

Charles Davis' Book Stirs Debate

London — (RNS) — Charges and counter-charges were hurled from all sides in Britain following publication of theologian Charles Davis' book on why he left the Roman Catholic Church.

The book, *A Question of Conscience*, appeared on Nov. 20 its fundamental point being that Mr. Davis, who renounced the priesthood 11 months ago, "left the Church because I had ceased to believe in it."

Simultaneously with its appearance, a 16-page pamphlet, by a noted Dominican theologian and lecturer, Father Cornelius Ernst, was released for general distribution as an answer to the Davis book.

Father Ernst is based at Blackfriars, Oxford, where he is reported to have been helped in compiling the pamphlet by Father Herbert McCabe, who was recently removed as editor of the Dominican journal, *New Blackfriars*, after writing that the Roman Church was "quite plainly corrupt." Father McCabe is vehemently defended by Mr. Davis in his book but, unlike the theologian, stayed in the Church.

Observers described the publication of Father Ernst's

Franciscan Ordination

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Also, the Rev. John F. Marshall, O.F.M., the Rev. Cassian Kirk, O.F.M., and the Ronald P. Stark, O.F.M.

The Scottsville priest graduated from Wheatland-Chili Central School in 1957, and attended St. Bonaventure University until 1960 when he began priestly studies. The Elmira priest was graduated from St. Peter and Paul's School in 1953, and from Notre Dame High School in 1957. Father Bernard graduated cum laude from St. Bonaventure in 1961, with a B.A. in Journalism. He is a past Editor-in-Chief of *The Bona Venture*, the campus newspaper.

Both attended St. Joseph Seraphic Seminary, Callicoon, (N.Y.) the Franciscan minor seminary, then received the Franciscan religious habit and spent a year of training in the Franciscan life at St. Raphael Novitiate, Lafayette, N.J. After professing simple vows in Lafayette, they studied philosophy at St. Francis College, Rye Beach, N.H.

Theological studies for both Friars began in 1964 at the Franciscan Holy Name College, Washington. Each professes solemn vows at Christ the King Seminary, St. Bonaventure.

In Washington both were associated with the Franciscan theological magazine, *Interest*. Father John Julian was circulation manager; Father Bernard was typography and copy director.

Father John Julian is a candidate for the M.A. in Sociology from The Catholic University of America, Washington. Father Bernard is a candidate for the M.S. in Education at Siena College, Albany.

Father Bernard is a great-nephew of Sister M. Waltrude, S.S.J. of St. Stanislaus Convent, Rochester, and a nephew of Sister St. Joseph, S.S.J., of Good Samaritan Hospital, Selma Ala., and Sister Teresa Laurene, S.S.J., of St. Anthony's Convent, Elmira.

pamphlet as an unprecedented action on the part of the Roman Catholic Church, although it was stated that John Cardinal Heenan's approval was neither sought nor obtained. Its preparation for simultaneous publication with Mr. Davis' book was, of course, easily done, since review copies of *A Question of Conscience* had been issued to newsmen and reviewers several weeks earlier.

In his pamphlet, Father Ernst wrote: "As responsible Roman Catholics, it is our painful duty to listen to Mr. Davis' account of the failures of Christian love, hope and faith in the Roman Catholic Church, and to resolve to do all in our power to reform the abuses to which he points."

By and large, Mr. Davis' 251-page book—which is dedicated "For Florence," — Miss Florence Henderson of Farmingdale, New York, whom he married — got a mixed reception in British newspapers. The book takes the Roman Church to task as being "inimical to Christian faith" and "a zone of iniquity," says the Pope is "entangled in an antiquated court system, where truth is handled politically," and hits at local bishops for "manipulating censorship." Mr. Davis makes clear, however that he remains a Christian.

A Daily Telegraph writer described the publication of Father Ernst's counter-pamphlet as an incident "full of anomalies," adding: "Mr. Davis defends a man (Father McCabe) who does not wish to be defended and the publishers of the pamphlet take an unprecedented step without the authority of the Roman Catholic hierarchy."

"These are matters which are not irreconcilable, but they will certainly cause a new upsurge of controversy both within and without the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church."

The *Baptist Times*, in a front-page story headed, "Book that will shock the Roman Church," said: "The book will give the biggest shock by its revelation of the way the Roman Church manipulates truth to bolster up its power structure, silences criticism and prevents free inquiry."

The *Sunday Times* chose a prominent Roman Catholic to review the book — Norman St. John-Stevan, author, broadcaster and member of Parliament. Quoting Mr. Davis' statement that he had ceased to believe in it, Mr. St. John-Stevan wrote: "This . . . is about the only point in his book which is clear; the rest is compounded of omission and muddle."

On the "omission" side, Mr. St. John-Stevan said Mr. Davis failed to explain how he got into a position where "I wanted to be freed from a system which was oppressing me and tormenting me" and how the system was doing this.

On the "muddle" side, he said Mr. Davis "remains a Christian and his acceptance of the divinity of Christ is forthright, but his conception of the Church is shot through with ambiguity."

Among Roman Catholic newspapers, both the mass circulation *Universe* and the weekly review, *The Tablet*, published extensive reviews by theologians, who at the same time gave answers to some of Mr. Davis' charges.

The *Universe* accompanied its review with an editorial in which it said: "As convinced Catholics we believe that his final verdict—that the Church's

basic claims are false—is wrong. He says that for him the Church has 'lost its credibility.' We say he has lost his faith."

"And because he is wrong in his ultimate decision, we say, too, that his evaluation of the facts he deploys is wrong. None of these nor any combination of them should be so fatal to the Church as to drive him out of it."

"But this is not to deny the truth of many of his charges, a number of which attack the attitudes and code of conduct of Church authorities. There is, of course, nothing new in such

an attack, which is as old as the tension within the Church between the human and the divine. But we should be chastened to think that the impact of imperfection can have such personal disastrous results."

The *Tablet's* review, which runs to two full pages, was written by Father Peter Harris, professor of theology at St. John's Seminary at Romersham, in southern England. Before delving in depth with some of Mr. Davis' charges and arguments, he wrote:

"Charles Davis certainly increases his stature as a writer in this study. The character-

tics of clarity and coming quickly to the point . . . are apparent throughout the book.

"The Church which he has left must, I feel, in the end be grateful for a book which analyzes its present ills and weaknesses with such precision."

"This however, does not stop it from making sad reading to those who remain in allegiance, because it has the clarity of analysis of a broken marriage made by one of the partners after the divorce has been achieved, and we cannot help wishing that a reconciliation might have been possible."

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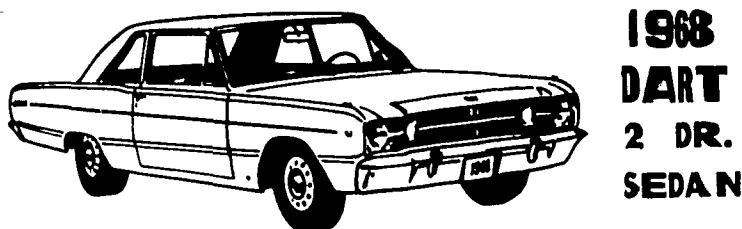


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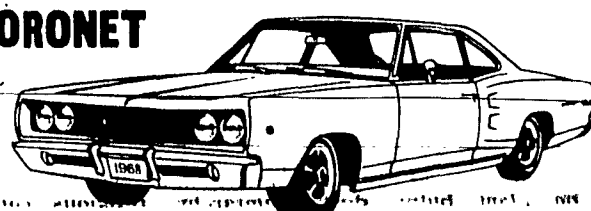
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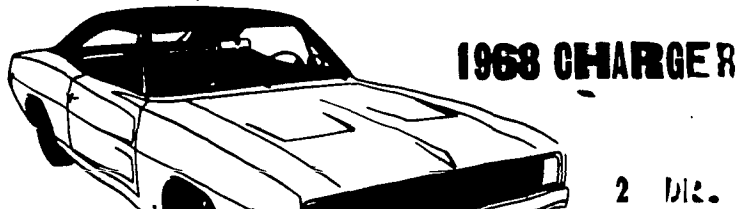


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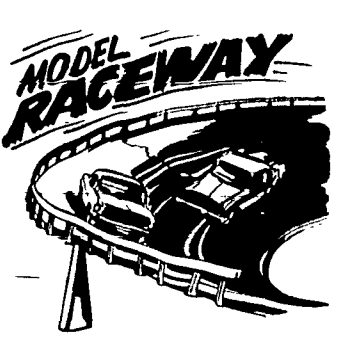
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