

OBEDIENCE: CONSENT OR CONFORMITY?

By JOHN MAHONEY

IF THERE IS any one question which underlies much of the disquiet experienced at all levels in the Church to-day, it must surely be the question on which I have been asked to speak, the relationship between the leading of the holy Spirit and the external rule of life in the formation of christian conscience. It is clear that there is a tension within that title, and perhaps I may be allowed to express that tension more succinctly if I describe it as 'Obedience: consent or conformity?' The resolution of that tension in the life of each individual in community, whether that community be society in general, or the Church, or a smaller unit within the Church, is a personal matter, which on occasion might more need the physician than the divine; but what I intend to do in this paper is to explore as a moral theologian the historical and theological conditions which ought to contribute to the resolution of the tension between consent and conformity, between the leading of the holy Spirit and one's external rule of life. I shall not be considering here the moral law as such, nor the infallible magisterium of the Church, but only the role and implications of positive legislation within a community of individuals.

To begin with, I should like to indulge in a little history for a few moments, because, of course, the tension which I have mentioned is no new phenomenon, even if it may be considered to exist in a more acute form today. I shall not, however, commit the fault of enthusiastic preachers and take you back to Adam and Eve, but only as far back as Plato. Plato, as you know, regarded the world we live in as a pale and deficient imitation of an ideal world, and this way of looking at reality influenced his views on the nature and function of laws. In his earlier works he realized that written laws were too universal in their formulation and scope to cover all possible contingencies and eventualities. As he wrote, written law is:

like a stubborn and ignorant man who allows no one to do anything contrary to his command, or even to ask a question,

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not even if something new occurs to some one, which is better than the rule he has himself ordained.¹

It was much better, Plato considered, to have a community governed by a wise individual who was superior to all written laws and who would personally legislate for each individual situation as it arose; but in the absence of such a wise ruler, as the best alternative, Plato demanded absolute obedience to the written laws of society. If not a wise governor, then at least written laws would be all-powerful.

In his later and more experienced works, however, Plato came to see that the best society in practice was one based on positive legislation, since only thus could society be protected against the excesses and abuses of a bad ruler. But it was even more important in such a situation that the laws be observed by all, including the ruler. In the concrete, of course, allowance must be made for the frailty and weakness of men, but any weakening or diminution of the law was regarded by Plato as a concession and an indulgence, a departing from the perfect and the ideal, a wounding of the law, which sapped the strength of the law. It would be much better if all men without distinction observed the law with equal fidelity, and it was regrettable if not all were capable of doing so.

We can see here how Plato's view of the individual as an imperfect realization of the universal and the ideal led him to regard departures from the written law of society as a lowering of one's ideals, and a necessary but really undesirable exercise of benignity and clemency. But the view of Plato's successor, Aristotle, was quite different. He shared with Plato the view that written laws are too universal in their formulation and scope to cover all possible contingencies and eventualities; and he explains that any lawgiver must confine himself only to what happens in the majority of cases and legislate for them. But Aristotle differs radically from Plato in his view of exceptional cases and emergencies. For Plato the exception is a deviation and a deficiency, due to the imperfect way in which worldly reality represents the ideal; but for Aristotle the exception, far from weakening the law, actually improves and corrects it. For

¹ Plato, *Politicus*, 294 C (Loeb translation). Cf Hamel, E., S.J., 'Fontes graeci doctrinae de epikeia', in *Periodica*, 53 (1964), 169-185 at p 173. This and the following articles of Père Hamel form an excellent survey of the history of *epikeia*, and are the source of the historical remarks in this section. Cf Hamel, E., 'La vertu d'epikie', in *Loi naturelle et loi du Christ* (1964), pp 79-106; 'L'usage de l'epikie', in *Studia Moralia*, III (Rome, 1965), pp. 48-81.

Aristotle it is the law itself which is inherently weak and imperfect, precisely because it is universal and general in its formulation. Worldly reality is too rich and varied to be comprehended by a general law, and so on occasion the general law has to be corrected and improved in order to bring it more into line with reality. This correction and improvement of the law in a minority of cases is done simply by the individual's ignoring what the law says, by his apparently contravening the letter of the law in order to observe the spirit and the true purpose intended by the lawgiver.

And, of course, such a correction and improvement of the law in some cases cannot possibly be a weakening or a benign relaxation of the law. As P. Hamel has written, for Aristotle 'what defect there is, is to be found not in concrete reality, as Plato held, but in the positive law which is too abstract and indeterminate'.¹ It is true, of course, that the law has some contact with reality, but only in the majority of cases, and in the normal course of events. But in other cases it is the role of the individual man to correct the limitations inherent in the law, rather than the role of law to condone the limitations of the individual. And in this view of Aristotle we can see his preoccupation with worldly reality and with the value of the individual, as opposed to Plato's view of the individual as only a shadow of the ideal.

The aristotelian view of law was introduced into christian theology when the *Nicomachean Ethics* was translated into latin in 1245 by the bishop of Lincoln, Robert Grosseteste,² and seized upon by Albert the Great. For Albert the matter is summed up in his statement that

one must respect the continual variability of the real and not attempt to locate all human actions under one and the same universal rule. The real must not be bent to the rule, but the rule must be adapted to the real.³

The metaphor of the rule, which both Aristotle and Albert use, is not that of a rigid ruler, twelve-inch or otherwise, which is snapped or broken on occasion, but more like that of the tape-measure, which can measure both straight and curved surfaces alike, and is sufficiently flexible to be able to do so. It was this flexibility inherent in law because of its universal character which both Aristotle and

¹ Hamel, E., 'Fontes graeci doctrinae de epikeia', in *Periodica*, 53 (1964), pp 181-182.

² *Ibid.*, p 183, n 35.

³ Hamel, E., 'L'usage de l'epikie', in *Studia Moralia*, III (Rome, 1965), p 51.

Albert recognized; and the same idea was taken up and used by Albert's pupil, Thomas Aquinas. He wrote:

Laws are made for human actions. But such actions are individual and concrete situations, and they are infinitely variable. Hence, it is impossible to establish a rule which is absolutely universal. Lawmakers consider what normally happens and draw upon that to make a law; but in certain cases the observance of that law would be against justice or the common good, which is precisely what the law is intended to safeguard . . . In such cases . . . it would be bad to obey the law, but on the other hand it would be good to ignore the letter of the law in order to do what is called for by justice and the common good.¹

The later scholastics repeated St Thomas' teaching on the nature and inherent limitation of positive law, but the subject came to be treated more and more within a juridical and legal framework, until, in the writings of Suarez, it was codified in the light of the whole mediaeval legal tradition, and the occasions were worked out when one could safely ignore the written law. But a change and a shift in emphasis have taken place. Basically, the difference between Aquinas and Suarez is that Aquinas regards law as primarily an expression of reason, while Suarez sees it more as the expression of the will of the lawgiver or superior.² Of course, Thomas also held that the existence of any law depends on the will of a lawgiver, but once the law exists it does so in its own right, independently of the will of the lawgiver. For Suarez, on the other hand, 'the soul of the law is the will of the legislator by which he obliges the subject to do this or that'.³

The consequence of Suarez's view of law is that one's attitude to the law is conceived in terms of one's attitude to the mind and the will of the person who made the law. And not only can, and did, this degenerate into a struggle or contest between two wills, that of the lawgiver to dominate the subject, and that of the subject to be free from the demands of the lawgiver; but it also led to viewing exceptions to the law as interpretations of the mind of the lawgiver, or as acting according to the intention of the lawgiver and in accordance with his presumed benignity or clemency. On such occasions, the

¹ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q 120, a 1; Hamel, E., *ibid.*, p 55.

² Hamel, E., *ibid.*, pp 61-66.

³ *Ibid.*, p 66.

lawgiver could, strictly speaking, demand the observance of his law, but in the circumstances one judges that such would not be his will.¹

Suarez's writings on law and the individual's attitude to it had a profound influence on subsequent theologians and canonists because of his gifts of clarity and orderly presentation; and inevitably attention was concentrated on establishing the conditions on which the subject might legitimately consider himself excused from observing the law. Freedom from the law became the subject of controversy; tutorists came down on the side of the law, while probabilists favoured individual freedom;² and always the guiding principle was the presumed mind and intention of the lawgiver, rather than the purpose of the law. Canonists have concentrated on the idea of being excused from the law in exceptional cases, and the moral books are full of their considerations of when one can safely regard oneself freed from the obligation of attending Sunday mass, or of fasting and abstaining, or when the priest may consider himself excused from the obligation of the office, and so on. In all of this the accent is placed on the exceptional case, and the mentality tends to be one of grudging and suspicious concession to human weakness, to what the text books describe as physical or moral impossibility.³ And in this mentality one can see once again the attitude of Plato rather than Aristotle, of Suarez rather than Aquinas. It is basically a difference of approach, which perhaps I might illustrate by the following example. In canon law today no one is obliged to fast before the age of twenty-one or after the age of fifty-nine. Why is this? Is it because those younger people and those older people have not the desired stamina, are unfortunately not up to it, and so one cannot reasonably expect it of them? Or is it because such a form of penance is unsuitable for such people? The answer one gives to these questions, I suggest, will show whether one is basically a platonist or an aristotelian in matters of positive law, whether one starts from the law and relaxes it in individual cases of human frailty, or whether one starts from the individual person and situation and realizes that certain forms of behaviour are no help in some situations and for some individuals.

Perhaps the time has come for me to tear off the mask, and confess that what I have been describing so far is the idea of *epikeia*. Until about thirty years ago, *epikeia* had a very poor press in the

¹ *Ibid.*, p 65.

² *Ibid.*, pp 68-69.

³ Hamel, E., 'La vertu d'epikie', in *Loi naturelle et loi du Christ* (1964), p 79.

manuals. It is defined there as a benign interpretation of a law in a particular situation, by which one presumes or judges that in such a case the legislator or superior would be humane enough not to oblige one to observe the law. Its discussion has always been conducted in an atmosphere of considerable reserve and restraint, not to say suspicion, as something particularly prone to abuse and, if not as the last infirmity of a noble mind, then too frequently as the refuge of sinners.

On the other hand, however, during the last thirty years,¹ *epikeia* has seen a considerable rehabilitation; and, as in so many other matters, this has been stimulated by a return to the true teaching of St Thomas. It was he who declared forthrightly that *epikeia* is the virtue by which one in practice corrects an inherently defective general law, and that it is not just a principle of interpreting laws according to the presumed will of a superior; and, since it is a virtue, it is a good thing, and something to be encouraged! What underlies the virtue of *epikeia* is the realization that the law is for the individual and not the individual for the law, that reality cannot be encompassed in general formulae, and that the most important thing in creation is the individual human person.

Even Plato acknowledged that written laws are too static, although he found it matter for regret that reality was not streamlined enough to be neatly slipped into place somewhere in all the round holes of a legal system. But the attitude of Aristotle and Aquinas was one of admiration and respect for the richness, and if you like, the ruggedness of reality. A friend of mine once told me that when he had at last acquired a pair of spectacles he was amazed to find how sharp corners were. With improved vision he could see the shape and configurations of individual things better and appreciate their individuality. *Epikēia*, in the teaching of St Thomas, is the acknowledgment that reality cannot all be pigeon-holed, that what distinguishes a thing is not necessarily an imperfection or a deviation, but frequently what gives it a particular dignity; that general laws are good, but that occasions do arise which they have not foreseen, and that in such cases it is not good that the law be enforced or observed literally.

Some people do not like sharp corners, of course, but reality has sharp elbows, and written general rules must expect to receive knocks from it. One might wish to fill in the valleys and level the

¹ Ibid., pp 79, 82ff.

hills, round off the corners and make the rough ways plain; but the result would be a wasteland, a flat uniform expanse of dull conformity where every head that was raised would be smartly and promptly tapped back into line. It has been pointed out, of course, and rightly, that Suarez was at pains in his view of law to safeguard the individual and his rights against the omnipotence of the ruler or lawgiver; but paradoxically it is Aquinas, I suggest, who most respects and enhances the dignity of the individual, because he is not concerned with a possible conflict of wills but with the use of human reason on the part of both lawgiver and the individual. He sees, in fact, the individual taking over from the lawgiver, and carrying on from where the lawgiver left off, applying in the infinite variety of actual situations the general principle which is all the lawgiver can be, and is, expected to give.

What this means is that in the mind of the individual there is what one might call a psychological gap between the external rule and the present situation. The rule is universal, abstract, and envisages only the majority of situations; and it would be a foolish as well as a highly complicated rule which attempted to foresee all possible contingencies. And yet the rule is intended to be a guide for reality; it is after all an external rule of life. But it is the role and the responsibility of the individual to fill the gap, to apply this guide for life in every situation which arises. Now, clearly, in the majority of cases, those which are actually envisaged by the rule, this application will proceed smoothly and effortlessly. But what of the comparatively few cases where there arises at least the possibility that the rule does not apply?

It already requires considerable maturity, of course, to acknowledge that such cases can arise; and it is the refusal to countenance even such a possibility which has been branded as literalism or legalism, the attitude that at all costs the letter of the law must be observed. Perhaps not many people would openly and explicitly profess such an attitude, but as a mentality and an implicit presupposition it is quite, even alarmingly, widespread. Every confessor is familiar with the penitents who confess missing mass deliberately, and who, when asked why, will explain apologetically that they were sick in bed, or that they had to look after a relative. They will perhaps agree reluctantly that it was a higher call of charity which kept them from church; but they will add that they felt they ought to mention it in confession, or that they would not feel right unless they confessed it. Nor is such an attitude peculiar to the laity in the

Church; it frequently underlies the behaviour of priests with regard to the saying of the office.

To acknowledge, then, the bare possibility that cases can arise when one's external rule of life may be deficient requires considerable maturity; but this requirement is even more evident when 'it comes to the crunch' and one has to consider whether this present situation facing one is such a case. And it must be admitted that frequently what one encounters here is quite simply a failure of nerve. All too often one can take refuge with relief in a literal observance of the rule and find peace of mind, or better, find security, in one's rule. And it does require courage to swim against the current of conformity or the tug of habit, to launch out into the deep, away from safely charted home waters. A year or so ago, the *London Tablet* contained a witty and percipient article describing how the barque of Peter was listing to port as many of the crew and passengers moved over to the left, and how some were even going overboard and attempting to walk on the waters.¹ And yet St Peter *was* invited by Christ to walk on the waters. The whole problem centres on that word 'invited', of course. Peter received an invitation; but there is no record of one having been offered to the gadarene swine. However, all that I am concerned with pointing out at the moment is that invitation is possible, and even peremptory.

Here I should like to introduce one of my favourite quotations from the letters of St Ignatius. In an answer to a Jesuit confessor who had asked his advice on how to guide some of his penitents in a particular matter, Ignatius wrote, 'see what the moral books say, and then in particular cases act as God inspires you'.² This, it seems to me, describes very well the relationship between one's external rule of life and the internal leading of the holy Spirit; and it acknowledges what I have called the psychological gap between one's awareness of the external rule and the personal decision one is being called upon to make. The external rule of life and the internal guidance of the Spirit are not at variance or contradictory, they are complementary; and the role of the Spirit acting within one is to enable one to apply the external rule in the light of the present situation. In the majority of situations this application is made with-

¹ Derrick, C., 'Trimming the ark: Towards a recovery of perspective', in the *Tablet* (7 May, 1966). Mr Derrick's remarks drew a rejoinder from Daly, G., O.S.A., 'A prophet of gloom?' in the *Clergy Review*, 51 (1966), pp 604-612.

² 'V.R. veda quello che scriveno le summe, et puoi nelle particolari faccia come Idio li ispirarà', in *Monumenta Ignatiana, Epist. IX* (Madrid, 1909), p 176.

out much ado, and if the Spirit's influence is perceptible, it is experienced as helping the individual to see how principle and situation interlock, to acknowledge the continuity between the law and the situation.

In other situations, however, the role of the holy Spirit is somewhat different. He enables the individual to compare and contrast the general rule and the particular situation, and to confront them with each other. And in that confrontation the individual gains an insight into the content of *both* the rule *and* the situation. He is able to see that the rule does not apply in this situation; and this is a refinement of his awareness of what the rule really means, and at the same time of what the situation really demands. I remember a professor of english pointing out sadly to examination candidates who had been asked to identify some lines of poetry, that, if they wrongly identified a quotation, not only did they show that they did not know which poem the quotation came from, but they also showed that they did not know the poem they said the quotation came from. One can see the same in musical snobbery. If I loftily describe a snatch of melody by Mozart as from a Gilbert and Sullivan opera, not only do I betray my ignorance of Mozart, but – what is worse – I betray my ignorance of Gilbert and Sullivan also.

It is this double-edged quality of insight which the holy Spirit brings in those cases where the principle does not fit the case; where, that is, the individual's appreciation of the true meaning and purpose of a given rule is refined and sharpened, and where, by contrast, his awareness of what is called for by the situation is clarified. Within the context of the moral law, what this means is that there is a continual process of refinement going on in our knowledge and appreciation of moral principles, even of revealed moral principles. And this same process is continually at work with regard to civil law, and to the external code of law in any community of men and women.

If I may continue the musical metaphor for a moment, the student of musical composition who is bound by the strict laws of harmony receives not a few shocks when he studies, for example, the Bach chorales; but he is told that the secret is to know when to break the rules of harmony. And it is some help to the inexperienced student of painting, gazing in consternation perhaps at the apparent chaos and artistic licence of some of Picasso's works, to recall that the painter possesses a complete mastery of line drawing and perspective. The secret of effect and success in both cases is knowing

when to break the rules, a profound knowledge of the rules and of their purpose, but accompanied by an attitude of responsible freedom towards those rules.

This is not an attitude which is easily acquired. It requires training and formation; and perhaps it should be admitted that in many groups and communities that training has not been provided. It requires a regular and graded process of instruction and education, not only in the content of the external rule of life, but also in its historical origins, its purpose, its value, and, I would add, its inherent limitations. Such education will inevitably include warnings and cautionary tales on the dangers of sitting lightly to the rules and of brushing them aside in favour of one's own opinion, one's pride and one's self-love; and it is right that such warning be given, in due moderation. But at least equal care and consideration should be given to explaining the dangers of literalism, of mechanical observance of the letter of the law, of legalism, and of undiscerning conformity.

Nor should this be grudgingly regarded as a safety-valve, or a pampering of young and unruly spirits. I think I have shown sufficiently how historically one can discern two fundamental attitudes to written laws, and no doubt you will have concluded that I personally prefer the view put forward by Aristotle and adopted by St Albert, St Thomas and many recent moralists. It is, I consider, more reasonable, more consonant with the dignity of the individual person, and more in accordance with the spirit of the New Testament. It is more reasonable because it views laws and rules as the product of reason, and not predominantly as the expression of the will of a lawgiver or a superior. It views government, which is concerned with individual situations, not as a struggle between two wills, but as the common pursuit of an agreed goal, so that the subject takes over from the superior at a certain level, and responsibly applies in the concrete situation what the superior could say in only general and universal terms of a vague multiplicity of possible situations. By the same token it respects the God-given endowment which no man or woman may ever totally abdicate to another, the gift of reason and intelligence; and with that it respects the ability to discern in any given situation whether it is reasonable to observe the letter of the law, or more reasonable to ignore the law in order to bring about the very purpose for which the law was intended.

Such a view of law, as requiring correction and improvement in some situations, acknowledges that obedience is always reasoned and

mature consent, and not simply conformity; and this is a factor of supreme importance today, when so much emphasis is rightly placed on the values of maturity, personal worth and self-fulfilment. It was Pope John who publicly stated in *Pacem in Terris* that 'the men of our time have become increasingly conscious of their dignity as human persons',¹ and also that 'women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity';² and, of course, the implications of this increasing awareness of the dignity of the human person are writ large in the documents of the Council dealing with religious liberty, with the Church in the modern world, with the Church as the people of God, and with the members of religious orders and congregations.

The emphasis on the dignity of the individual is new, but it would be absurd to say that the acknowledgment of the human person as superior to all positive law is a recent discovery. Those of you who have made the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius are familiar, perhaps over-familiar, with his opening statement that man was made to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and so doing to save his soul; and with the corollary that everything else is to be used or not by man according as it helps him to that purpose. But this 'everything else' includes his external rule of life. What is required is ignatian indifference to one's rules! I have expressed this extremely, perhaps even provocatively, you may think, but I consider it a thoroughly ignatian and christian sentiment, and as fully in accord with the writings of St Paul as it is with the opening paragraph of the jesuit *Constitutions*. There Ignatius writes that more than any external constitution it is the internal law of charity and love, which the holy Spirit writes and imprints in hearts, which will conserve and rule and promote the Society of Jesus in the service of God.³ One can see here clearly acknowledged the primacy of the internal leading of the holy Spirit over any external rule of life, an acknowledgment which does no more than repeat the teaching of Augustine and Aquinas: that in the New Law of the gospel what is primary is the grace or the presence of the holy Spirit, rather than

¹ *Pacem in Terris*, (Catholic Truth Society, London, 1963).

² *Ibid.*, p 19.

³ 'Y de nuestra parte, más que ninguna exterior constitución, la interior ley de la caridad y amor que el Spiritu sancto escribe y imprime en los corazones ha de ayudar para ello', in *Constituciones*, para 1. It is worth noting that the english translations, which describe the interior law of charity as one which the holy Spirit is *accustomed*, or *wont*, to imprint in men's hearts, follow the latin text of the *Constitutions*, and not the spanish original which does not possess this apparent qualification.

any written law, which, though important, is secondary.¹ It is this primacy of the Spirit at work in the individual, enabling him and ennobling him to serve God and his neighbour, which should be explained more and more today to young people in the Church and in communities within the Church; and they should receive a careful and accurate training in all that it implies.

All this with regard to the *attitude* which is desired towards one's external rule of life. In the day-to-day expression of this attitude there is further required the ability to discern in every situation what one's relationship should actually be to that rule, the ability to discern whether this is a situation where the rule should be observed literally, or whether it is one of those comparatively rare occasions when the rule should be ignored, so that the ultimate values which are enshrined in the rule may be better realized. And here is where one can see the absolute importance of discernment, and also of the discernment of spirits, of which St Ignatius is an acknowledged master. This subject is to be treated by others in subsequent papers, and I shall not presume to anticipate what they will have to say; but I should like to make the point briefly, for the sake of balance, that the ability to discern the spirits, or to discern whether any given situation is one where the external rule may, or even must, be ignored, depends in the last analysis on one thing, and that is love of God. St Ignatius would term it 'discerning charity', union with God, or intimacy with God; St Thomas would term it simply discernment, or connatural wisdom rooted in charity; and St Paul would term it being a spiritual man. The terms, and even the theological elaborations, differ, but the reality is abiding; a psychological identification with God's own point of view, which can be fully realized only if one shares, as fully as is given to one, in God's own life and love.

And one inevitable concomitant of this is fidelity to one's external rule of life, the unremitting striving to observe the rule which alone gives one the competence, when occasion demands, to abandon the letter of the law, the better to realize the spirit and the purpose of the law. It was a wise spiritual director who once said that the only man who can serenely omit his daily examination of conscience, when the occasion calls for it, is the man who always makes his daily examination of conscience.

A final point which I should like to make is this. I have said that

¹ *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q 106, a 1.

education and formation are required to enable the individual to take habitually a balanced view of the role and function of law, and that in individual situations there is need for personal discernment to judge how one is to act with regard to a particular law. I have been presuming that the occasions when one might or must judge that a particular rule is irrelevant and to be ignored are, by definition, comparatively rare. If rules are made with the normal course of events in mind, then the occasions when they do not apply will be in the minority, and the internal leading of the holy Spirit will mostly be in accordance with the external rule. But what happens if the balance changes? If the occasions when discernment leads individuals increasingly to ignore a particular law multiply? Surely, the law must be changed? Or better, the letter of the law must be changed in order that its spirit and purpose shine forth more clearly. And this not just from a desire for legal tidiness, but from the acknowledgment that the letter of the law has become not a help but a positive hindrance to the purpose for which it is intended.

And this change of balance, too, is a phenomenon which has become increasingly realized in recent years. If I may quote from Pope John again, he points out that today

social life in the modern world is so varied, complex and dynamic that even a juridical structure which has been prudently and thoughtfully established is always inadequate for the needs of society . . . Such a situation therefore demands that the civil authorities have clear ideas about the nature and extent of their official duties if they wish to maintain the existing juridical structure in its basic elements and principles, and at the same time meet the exigencies of social life, adapting their legislation to the changing social scene and solving new problems. They must be men of great equilibrium and integrity, competent and courageous enough to see at once what the situation requires and to take necessary action quickly and effectively.¹

Pope John has secular society in mind, of course, but his remarks have a relevance for any community of men and women possessing a stable external rule of life in the world today. Flexibility and adaptability are essential, and loyal and courageous fidelity to the purpose for which any community exists demands a continual sensitivity

¹ *Pacem in Terris*, (Catholic Truth Society, London, 1963) p 30.

to new and temporary expressions of that purpose. I have used the phrase 'temporary expressions'. You may remember the story of the young man who said, 'when I was seventeen I thought I knew everything. Now that I'm twenty-one I realize I didn't. But I do now'. The process of consultation and adaptation is continual, and external rules of life must be subject to continual re-appraisal. Nor do I understand how one can talk meaningfully today of a definitive adaptation or reform unless it is in terms of *very* general rules and norms. Otherwise one will ignore the implications of Pope John's remark that 'even a juridical structure which has been prudently and thoughtfully established is *always* inadequate for the needs of society' in the modern world.

What this means is that those responsible for establishing the external rule of life are also subject to the leading of the holy Spirit, and must be ever sensitive to his promptings in themselves, and also within all the members of the community of which they form a part. It is basic to the Church that the Spirit works not just in individuals but in a collectivity, in the community of believers; and wherever he blows, his voice must be listened to. And if he is leading a growing number of members increasingly to by-pass the letter of any part of the external rule of life, the clear conclusion (to me, at least) is that the letter has now served its purpose, and should give way to a more faithful expression of the spirit and aim which it existed to serve.

I should like to conclude with a short quotation from St Thomas on the tension which might be considered to exist between conformity and consent, between the external rule of life and the leading of the holy Spirit. He was considering the aberration which has arisen from time to time in christianity that those who possess the holy Spirit, those who are spiritual men, are not bound by any other law, even civil law; and he replied as follows:

The law of the holy Spirit is superior to any law made by man. It follows that spiritual men who are led by the law of the holy Spirit are not subject to law when it is contrary to the leading of the holy Spirit. But nonetheless it is an element in the leading of the holy Spirit that spiritual men are subject to human laws.¹

This, it seems to me, sums up very well the relationship between

¹ *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q 96, a 5 ad 2.

an external rule of life and the leading of the holy Spirit. The external rule of life is an element in the leading of individuals by the holy Spirit, particularly when that rule is continually re-appraised in the light of its fundamental purpose. But occasions can and do arise when more is required than reasoned conformity, when the leading of the Spirit will be contrary to the letter of the rule of life, because that rule cannot foresee every contingency. What is required is a serene acceptance of this possibility, not only on the part of individuals but also on the part of superiors; and when through discernment we judge that the possibility has become a reality, what is even more required is not loss of nerve or fear of non-conformity, but consent, and courage, and trust in the Spirit of Christ who is leading us.