Comment

There are three reasons for regarding the Advent letter of the Archbishop of Birmingham as the most important pastoral for years, reasons that make it worth commenting on a month later and worth remembering for much longer.

In the first place it brings into the light of the gospel concrete public issues of concern to all the people of the archdiocese, Christian or not. Bishops are not consecrated to run the ecclesiastical machine, to open garden parties, attend ecumenical gatherings or administer confirmation; they may do all these things but what they are consecrated for is to preach the gospel to all men. In this preaching it is proper to expound the central mysteries of the faith; we should expect pastoral letters which make the Trinity, the Resurrection and the future Kingdom a living part of the consciousness of Christians; it is proper also to encourage men and women in the daily struggle to be faithful to the gospel, to remind them always of the compassion of God that comes to us in Christ; but most of all it belongs to this preaching to present the gospel as a challenge to the world. This cannot be done with high-sounding generalities—the world knows well how to deal with these, how to twist them to its own purposes —it can only be done by taking sides, by putting the times under the judgment of God, by saying *this* is what Christianity stands for and *that* is what it stands against. The challenge of the gospel has not been issued unless there is some party-line, some attitude or ideology that is threatened by it.

Now Archbishop Dwyer unquestionably challenges us in this way; it is quite clear what he is against, and what he believes the gospel to be against, as well as what he is for. In the matter of the Rhodesian 'settlement', for example, he is evidently against the view represented by, say, Mr John Biggs-Davison or Major Patrick Wall, and for that of Mr Michael Foot. Over the question of torture he is against Sir Edmund Compton and with Miss Bernadette Devlin. Over the attempted censorship of news from Ireland he is against the government and for the reporters. In the matter of the struggle against Stormont he is against the tactics of the Provisional IRA and for those of Mr John Hume.

Bishops do not lay claim to infallibility; on the other hand they are frequently a little too shy about putting their fallibility to the test. Too often, and especially in pastoral letters, they prefer either to talk at a level of abstraction at which falsification becomes practically impossible, or else to talk about things so uninteresting that no one would bother to challenge them. Archbishop Dwyer takes neither of these escape routes, he makes definite contingent statements which are certainly going to irritate people. He could, of course, be wrong in the stand he has taken. The point is that since he has taken it his Christian opponents can no longer treat their politics in abstraction

from their faith; they now have to try to justify themselves in terms of the gospel.

The second reason is that, in fact, the Archbishop's options are, by and large, the right ones. Lest we should be thought to be admiring him merely for confirming our prejudices, let us note a couple of points of disagreement. His necessarily summary picture of the development of resistance in Northern Ireland is very much the view from Birmingham rather than from Ballymurphy. The idea that a peaceful protest on its way to success was ruined by a bombing campaign is altogether too simple, but we need not quarrel about that. In our view he is a great deal too optimistic about the effectiveness of public opinion in political matters. The Africans of Rhodesia now know (as the Irish have known for a long time) just how much trust they can put in British liberal public opinion, especially when it piously eschews the use of force on the side of justice. But whatever reservations we may have, at least the public opinion he wants is the right one. Catholics who are on the side of decency and justice can now feel less ashamed and more at home in the Church they love and in which they find Christ.

The third and most important reason is the principle that is invoked throughout the letter: Let us call things by their right names. Let us, he says, not call it peace when what we have is merely a 'quiet life' based on indifference to injustice. Not many people these days would think of Belfast as a place for the quiet life, but it may be approaching peace for the first time in half a century. It is right to speak of the IRA as men of violence, but what, then, is the right name for Mrs Indira Gandhi or President Yahya Khan or Mrs Golda Meir—and should we refuse to negotiate with them or even meet them? The Archbishop rightly says of the 'campaign of bombing, burning and shooting . . . We must call things by their proper names. This is not self-defence. It is a crime against humanity.' In November there were 134 explosions in Ireland; in Vietnam there are now more bomb craters than there are individual letters in the last *four years* of *New Blackfriars*. What is the proper name for this? The Archbishop has only made a beginning in calling things by their right names, but it is an excellent beginning. If there is brutality, let us call it that, whether on the streets or in the police station; if there is a sell-out, let us call it that, whether it be of Black Africans or of Protestant Irish; if there is censorship, let us call it that, whether it be by rules for the BBC or by *Imprimatur*.

And what, finally, is the right name for this pastoral letter? Is it a piece of religion or a piece of politics? I think the Archbishop is telling us he can't be bothered with silly questions; he is a Christian and he is bothering about people.

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