

Has the Church Opted for Revolution?¹

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by José de Broucker

Has the Roman Catholic Church now come round in favour of revolution? It is in South America that the question arises above all. The multiplication of facts and declarations which provoke the question often incline one to give an affirmative answer. In order to see what's what, it might be useful to review certain recent events that have been particularly noteworthy.

Most recent declarations rest on paragraphs 30 and 31 of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*: '30. There are certainly situations in which injustice cries to heaven. When entire populations, deprived of the necessities of life, live in a dependence that prevents them from exercising any initiative or responsibility, or from making any cultural advance or taking any part in social or political life, the temptation to remove such insults to human dignity by violence is great. 31. We know, however, that revolutionary insurrection—except in the case of manifest and prolonged tyranny that attacks fundamental rights of the person and endangers the common good of the country—engenders new injustices, brings in new imbalances, and involves new ruins. A real evil is not to be combated by a greater misery.'

These two paragraphs have in general been received as a faithful expression of the traditional thought of the Church. The new factor here is therefore not at the level of thought or of expression; it lies in the welcome it has received and in the way in which it has been interpreted at the hands of a Christian public that is as inclined to justify 'revolutionary insurrection' now as it was formerly to discourage or condemn it. The Pope's famous parenthesis 'except in the case of . . . etc.' is today read in quite a new light.

During the summer of 1967, sixteen, then seventeen, then eighteen, bishops, half of them from Brazil, addressed a *Message to the Third World*² in order to render the teaching of *Populorum Progressio* more explicit. This document soon gained a wide audience. In January 1968, three hundred priests from the Argentine declared their support and asked their own bishops to declare their adherence publicly.

'All revolutions are not necessarily good,' went the Message. 'But history shows that certain revolutions were necessary and that they freed themselves of their momentary antagonism to religion, yielding good fruits.' Far from shunning revolutions or from disengaging themselves from

¹This is a translation of an article that first appeared in *Croissance des Jeunes Nations*, April, 1968. We are indebted to the editor for permission to publish it here in English.

²An English translation was published in *New Blackfriars*, December 1967.

them *'Christians and their pastors must know how to recognize the hand of Almighty God in events which from time to time put down the mighty from their seats and raise the humble, send away the rich empty-handed and fill the starving with good things.'*

The phrase in the Message that will no doubt have the greatest repercussion is the one which invokes the right of legitimate self-defence on the part of the poor. *'Money has insidiously been waging a subversive war throughout the world for some time, massacring entire peoples. It is time that the poor peoples, supported and guided by their legitimate governments, defended their right to life.'*

In many countries, however, and above all in Latin America, 'legitimate governments' are seen to be accomplices of the 'subversive war of money'. The right of legitimate defence is therefore often invoked against them also.

In October 1967, three hundred Brazilian priests published a long document which opens with a description of the country. Brazil is a 'murdered people', a 'people robbed'. If murder is a crime, *'is it not also a crime to allow millions of people to perish?'*

At the same time, again in Brazil, Dom Helder Camara also spoke: *'Woe betide Christianity if the people as they gradually open their eyes should come to think that the Church is cringing weakly before the powerful and has given up the courageous defence of the humble.'* The Bishop of Crateus, Dom Frago, rendered public homage to the Cuban revolution: *'I support the courage of little Cuba, and I beg God to give me the courage to imitate it and to arouse the conscience of my people to imitate it.'* The Bishop of Volta Redonda, Dom Valdir, protected a French deacon prosecuted for having distributed 'subversive' leaflets. The conference of bishops proclaimed its 'solidarity' with *'bishops, priests and lay-people when their authentically apostolic activities are misunderstood or unjustly treated'*.

The death of the Che Guevara in the Bolivian maquis crystallized attention and opinion. Those who called him a hero found more agreement than those who called him a bandit. The great Brazilian Catholic author, Alceu Amoroso Lima, paid homage to him along with Camilo Torres, the Colombian priest who had asked to be reduced to the lay state in order to take part in the revolutionary struggle in the Colombian maquis. It is sufficient to have read the January number of the review *Vispera*, edited at Montevideo by the Latin-American student branch of *Pax Romana*, to realize how sympathetic an active number of young Catholics is to the problems of violence and guerilla warfare.

More facts. In a long pastoral written with the help of his clergy, the Archbishop of Montevideo, Mgr Parteli, echoed the Message to the Third World: *'History is shot through with revolutions, some are violent, others are not. In every case, innumerable Christians took part.'*

At Tucuman, in Argentina, a priest took part in a protest demonstration against the dismissal of workers. His superior defended him

against the criticism of the civil authorities: '*Many people do not understand the dynamism of charity when it becomes revolution*', he stated.

At Santo André, in Brazil, the bishop, Dom Jorge, declared on television: '*Armed revolution by the people is justified when oppression rules and famine wages obtain.*'

In Guatemala, three American priests and a nun sided with the guerilla fighters (without taking up arms) and explained their actions at length.

In Havana, in the course of the international conference of intellectuals, four priests, amongst whom figured a French Dominican Père Blanquart, committed themselves publicly '*to the revolutionary anti-imperialist struggle, to the very last consequences, in order to obtain the complete liberation of man and of all men*'.

A pope, two dozen bishops, hundreds of priests, thousands of copies of reviews. . . . Does the rapid inventory of commitments which we have indicated—and which are far from duplicating each other—amount to a veritable ecclesial *consensus*?

The widest episcopal *consensus* to have expressed itself to our knowledge these past few years is that of the Brazilian bishops in its declaration of 1st December, 1967.³ This is a courageous statement in the support it gives Christians who have dedicated themselves for apostolic reasons to work alongside the poor. It is balanced in its treatment of the justification of insurrection: '*We do oppose truly subversive movements, that is to say, movements designed to disturb the social order and to exploit the ensuing anarchy for factional advantage. But in the same way the abuse of economic and political power for one's own particular interest is also a subversion of the social order.*'

We shall have to await September next to know the position of the whole body of South American bishops assembled in 'synod' at Medellín (Columbia). But already Mgr McGrath, who is vice-president and as such acting secretary of the C.E.L.A.M., recently had the opportunity to express an opinion that no doubt reflects general opinion pretty well.

'What is the position of Catholic leaders of Latin America on revolution? Very many think that it is possible to bring about a rapid change without violence; but for some violence is the only way. For them violence is no longer an ethical but a tactical problem.'

For his own part Mgr McGrath knows no country in South America where violence can be said to be justified. 'But I do not know the whole of Latin America.' And he adds: '*The idealism and impatience of some of our finest Christian leaders, especially the younger, make them susceptible to the emotional appeal of the "heroes" of guerilla warfare. But very few of them are trained to analyse the ethical, or even the tactical, problems implicit in the way of violence.*'

The hundred and two Maryknoll missionaries from Guatemala would seem to mean much the same thing when they reproach their

³An English translation was published in *New Blackfriars*, April, 1968.

four brethren and sister who have opted for the revolution with being 'naive', and with 'showing a complete ignorance of the realities of this country'.

'We already have a theology of the revolution', Mgr McGrath has said again, 'thanks to the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, understanding by revolution the search for rapid and radical changes in economic and social structures. But what we need now is a theology of violence which would discriminate between what is legitimate and what is not.'

It is towards this 'theology of violence' that a large number of conferences, seminars, publications are working towards now. But what is already clear is that such a theology will always have to allow for appreciations of the immediate situation, which will be matters of political judgement. Only a political analysis can determine if and when 'the case of manifest and prolonged tyranny' of which *Populorum Progressio* speaks actually obtains. On this point, which is critical, laymen cannot pass back to the teaching authorities of the Church the heavy responsibilities that fall on them as their own.

'Most of all, we must let our action be sustained by the deep insights and hopes of our Christian faith. There are, I know, people who dispute this and ask: What has all this to do with religion? Ought we not to leave to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's? Ought Christians really to be engaged in political action?

I believe that because God made us body and soul, there is really no escape from involvement in politics. On every possible occasion He told us to see man as he is. We are not agnostics: ours is a very 'unspiritual' religion. We are constantly reminded of the need to feed the hungry, and shelter those who are without homes and give help to those in danger of death. Certainly, God would never have taken to Himself a human body if He had not cared for it. I am certain He did not build the human body to be starved.

Yet God did leave us an enormous leeway of intelligence and free will. He neither loaded the dice nor fixed the cards. He left the decisions about how to live to us. Because of this freedom, we have the incredible dignity and the appalling risk of being creators of our own society. We cannot create without being involved fully in our human world and its politics and its politics and its daily bread. As Christian citizens, our obligations are inescapable—more so now than ever before. As creators of the human order, Christians today face a challenge which no previous generation of Christians has ever faced.'

—from *Poverty and Politics*, by Barbara Ward, the complete and unabridged text of her lecture, published by and obtainable from the Catholic Institute for International Relations, 38 King Street, London, W.C.2 (price 2 shillings).