

COMMENTARY

THE CHURCH IN CHAINS. Persecution is never new: it was promised the Church from the beginning. The extent and pattern and point of it are all that alter. Since the war whole areas of the Church have gone into the shadows, and even the facts are hard to find. Already a generation is growing up that accepts the enchained Church in Poland, Hungary or China as inevitably lost. The imprisoned are silent, and soon they are dead. And so the conscience of those who still know freedom grows less disturbed: nothing can be done, protest is useless, there is only prayer.

‘There is only prayer.’ That truth can be an irony none the less. For prayer is never an alibi to which appeal can be made when no other answer can be found. Prayer is not an acquiescence—as it certainly is not a temporal plan of campaign. It accepts and loves God’s will, and there is a true sense in which the Passion of Christ is prolonged as long as time lasts. But the whole Church prayed that Peter might be released from his chains: it had no doubt that God could and would free him. The angel came and brought Peter out of captivity. But, despite their prayers, the Christians were astonished, for the deliverance was beyond even what faith could expect to find.

The prayers of the Church are for all men everywhere, and they are always disinterested. It would be a betrayal of prayer if our hopes for the Christians in China were confused with a temporal hope for the restoration of a political regime. We may think that this or that circumstance might make the Church’s mission easier to achieve, but we can never be sure. The Calvary of China now is, under God, the condition of the Church’s final triumph there, even though it be a thousand centuries hence that the final reckoning will be known. Yet it is certainly true that in Communism the Church has found an adversary more ruthless and more successful than any she has known, and a confidence in the Church’s ultimate victory cannot mean ignoring the true dimensions of her adversary’s power. While the Church can never be invoked as an ally in a strategy of anti-communism—and many who find the Church’s mission unacceptable in other

respects would willingly enough accept her aid in this—it is none the less a heresy she fights, however silently or helplessly, as it seems. It is the Catholic faith itself that is in question: what she defends is the divine law itself and the natural rights of man which that law protects.

The seventy million Catholics throughout the world who suffer today for that faith deserve more than a momentary gesture of sympathy, a mention in our prayers. Indeed an understanding of what is really involved in their sufferings is essential for a prayer that will be sympathetic, a sharing in the burden. So often the issues are obscured, and pressures beyond all previous imagining are at work to confuse and to divide. Such a book as Jean Monsterleet's *Martyrs in China* shows plainly enough how subtle is an appeal to a proper patriotism, identifying the Church with the 'imperialism' of its American and European agents. It shows, too, how courageously that fallacy has been rejected by the overwhelming majority of Chinese Catholics. Just as St John Fisher and St Thomas More saw clearly, and at once, what was truly involved in a 'reasonable' appeal to a nation's right to oppose a 'foreign' ecclesiastical authority, so today in all the countries under Marxist rule the martyrs—and the word primarily means those who bear witness to the truth—are concerned to proclaim a single allegiance to God, and that in circumstances more formidable than any the world has ever known. For the Christians are confronted with an enemy that is world-wide, organized with every skill that modern technology and the conquests of psychology can provide. An enemy, moreover, that appeals to the natural instinct for justice that smoulders in millions of people in the underdeveloped lands of the East, and which has at every point the backing of the immense power of Russia.

The prayers of the Church for those who suffer must be allied to a sense of every man's share in his neighbour's lot. The choice for us, who retain the freedom to choose, is rarely spectacular. One day it may be otherwise, and the fidelity of those who suffer in China today is the fruit of the earlier—and smaller—fidelities in the easier years. *Tu autem in nobis es, Domine, et nomen tuum invocatum est super nos; ne derelinquas nos, Domine, Deus noster.*