THE SIGN OF HOPE

By FRANCIS O'CONNOR

THE FATHERS OF the Second Vatican Council in the dogmatic Constitution on the Church describe the new People of God who form the Church in language that rings with typical biblical optimism. This new People is 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people... You in time past were not a people, but are now the People of God'.[1] Members of this new People who are the Church are dignified with a participation in God's own life. They have access to the Father through Christ in the one Spirit.[2] The Spirit lives within them as in a temple and he guides the Church into the fulness of truth. Through the gospel the Spirit brings growth to the Church, perpetually renews her and guides her toward perfect union with Christ. Her future is manifestly bright and certain: she will one day appear in glory with the Lord.[3] With all her strength the Church hopes for this future which is her promise. Borrowing heavily from the bible, the Council Fathers saw the Church's life as a divinely directed thrust through present time into another glorious age. Not only does the Church herself expectantly look forward to this future, but as a kind of sacrament she is a sign of hope for all men, for it is her urgent task to bring all men to full union with Christ.

Even today an inner dynamism, which is the Spirit dwelling within her since pentecost and building her up as the Body of Christ, is at work within the Church. He draws her together from the far corners of the earth and creates a living unity from the many disparate peoples who form her: 'For all the faithful scattered throughout the world are in communion with each other in the holy Spirit'.[4]

Though filled with hope and meant to be a sign of hope for all men, the Church today is for many rather a sign of despair. They feel that the implementing of the spirit of renewal, called for by the Second Vatican Council, has been proceeding at a snail's pace.

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1 Cf 1 Pet 2, 9–10; *Lumen Gentium*, 9.
2 Cf Eph 2, 18.
3 Cf Col 3, 1–4.
4 *Lumen Gentium*, 13.

Others squirm uncomfortably under what appear as unwarranted and uncalled-for restrictions on responsible liturgical experimentation. Institutionalism run rampant seems to have crushed individual initiative, or has made us forget the significance and importance of the individual person. The springs of love have gone dry in the Church. There is a segment of the Catholic press which points to a loss of confidence by some Catholics in the leadership of the episcopacy in some quarters. Too late and too weak a voice, they say, has been heard from the hierarchy in opposition to institutionalized racism or the new poverty in our day. Or, worse still, many Church leaders have stood altogether silent at times when the abuses of tyranny called for their firm and vocal opposition.

Camps called 'conservative' and 'liberal' have formed since Vatican II, and positions have hardened with time. Many on both sides of what is known as the 'generation gap' in the Church see no realistic possibility of building a bridge to close the gap. Conservative and liberal, young and old – the Church (and the world too) are made up of 'us' and 'them', and never the twain shall meet.

The Church is likewise called a symbol of irrelevance: many christians feel that she makes no difference in the modern world. Her roots and her attitude are sunk so deeply into past ages that her outlook towards today is one of fear. She is likened to the ostrich whose head is buried in the sand. To many observers it is not so much that the modern world opposes the Church; rather, the world simply does not care about the Church. She is ignored. Open hostility has been replaced by open indifference. The Church is being passed over by the world of today. To those whose vision of the Church is thus directed, the Church is a sign of irrelevance: she does not seem to matter any longer.

As grim as are the remarks like these which one hears about the Church today, the educated and interested christian would hesitate to say that the observations are all completely false, any more than one could say that Martin Luther, for example, was completely falsifying charges against the Church in his own day. It would appear naive to shut our eyes and close our ears, or to hope and pray that what is unpleasant and embarrassing in the Church today will simply disappear or somehow go away otherwise. Nor will imposed censorship smooth the ruffled waters; the day for well-kept secrets is just about over. Where there is truth, it cannot be muffled for long. It is both absurd and wrong to pretend that there do not exist in today's Church serious problems which are crying for cor-

rection. To deny their existence today and in past ages is to betray a deep phenomenological and historical ignorance. The question is not whether or not the modern Church is experiencing a kind of crisis today, but rather how is the committed christian to react to this crisis.

There are several possibilities. One could accept the scattered evidence for the crisis when it is presented to him, and still refuse to draw the conclusion pointed to by the evidence, namely that the Church is in crisis. This reaction is comparable to that of the terminal cancer patient who is given competent medical advice on what the x-rays show. He accepts the explanation and then firmly rejects the reasonable conclusion given him by the doctors, namely that his condition is critical. Physicians tell us that this kind of reaction is not uncommon, though it is highly unrealistic and unreasoning because it cannot face up to the truth. The christian who cannot or will not see a crisis in the Church cannot or will not face the truth.

Another type of reaction to the existence of a crisis in the Church is to opt out. Discouragement with things as they are can be so overwhelming that one might throw up one's hand and call the situation hopeless. The next step could be to leave the Church. Within recent years there have been notable examples of frustrated men whose disappointment with the present institutional Church has been so deep as to lead them out of it. They saw the official Church as a cruel and harsh mother, disfigured by evil, devoid of love, an obstacle to a truly christian life. Once again, who could say that their description was without any foundation in fact and entirely false? The only way of coping with the scandal was seen by them to lie in letting the scandal be and simply separating one's self from it and the Church in which the scandal existed.

A third reaction to the present Church is to accept its reality. What is this reality? What does the Church look like today? Her mystery lies in her foundation, 'for the Lord Jesus inaugurated her by preaching the good news, that is, the coming of God's kingdom', a kingdom which has its initial budding forth in the Church and which will be fully itself at the end of time.[1] But, like the biblical field filled with wheat and weeds, the Church is a mixture of incompatible elements: 'The Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy, and always in need of being

[1] *Lumen Gentium*, 5.

purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal'.[1] The paradox of the Church is that she appears to be at the same time a mixture of opposites. She is both holy and loving, but she is also sinful, and she can be and has been harsh.

The Church is holy and sinful. Her children give testimony of her holiness. One of them, an italian peasant of simple faith, became bishop of Rome and Pope John XXIII, a man who, we are told, actually liked the blessed Virgin Mary and the rosary. He was inspired by the Spirit to convoke a Council which set the modern Church on its way to the existing period of renewal in which we are now living. The holiness of the Church is also clearly seen beautifully manifested in the ordinary man and woman, happily married, carefully raising a young family; or in the couple, unhappily married, who persevere together, making it work out for the sake of their young children. Who can count the hidden corners in the Church where holy people quietly suffer and grow? A brilliant cardinal, spiritual ruler of a great metropolis, announces his resignation from his high post in order to serve as an unpretentious missionary among african lepers. These are signs of the Church's holiness.

The Church, however, is full of sinners. She stands in constant need of being purified. Some of her people have helped to create ghettoes where their fellow men live crowded together robbed of their human dignity. Some of her people spend their lives primarily straining for financial security, forgetting Christ's admonition: 'Does not your heavenly Father know that you have need of all these things?'[2] While reminding men of our other-worldly vocation, the Church appears at times to be giving an example of excessive concern for material goods.

The Church is both loving and harsh. Her spokesmen have at times been eloquent in their pleas for world peace and their concern for suffering members. She acts the loving mother in her institutions which house the poor, the sick, the orphaned. Her doors remain open in welcome to those who choose to leave her. But she can also be a harsh mother through her spokesmen, who have at times stifled initiative and stopped healthy probing by her creative thinkers. She can make unreasonable demands on her servants' physical energies. She can point out the need for constant renewal, and at the same time, through individual churchmen, crush attempts at renewal.

[1] *Lumen Gentium*, 8. [2] Mt 6, 32.

Holy and sinful, loving and harsh – the Church is a paradox, a combination of the divine and the human, a mixture of opposites, a pluralism in its most striking form. This is the Church as she is here and now. To acknowledge her as she is, and not as she might now possibly be in an ideal order, is to be realistic. But this acceptance of the Church as she is here and now does not connote sheer passivity in the face of a stale *status quo*. Otherwise what would be the meaning of the Church's mission in the world? This acceptance nevertheless does imply perseverance despite dissatisfaction; it calls for loyalty despite impatience; it asks for hope when there seems to be little reason for hope.

St Paul, in a lovely blessing which summarizes the main themes of the doctrinal section of his letter to the romans, asks of the Father for the early roman christians: 'May the God of hope bring you such peace and joy in your faith that the power of the holy Spirit will remove all bounds to hope'.[1] This God of hope invoked here by Paul is he who inspires christianity with the promise and hope of resurrection through the resurrection of Christ. He is the God who has contradicted suffering and death through Christ's overcoming suffering and death. He is the God who stirs christianity to move ahead, to transform the present moment of history.[2] Hope in God for the christian means conflict with the suffering and death witnessed by the christian in the world. It signifies a certain dynamic impatience with present reality, with things as they are. The man of hope sees the present moment as unfulfilled. It is a thing of promise pointing to the future. The present world is transformable. Far from being a rigidly closed system of unchangeable laws, the world is flexible, filled with innumerable possibilities. It is a thing unfinished, but in the process of completion. It is waiting for man's touch to bring it to gradual fulfilment.

The christian man of hope sees himself as an agent of this transformation of history. Time for him carries more than the threat of death; it is not a mere menace. He sees time as that ground in which all earthly growth and life take their form. He is the more christian as he uses time to build the kingdom of God on earth and to spread the reign of Christ: 'They show themselves to be children of the promise, if, strong in faith and in hope, they make the most of the present time... and with patience await the glory that

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[1] Rom 15, 13.

[2] Cf Moltmann, J., *The Theology of Hope* (New York, 1967), pp 21ff.

is to come'.[1] In 'making the most of the present time', the christian sees in the present moment the place where he hears the voice of God speaking to him: through persons and situations which he meets concretely in his ordinary living. He sees and hears God in the hurly-burly of the here and now. He hears an invitation in the risks and surprises which he faces in the real world of the present. Moment by moment, time takes on a rich meaning and its texture assumes a pattern directed to the glory of a promised future. For the christian filled with hope, time therefore is not hostile but friendly. It resounds with the Lord's familiar words: 'It is I indeed'.[2]

The recognition of the presence of God in time is a gradual process in the life of the christian. It is a sensitivity which deepens with faith and hope. It is the result of quiet prayer in which one tries to see reality as it is. One is tempted to think that the mother of the Lord herself grew in recognizing God's presence only throughout a period of time. The words of her response to God's messenger as given in the lucan account of the annunciation story were: 'Let it be done to me as you have said'.[3] The evangelist depicts Mary here speaking perhaps the most exquisite words of selfless abandonment ever uttered by a human being. There is no doubt that the gospel writer intends to depict Mary offering her young life completely to the Father and whatever destiny he had in mind for her: 'Let it happen to me as you have said'. It is likely however that she did not then know what the *it* was. She learned what it was in the events of the years that followed – in the birth of Jesus, in watching him grow to manhood, in her experience of the crucifixion, in the joy of his resurrection, in her work as part of the early Church. According to Luke's story, Mary answered, 'Let it happen', as a young girl. She let it happen gradually in time, in persons and events where she sensed the presence of God. And in time she experienced the rich significance of her initial response in the annunciation, as she later fully and actively responded to God in event after event during her Son's earthly existence. This was her way – somewhat as it was to later become a typically christian way – of making 'the most of the present time'.

How is the man of hope – the committed christian – to make the most of his time? How is he to make his response to God in the world? Is it by merely sitting back cosily, letting God take care of the Church and the world? The Council Fathers of Vatican II

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[1] *Lumen Gentium*, 35. [2] Lk 24, 39. [3] Lk 2, 38.

thought not. The role of the christian who is filled with hope is to labour vigorously 'so that men may become capable of constructing the temporal order rightly and directing it to God through Christ'.[1] The Fathers possessed a healthy mixture of the so-called incarnational and eschatological views of the world. They cite the book of Genesis: 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good'.[2] They look upon the things of the temporal order such as culture, economic affairs, the arts and professions, and note that all of these elements have an instrinsic value implanted in them by God. But beyond this intrinsic natural value which it possesses in itself, the temporal sphere is enhanced by a relationship to Christ as its head. St Paul's majestic poem in his letter to the colossians is a hymn eulogizing the unity that exists in the universe through Christ who is 'the first born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth. . . all things were created through him and for him. . . God wanted. . . all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and everything on earth'.[3] A reading of the whole of this poem reveals the dynamic unity that exists throughout the universe in the cosmic process by which all things alike are restored through Christ in submission to the Father.

This restoration of all things in Christ to the Father is the task of the christian. This is the direction he is asked to give to history; it is the transformation he is to offer to the world. The invitation to the task is woven throughout the documents of Vatican II. The laity are asked to let the power of the gospel shine forth in their daily social and family life.[4] They are not to hide their hope 'in the depths of their hearts, but even in the framework of secular life let them express it'.[5] The christian, through his earthly life and work in the spirit of the gospel, helps in the universal task of establishing the kingdom. This is the Church's – and the christian's – task on earth. The task is being accomplished through the Church of today as 'the sacrament of salvation, simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God's love for man'.[6] For the christian strong in hope, the re-establishment of all things in Christ is guaranteed because 'the Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the longing of history and of civilization, the centre of the human race, the joy of every heart, and the answer to all its

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1 *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 7. 2 *Ibid.*, Gen 1, 31. 3 Col 1, 15–20.
4 *Lumen Gentium*, 35. 5 *Ibid.* 6 *Gaudium et Spes*, 45.

yearnings'.[1] The Church of today, guided by his Spirit, journeys toward the consummation of human history when all things will be re-established in Christ, both those in the heavens and those on the earth.[2]

It would be a tragic mistake to be deluded into believing that the sublime task of redirecting history to its centre in Christ were the task of some ideal Church, and not the Church we know today. The Church that is now journeying toward the consummation of human history and the restoration of all things in Christ is the Church that we know – the paradoxical mixture of human and divine, strained by bickering between 'us' and 'them', suffering in places from a timid hierarchy, from men who are very human and therefore very weak. She is the Church who at times has proved a harsh mother to some of her children, a mother who is disfigured here or there by evil. It may be true that in certain circles she is not opposed any longer: she is rather ignored, she makes no difference. She is abandoned by some of her most brilliant children who have been so disappointed in the slowness – or the rapidity – of her renewal that they opted out. This Church of the here and now is the sign of hope to all men, because it is she who is straining and hoping with all her strength toward the promised day when she will appear in glory with the Lord. There is no need to search for some platonic form, but merely to reach out and touch the flesh and blood christians around us, making their way as God's new pilgrim people to the promised land of a future glory. They are the Church in the world whose future is so certain because it is centred in Christ, the head of all creation.

The features of this Church of the present and the future – both are one and the same – may become clearer now through a brief reflection on the Church in the past. In the enigmatic account of Jesus' ascension in the book of Acts 1, 1–11, his friends, after having experienced his presence in a special way for a while, were snapped back into the routine of every-day reality, while Jesus himself remained glorified with the Father. Soon the early Church would begin her mission under the Spirit's power, as Jesus had promised. Growth followed upon growth in a great and dynamic process. The apostles would give the Good News first to their fellow jews and then to others called gentiles. First the message of salvation was spread in a concrete semitic manner and then it would enter the

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[1] *Gaudium et Spes*, 45. [2] Eph 1, 10.

greek world and take on an abstract greek flavour. The early christian missionaries swept out over large areas and through them the Spirit was given to people after people. Thus it was that christian love took root. But the growth brought growing pains too. The question, for example, of making all christians obey jewish customs and laws caused tension and finally open hostility; and some opted out of the Church as a result. Growth means pain because it usually implies the giving up of something we are accustomed to and love. The history of the Church since the early days in a story of growth and growing pains, but also of life.

Today's moment of that history is no exception to the rest of the pattern. Through the gospel the Spirit brings growth to the Church and constantly (though slowly, at times) renews her.

The christian is full of hope – and the Church is a sign of hope – not just because he knows blindly that everything will turn out well in the end. (It will, because the end is really Christ and everything will be returned in him.) But in the meantime the new People of God of today face up to, but do not rest smugly with, their problems. Together they ponder the reasons why the Church is for some a sign of despair or irrelevance, rather than of hope. Why, they ask, do some of our people leave us? They search within themselves to see whether renewal is too slow. They are healthily embarrassed by the human weakness of some of their members, or by the ill-timed silence and ill-advised decisions by some of their leaders. Smugness cannot be the hallmark of a pilgrim people such as the Church. She faces the crises of her present history, and knows that if she reads the gospel of Christ in his Spirit, she remains faithful to herself and grows to completion. Her future then remains bright: 'So the body grows until it has built itself up, in love'.[1]

[1] Eph 4, 16.