

The Roman Catholic Church has had a break-down.

This may seem a particularly inauspicious way of entering a month that is again to be marked by the unity octave. It is of course a manner of speaking, or rather regarding; but it is at least arguable that what we need is such containing images, interpretative categories, rather than a closer journalistic comment on events. 'Facts' after all are scarcely lacking: defections, conflicts, rumours. It is precisely interpretations we need, ways of looking that articulate and shape ways of learning to live creatively with all these disturbances.

And this particular image of a break-down succinctly carries with it the suggestion at once of the pressure of new experience, of the temporary and reciprocal dislocation of parts that rightfully belong together, and of the life-instinct for a new integration round a newly related and relating centre. The ecumenical significance of which appears once we have grasped that re-integration into the one visible Church of Christ must come by way of a change in the existing form of the one visible Church—and that precisely under the stress not of ecclesiastical but of human pressures. True ecumenism cannot be an enlarged ghetto, but a new assumption of humanity.

It may then be opportune to ponder a little more attentively the virtualities of change and reconstitution in the Church, particularly in regard to authority.

We may now take it for granted that it is only one of the applications of the new ecclesiology that the Church must constantly learn from the world as well as renounce it, because it is related to it by way of assimilation as well as of discrimination and critique (cf. e.g. *Gaudium et Spes*, 44). The theological reason for this is that there is only destiny for mankind and each man, a supernatural one, not two, a supernatural and a natural; and that therefore a real life-choice is either for or against this single destiny, just as every life activity is expressive of or conducive towards such a critical option, and, if for, anonymously or explicitly Christian. It follows that every humble assimilation of what is true and noble and good in the world is an occasion of a new self-awareness and self-realization on the Church's part. Such renewals will necessarily modify past acts of self-awareness and self-realization, though, to the extent that they are true, will be found to recapture and reactualize the essential of the past, producing continuity out of apparent discontinuity.

Thus in the particular matter of authority, to acknowledge the

increased educational maturity, mutual consultation and co-operation of ever larger numbers of people today is simultaneously to make some sort of statement about the Church, albeit implicitly. In this light, to take a particular if especially dramatic example, we might do best to view the possible mistake of the Church in the matter of birth-control—rather made light of by the majority of theologians and made so much of by the minority—as but the evidence of a failure of connexion; and to see the crisis of doubt as one of the last throes of a change from one set of relationships between Pope, bishops and people to another set.

What I am arguing therefore is not only that there is currently a change in our relationships with authority—this is a common-place—but that this is another chance of a new self-realization on the Church's part that is homogeneous with the past. For there is a *principle* that informs both the system of relationships we have grown up with, and also the system we are now feeling our way into. This one principle is at present in the process of re-application in function of the changed sociological realities. Now I find this principle nowhere more succinctly and evangelically stated than in St Thomas Aquinas. In his discussion of the question whether a man can be said to teach and to be called a master, or whether this belongs to God alone, he puts to himself an objection taken from St Matthew 23 : 8: 'But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher [and you are all brethren]'. To which he replies: 'We are forbidden to call a man master in the sense of attributing to him ultimate teaching authority (*principalitatem magisterii*), which belongs to God alone, as if to repose confidence in the wisdom of man, where we ought rather, on the basis of what we have heard from men, to consult the truth of God, which speaks within us through our participation in its likeness and by means of which we can judge all things' (*De Veritate*, Q. XI, de Magistro, Art. 1, ad 1 um).

We have, however, at this point to try to be very precise. On the one hand, we can in virtue of the sociological changes say that we are, to borrow a locution from F. R. Leavis, moving from a situation in which a man says 'This is so' to one in which he says 'This is so, isn't it?' Which seems to render a great deal of what St John wrote in his first epistle: 'But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and know that no lie is of the truth' (1 John 2 : 20-21). This is the part of assimilation allowed by principle.

On the other hand, 'This is so, isn't it' cannot mean that all truths are up for haggling. A Catholic Christian must believe that the words 'He who hears you, hears me' (Luke 10 : 16) carry with them the possibility of ever-renewed access to the personality of the founder through a complex of words, prayers, gestures, behaviour and attitudes transmitted through others; and that some of these others

are distinguished from the rest by having their very role specified in terms of this task of transmission of the minimal essentials of the faith. This is the part of critique.

The real difficulty and point of growth is in the manner of combining these two truths: the observable sociological fact become norm, and the received hierarchical principle of differentiated and privileged roles. The 'This is so, isn't it' indicates merely a new type of human relationship; it cannot of itself entail a decisive change of roles. Yet the real question is to what extent the human change can in concrete fact modify the role and institution.

There does therefore seem to be an area of play between the new human realities and the received roles, between the principle of assimilation and the principle of critique. Or perhaps it should be more honestly stated as an area of conflict: one of those occasions where growth inevitably proceeds not smoothly but through opposition, rupture and darkness—and, by the same token, trust. And it may well prove to be the chief function of the received role of the papacy to continue to witness to the necessity of a vital centre of reference for any sort of connexion, under pain of dissociation.

The image of the break-down has then a creative sense. And we would do well to recall what the psychologists tell us: integration should be seen as the toleration of opposites. This does not seem to be an inapt comment on the *catholic* Church in its earthly condition.

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