At the beginning of the closing decade of the twentieth century, two of the oldest and most celebrated Western men of letters continued to write and publish. Born in the infancy of our present century – Julien in 1900 and Graham in 1904 – both writers have produced a considerable and varied body of work in old age. In Julien Green’s case this has included his trilogy of novels set in the American South before and during the Civil War, and also drama and the ongoing publication of the journal. For Graham Greene, advancing age saw not only a significant addition to the novel with the 1982 appearance of *Monsignor Quixote* but also works which clearly revealed his continuing commitment to decency and fair play in politics, both locally and in the international arena. Members of the Roman Catholic Church for a great many years, both men, despite their protests, have had to put up with the label of ‘Catholic writer’. In each case, an upbringing in the Anglican Church was followed by conversion to Roman Catholicism, by adhesion to a religion that inevitably coloured the pattern of the life and work. In these pages, we examine the responses of each writer to changes in their Church following the great conciliar gathering of 1962.

For both men, membership of the Catholic Church has involved lengthy periods of intense uncertainty and inner struggle, to such an extent that Graham Greene for long regarded himself as belonging to what he has termed ‘the Foreign Legion of the Church’, while in the thirties before his second conversion Julien Green felt the strong attraction exercised by oriental religion, by aspects of Hinduism and particularly of Buddhism. For Julien, it was the firm hand of the Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain – himself a convert from Protestantism – that was to preserve him from closer involvement with Buddhism and in fact to prove instrumental in his definitive return to the Roman Church.

At the time of their conversions, indeed well into the second half of the century, the institution to which both men had pledged them-
selves appeared immutable, seemingly showing no sign of seeking to accommodate itself to a vastly different twentieth-century world order. Notwithstanding the enormous upheavals and unparalleled strife and barbarity unleashed on the planet by world wars and major revolutions, Vatican authoritarianism reigned supreme. Papal condemnation of modernist attitudes and socially progressive stances was routine. In the early years of the century Pius X – canonised by Pius XII in 1954 – had issued his strong condemnation of modernism in the Church (Pascendi 1907), while in the thirties Pius XI’s encyclicals Quadragesimo anno (1931) and Divini Redemptoris (1937) tended to gloss over the worst crimes of capitalism while even the minor mistakes of the communists were vigorously criticised. The perception of Marxism as an out-and-out enemy devoid of any redeeming feature was kept up by his successor, Pius XII. It was Eugenio Pacelli who exhorted Catholics to combat communism, and from the end of the forties he excommunicated Italian Catholics who became members of the Communist party. The equation of Marxism with great evil has been continued by the present Pope, John Paul II, to the ire and consternation of Graham Greene. Writing in the mid-eighties, in a letter to The Times dated 11 September 1984, he accused John Paul of taking a partisan line: ‘To him (John Paul II), as to President Reagan, Marxism is the great enemy, black against white, and the word Marxist becomes more and more a vague term of abuse ... one might expect the Pope to remember that Marx as a historian condemned Henry VIII for closing the monasteries.’

Yet after the unequivocal liberalism of Jean XXIII and the relative tolerance of his successor, Paul VI, Karol Wojtyla was simply enunciating the view of the traditional, immutable Church, not just on social matters but on Catholic values in general. John Paul II’s objective was no less than restoration, the ‘restoration of pre-conciliar values’.

Faced with such a programme, one might expect from the progressive Graham Greene a generally negative response in strong contrast to the anticipated enthusiasm of the tradition-oriented Julien Green; the reality, however, is rather more complex.

What unites both writers is admiration for John Paul II’s own total commitment to his task and his equal insistence that the priests of his Church be totally committed. In an address made to West German priests in 1980, the Pope tells them that they ‘are called to share in a special way in the spiritual struggle ... are called to this constant combat that Mother Church is engaged upon’. With this emphasis on struggle, on combat, the priest’s role is perceived essentially as that of