

## THE CANON LAW SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND AND ITS NEWSLETTER

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The organisation now known as the Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland was founded in 1957, and its *Newsletter* was first published in 1969. The activities, publications and achievements of the Society within the Roman Catholic Church are manifold, and were acknowledged by Pope John Paul II when he granted an audience to participants of the 1992 annual conference held in Rome. This papal address is printed at the beginning of *The Canon Law: Letter & Spirit* (London 1995), the full commentary on the 1983 Code of Canon Law prepared by the Society.

The commentary aimed at being both a practical guide and an academic investigation, and this gives a good idea of how the Society approaches canon law and how it is generally practised and studied in these islands. It is an approach that is in continuity with the tradition which used to be exemplified by the regular canonical writings in *The Clergy Review*, on which the early members of the Society would have been formed, of not airing difficulties without also trying to suggest a solution or remedy. It is probably still too early to write a full history of the Society, but much relevant and fascinating material can be found in issues 52–53 (1982) and 100 (1994) of the *Newsletter*.<sup>1</sup>

The *Newsletter* of the Society is distributed to members four times a year, and individual issues vary in length from about forty-five to seventy pages. Twice a year, members also receive *Canon Law Abstracts*, a booklet which, since 1959, gives brief summaries in English of canonical literature appearing in dozens of periodicals and a variety of languages. The summaries are grouped so as to correspond to the canons with which they deal. There is nothing comparable to this indispensable survey of literature, with its unique worldwide coverage. Since 1967, the Society has also compiled and published each year a series of law reports now called *Matrimonial Decisions of Great Britain and Ireland*. These reports are a selection of the judicial decisions given by the ecclesiastical courts situated within the geographical area covered by the Society. It should be pointed out that many of the parties involved in these matrimonial cases are not Roman Catholics.

Returning to the *Newsletter*, this quarterly publication contains a variety of items likely to interest and educate members of the Society. There are what might be termed pieces of news and obituaries, a limited number of book reviews and some documentation. Chiefly there tend to be articles discussing contemporary canonical problems and issues or commenting on recently promulgated canon law and other official documents, either universal or particular in scope. As can be seen, the *Newsletter* sets out to be both informative and a forum for debate on disputed questions.

The value of the *Newsletter*, as of all the activities of the Society, is increased by the regrettable fact that no specialist periodical dealing with Roman Catholic canon law is published in Great Britain or Ireland. This lack is related to the absence from these islands of a faculty of canon law; the academic qualifications of licence and doctorate have to be obtained from elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The Canon Law Society thus fulfils a pivotal role in the study and practice of canon law. This helps to explain why John Paul II's

<sup>1</sup> The position of the Society in canon and civil law is discussed by R. Brown, 'Report on Associations of the Faithful in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland' in W. Aymans, K.-T. Geringer and H. Schmitz (eds.), *Das Konsoziative Element in der Kirche* (St Ottilien 1989) 891–6.

1992 speech to members of the Society referred to the work they carried out 'in classrooms, offices and tribunals'.

To conclude with a glance at 1998. The Society's *Newsletter* contains in its four issues for that year a fairly typical range of material along the lines described above. We might usefully focus on the longer pieces in issue 113, the first for its year. The full text is given in English of the Pope's annual address to members of the Roman Rota, reflecting on the nature and purpose of justice and the judiciary in the Church. This papal speech is printed without comment, whilst there is a lengthy assessment by Fr Gordon Read of the 1997 Roman instruction on collaborative ministries. There has been much public discussion of the book *Shattered Faith* (1997) by Mrs Sheila Rauch Kennedy, which includes strong criticisms of Roman Catholic law and practice as she experienced them when her husband sought a declaration of nullity of their marriage. The book is discussed by Mrs Alicia Sloan. The case itself has gone on appeal from the first instance court in the United States to the Roman Rota. Next comes a discussion by Fr Paul Hayward of aspects of family law reform in England, with an eye to its implications for Roman Catholic canon law dealing with nullity of marriage and separation of the spouses. Bp John Jukes examines and discusses the consequences for canon law of a thesis proposed by Frank Mobbs in *Beyond Its Authority? The Magisterium and Matters of Natural Law* (1997), according to which the teachings of the *Magisterium* on natural law do not count as teachings of the Catholic Church. The Bishop concentrates on canon 1364 of the 1983 Code as it bears on heresy. The final article is by Sr Gwyn Richards, and it explores the position of profoundly deaf people as it is relevant to pre-nuptial inquiries and the establishing of grounds for invalidity of marriage.

Membership of the Society is not limited to Roman Catholics, and anyone interested in joining it should write to the Administrative Secretary of the Society at Cathedral House, Ingrave Road, Brentwood, Essex CM15 8AT (England). It should be noted that whilst the *Newsletter* is only available to members of the Society, anyone can purchase the *Matrimonial Decisions and Abstracts*.

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<sup>2</sup> For the history of canon law teaching at Maynooth (Ireland) see P. J. Corish, *Maynooth College 1795–1995* (Dublin 1995).