

## Comment

When the Marxist Salvador Allende was elected President of Chile, amongst those who refrained from sending any message of congratulation was, unsurprisingly, the President of the United States. Amongst those, however, who did congratulate him was Pope Paul VI. But that was in a far country and besides the man is dead—thanks largely to the same President of the United States. Italy on the other hand is a near country and Sr Berlinguer notoriously alive.

There is something terribly undignified about the Pope's recent outburst against Christians who give aid and comfort to Marxist political movements and parties. It is perfectly plain that while ostensibly engaged in theological reflection he is in fact campaigning in the Italian elections. Now there is not the slightest reason why a Pope should not express his opinions about these elections. If *The Times* and *Pravda* and *The Washington Post* can express their views, why not the Pope? Given the peculiar relationship between Vatican City and Italy it is naturally something that interests him. What is undignified is simply that he should talk as though the fate of the Church hung in this balance, as though the preaching of the gospel depended on the exact terms of coalition of the next Italian government. When F. E. Smith affected to believe something similar about the Welsh Disestablishment Bill, Chesterton, it will be remembered, urged him to "Chuck it, Smith." A perhaps more respectful form of the same advice seems called for in this case.

I offer this hostage to fortune before the elections take place, but no sane observer expects Italy to go Communist overnight; the most that anyone foresees is that the electorate, understandably fed up with a party that seems to spend more time and energy in financial swindles than in trying to govern the country, will give a lot more votes to another party that shows some signs of wanting to clear up the mess. The PCI is, in any case, a very Pickwickian kind of Communist party, not because of its refusal to be dictated to by Russia (that is something we have a right to expect of any socialist movement), but because it is hard to see the Marxism in a party which seems to have abandoned both the public ownership of the means of production and the concept of the workers' state. A quite massive vote for such a party can mean little more than a hesitant step a little nearer socialism but as such it must be welcomed as at least better than a return to the Christian Democrat regime.

It is interesting to contrast the new cold-war attitudes displayed by the Pope on this occasion with what is simultaneously going on in the Church throughout the world. Glancing through current news items what do we find? We find in the Dominican Republic a bishop defending his priests

against the regime's accusation of agitation and incitement of the peasants (for demanding land reforms) while in Colombia an attempt by the local hierarchy to echo the Pope's worries about votes for Marxists is roundly condemned by the clergy (Colombia is the only country in Latin America where the clergy are not mainly foreigners). In the Philippines 12,000 priests and religious have denounced the tortures in use by the U.S.-backed reactionary regime—which, incidentally, shares with India and some other parts of the Free World the view that the proper answer to poverty and starvation is not socialism but wholesale sterilisation. In Paraguay, where the Catholic Church is the only institution opposing the frightful Stroessner, more clergy have been imprisoned or expelled. In Spain too, a bishop's pastoral letter remarks that the police 'have become so hardened that they regard brutality and torture as legitimate'. Even in Argentina the hierarchy are protesting against indiscriminate imprisonment and the torture of prisoners. Meanwhile in Angola, Agostinho Neto has congratulated the Catholic Church on its collaboration in the struggle for national independence and said that he is confident that 'the Church will continue to play its part in the reconstruction of our country' (thereby partially rebutting some rather ungracious suspicions we expressed about the MPLA in *New Blackfriars* recently). In Poland the bishops have spoken out against a new Constitution which seems to write subservience to Russian imperialism into the law of the land.

Throughout the world the Catholic Church, like so many other Christians, is rediscovering the gospel, discovering that it means sharing in the active struggle for justice and liberation and conscious that critical collaboration with 'Marxist' parties and movements is nearly always the obvious means to this end. Part of the inspiration for this renewal came from documents like *Populorum Progressio* and so it is sad that its author in his old age should seem to have lost confidence in what is surely the work of the Holy Spirit in the whole Church.

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