

Aggiornamento

1.—From Dialogue to Self-Awareness

by Ian Hislop, O.P.

The attempt of the Church's Council to renew its life and to enter into a dialogue with the non-Catholic world has led in fact to the attempt to find ways of communicating with, or of understanding, at different levels, elements within itself and the world in which it finds itself. If the first discovery of the Council was the need for the bishops to communicate with each other, to form a collective mind, and to learn to regulate the processes of civilised discussion, the second was that ancient defensive positions should not prejudice the necessity for intelligibility in a world increasingly literate. The first led to a restatement of the primitive teaching about the bishop's role, both as representative of the local church, and as a member of that group, or college, that succeeds to the apostles, and shares with the successor of Peter in the direction of the Catholic Church. The implications of this, both in the traditional ecclesiastical sphere, and in relation to the sharing of the presbyterium, or priestly group, in the affairs of the local church, and in the necessarily growing part the holy people of God will take in areas, till recently confined to clerics, is in principle outlined in the Decree on the Church, though the carrying out of the implications of the decree may take long enough.

The logic of the dialogue forced the Fathers of the Council not only to consider the way in which the Church is governed, but it also compelled them to ask how can the Church fulfil her task of witnessing to Christ in the contemporary world. It was easy enough to see that charity demanded that the old semi-secular hatreds be transcended, and that the working of God's grace through water and the Word be recognised. Further, in view of the information we now have, there was no real difficulty in admitting that a Western colonialism, the product of the aggressive spirit so characteristic of the tradition of Western Europe, had not only embittered relationships with the Orthodox East, but also obscured important factors in the ancient traditions of the Catholic Church, which the West imposed to its own detriment. Given this, and however much it may involve in heart searching, and in the recognition of a depth and variety implied in the name of Catholic, it none the less involves a reform in the realm that is familiar. It may be that it is an unfamiliar sight for the European Catholic to admit in public his collective responsibility and his failure, but this is no more than a rediscovery of the sinfulness of

the members of the Church, and the folly of equating abstract statements of the perfection of the Body of Christ with the existential situation of the people of God.

The question, however, of the relation of the Catholic Church to the non-Catholic Christian churches and groups, or even to the non-Christian religions, is simply a question of analyzing the tradition of the Church, of absorbing what comes from the past – the whole process takes place within a world whose pre-occupations and language are the same; and however extreme the exegesis of some may be, they are recognisably working within a framework that is familiar, at least in the sense that Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Kant and Bultmann speak, in spite of their differing outlook and language, about a common subject matter. All that is involved here is the abandonment of the attempt to reduce such differences to a secular, or even a political, divergence and to regard the Treaty of Westphalia as a final solution. It may well be that a deeper analysis of the issues involved in the Lutheran and Reformed movements will lead to a recognition that many of the so-called traditional points of dispute are in fact simply disputes about words, or masks for political or economic influences; and that the real theological difficulties are not as recalcitrant as the debater may suppose.

The debates of the Fathers went further than this, for the very entry into dialogue implies, at a human level, important truths, sometimes obscured in religious history: the rights of a man to follow his conscience; the claim to toleration and the recognition of the unity of the human family. Once this has been recognised, with its corollary of Catholics' guilt before their fellowmen, especially the Jews, it follows that the Church, that is the people of God, must recognise itself in the contemporary world. This implies two things – a process of self criticism, not in terms of this or that ideology, though of course one may learn from such, but in terms of the Gospel; and secondly the relation of this discovery of one's vocation to the world in which one is called. The first implies the rejection of all that has been called triumphalism which is the tendency to found the Church on values other than those of the Gospel, and the whole nostalgic craving for a return to the middle ages, for the identification of the Kingdom of God with a particular, and imperfect, cultural exemplification. To grant secular power to right minded 'lords' is obviously absurd in evangelical terms, yet such is our historical conditionment that we find it almost impossible to escape from its clutches. Too many of us have waited for the restoration of abbeys and cathedrals, instead of seeing that most of these are condemned to be museums or tourist attractions, and that the task of the Church is not in the restoration of the past, but in the creation of new communities. Perhaps the most significant element in the Church's renewal is her awareness of her vocation to poverty, the recognition that the Gospel must be preached to the poor. The slightest knowledge of religious sociology

will reveal the anguish that this recognition entails.

All this, perhaps, might involve no more than an alteration in our techniques, an increase in virtue, but in fact the problem is much greater. It may be that the Church has recognised the values proclaimed in 1789, though the delay has been catastrophic; but what of 1917; what of the world of Marx, Freud, and Einstein. Contemporary man, if we are to accept the interpretation of artists and writers, lives in a world without meaning in the old metaphysical sense, and yet he preserves, and to be just to him develops, a care, a concern about moral issues; suffering man means much to him and he regards himself as committed, and this not merely at a parochial or a national level, but to man as man. He combines both a powerful sense of freedom, of human dignity, with a not unfounded distrust of all human institutions, and the false platitudes of his fathers that have led the world to the brink of disaster. In his heart he is unable to identify himself with any of the power blocs and, it is important to see, on moral grounds enters his protest against them all. Herein lies the first part of the Church's problem, how to accommodate an outlook fashioned on the struggles of the sixteenth century, conditioned by the refusal to accept for so long even the existence of a new world with the consequent difficulty of distinguishing between structures and positions that belong to the integrity of the Church, and those which are merely temporal (in the sense of existing within a particular historic epoch). The confrontation of this problem involves both a negation of the view that the Catholic Church is a great ash bucket of past cultures, the ideal of a Ministry of the Past, and a willingness to discover what it means to be human in the mid-twentieth century, this as the pre-condition of being a Christian in the twentieth century. And with this goes the recognition that this is not an individual matter – personal yes, but also social and communal. Methods of government, judicial processes proper to the sixteenth century, are not merely incompatible with modern ideas, but extended into contemporary life they sin against truths about man discovered within the last hundred years, but foretold in the gospels.

More difficult is the adaptation of the religious mind to the strange 'real' world, a world of the neutral, a world 'without God'. It may well be that nothing more is needed than an extension of St Thomas's teaching about secondary causes, but the popular Catholic world remains firmly opposed to any possibility of a scientific direction of human problems being reconcilable with the concept of divine providence. On this depends the worldly future of the Church. It can be met only by those who like Pope John, are so firmly rooted in the tradition, that they are unafraid, do not have to assert irrelevant truths because of a basic insecurity, but are able to adventure in the spirit, prepared to meet God wherever His image is to be found.