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**l'École de Paris**

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**Managing the word of the Church**

7th Breakfast Meeting at the Ecole de Paris  
Thursday 16 June 1994

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with

**Olivier de DINECHIN**  
of the Society of Jesus

Modern management owes much to the Church, and can still learn a lot from its current practices. For many centuries, the Church has been the sole guardian of learning and the written word. According to most historians, the matrix of European economy can be found in the medieval Benedictine abbeys - and particularly so in their Cistercian branch. If we look back even further, our own western archetypes of power, the emperors of Rome, wielded both secular and religious power.

Indeed, the Church can be seen as a very old and very effective multinational corporation whose production, in layman's terms, is made up of words. Consequently, we will focus on the problem of managing the written and spoken word of the Church at this Breakfast Meeting.

Father Olivier de Dinechin is well qualified to speak on the subject. On graduation from Polytechnique, he joined the Jesuits and during the past thirty years has specialised in the particularly sensitive area of bio-medical ethics, an area in which he has taught and published extensively.

In this field, he represents the Church at the highest levels. Olivier de Dinechin is going to tell us about his work in this area and afterwards will be available to answer any questions we might have.

## OLIVIER DE DINECHIN

Before going into what I actually do, I would like to briefly sketch out how the Church is run today. Technically, the Church is very highly centralised and operates according to Canon Law, largely inherited from Roman law. In practice, the Church appears in multiple and diverse forms and Rome often struggles to represent the unity of it.

Nonetheless, the Church of France is rather clearly structured on a territorial basis. France is split into dioceses (which correspond roughly to the administrative departments) headed by Bishops. These dioceses are on the one hand further split into parishes with their priests, and on the other regrouped into apostolic regions. Parallel to this territorial structure we find Congregations and the Orders, such as the Society of Jesus to which I belong. These parallel hierarchies report directly to Rome.

Since the sixties, the French bishops have organised themselves in a "Episcopal Conference", presently presided by Mgr Duval. This Conference has a "Permanent Council" and a variety of specialised Commissions, such as the very important Catholic Schools Commission. Overall, the responsibilities of these Commissions would require the participation of up to two hundred bishops whereas the Church of France has no more than ninety bishops - this can give you an idea of the amount of individual work involved.

For my part, since 1969 I have been specialising in Moral Theology; I teach at the Sèvres Centre and contribute to various publications. In 1975, when the Episcopal Conference decided to focus on new developments such as test-tube babies, it chose to create a specific post rather than delegate these sorts of issues to the Family or Health Commissions. I was chosen for the job and report directly to the Permanent Council. I would like to add to this structure the importance of the position and personality of Cardinal Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris.

My own activities fall in the following three categories:

- to keep up-to-date on all developments in the field of bio-ethics;
- consult with concerned individuals or groups;
- handle public relations, particularly with doctors.

From 1989 to 1993 I was appointed by the President of the Republic to the National Council for AIDS, and since 1990 to the National Ethics Advisory Board. I have also been occasionally involved with the work of the Human Rights Advisory Commission.

Words do hold a predominant role in these activities. The heart of these matters touches upon very private family questions, and a priest is supposed to be able to hear it all; this is certainly my case through numerous personal contacts. As a teacher, particularly in consultancy and Adult Education, I give about fifty lectures a year. I am also involved with various workgroups with researchers, doctors etc. which again means making one's position public.

How do I prepare these words and write these texts? I rely for the main part on my background in philosophy, human sciences and theology. I also use what is constantly being published and consult with numerous experts. Finally, any important public declaration is prepared with the relevant Church authorities.

For instance, when the Episcopate position on AIDS prevention for teenagers had to be prepared, I was asked to draft the outline of the document. This outline was then sent for review to about twenty Catholic experts (doctors, teachers, association members, theologians). Enriched by their comments, the text then went to several bishops before being submitted to the Episcopal Conference, where it was edited again. Should it be co-authored by all the bishops? After much thought, it was decided that the text would be signed O. de Dinechin. It was sent directly to the bishops, and the media coverage of the text was just about non-existent. The newspaper *La Croix* only heard about it through the diocesan magazine of Moulins, but didn't realise how quietly it was being distributed. I was surprised by the fear all this caution showed. In the end, the text reached its target audience and the bishops took on board its main ideas, as with Mgr Jean-Charles Thomas in Versailles. This is a typical example of how the written word and the position of the Church is managed.

## DISCUSSION

**Q.** : *Is it true that it is sometimes possible for more conservative people to by-pass the usual hierarchies and get straight through to Rome if they have got information about what they regard as potential heresy?*

**O. de D.** : Yes, it is, and it means that I have to be particularly careful in my own field. In France you can still find leftovers of the Right wing of the between-the-wars period. These people are inspired by the Action Française, and have been deaf to the messages from the Vatican II Synod about the democratisation and widening of such debates. They send enormous amounts of correspondence to Rome, whereas the more liberal minded factions hardly write at all. This means that the Vatican is snowed down with piles of denunciations of "unsuitable" opinions or positions. Two areas in particular are vulnerable to such treatment: abortion and birth control.

**Q.** : *Do lay people play much of a role in the debates of the church?*

**O. de D.** : The involvement of outside bodies, even non-believing ones, is quite common in Church debates, especially at our Sèvres centre. Three topical subjects in particular come to mind: euthanasia, organ transplants or removals, and human dignity. The problem is to keep such outside involvement free of internal pressures, i.e. not to "use" their opinions or presence, but there are no fundamental problems with this.

This might not be the case in other dioceses which still have strong clericalist traditions. Some priests have

trouble accepting outside opinions. This was made acutely clear in the debates on test-tube babies. Catholic clinics which wanted to use test-tube fertilisation had set up ethical committees to look at the issues involved. When the ban came from Rome there were quite a few painful break-aways.

This example showed me how much the quality of relations between Rome and the laity depends mainly on the local bishop.

**Q.** : *Don't you think that the Church gives out differing messages according to who it is talking to: public or private?*

**O. de D.** : That's the way things are. In moral theology, which is my field, there are general universal norms which are then applied to specific situations. These norms are based on fundamental anthropological reasons which are often forgotten by the media. In fact, humanity is very touchy about being forbidden to do things. There are public stances which are far less institutional than those made by the church itself, such as discourse by Abbé Pierre, Mgr Gaillot, or Mother Theresa which focus on what people are actually experiencing. There is definitely a tension between institutional discourse and charismatic discourse.

**Q.** : *As a management researcher I would like to ask you about Casuistry, which is a bit like our case study methods.*

**O. de D.** : Throughout my studies to become a Jesuit, I was trained to look at individual cases, especially about things that we might come across in confession. This method of training petered out in later years and is only now reappearing somewhat, but still too timidly, I think. The word "Casuistry" has taken negative connotations, but personally, I believe that looking at case studies helps to deepen one's reflection and mature one's attitude towards personal and private consultations. In particular, I think that when they first start out, young priests today don't have enough training in areas concerning the family or sexuality.

**Q.** : *The Church is by nature conservative and centralised. How can it evolve in today's world?*

**O. de D.** : Throughout history, the Church has changed in times of crisis, as with the French Revolution or the development of communications in the 19th Century. Such evolution was desired and organised, as with the Vatican II Synod, which promoted a more democratic model of discourse.

To be honest, the progress of this new model is slow. In the face of current developments in the world today, Rome has a tendency to fall back on a somewhat "Vulgate" neo-Thomist position which does not help them to be open to hearing about specific localised realities. This is particularly true in Africa, where the bishops, who are directly dependent on the Vatican, are having enormous difficulty getting anyone to acknowledge the gravity and specific nature of their problems. But this happens in France too, where the bishops are working hard to get the painful realities of pastoral life in France acknowledged at the highest levels of the hierarchical ladder. Realities such as the amount of remarried divorcees in France today. Changes can be witnessed but they are slow and painful.

**Q.:** *What about secrecy?*

**O. de D.** : Communication depends on secrecy. I've noticed that attempts at complete transparency in groups usually ends in disaster. Even God has his secrets and man is made in his image. Each institution has to decide who it tells what, according to the consequences.

Of course, you cannot allow lies or the withholding of information, which deny the truth to someone who has a right to it.

**Q. :** *What about women in the Church?*

**O. de D.** : Women, both nuns and lay women, are very present in the Church. Approximately 200,000 lay people are involved in teaching the Catechism and most of these are women. Nuns play a major role in providing services such as nursing and education.

However, it is true that women play a far lesser role when it comes to the actual visible powers of the Church: they do not have access either to Priesthood nor as a result, to the office of bishop. On this subject, the Pope's latest document has caused quite a lot of furore. Although not much in the public eye (feminism is not as strong as it has been), there are several strong but discrete movements working towards increasing the influence of women.

**Q. :** *How do new ideas spread in the Church, like an interesting paper? What about your own works?*

**O. de D.** : The Bishops do what they can, which usually isn't enough. There is a number of things they can do, the most common being to call a press conference. At the moment, Father Di Falco has managed to fashion a good media image for himself with the Episcopal Conference, but, at the end of the day it has to be said that new ideas don't spread very easily.

I have personal experience of this. For example, the Permanent Council of Bishops has recently published a fairly thorough document on the subject of organ transplants, aimed mainly at doctors. However, yet again, I have seen that doctors don't really read anything that is not printed in their own professional press. I've found that the best thing to do is go in person and give papers at conferences, but even that is not ideal.

**Q. :** *How do you reconcile two contradictory concerns - on the one hand setting a clear moral direction ("the compass should not follow the ship") - and on the other hand, responding to the genuine day-to-day problems of people?*

**O. de D.** : In my own mind, there are some constants in my conception of what is morally right. For example, I refuse to separate sexuality from conception. What I mean by such a separation is a moral lightness on the one hand, and economic calculations on the other. This is not to say however, that when listening to the faithful, one can see that taking too rigid a stance can cause unnecessary harm. In this area, I get much food for thought from marriage guidance counsellors. It is interesting to look at what happened with money lending for interest. In the past it was condemned out of hand as the sin of usury, whereas in certain situations money lending as a service has become an unavoidable

aspect of business life. A reflection on these evolutions has led to the Church's social criticism of capitalism.

**Q. :** *In the opposition between diversity and universality, wouldn't it help to make the difference between what you say in a specific situation to a local community, and what you say in rituals, with set gestures and which need to be accepted as such by all?*

**O. de D. :** Restricting things into ritualised texts and gestures is explicitly condemned by the Gospel. Undoubtedly, a certain amount of ritual is needed to maintain a collective identity, but what should be more important, especially from a moral point of view, is a critical evaluation which respects the uniqueness of each situation.

**Q. :** *Do you think the Church expresses itself too much or not enough?*

**O. de D. :** Too much, much too much. We are snowed down under documents from all kinds of sources. Some of them are almost unintelligible to those they're aimed at, especially when it's families. In the dioceses, they call it the "photocopying Church". Even I, as the editor of a magazine, wonder sometimes at the wisdom of adding yet more pages to this overflow.

**Q. :** *What do you think of the balance between the position of the Church on sexuality and its position in the political and social arena?*

**O. de D. :** The problem is to be found with the level of tolerance of public opinion to one or other of the positions taken by the Church. The public sphere today is dominated by questions of production and distribution of wealth, which causes problems of justice. It is considered valid to participate in this public debate on these subjects. However, the private sphere today is characterised by questions of happiness and spontaneity. A strong dogmatic position from the Church is badly received in the private sphere, even though people are keen to discuss these topics. I do a lot of work in this area. However, it is true to say - and this has been blatantly obvious in the parliamentary debates on bio-ethics - that the Church authorities withhold from giving verdicts. They let their position be known, but leave the freedom to judge to the legislators.

**Q. :** *What are your main anthropological sources?*

**O. de D. :** They are of two sorts: cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis. As for cultural anthropology, I feel that my approach is more concerned with meaning than with numbers, and as for psychoanalysis, I belong to the generation that was heavily influenced by the Lacanian school of thought.

**Q. :** *Don't you think that democratisation has its limits? Shouldn't a centralised authority be maintained, an order with a certain amount of secrecy? And what about Faith?*

**O. de D. :** I belong to an Order which has sworn obedience to the Pope, and which is pledged to uphold the unity of the Church. But the Pope is surrounded by an administrative structure which could benefit greatly from being modernised. As for Faith, I would want it to be enlightening, in search of intelligence. To start with, it is an event, a necessity I lean on, a call for exacting morals. Nonetheless, I see these demands in close relation to a "natural morality", one that Reason can accept. It is in this spirit that I converse with my colleagues on the Ethics Advisory Board, notwithstanding their spiritual orientations. We're talking about reasoned dialogue and not dogmatism.

## CONCLUSION

The Friends of the Ecole de Paris would like to thank Father Dinechin for his rich and clear message on the management of the written and spoken word of the Church. They will undoubtedly discover in the near future that his message goes beyond the boundaries of the Church, as the business world is increasingly concerned with ethical issues which carry as much weight as purely economical ones. To deal with the issues surrounding this question, the experience of the Church will surely prove to be a valuable one.

Le Sélect, 16 june 1994