

■ The resumption of the Vatican Council for its fourth, and presumably final, session is inevitably an occasion for assessing what has been accomplished so far and for speculating on what remains to be done. It has been said that the Council's greatest achievement has been its mere existence, and it is certainly true that formal enactments are only a part of its purpose. Yet the decrees on the Church, on ecumenism and on the liturgy are documents that deeply affect the Church's response to Pope John's initial hope for a spiritual renewal, a renewal that is to prepare the way for the restoration of Christian unity which is the Council's final aim. And only a spirit of apostolic purpose, which the Council has itself so profoundly exemplified, can make their implementation fruitful.

The issues that have still to be resolved – religious freedom, the Christian attitude to the Jews, the complex social and moral dilemmas that face the Church in the modern world – are of their nature those that have attracted most publicity. They touch the structures of society at sensitive spots: they involve changes of attitude that are more painful than even those of a more purely theological order. The controversies they have aroused – and will continue to arouse – are not going to be silenced by the taking of a vote. And consciences will undoubtedly be troubled, for, whatever is decided – or even though there be no decision at all – it will seem too much to some, too little to others; and silence will be interpreted as a dereliction of duty.

This is not to say that we can anticipate a mood of rebellion, a refusal on any large scale to accept the Council's authority. It is merely to recognize – and this should be already clear – that never before has the Church in Council been submitted to so close and constant a scrutiny not only of its acts but of its motives as well. The modern methods of mass communication have seen to that; and the unaccustomed freedom that Catholics have enjoyed in the last few years to debate questions that hitherto were hardly ever publicly mentioned has affected their sense of obedience. They can cite plenty of authorities in the Council itself to defend their claim to be fully informed and to be properly consulted. They are unlikely, at least in countries that do not border on the Mediterranean Sea, to feel that the end of the Council is the end of their freedom to discuss issues that intimately affect them in their own lives every day.

It can hardly be said that some of the more vocal advocates of change have helped to prepare the way for the renewal that is needed. Too often there is the suggestion that if only structures were altered – the Curia dismantled, the Index abolished, or democratic processes adopted in diocesan and parochial affairs – the Church could, for that reason, move out of its old impotence into a new and vigorous future. Structural reforms are needed, just as theological renewal is needed, but there can be a sort of snobbery that disposes of the common fidelities of Catholic life, untidy and muddled as they often are, and thinks of the Church itself as an extension of one's own little group, informed and articulate, no doubt, but often sadly out of touch with the community of the poor and the forgotten – those who most of all bear the credentials of Christ. And the selective indignation of the advocate of this or that – the condemnation of nuclear warfare, the allowing of birth control, the reform of the seminaries – seems rarely to allow for others the freedom of conscience that is so loudly proclaimed. The primacy of charity is so constantly defended by those who look for reform that the *demands* of charity can seem to be overlooked; and a measure of patience and compassion are part of its price.

The recall to fundamental spiritual realities is, one may suppose, the answer. But this must never be the mere alibi of an irresponsible pietism: 'just say your prayers and all will be well'. The Council has in effect already provided the setting in which a more robust and adult spirituality can develop. The liturgical changes are not intended merely to *exhibit* the Church at prayer: they could become a new formalism if they did not sustain a deepened personal identification of the Christian with Christ. The decrees on the Church and on ecumenism are not just formal documents to be added to the theologian's library. They are to form the conscience of the faithful, to activate their prayer. And, one and all, they articulate a faith that looks beyond an immediate and pragmatic resolution of the Christian's every difficulty. They appeal, above all, to a hope that must in the end be hereafter. They are, in the profoundest sense, eschatological: they place us where we belong, on our way and not at the end of the journey.

But we do need help on that journey, and we have a right to ask that the Church in Council should be aware of how agonizing is the pain of that journey for so many. Writing in the last issue of this journal, Mr Michael Dummett instanced the simple fact of the tragic isolation of so many Catholics in being deprived of the social support they have a right to expect. The Council can do much, but it cannot change the hearts of men. And if some are going to be disappointed because they feel that the Council has failed to speak as plainly and as courageously as they had hoped, they must be driven – as throughout the Church's history the saints have been driven – to the single ground of Christian faith: that

Christ has not abandoned his people and is most of all with them when his face is hard to see.

It might seem odd to say that Lourdes is an appropriate place in which to see the Council in perspective. It represents much that the impatient most want to discard. But, behind the unspeakable facade of vulgarity and greed that makes the town so unlovable, there is a simple, constant theme. Men have done their worst to betray its meaning, yet it is as strong and as redemptive as the Gospel itself. For it *is* the Gospel itself, with its inescapable appeal to penance and prayer. And, as it happens, the hideousness matters not at all. Or, rather, it makes you see that in a valley, if not of tears then at least of fears and forebodings, there is a community of pain and sadness and loss. And somehow it turns to joy. But only because Christ was crucified and rose from the dead. The renewal is there, at the heart of the matter.