

GOVERNMENT IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

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THE DOCUMENTS published by the Council are marked by a deep vision of unity. The Church is not considered in isolation, but in its union with the whole human race. Catholics are no longer seen as segregated from other christians, but as one with them, in spite of real differences. The pope and the bishops form one organic body in the episcopal college.

The same vision of unity is extended to religious institutes. In them the head and the members form one body, and the healthy life of the community depends on a balanced collaboration. This is why the problems of government and obedience cannot be separated: they are two aspects of the functioning of the same organic body. If either of them is infected, the whole body suffers. However, it is still practical to consider separately the problems attaching to government and obedience. Our concern here is with government, according to the mind of the Council as expressed in the Decree on the renewal and adaptation to modern times of the religious life; even though for the sake of balance, we shall have to refer occasionally to the question of obedience. The Council provides us with a new vision of government in religious life. Not, of course, in the sense that it changes the substance of the tradition inherited from such masters as St Benedict, St Francis of Assisi or St Ignatius of Loyola, but that it gives us a better understanding of God's plan for men and women called to live under the guidance of a religious superior.

The new vision which the Council's teaching provides is the unity of a religious body or community, and the understanding that a closer relationship between the head and the members, far from destroying the authority of the head, actually strengthens it.

In order to give an account of this new insight which the Council affords, and to explain its content, it will be necessary to say something of the antecedents of the Council: how the work of theologians laid the foundation for a better understanding of the life of a religious community. Then we shall examine those documents of the

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Council which treat of government in the Church in general, and of the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, in particular, which deals with government in religious life. This will be followed by an attempt at a short theological synthesis, in which the harmony and the balance of the Council's doctrine can be better seen: and by way of conclusion, we shall offer some practical applications and considerations.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

One of the signs of the divine origin of the Church is the harmonious balance in her life of seemingly contradicting qualities, such as stability and openness to change. This balance can never be completely destroyed, since it is the work of the Spirit of Christ. But it can be upset by our own lack of understanding. In recent centuries there has been so much stress on the permanent elements in the life of the Church, that in her practical living full play has not always been granted to the inspiration of the Spirit. Our liturgy reflected the permanent beauty of God, but not the powerful wind and the tongues of fire of the holy Spirit. Similarly, our conception of government in the Church affirmed the permanent presence of God through legitimate authority, but perhaps it failed to give due weight to the less articulate and less tangible presence of the Spirit in every member of the social body. To enter into the mind of the Council, we must accept both these principles: that is, to stand firmly on the rock which is immovable and to be exposed fully to the wind of the Spirit who moves us. The old tradition has to be blended with a new inspiration.

What then are the principal developments in theology which seem relevant for religious government and obedience?

The development of the doctrine of the mystical body

This development has provided us with a better understanding of the structure and the life of the Church. The pauline image of the Church as an organic body has emerged into the full light of day. Head and members are no longer considered as separate units, but as the organs of one body. The realization that the organs are held together by the Spirit of Christ has deepened. Since the one Spirit lives in many members, there is an invisible communication among them; no single one of them could live without the others. The dynamic quality of the life of the mystical body has also been emphasized.

It has been discovered anew how the Spirit of God infuses life and movement into the whole Church and into the smallest part of it; with the practical conclusion that this life must be made manifest by new initiatives, which reflect the dynamic presence of the Spirit in the whole community.

Development in the vision of authority

Following on this more profound understanding of the mystery of the Church, it was re-discovered (if this term is legitimate in theology) that the highest form of authority in the Church in its deepest reality is of a collegiate nature: not in a legal, but in a theological sense, whereby college means communion and organic union. However, this communion of many in the one power of Christ has a hierarchical structure: the position of the head and his share in the power of Christ is different from that of the members. But the close union between the head and the members, that is, between the pope and the bishops, does not destroy the full authority of the head; rather it strengthens it. This general vision of authority has been incorporated, in an analogous form, in the Decree on religious life.

New insight into the function of authority

Authority has increasingly come to be understood as service. The legal element in exercising power is being reduced to its right proportion, and a more spiritual image of the superior is emerging: the servant of the people of God, whether in a large community, or in a small one. The type of this service is not that of the roman slave, but of Christ the servant of Yahweh, who received his authority primarily from the Spirit dwelling in him. He taught with power, he promulgated the law of the new covenant; but he also washed the feet of his disciples, and served them with a hot breakfast on a cold morning on the shore of the Lake of Genesareth. He himself summed up the qualities of this good servant when he described the good shepherd who leads the flock, feeds the flock and gives his life for it: a complex biblical image that cannot be fitted into any legal scheme. Some of the old names for religious superiors contain this scriptural idea: abbot means father and minister means servant. This is not to deny that the spiritual power of the superior needs a legal framework to support it: the invisible and divine element must be embodied in a visible and human organization.

Infallibility cannot be delegated

If there was ever a tendency to suggest or to insinuate that some sort of infallibility is attached to offices not instituted by Christ, such as to the office of a religious superior who is not a bishop or does not share the episcopal power in some other way, it has certainly come to an end. All agree that infallibility cannot be delegated. Apart from the supreme authority functioning in special circumstances, for example, the pope or council in defining doctrinal questions, all other authorities in the Church are subject to human failure, and there are bound to be mistakes in their judgments and actions. It follows that, in order to understand the mystery of government and obedience in religious life, we have to look in the Church towards that field of human activity where persons holding an office, although helped by the Spirit, are subject to failure, and not towards the field of divine guarantees that exempt the highest authority from error.

Development of the theology of the divine indwelling

Nowadays, more account is taken of the invisible capabilities of a child of God which follow from the presence of the Spirit; his inspirations and desires can be better discerned and a greater scope can be given to them. At the same time, the social nature of God's grace has been further explored, and we realize better that the grace God wants to give a community will somehow be given through all the members – even as the fulness of life is given to our body through all its organs. If communication between the members breaks down, or the graces and gifts offered to individuals are not valued, the whole body will be poorer for it; and it may even become sick, manifesting all the symptoms of spiritual malnutrition.

These theological trends converged at the Council and produced abundant fruit in its constitutions, decrees and declarations.

THE COUNCIL

The Decree on religious life is not an isolated pronouncement. Its true sense cannot be grasped and appreciated unless it is considered in the context of the other documents. The idea of government in religious life is hardly more than a particular application of the idea of authority in the Church to the particular case of religious. Even within the field of religious life it will take different forms and

shades, according to the personality of each institute. The Council does not want to destroy diversity, but to inspire in religious a common element of universality.

The Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, explains in detail the nature of the supreme power which is present within the communion of bishops, with the pope as their head. This power and authority is owned by a communion of persons, although its exercise belongs either to the pope alone, or to the college – which can only move with the consent of the head. This is strictly not the case in a religious institute, but an important analogy remains. The close union of the members with the head, even to the extent of the members taking an active part in the deliberations of the institute, does not destroy the authority of the head, but confirms it. A body is not weaker because the head and members work closely together.

According to the same constitution, laymen are to be caught up into the life of the Church to a degree rarely envisaged in recent times. They should be consulted, trusted and given an active part in the life of the universal Church, the diocese and the parish. They should have a freedom of action, and their wishes and desires should be considered with due attention. Here again the dominant note of unity is sounded: the flock and the shepherd should be one. But the roles are not reversed: the flock cannot have any legal power over the shepherd.

The Decree on the life and ministry of priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, directs that the bishops should see in their priests their brothers and friends. They all share the one priesthood of Christ, even if not to the same extent: the bishop has the fulness of it, the priests a lesser share. The Council recommends that a senate of priests be instituted in every diocese to assist the bishop and to express the unity of the priesthood. On a lesser scale the college of priests surrounding the bishop is parallel to the college of bishops surrounding the pope. The desire of the Church is that the legitimate power of the bishops, which always remains his, should be exercised within the context of this spiritual and practical communion between the bishop and his priests.

All these cases offer us an analogy which clarifies the meaning of our Decree when it speaks of religious government. The theme of unity between the head and the members will dominate.

Perhaps the best way of penetrating into the inner meaning of the Decree, *Perfectæ Caritatis*, is to take some of its key concepts on

government, and to give the theological meaning of these concepts.¹

Superiors have the souls of their subjects entrusted to them – *animæ sibi commissæ*. In other words, the superiors are God's trustees, with the right and duty to protect and help the souls of their subjects. Let us beware of any sort of platonism: soul here means the whole person who is a child of God with an eternal destiny. A trustee is not an owner: he has to administer the property of another, according to the wishes of the one who commissioned him. The somewhat legal concept of trusteeship in this case becomes profoundly theological: the superior is not the owner of the subject, but has to take care of him in the name of another: Christ in this case. It follows that the personality of the trustee has to withdraw to a healthy degree so that Christ's personality should have a free impact on the subject. A superior should never try to transform a community to his own ideals; he should have the humility to hide himself, and let Christ impress his own image on them. This will give stability to every religious community; the change of superior will not mean a radical change of outlook and way of life. At the same time, the superior should keep all his legitimate power: no good trustee would allow it to be denied or destroyed.

In fulfilling this office of trust, superiors should show themselves docile in submitting themselves to the will of God: *voluntati Dei in munere explendo dociles*. Here we touch a crucial point. To be docile means to be open, to be ready to receive new knowledge. It also means a readiness of will to put the knowledge into practice. Docility to the will of God means a devoted search to know this will, and a selfless determination to carry it out. Therefore the Decree assumes that the will of God frequently exists and can be known prior to the decision of the superior, at least in substance. Otherwise the text would be meaningless. It follows that the substance of the office of the superior is to obey; to obey the will of God, and to put great effort into trying to know it, to formulate it and to specify it for his subjects. This general will of God, antecedent to any decision by the superior, can be known by reading the signs of the times, by looking for God's designs in the ordinary events of his providence. It can also be known through the inspirations of the holy Spirit. Either of these means of knowing the will of God, that is, reading God's design in events and discovering his will through inspirations, are open to the superior and to his subjects. The search

¹ Cf *Perfectæ Caritatis* 14, *supra* p 49.

for the will of God should therefore be a concerted effort of the community: without a continuous and honest dialogue (not reduced to a mere formality) between the superior and the subjects, the will of God simply cannot be known adequately. This dialogue should not be restricted to spiritual matters. It should extend to all practical problems of the subject's life: his assignment to various jobs, and all the human problems of his external apostolate.

But in the last analysis, it is the superior who must make the binding decision. If he is docile, he is likely to set the real will of God as the norm of action for his subjects; but if he is not open in his heart, he may fail to do so. Yet provided the subject does not deliberately co-operate in a sinful order, he will be protected supernaturally in carrying out the mistaken order, since 'we are well assured that everything helps to secure the good of those who love God'.¹ Nonetheless, the failure of the superior to conform in his order to the pattern of the will of God will have a disrupting effect on the life of the community. There is no divine guarantee that all orders will serve to the greatest good of the institution in question. Bad government can do untold harm to it, even if obedience is perfect. The history of religious orders and congregations offers abundant proof of this.

A fundamental quality in a good superior is an unlimited capacity to listen. God's creative activity is taking place around him: in events, in his own mind and heart, and in those of every member of the community. To neglect to listen to any one of them may well mean that the superior cuts himself off from information that God wants him to have. It would be a failure in docility, with disastrous effects for the community if the case is a serious one.

All authority has to be exercised in a spirit of service: *in spiritu servitii pro fratribus auctoritatem exerceant*. We have already seen that the evangelical concept of service is complex and includes both authority and humble care for the spiritual and temporal needs of the subject. It certainly includes a humble mind and a real living devotion towards the religious, who are the chosen children of God. It must include humble actions, analogous to those performed by servants. Otherwise the humble mind is not expressed: the word does not take on flesh. A superior who is not inclined to consider those under his care as his friends, equals and even his superiors

¹ Rom 8, 28.

in the Spirit, is certainly not a person after the heart of Christ, the servant of Yahweh.

In their government, superiors should express the love of God for his children: *caritatem qua Deus illos diligit expriment*. The room for comment here is unlimited; but one quality which is certainly the manifestation of God's love is to trust another person.

The trust that the superior has in his subjects should resemble the trust that God has in us. He has every reason to distrust us: he has been more than once deceived by our lack of fidelity. We have all abused his goodness. Nevertheless, his confidence in his children remains unshaken. He is always ready to grant his pardon. And when he forgives our trespasses, he also forgets them, and we can start again with the generous capital of God's good will. The life of a good religious can be made unjustly hard because of a fault once committed, and never really forgiven; or, if forgiven, never forgotten. True love covers up everything, and always concedes a fresh start: not seven times, but seventy times seven.

There is no policy nor pedagogical device which can bring so much out of a person of goodwill as the conviction that he is trusted. It must be taken for granted, of course, that not all persons will be of goodwill and that our trust will be abused by some: in the same way as the good will of God is sometimes abused. But better isolated abuses than the steady abuse of God's love by lack of trust. To avoid any misunderstanding, let us say clearly that christian trust never excludes legitimate prudence. Lack of trust is lack of charity: prudence is the expression of real charity.

Superiors should be aware that they have under their care the children of God: *subditos regant qua filios Dei*. Here it may be useful to say something about the difference between the external and the internal aspect of the Church. The external aspect is the hierarchical visible structure. It is based on the mysterious power to govern that Christ has handed over to the apostles, and which arises from the nature of an organized society. It is essentially temporal and connected with a legal framework. The internal aspect is the union of the faithful with Christ through his Spirit; a union that is invisible. It is eternal, since it consists in the possession of the best of all charisms, charity. Now the superior's office belongs to the external aspect of the Church; the perfection of each one in charity belongs to its internal structure. Externally, there is a hierarchy of authority; internally, there is a hierarchy of charity. The two do not necessarily coincide. Though the superior is in a higher position within the visible

framework of the community, many of his subjects may be in a higher position in the intensity and purity of their charity. A delicate and practical balance of mutual respect is needed here: while the subject must acknowledge Christ's public authority in the superior, the superior must revere and be aware of the invisible authority of the Spirit of God present in his subjects.

It is God's will that each of his children should reflect his glory in a way that is absolutely unique. Therefore the superior should take care that the particular gifts of grace given to each person should develop, as his own special grace should develop too. Any attempt to standardize devotions and attitudes over and above the common heritage of the institute is harmful to the community.

It may be useful to recall that there cannot be a real growth in spiritual life if a certain margin is not left for the inevitable mistakes and faults. Men and women do not enter religious life because they are perfect but because they want to mature in God's love. Now any process of growth and development in a person is tied up with mistakes and failures. If a climate is created where the slightest false step is reproached and harshly corrected, the members of the community may take refuge consciously or unconsciously in a spiritual immobility. If a person does not move, he will not make mistakes. But he will not mature either: he may remain an apparently disciplined person, but not a creative child of God.

The superiors should respect in their subjects the human person: *subditos regant cum respectu personae humanae*. To be a person is to be unique, somehow similar to God. To be a human person is to have one's own mind and heart, a personal vision of the world and a basic freedom to act. To respect a person means to respect his uniqueness, his talents, and all that is good in him, in his opinions and in his desires. This respect does not mean that those personal gifts cannot be sacrificed to some extent for God's sake, or that they cannot be given a new direction when necessary; but it does mean an essentially humble attitude towards the individual and the sincere intention to help him to remain a person, unique in this creation. We have to remember that to destroy a human personality means to destroy a particular reflection of God's glory in this created world, which is irreplaceable. Again, in the context of incorporation into the mystical body and of religious profession, each one is given a special power to contribute all that is his unique personal possession, so that Christ himself can live in him, and develop those human possibilities which he could not live in his single individual

human nature. This is why the superior has to consider all the qualities of the subjects concerned when he is making a decision. He is God's steward, and will have to give an account of every single talent that God has given not only to himself but also to his subjects. For both, the reckoning will be exacting, as it is described in the parable of the talents.

To respect a man or woman as a person means to respect his mind. When a decision is communicated or an order given to a subject, it is the superior's duty in charity (though not in law) to give him as much information about the order as is reasonably possible, so that the subject should not remain in obscurity, but should participate fully in the work suggested or requested. In this way the dignity of the human person is preserved; and the result will be a much more efficient work and a much closer tie between the head and the members. A wise superior will not try to keep his subjects in an intellectual vacuum, but will integrate their minds into the common work of the whole institute. In this way he will greatly contribute to the intelligent praise that every religious body has to offer to God.

To respect a human person means also to leave him a certain amount of freedom. Rules are meant to be a framework to help the individuals and the community to create the most helpful climate for the work of the holy Spirit. One can have too few rules, and the result will be chaos. One can have too many rules, and the result will be a burden that destroys the freshness of mind and heart so necessary to receive the inspirations of the Spirit. If no reasonable amount of freedom is left for each person, the spirit of prophecy (which should exist in every christian community to a greater or lesser degree) will be soon destroyed.

There cannot be a real respect for a human person if his personal maturity is not respected. Each religious should be treated according to his own age and mental capacity. Novices between the age of eighteen and twenty should not be treated as if they were much younger, and the noviciate should not have the air of a school for children. Grown-up men and women in religious communities should have all the consideration that is due to an adult person. They should have a more generous allowance of freedom within the substantial framework of the rule.

The Council insists in particular on the freedom due to religious in the matter of confession and spiritual direction. The consequence of this insistence may well be the relaxation of the law of special

faculties for nuns. It will be a welcome change. Perhaps the insistence of the Council will help also to remove the last traces of well-meant but ill-conceived restrictions, which may exist still here and there, more in actual practice than in any written rule.

Superiors are enjoined to promote in their subjects the virtue of active and responsible obedience: *sodales eo perducant ut activa atque responsabili oboedientia cooperentur.*

A human person cannot be active, unless he expresses himself in a personal and creative way. And the Council is saying that religious obedience cannot be perfect unless it includes this personal and creative element, both in new initiatives and in bringing to fulfilment works already begun. The ideal of obedience is not in an ever increasing passivity, but in the right blend of the essential dependence on the will of the superior and a personal and creative contribution towards the goal intended. Great scope is given by the Council to the inspirations of the subject and to his talents and gifts; but they have to be used within the framework laid down by the legitimate authority.

Activity supposes and entails responsibility. A responsible person is able to foresee the probable consequences of his acts; he takes them into account in planning his actions, and recognizes that he must answer for them. He is also a trustworthy person: important jobs can be given him; and it is anticipated that he will have the capacity to solve a complex question in a balanced way without over-simplifying it. Responsibility represents an intellectual element in the person, an ability to weigh up reasons for what they are worth without being unduly affected emotionally.

The mark of wise government, according to the mind of the Council, is the good judgment of the superior which blends orders with a proper allowance for freedom in his subjects. A discerning superior will find a balance between imposing his own will on another person and letting him formulate a responsible decision. The virtue does not lie in either of the extremes. It does not lie in a passivity which makes one await prompting from above for every action, nor in a fully independent activity either, which would destroy the submission essential for any true obedience.

The perfection of active and responsible obedience cannot be reached in a day. An understanding superior will know that the persons entrusted to him will learn it by trial and error. To promote this christian obedience, the superior should be ready to listen to his subjects: *superiores libenter sodales audiant.* They will certainly talk if a

climate of confidence is established within the community.

For this climate of mutual trust, it is essential to know that secrets of consciences are scrupulously respected. By the law of the Church no religious has an obligation to manifest his conscience to his superior. If he does so, he hands over his own private property and has a right to ask that it should not become public. The local superior is not entitled to pass on any knowledge concerning the conscience of a person to a higher official, for any reason whatever, unless he has the explicit permission of the person concerned; a permission which is not to be requested lightly, is never presumed, and is invalid if it is obtained with subtle constraint. The absolute respect for this law, and the knowledge that its breach is never tolerated, will help younger persons to seek help from their immediate superiors. In this way vocations can be strengthened or saved; problems will come before the superior in good time. Obviously, it is permitted to a local superior to suggest that the subject himself should seek help from a higher superior, provided the suggestion does not curtail the person's freedom.

No one should ever be blamed for having ideas and inspirations when he communicates them to the superior. Even if the subject were to say the wrong thing, he would be saying it to the right person and in the right place, where slanted visions and ill-conceived projects can be corrected.

The superior should distinguish and separate the field of conscience from the field of external administration. No advantage should be taken of a confidential communication between the superior and the subject in imposing external discipline.

Perhaps we ought to mention how necessary it is for a superior to have a wide christian and human culture. If he does not have it, he will be inclined to silence a person when he should be discussing his problems. If he has this culture, he will be able to enter into a real dialogue.

The Council wants the co-operation of all the members for the good of the institute: *conspirationem ad bonum instituti et Ecclesiae*. This co-operation is not possible unless all the members of the community are integrated in the right way into the life of the community. This integration supposes a fair amount of information about the work and the problems of the whole institute. A wise superior will know how much to say about the financial situation of the house, the projects for the future, the successes and failures in the past, in order to create that family spirit which makes each one feel responsible

for the others and for the good of the whole body. Complete silence about these topics will not promote co-operation. It is not an answer to say that the ordinary members of the community have no right to know the secrets of administration. They may not have a legal right, granted, but the true charity of the superior will cover this lack of a right, and will not leave them in the dark.

At the same time, the Council makes it clear that the right to make a final decision and to give an order belongs to the superior. The new provisions in the Decree do not destroy the basic concept of authority. They are meant to strengthen it.

The union between the head and the members of religious communities is expressed especially through the work of the chapters and councils. Their job is to help the superior with independent judgments. The final verdict will have to come from the authoritative source, but before it is given, the advisers have to speak their own mind without any human respect. But once the decision has been taken, they, too, have to obey.

Through the work of the chapter and the councils, all the members of the institute should somehow co-operate for the good of the whole body. This provision implies that the composition of these groups should be representative to a reasonable degree. If they are not, the institute should revise its constitutions. A chapter in which the majority of the members is appointed by a higher superior (directly or indirectly) and only a minority elected, would not correspond to the ideals of the second Vatican Council.

SYNTHESIS

It was not the intention of the Council to give an exhaustive description of the office of the superior, but to state some essential principles which would help the life of the community and promote the right type of obedience. At the same time, the Council wished to stress certain points on which the prevailing doctrine or practice of government needed gentle correction. Therefore the content of the Decree must be put into a broader theological context; otherwise there might be an unbalanced presentation of it.

In the Church, there are offices of divine institution with a charism attached to them. Such are the priestly offices in their various degrees. The pope, the bishops and the priests are all in possession of an office to the holder of which a special assistance of the holy Spirit is guaranteed. This assistance is not easily explained

in theological terms, since it is part of the mystery of the Church. But the assistance is there independently of the worthiness of the person; it is there because of the office. By God's will it is given to the person through the office and not otherwise.

The theological status of a religious superior is situated at a different level. There is no particular charism attached to his office; the office is not conferred sacramentally. The superior does not have a grace of office in the strict sense, as bishops have it, but he is personally assisted by God, as every good christian is, to fulfil the task that God gives him. So, the graces the religious superior receives are given to him not through his office, but personally, in view of the fact that he has to govern. God assists the superior in his government, as God assists the subject in his obedience. From this assistance it would be no more legitimate to conclude that the superior governs in the right way than it would be legitimate to conclude that the subject obeys in the right way.

To clarify the theological elements of the office of the superior means to discover in it God's gracious mystery: through the superior, God is working out the plans of his providence; a divine action is taking place in a human context.

This context does not include a special charism attached to the office, either in the form of infallibility in judging an issue, or in the form of unfailing prudence in practical deeds. The superior's judgments are fallible and his prudence subject to failures.

At the same time, these human elements are in a divine context. Here faith in providence comes in. The world is governed by God, and he takes care of his chosen ones through the fragile actions of a human person. This faith in the providence of God is the answer to the doubts and anxieties arising from the human limitations of a superior. Through a human person God is working towards achieving his plan of love with regard to the superior himself, and to his subjects. The perfection of the superior's judgments and actions is not divinely guaranteed, but God's effective love towards all is guaranteed.

It is vital that the superior should be well aware of his own theological position, of the graces that he may or may not have. Any miscalculation would result in taking a wrong direction in government; while the knowledge of the truth will have a liberating effect on him and his community, and will help them all to use the available resources fully.

Since there is no charism attached to the office by divine law,

it follows that the personal qualities (natural and supernatural) of the superior will have the greatest importance. If he is closely united to God, he is likely to discern God's will in the external events and the internal inspirations; then he will be able to formulate it or specify it for his subjects, and lead the whole community to God.

The need for this spiritual vision in the superior is evident: without it he will never reach the necessary degree of discernment. The necessity of some training on a human level is equally important. Here, the science of human relations can prove helpful, and a knowledge of psychology almost indispensable. A fair amount of human culture is more than useful; without it a dialogue with the community, and the consideration of new ideas, is hardly possible. Openness of mind and heart is essential; the holy Spirit cannot work through those whose minds are closed to a new wind, to new tongues of fire, and to persons speaking a new language.

The knowledge by the superior of his own theological position is bound to have a double effect. Firstly it will inspire in him a deep sense of humility. He will know that his decisions are not infallibly right. This awareness of his own limitations will make him eager to intensify his own relationship with God, because he has to be the interpreter of God's will. It will also make him open to suggestions before a decision is taken, and to a reasonable amount of open discussion after the decision has been made. A good superior will know that he may have made a mistake, and the subject who represents his own view may bring him a new light. Therefore, he will receive the subject with humility, leaving the door open for the correction of his decision, either by himself or by a higher authority. Precisely because the immediate superior can make a mistake in interpreting or specifying the will of God, there ought to be a margin of security in going to higher superiors. But when the point is reached where, considering the importance of the case, it would be unreasonable to go further in discussions or appeals, it is to be assumed that God's providence works through the order received. No further move should be made. The competent superior should decree the case closed, and the subject should obey with simplicity.

Secondly, this theological knowledge will give the superior a sense of security. He will not have to claim that his decision is the only correct one. He can rightly ask for obedience even in the case of an imperfect decision, because God's mystery will still be present in it.

This sense of security will be re-inforced by the fact that a humble superior will not lean on his own wisdom only: his openness will make him gather the best of reasons from every source. He will have the accumulated wisdom of his brethren. At the same time he will know that he has authority, and will not be afraid to use it. He will know that he has a right to bind and to loose (in the broad sense of the term) in the name of Christ. He is the chosen instrument of God's providence.

To complete the picture, it may be well to recall, perhaps, that a divine guarantee of protection exists only for the salvation and spiritual good of a person, and not for the life and development of a religious institute. Bad administration can harm a religious community slightly, or seriously, or even fatally. This statement is valid even when the superior acts in good faith, but in an inefficient way. The institute will inevitably be harmed, although the souls of the superior and subject will be saved. One of the alarming signs will be the lack of vocations. The evil state of the world should not be blamed for lack of vocations; a serious examination of conscience should be held by the religious body concerned. God has his chosen ones in every age and at every place; but he will not inspire them to join an organization which is not in harmony with his plans.

It is also good to recall that there is no divine guarantee that the human values of a subject will be safeguarded in the case of mistakes in government, even if the mistakes are made in good faith. A nervous break-down may have its cause in misguided orders coming from above; though there is, of course, a guarantee that the break-down will serve for the spiritual good of the suffering person.

In religious government which functions according to the mind of Christ, the mystery of incarnation is present. God comes through human words and actions to redeem us from ourselves and give us his own life. In this process, the superior plays the part of the human steward for the divine Master. The ideal is that he should reflect in himself the image of Christ.

SOME PRACTICAL POINTS

There is no good government without an honest respect for the so called principle of subsidiarity. This principle enunciates a law valid for any society or community, and can be stated in various ways: 'A superior organ should never take over the function of an

inferior one, but should only subsidize its strength when it is necessary'. Or, 'Every organ in a body should function to its full capacity'. Or, less technically: 'Each person should be left to do his job fully: his superior should not interfere unless the common good imposes it'. The practical applications are numerous, but some examples can be given. The work of a headmaster should not be taken over fully or partially by his superior if the two offices are given to distinct persons; the priest who is in charge of a community of lay brothers should not dictate each separate item of the daily menu to the cook, and so on.

Respect for facts is another mark of wise government. To dissociate oneself from facts means to cut oneself off from the living source of the will of God. Therefore if there are problems in a community, they should not be swept under the carpet, but faced with robust realism. The more one enters into the real world of God, the more one is united with God's plans.

Fear and apprehension are rarely good counsels for prudent decisions. A christian should be able to listen to anything, to hear any idea, because he has the discernment to choose what is good, and to leave aside what is bad. Fear may cause a complex which compels the superior to silence persons with new or unusual ideas, without giving them an answer. The ideas, of course, will not be suppressed. They will go underground and will do far more harm than if they had been allowed to be aired and then answered properly, either by the superior or perhaps by someone else who can do so.

A superior who wants to help his subjects to love God will know how to discourage servility. Servile obedience tends to concentrate on the human qualities of the superior, and tries to obtain favours through misguided signs of respect. A climate against servility can be built up if it is known that the superior appreciates those who are ready to tell the truth as they see it, without human respect. If, on the contrary, it is felt in the community that the opinion of those who agree in everything with the ideas of the superior is the most highly esteemed, then the strength of the community will be undermined.

Instead of a conclusion, we would prefer a warning. The reader should be aware that the ideas expressed in this article are no more than an attempt to penetrate the meaning of the Council's doctrine on government. This attempt leaves many problems untouched, and it remains incomplete. For instance, we cannot claim to have

explained in what sense the subject can consider the superior as the representative of Christ for him, because this problem can be better treated when religious obedience is studied. Further, any presentation of the teaching of the Council on government is bound to be misleading unless it is studied simultaneously with the doctrine on obedience. And finally, let it be said that the whole topic is so rich that it will take some years, and many more articles by authors of varying views, before we reach a reasonably complete understanding of government and obedience in religious life. And even then it will remain embedded in God's mystery.