

It is clear that many Christians, keenly loyal to the Church and equally keenly aware of the needs of the Kingdom and the People of God, are growing impatient at the slow progress of the fulfilment of the aims of Pope John and Vatican II. It is necessary for such people to be aware of the immense difficulties that lie in the path of the implementation of the decrees of the Council. Too many have regarded the 'renewal' as merely a matter of a change in rubrics or at best a change in method; vernacular to replace Latin in divine worship, the setting up of 'senates' of laity, clergy, bishops, the opening of dialogue with 'separated brethren'. All such changes are, however, intended to be the outward manifestation of a complete change of attitude, a movement away from the centralisation of authority and the executive in Rome, which was brought about by the impact of the Reformation.

The habit formed over the centuries of looking to Rome in every emergency, for direction in the smallest local difficulty, cannot be changed in a year or two, not perhaps in twenty years. It is not simply a domestic habit formed by Roman Catholics in the administration of their own affairs. The trend in the whole modern social structure is towards centralisation, towards putting more and more power in the hands of the few, of establishing larger and larger organisations. This trend is to be seen not only in the Communist ideal of some sort of world socialism or in the more vapid scheme for a World State, but also in the movements towards common markets in Europe and America, which are supported by political ideals as well as economic. The extreme facility of world-wide communication has made this inevitable.

It seems, however, that in this tide which sweeps us on towards more and more compact centralisation, we have not as yet come to terms with autonomy in local affairs, which is urgently necessary in order to achieve a workable social balance. We have so far failed to work out in any practical way the social structure in which the smaller groupings can exercise the maximum of autonomy while firmly linked to the larger combinations of power and authority. A great deal of publicity is given to the formation of local government at election time, and intoxicated jubilation infects the Conservatives when they obtain a sweeping victory in the election of the Greater London Council. But in fact local government holds little signi-

ficance in the eyes of the majority; few people bother to go to the polls, knowing that as likely as not there will be an equally amazing victory for Labour next year. It is difficult to find suitable candidates for the posts, apparently because most people feel that everything is ultimately arranged and decided in the House of Commons. A number of people fight strenuously for autonomy in Wales or Scotland, and this struggle for local autonomy and responsibility runs right down through society to parents in regard to their own houses and families. But insufficient thought has been given to working out in practice how this can be established as a 'both . . . and' rather than an 'either . . . or.'

With Vatican II the Church has set her face resolutely in the direction of responsible autonomy in the local community. And if she can realise this ideal in the life of the ordinary Catholic, she will be making a most important contribution to the establishment of responsible units within larger associations in the whole of society. But, as we have said, the difficulties are considerable not only because of the social atmosphere in which the Church exists, but also on account of this long history of centralisation in her own domestic affairs. During World War II communication between Rome and Catholics throughout the world became necessarily attenuated, and a certain modicum of autonomy emerged in the various countries, where the local hierarchy was constrained to make decisions that would otherwise have been made in Rome. It may have been during that period that the seed of Vatican II was sown; but when communications were restored the seed was quickly buried to incubate for another decade and a half, while we reverted to post-Reformation structures. And although the Fathers of the Council have cultivated this growing seed and assisted it to thrust out its green shoots, it is probable that many of them scarcely realised what was involved. For older men it is difficult to discard a habit of mind which has been theirs since childhood, part of the atmosphere that has been a source of life for them for half a century and more.

A striking example of the instinctive reaction of this necessarily centralised habit of mind occurred in the recent turmoil surrounding this journal itself, *New Blackfriars*. Had the principles of Vatican II already burgeoned into full flower, the process of dealing with a doubtful Comment from the Editor would have been for the central authority to see that the situation was being dealt with locally. But we have not yet reached this stage in the post-conciliar development so that it was inevitable that headquarters should react immediately and ask that the Editor be removed. It is probable that the local situation was not fully realised; the weakness of post-Reformation centralisation lies in physical incapacity to sense fully the total situation in a far off country, having to rely on a single printed passage, which has appeared in a context of many other books and articles published over the years, having to rely also on one or two

reports which arrive, perhaps in some haste, from the country in question. It is possible too that national reaction to the sudden removal of an Editor in the tense local atmosphere could not be assessed. And it is clear that whatever word was used in stating – as reported in the national press – that the local authorities had been ‘consulted’, this word implied only the pre-conciliar methods which would be more properly translated into modern English by ‘inform’.

In other words, given the actual state of growth of this delicate plant of local autonomy and responsibility, this event, given all the circumstances, was almost inevitable. We must not be impatient, thinking that the millennium is just round the corner. We must not regard Vatican II as a thinly disguised Yahweh, saying in this new beginning of ours: ‘Let there be local responsibility’ and there was local responsibility. Inevitably a generation or two must pass before the plant can flower. The youngsters who are in their teens today may begin to breathe this new atmosphere and so grow up with a new outlook and thus be able to put into practice the ideals of *aggiornamento* without acrimony or impatience. The immense proliferation of Commissions and Committees may be noticed as the senates of local laity, clergy and bishops are set up. The Low Week meeting of the English bishops quite properly inaugurated new committees to consider social services, education and the like, instead of issuing edicts about the Pill or the War in Vietnam. In order that the new principles should take firm root and not be swept away by passing enthusiasm for changes in rubrics or methods, such local councils are absolutely necessary. It is part of the growth. And it takes time. The only danger lies in regarding these Committees and Commissions as achievements in themselves, as though something has already been done. We are only in the process of setting up the plant (to change the sense of the word and the metaphor), which will remain a dead monument to Vatican II, unless it begins to produce the goods for export. All those who are keen to see the realisation of the ideals of the Council, and who are working at the local level, instead of being impatient with the remnants of the post-Reformation mentality or with vast multiplication of committees, must keep their interest and determination alive. They must constantly prod these committees, keeping them awake and active and seeing to it that their suggestions are carried out. Responsibility for the realisation of local autonomy lies with the locals, not with the Romans.

C.P.

NOTE: Walter Stein’s third article on Raymond Williams’s *Modern Tragedy*, which was to have appeared in the April issue of *New Blackfriars*, will now be published in the June/July issue of *Slant*. An explanation of its withdrawal from these pages appears below (pp. 493-494).