

Man of principle

THE session of General Synod which begins on Monday promises to be memorable: it is, after all, the final session of this historic first General Synod whose last, probably jaded, performance is to be played out beneath gathering economic and political storm-clouds of apocalyptic menace. Never, for the relief of dullness and of doom, has the Church's parliament so badly needed the services of the one man who this time will not be there—to wit, the Rev. Christopher Wansey.

Mr. Wansey (who retires from the parochial ministry on the day that General Synod convenes) was what you might call the court jester of the Synod and, for many years before that, of the old Church Assembly also. Like many jesters of yesteryear, he had a more serious function than simply that of keeping the audience in stitches; though he did that supremely well. In his case, the wit always cloaked a penetrating point of principle or practicality which often went home without the still-laughing opposition realising that it had been wounded.

Mr. Wansey has a formidable ecclesiastical pedigree: his father was a priest, he is cousin to a bishop, and he is related by marriage to Lord Ramsey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury; he is the youngest of four brothers who are all in holy orders; and, to top it all off, his sister married a clergyman.

His early years were spent in Japan, where his parents were missionaries and where he was later to return as a missionary for a few years himself (having actually applied to serve in Africa). He does not think he did much good in Japan. For one thing, he was hampered by being treated virtually as an enemy alien—this was in the late '30s and early '40s—which made him also a liability to the local Christians.

"But Japan did me a lot of good," says Mr. Wansey, "chiefly by allowing me to be away from England so that I could return with a missionary's eye and find that it was Darkest England. As a result, it has been my ministry ever since to try to introduce missionary methods in the context of an English parish."

Perhaps it is an illusion of a fanciful imagination, but the Japanese influence seems to have stayed with him in other ways, too. There is something in the way he stands, when he gets up to speak, that suggests Oriental diffidence; and often he has shown a sort of elliptical approach to his subject which one also thinks of as being typically Japanese.

The similarity can be taken further; for the Japanese, while being the epitome of self-effacement and old-world courtesy, are also extremely skilled and hard-headed



businessmen; likewise Christopher Wansey, while being both humble and polite, is also a hard-headed (some would say pig-headed) man of principle who has vigorously promoted his convictions with all the very considerable skills at his disposal.

Prominent among his causes has been his growing commitment to "believer's baptism" only. For the past eleven years he has steadfastly refused to baptise babies—"this wicked procedure," he calls it, "of drafting these little conscripts into what should be a volunteer army." Seven is the earliest age at which he will baptise anyone, this being the earliest point at which he believes a child can understand "a simple commitment to our Lord."

He claims to know this from personal experience, since that happens to have been the age at which he was himself christened—his father became a Quaker while in Japan, but later reverted to the Anglican ministry and thereupon had the young Christopher baptised.

Another loud buzz in Mr. Wansey's lifelong bonnetful of bees has been the "scandal" of the State appointment of bishops. "There's another good man gone west," he says to himself whenever he hears of a new bishop being appointed, "—hindered by the source of his appointment, you see." The unrelenting war which he has waged on this front with pen, speech and publicity stunt has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the first official steps now being made to give the Church the decisive voice in the choice of its bishops.

Mr. Wansey is "not greatly enamoured" with the new synodical structures of the Church, though he does think that General Synod is an improvement on the Church Assembly. "But," he adds, "I still think it has been a mistake to expect the laity and clergy to do the same job in the Synod. There is a place for them to meet separately sometimes because at present the laity are often called upon to discuss things they don't understand, and things are getting pushed through without people knowing what they are doing."

Over the years the slightly eccentric Mr. Wansey has been that thing which is vital to the make-up of any healthy Church: an embarrassment. With any luck he will continue so, since he intends his retirement to be an active one. Meanwhile, he has the following piece of advice for members at next week's meeting of General Synod: "Speak your mind," says he, "and to hell with the consequences. Better them in hell than you."

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