

'A force of incalculable revolutionary magnitude, whose implications for the continent are highly explosive because it is rooted in the great masses and seeks to give faithful expression to their needs and problems.'

A true revolutionary movement, according to the classical theory, must first of all have a mass basis and it must make explicit, and struggle to fulfil, the historical aspirations of the dispossessed. It has become a platitude to say that, judged by these principles the official communist organizations in many countries have failed. Paralysed by bureaucratic centralism and representing too often the doctrines of an intellectual élite rather than the needs of the masses, they have become objectively defenders of the *status quo*. The quotation above, however, which is taken from the latest biography of Ché Guevara,¹ does not refer to any such organization but to the left wing of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. The evidence increases daily that the true inheritors of the spirit of Marx in that continent are not necessarily those in the legitimate apostolic succession but such unlikely figures as Brazilian priests and even Peruvian colonels. These, to adapt the jargon of the day, might be called the anonymous Marxists of the area—not that they are all that anonymous; many of them seem clearly aware of the amount that Christianity can learn from the Marxist analysis of our society. As is notoriously the case in Chile, a great number of Catholics have become disillusioned with the Christian Democrat idea and are exploring the possibilities of a Christian social action much further to the left.

It is not only the admirers of this movement who witness to its character; we have become accustomed to Fidel Castro's tributes to the revolutionary potential of the Church, but when the São Paulo police charge Fr Michel Candas with subversion because he has a document on the Medellín bishops' conference, we have an even more reliable witness from the other end of the spectrum.

Of course, as every responsible observer of the Latin American scene is careful to point out, not every bishop is a Helder Camara; the Brazilian Dominicans may represent the masses of the people but they hardly yet represent the whole Church. There are those who feel about the revolutionary Church as Dr Johnson did about the woman preacher: they are surprised not so much that she does it well but that she does it at all. Nevertheless it is clear that she does it.

In view of all this we have to reassess our own squabbles on this side of the Atlantic. The polarization that appeared during the Council (perhaps more often outside than inside the chamber) between conservatives and progressives, no longer seems to provide a

¹*Ché Guevara*, by Daniel James. George Allen & Unwin. 1970.

helpful model for understanding the state of the Church. Maybe this should have been obvious from the beginning; Pope John, after all, was by any standards a theological conservative. The polarization is still there (perhaps more obviously in North America) and a great nuisance it is, but we have to ask whether there is not a much more significant divide between the Church of the rich—which includes Cardinal Suenens and most of us as well as Cardinal Ottaviani—and the Church of the poor.

Although to name them in this way is already, for a Christian, to imply a value judgment (evidently the Church of the poor is more authentically the Church of Christ) we should not draw the conclusion that the proper thing for European and North American Christians to do is to become pale imitations of Camillo Torres. While a radical and subversive attack on the accepted mores of our society, of 'this world', is part of the meaning of the gospel, the attack is only obscured and hindered by pseudo-revolution or 'revolution in the head'. The techniques of repression employed by our society in, say, Northern Ireland or Leicester, brutal as they are, have almost nothing in common with what goes on in the cells of São Paulo, and the techniques of Christian subversion must be correspondingly different. I do not say we must go back to the old ways in which the Christian challenge to the world was restricted to a criticism of the individual's behaviour, usually his sexual behaviour, but we must find our own way of directing the fire of charity upon our western world. It is not techniques that we can learn from the Church in Latin America, but a certain perspective.

Set beside the sufferings and achievement of that Church our own problems shrink to their proper size. Take, for example, the debate about clerical celibacy that seems to be preoccupying the Church in Holland and in the United States. It has to be said that both sides sound altogether too pompous. The defenders of compulsory celibacy are driven to making absurd claims for its value while their opponents sometimes give the impression that marriage would solve the major problems confronting priests.

The essential problem facing the priest is, and has been for years, that of preaching the gospel in a society that has 'co-opted' Christianity, in which the radical and disturbing language of the New Testament has been taken over, devalued and made to serve the rulers of this world. In the recent past the priest could conceal his failure from himself by busying himself with running the elaborate machinery of the institutional Church or else by doing useful social work. Now that the machinery is rusting away and the social work is done better by others, what is there left for him but to face the meaning and the near-impossibility of just being a priest? In Brazil the demands of the gospel are clear and agonizing; here the words we need have been taken from us or we have sold them. This problem confronts all priests, married or single: how to speak of what

transcends this world, this society; how to find words that will not betray us into one of the many kinds of conformity and compromise. Here in Europe too we can borrow language from the Marxist to express our maladjustment to the materialist bourgeois world, but unless we can find the Christian depth within these meanings, they too will, in the end, betray us. This is the real thing we have to face; compared with this the matter of celibacy is a trivial irrelevance.

Take, as another example, the ridiculous fuss that is going on in Birmingham. There, the Catholic Renewal Movement has published a leaflet called *Catholics and Family Planning* which takes account of the well-established fact that a great many Catholics believe they can use contraceptives while remaining in good conscience within the Church and taking part in her sacramental life. The leaflet is written to advise such people about family planning. The Archbishop of Birmingham, when it was shown to him, sensibly remarked that the authors would hardly expect him to agree with them, and that, in view of *Humanae Vitae*, they clearly could not present their view as any kind of official Catholic teaching. There he seems wisely to have let the matter rest. Not so the religious Congregation to which Fr John Challenor belongs. Fr Challenor was an official of the Catholic Renewal Movement and his superiors first compelled him to offer his resignation from his office and membership in the movement and seem now to be trying to persuade him to leave the Congregation itself. The situation is murky and made no clearer by the refusal of the local officials of the Congregation to discuss the matter.

Now it is neither surprising nor regrettable that Catholics should disagree strongly with other Catholics who disagree with the Pope. What is absurd is that a disagreement on this matter, which simply reflects a general public disagreement within the Church, should be thought important enough to call in question a man's priestly ministry. Like the celibacy debate, the quarrel indicates a failure to grasp what the Christian ministry is really about and why it is important. Priests are not ordained to live lives of personal fulfilment fully adjusted to their society, nor are they ordained to be officials in a propaganda machine; if we want to see in clear and dramatic terms what they are ordained for we should look beyond our own suburbs towards Latin America.

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