of the constricting harness of ecclesiastical convention and bear witness to dimensions of Christian life that it smothered.

The tradition of the church is so varied and rich that it has something to offer pretty well anybody, and it is continually co-opting new forces from the most unlikely sources. Witness its conversion to saving the planet or to concentrating its concern on the damage to the victims of sin rather than on the sinner. Fifty years ago hellfire was preached from pulpits in a way that is never heard nowadays. There

is always plenty of scope for finding new ways of relating tradition to new circumstances and tying them to the traditional rituals and forms of devotion that are the bread and butter of religious life. Unfortunately for this enterprise, the old orthodoxy that saw all the ills of the modern world as deriving from the abandonment of the great Christian civilisation of the Middle Ages is no longer tenable. For the past couple of centuries moral leadership on all the major social problems has been taken by secular humanists. The church finds itself swept up in ecumenical dialogue, not just with other Christians but with non-Christian religions that can no longer be dismissed as the spawn of the devil.

These disruptions came to a head in the middle 'sixties in the Second Vatican Council. After that the old system was no longer sustainable. Classes in the seminaries at Springwood and Manly shrank in a few years from cohorts of forty or fifty to four or five, and both institutions were closed down, Springwood becoming a school and Manly a business college focused on the tourist industry. The Vatican reacted by reasserting orthodoxy on such matters as birth control, abortion and the ordination of women, thus renouncing its claim to be the light of the world in favour of keeping a small candle alight in its own corner.

Through all of this period Paul Crittenden remained faithful to his priestly vocation until finally he found himself forced to acknowledge that he could no longer in good conscience stand up as priest committed to the deliverances of its authorities. It was a quiet exit, and in many ways a reluctant one.

The assessment given of the academic side of the seminary I found surprisingly favourable. Things had improved a little, no doubt, in the ten years that separated our studies. In my day nobody looked at an original text. One simply had to regurgitate the second hand accounts of the lecturers, who often had no interest in what they were required to teach. By today's standards it was abysmal. But on reflection so was much university education at the time. John Anderson at Sydney University still dictated his lecture notes to students and expected them to deploy his key slogans as knock down arguments against a set of Aunt Sallies. Medical and legal students were fed a diet of things

to be learned by rote that were quite irrelevant to practice and often even to theory. The conception of education as simply the handing on of received opinion was overthrown only by the social ferment that came after the war.

Yale and then Oxford introduced Crittenden to cultures that he found very much more congenial than the brash and often abrasive atmosphere of Sydney. The pictures he draws of 'scenes of clerical and academic life' in Oxford express and communicate this attraction. At the same time he provides an accessible and perceptive account of the main trends of development in Oxford philosophy in the 'sixties, in many ways its golden age.

In mid 1968, while still working on his thesis, he applied for a lectureship in Sydney. Before the appointment committee reached a verdict, Charles Martin, then head of department, wrote with an assurance that the result was certain and that he could expect an official letter to follow. As he puts it, 'it turned out, to my disappointment and the considerable concern of my referees, Anscombe, Kenny and Ryle, that the position was actually offered to someone else'.

In fact I was the someone in question. Late in the piece I had decided to resign the Rectorship of St John's College and seek a full time academic career, partly because I needed to withdraw from any official role in the church and consider if I ought leave it altogether. The university authorities decided that it was in accordance with precedent to allow my late application to go forward. It was no slight to Crittenden's referees or to him that I was appointed over him. I was ten years more advanced in my career, with a good doctorate behind me and eight years of part-time teaching in the department. Crittenden was offered some part-time teaching when he returned to Sydney. We all felt badly about his disappointment, which was due entirely to Martin's flouting proper procedure in such matters. Ten years later, when I was head of General Philosophy, he was appointed to a full lectureship in the department. I was in the invidious position of having to represent the view of the department, which supported another candidate. The decisive force behind the success of the candidature was Professor David Armstrong.

The appointment was, unsurprisingly, resented by many in

the department. By the quality and scope of his teaching and his constructive role in departmental politics Crittenden overcame these difficulties so thoroughly that five years later he was readily accepted as head of department. Those same qualities made him widely respected throughout the Faculty of Arts, of which he became Dean at a critical stage of the changes that swept through universities in the nineties. Together with Gyorgy Markus and others he opened up a space for philosophy beyond the confines of the received 'analytical' paradigm, which has had a profound influence on the course of philosophical thinking in Australia.

While by no means dismissive of philosophical argument, Crittenden sees Philosophy as one of the great forms of 'expression of the human spirit', closely related to literature, the arts and the myths of the great religions. He is concerned not so much with testing propositions against thinly described imaginary cases (in the manner of so much 'analytical' philosophy) as with appreciating the contributions that different perspectives may make to our understanding. Such a conception is in constant danger of degenerating into anthologising inspiring thoughts without coming to grips with the antitheses, paradoxes and assumptions they conceal. He is well aware of the danger. It comes as a surprise to find that the modern philosopher most frequently referred to in these pages, almost always with approbation, is that archenemy of complacency, Nietzsche.

What Crittenden and other priests involved in academic philosophy were doing was to attempt to show both believers and unbelievers that the great thirteenth-century ambition of Aquinas to reconcile faith and reason could be pursued in a more modest form in the infinitely more complex situation of twentieth-century thought. In lecturing with understanding and sympathy on Nietzsche or Sartre he was offering concrete proof that to be a Catholic intellectual was not to inhabit some ideological ghetto. His task was not to produce proofs of God's existence or quick answers to objections to them, but to open up a broader and richer understanding of our situation.

I was more argumentative. The accepted refutation of the existence of God among our atheistic colleagues was the existence of

preventable evil. Surely an infinitely powerful and benevolent god would have created a better world than this. To which I would reply: How do you know he hasn't? Perhaps he has created an infinity of worlds. We happen to belong in this one. So the question becomes: Is this one so bad that it should never have been created? Of course, if one pushes that line one risks ending up with a god who produces all possible worlds, like the god of Spinoza, which is simply another name for nature. There are no knockdown arguments in such matters. As David Armstrong used to say, the difficulties in philosophical positions are like bulges in the carpet. You smooth out one bulge only to find it displaced to another equally inconvenient site. What exploring such problems delivers is an insight into the complexities of things and perhaps a clearer view of the issues.

The strategy we had adopted backfired when we had to resign from the priesthood because we could no longer accept the official positions of the institution. The reasons were very complex. They ranged from the sort of considerations that troubled so many people about the rigidity of the church's stand, especially on matters of sexual morality, to the growing conviction that there were things that were profoundly wrong with the way in which traditional theism approached understanding the world and our situation in it. Neither of us spent our energies in attacking the church. It was more important to get on with a constructive engagement with a rapidly changing world. There was no point in defining oneself negatively as anti-Catholic or anti-religious or atheist. One needs positive points of reference, but not some exclusive perspective.

Paul Crittenden continues to take an active role in the intellectual life of Sydney and continues to develop his view of our situation. One hopes that he will eventually put his later thinking together and reveal more of his inner life.

John Burnheim