

The Church and the World

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The Church exists among men, men of flesh and blood who are, for the most part, in what we shall call 'the world'. It is not a simple thing. While men are free to change the world they live in, this same world exercises, now as in the past, a great influence on men, including those who make up the community of believers that is the Church. It is true that the Gospel must be numbered among the forces at work in the world, since the men who respond to the Gospel are also in the world. There is an interplay, a complex relation between the world and the Gospel, a relation that varies from time to time, and which cannot be solved by a simple affirmation of a common divine origin of both societies. St Paul, having commented rather sharply on aspects of the world in his time,¹ says later on: 'Be not conformed to this world, but be reformed in the newness of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and the acceptable, and the perfect will of God'.²

Nevertheless, history has seen a considerable assimilation of elements from the world within the structures of the Christian community, even before Constantine. In the Eastern Churches, the conciliar procedure followed that of the Roman senate, and the division of ecclesiastical dioceses followed that of the civil dioceses. Byzantium was a place of little importance in the Church until Constantine established his capital there. Even in the realm of faith, the influence of Hellenism is undeniable. Contact with the Greek intellectual world raised questions, while at the same time it provided tools, for a theological reflection which is a permanent part of our Christian heritage. To admit a certain assimilation of elements from the world, a certain 'conforming' to structures which do not have their origin in the Gospel is not to say that these elements are always corrupting influences. The vitality of the Church is such that many elements can be assimilated, and indeed should be assimilated, without destroying the force of God's initiative in the history of salvation. In some cases this assimilation has become so much a part of the transmission of the Christian message that an attempt to shake it off would create delicate problems. Such is the case with much of the Hellenistic influence in the development of doctrine.

¹Cf. Rm 1.

²Rm 12, 2.

In the realm of discipline, the permanence of such influences will naturally be considerably less than in questions of doctrine. The structures of Roman law have less intrinsic value than those of the Mosaic law for a Christian, and St Paul has warned us against the dangers of legalism with respect to the latter.

Yet the assimilation of elements from temporal structures is not something to be objected to, *a priori*, as a pernicious influence in the Church. Many who are against attempts to approach current thought forget that the biggest difference between these attempts and others in the past is the time in which they take place. St Thomas Aquinas was condemned in his time for similar endeavours. Of course, care must be taken to avoid confusion of elements which are, as it were, 'native' to the Gospel, essential to the process of salvation, and elements which are accidental, simply accepted from the world in which the Church lives. This is easy enough when one criticises ideas which have been developed in our own time, for example, ideas accepted from Marxist ideologies, but time has a way of dulling our perception with respect to things assimilated in the past. Not infrequently exaggerations are noted in both directions. Fifty years ago many scholars enjoyed an almost absolute certitude on questions which are recognised today as very complex. Structures in the Church were attributed to the world when in fact they are essential to the Church, while on the other hand accidental things have been tenaciously defended as a part of the Gospel. Confusion between the dogmatic reality of ecclesial structures and the form which these take in any given time can also lead to misconceptions of the Christian economy.³

At times the influence of the world has been so strong as to pass without comment among Christians when in fact they were opposed to the Gospel. Pius XII stated in 1953 that physical and psychic torture should be excluded from juridical processes, in the first place because these infringe on a natural right of the accused person, even if he be really guilty.⁴ Pope Nicholas I, in the ninth century, condemned similar practices when queried by a people who had recently come in contact with Christianity.⁵ Yet under the influence of the revival of Roman law in Europe, the practice of torture came to be so taken for granted that Innocent IV, in permitting its use by the Inquisition in 1252, uses terms which imply that this is an accepted procedure in

³Cf. A. Osuna, O.P., *La Ciencia Tomista*, 90 (1963), p. 186.

⁴A.A.S. 45 (1953), p. 735.

⁵cited by Pius XII, A.A.S. 45 (1953) p. 736.

criminal courts.⁶ Fortunately, such flagrant instances of acceptance of institutions which time has enabled us to see as contrary to the demands of the Gospel are relatively rare, although in these days of discussion of the morality of modern warfare, it might be well not to forget them.

Between those questions which are indifferent and those which obviously clash with Christianity there is another area which perhaps offers a greater danger of compromise with the world, since its temptations are more subtle, areas where concrete question of doctrine or action are not immediately raised, but where an attitude or an emphasis can have a considerable effect on the life of the Church. Such for example is the question of the position of authority within the Church. This writer does not for a moment doubt that the existence of authority in the Church and over the Church is a datum which originates in the Gospel, in the message preached by Jesus Christ. It is clearly a question of faith for any Catholic. On the other hand many elements related to the manner of exercise of this authority, to the balance between the notion of authority *within* and authority *over* the Church, to the relative importance of other elements in the constitution of the Church, can and should be examined in the light of the principle enunciated by St Paul: *Do not be conformed to this world.*

Particularly in the post-tridentine era, many apologists give the impression that authority is the most important, if not the only really important factor in the constitution of the Church. Pressed by the need to answer those who denied any real authority in the Church, they might be likened to a man wrongly accused of selling hard liquor to children, when in fact he is selling lemonade, but who defends himself by asserting his right to sell hard liquor to children. Rather than point out that the charge is groundless, he accepts the charge and argues on the terms proposed by his adversary. Thus some apologists, faced with a denial of authority, simply reply that this is according to the Gospel, without bothering to question the notion of authority involved.

Even as the Church deliberately adopted some procedures of the

⁶. . . tamquam veri latrones et homicidas animarum et fures Sacramentorum Dei et fidei christianae', (Bull *Ad extirpanda*, 15 maii 1552). In the seventeenth century Passerinus declares: 'Et in casu, quo testes clerici sunt torquendi, non sunt torquendi a iudice laico, sed ab ecclesiastico' (*Regulare tribunal*, Romae, 1677, qu. 15, n. 138). In an age given to casuistry the efficacy of torture as a means of arriving at the truth was frequently questioned, yet no one appears to have doubted its licitness. It is interesting to note that the Reformation, while questioning many institutions of medieval Christendom, does not appear to have rebelled at this one, at least in criminal courts of civil society.

Roman senate in her Councils, the attitude of the Roman state towards authority seems to have been resisted. Rather than a despotic control, above and outside of the society with which it is involved, it was looked on as a service, not only over the Church, but within the Church, a service of the Gospel and of the Christian people. Even when the phrase came into common usage, *Servus servorum Dei* was more than an empty title. This tradition has, in these latter times, perhaps been more faithfully observed in the action of those who bear the title than by theologians and canonists who write about it. There is no innovation, but rather a change of emphasis, provoked both by a reaction against usurpations of ecclesiastical authority by princes and by a certain assimilation of the notion of authority that was claimed by princes. The fact that both secular and ecclesiastical authority were often exercised by the same persons made this assimilation even easier.

With the Reformation, authority in the Church is denied, and this is heresy. We must therefore affirm it. But just what is denied, and what are we affirming? We find ourselves in an age of despots, as well as in an age where nominalism is predominant. The theorist easily affirms, in the Church, the same notion of authority which is denied. But is this notion really compatible with the Gospel? Is there a sufficient reflection on the notion of authority? Or is the current notion taken for granted and applied simply and ingenuously to the Church? In a later period people will attribute to the Church the liberal notion of private property, and deny it vehemently. Again, without a critical examination of just what is being denied, Catholics will be found who will just as vehemently affirm, in the name of the Church, doctrines which are actually foreign to the real position of the Church. A caricature of a position defended by the Church is attacked, and in our zeal to defend Christian doctrine, we accept the caricature. As in the case of the man selling lemonade, we do not explain that appearances deceive. The very need to defend a datum of faith—in this case the unquestioned authority existing in the Church—may lead Catholic thinkers to limit their reflection to the point under attack. Not only do we run a danger of affirming all that is denied, but also of neglecting other equally important elements in our vision of the reality that is the Church.

The caricature of human authority, attributed to the Church by men—in and out of the Church—whose notion of authority is drawn from the world of their time, then denied as contrary to the Gospel, involves a double risk. As a concept of authority in civil society, it tends to be both despotic and paternalistic—two ways of overlooking the role of

human freedom in society. Such a vision of authority, while superficially contributing to efficient government, fails in the long run to build a really human society, since it tends to eliminate really effective and spontaneous action on the part of individuals and intermediate structures in society. The assimilation of such a notion of authority, especially in the realm of action, can have disastrous consequences. An individual in the position of a Thomas More can easily assume the attitude that More refused to assume: 'Wiser, more learned men than I, men in positions of authority, are willing to conform. Who am I to die for something that these men reject?'

To go deeper, the facile equation of authority in the Church with authority in any merely human community is not without danger. Our textbooks of apologetics affirm, in the face of denials, that the Church is a real society, that there is real authority in the Church, and all this is true. But they sometimes forget that if the Church is a real society, with real authority, the Church is also a very *different* society. In some areas of theology, we are always reminded that our reflections on supernatural truths must be governed by analogy, that simple and univocal affirmations are dangerous. Apparently, apologists sometimes forget that the Church, even as a society, is a supernatural reality. The attitude towards authority in the Church is always conditioned by the words of Christ: 'You call me Master, and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If then I being *your* Lord and Master, have washed your feet; you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, so you do also'.

A critical reflection should be demanded not only with respect to structures that are simply 'of the world', but also with respect to those of 'Christendom'. The middle ages in Europe witnessed an attempt to christianise temporal structures which was in many ways admirable, yet we should not therefore imagine that this is the only possible relation of the Christian community to temporal structures. Those of medieval Christendom were in fact profoundly influenced by the Gospel in many things, but even there the influence was mutual, and we can hardly look to medieval Christendom as an ideal which cannot suffer improvement, or even as the ideal upon which any Christian society must necessarily build. The symbiosis of the Gospel and temporal structures which was attempted has gone, and with it the confusion between the temporal and the sacral which marked medieval society. A nostalgia for this lost world is not only unrealistic, but also dangerous when it brings with it the conviction that this is the only

ideal state of relationship between the Church and the world. The weakness of these structures before the onslaughts of the Reform and Laicism is significant. Often it was enough for leaders of the Reform to assume control of the structures of Christendom to ensure the defeat of Catholicism in a given region.

Today, many of our efforts appear to be directed towards the creation of artificial structures dominated by a mentality of Christendom. This mentality manifests itself in the desire to put 'Catholic' labels on things which could function as well under a variety of labels. Can there really be such a thing as a 'Catholic' trade union? Should we not rather work towards a christianisation of such structures through the presence of Christians than a christianisation of men through 'Christian' temporal structures?

It is true that in certain stages in the history of Christendom, such structures exercised considerable force in the outlook of men: to be a Christian was a thing taken for granted; one was born into the Church. Today, it often appears that the only really efficacious social unit which can exercise this function is the Christian family. Even the parish, conceived as a *mélange* of the religious and the temporal, fails to fulfil such a function.

The world has changed, and if the Gospel has not, we must recognise the fact that the world in which the Church is to be built is not that of Christendom. Artificial attempts to preserve such a society by withdrawing from the world involve a lack of Christian realism, as well as a lack of consciousness of the missionary task which faces the Church today: 'Do not be conformed to this world': the dictum of St Paul must be applied not only to pagan Rome and to paganism today, but to the lost world of Christendom as well. Perhaps even more important, it must be applied to many defensive attitudes conditioned by the atmosphere in which post-tridentine theology developed. We need live neither in fear nor in a fear-inspired aggressiveness. We live in an age which has developed instruments of criticism which can be invaluable in the task which faces us. Unnecessary baggage can be sacrificed without remorse, and with St Paul's reminder before us, we can attempt an understanding, where possible, with *our* world.