

Ideas that the Faith should be built on

What does a merciful Church look like, not just from the papal balcony overlooking the Piazza San Pietro but at the grass roots? Some answers to this question were beginning to emerge at a three-day conference at Durham University this week, held as the high point of this year's celebrations of The Tablet's 175th anniversary. Participants, a mixture of mostly lay readers of The Tablet with assorted parish clergy leavened by members of the university's Centre for Catholic Studies and other distinguished academics, were in the mood for what felt like a collective sigh of relief after a long siege. Pope Francis has relaunched the Catholic project in a way that seems to have lifted a heavy burden off many Catholic shoulders.



Yet in a spirit of mercy they were not in the mood for blame. It was widely felt that Pope Benedict was faced with more than he could handle; that Pope John Paul II could only have been the media superstar he was. Nevertheless, the Church suffered under both of them – the disintegration of the Roman Curia as Benedict's energy failed him; the shame of clerical child abuse scandals that were never properly addressed under St John Paul II; the one-size-fits-all micromanagement that happened under both of them; the silencing of original voices who ventured beyond a narrow path of orthodoxy; and above all, a Church that never seemed to understand its members but bullied them to be good. All those things are passing. A new sense of being proud to be Catholic has arrived. Whatever the downside of Francis' papacy may eventually prove to be, and every papacy has particular weaknesses, this is an optimistic moment. There is mercy, hope, even joy. But as Professor Eamon Duffy remarked after reading a paper from Cardinal Walter Kasper (who was absent due to illness), these things should not have had to wait for a new pope. Catholicism should never depend for its health on the character of one man, however much the age encourages the cult of personality.

The 300 or so Tablet readers who attended the events in Durham may have arrived as separate individuals, but seemed quickly to coalesce through shared conversation, worship and meals into what

became a kind of “Tablet community”.

A distinctively liberal and tolerant English Catholicism, without which The Tablet itself would not have survived, is emerging from the shadows. “Tablet Catholicism” may after all be indistinguishable from mainstream English Catholicism in general. Ever since it resisted *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, conservative voices tried to brand the journal as disloyal. But in taking its position, The Tablet, far from urging a libertarian approach, was recognising the faults and foibles of humanity that make it so difficult to follow the path of that encyclical. In the light of Francis’ gospel of mercy, the official Church has begun to glimpse what families have always known – that even in the case of transgressive sexual behaviour, it may be where love is, and so where God is. Pope Francis may not read The Tablet often, but he would have been comfortable among its readers in Durham.

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