

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

By PETER HEBBLETHWAITE

CHELTENHAM, England, is a sleepy town, a favourite place to retire to. It has parks, benches, colonels and old ladies. One day I overheard an old gentleman of distinguished appearance and bristling moustache say in clipped tones: 'Can't tell the difference between boys and girls today. Look just the same to me. It's a sign of the times'. The calm of the park had been momentarily broken; but peace soon returned, the birds twittered on, and the old gentleman relapsed into waiting for dinner or death, whichever came first.

I don't suppose that he had heard of the Vatican Council or knew that he had just used one of its key phrases. But his chance remark, deeply felt, enables us to see the rootedness of this expression in ordinary usage. Its use implies a threefold process which can be broken down in this way. One must first have noticed something, made an observation, spotted a trend or tendency. The second stage is to interpret this as possessing a meaning 'beyond itself'. And the third is to place the interpretation in a still wider context of 'where history is going'. This is precisely what the old gentleman did. He had noticed that boys are wearing shoulder-length hair, that blue jeans have become the unofficial uniform of the young, that unisex clothing is all the rage. He then interprets this observation as a 'sign' and places it in the context of a rather rough and ready philosophy of history which can be summed up in the general proposition: 'Things are getting steadily worse'. Such pessimism often helps to reconcile people to leaving this life. He could of course have been using the phrase more loosely and felt with Shelley 'These signs the coming mischief did foretell', but I think that the scheme I have suggested is not abusive and that it throws light on the passage in *Gaudium et Spes*, which declares that the Church, in its task of serving the world, 'has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel'.¹

'Signs of the times' is a phrase with a history, and we will begin

¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

with the history before moving on to its implications, ambiguities and impact.

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'Signs of the times' is a biblical expression, found for example in Matthew's Gospel,² where Jesus says to the pharisees and sadducees, after quoting proverbs about weather prediction, 'You know how to read the face of the sky, but you cannot read the signs of the times'. The 'times' refers to the messianic age, and the 'signs' are the miracles worked by Jesus.³ Recent ecclesiastical use of the term has leaned on this passage, though the accommodated interpretation it provides has not always satisfied exegetes. As far as I can discover, the first use in recent years was in the apostolic constitution, *Humanae Salutis*, by which Pope John convoked the Council. The general aim of the Council was expressed thus:

While humanity is on the edge of a new era, tasks of immense gravity and amplitude await the Church, as in the most tragic periods of its history. It is a question in fact of bringing the modern world into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the Gospel, a world which exalts itself with its conquests in the technical and scientific fields, but which brings also the consequences of a temporal order which some have wished to reorganize by excluding God.⁴

And the key provided for this contact between Church and world is the 'signs of the times':

Indeed we make ours the recommendation of Jesus that one should know how to distinguish the 'signs of the times' (cf Mt 16, 4), and we seem to see now, in the midst of so much darkness, a few indications which augur well for the fate of the Church and humanity.⁵

What these hopeful 'indications' were remains rather vague.

However, the encyclical letter, *Pacem in Terris*, though it does not formally speak of 'signs of the times', helps to fill out the content of the expression. Each of the four main sections into which it is divided concludes with a review of contemporary developments. So, for example, Part One, which is devoted to 'Order between Men', notes that 'workers refuse to be treated as if they were

² Mt 16, 3.

³ Cf Mt 11, 3-5; 12, 28.

⁴ 25 December 1961. (English version in Abbot, W.M., *The documents of Vatican II* (London, 1966), p. 703.)

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 794.

irrational objects', that 'women will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments' and that nations emerging from colonialism are shaking off their inferiority complexes. So far, it might be thought, so banal. But the importance of these observations is out of all proportion to their jejuneness. They raise a crucial question of method. Instead of making pronouncements on social matters and proposing general principles from a great height, an attempt is made to look at what actually is happening in the world. Admittedly it is all rather vague: trends and tendencies, shifts of sensibility, are difficult to pin down briefly and describe accurately. But in so far as *Pacem in Terris* asserts a correspondence between 'what was going on' and what the Church had to say, it inaugurated a theological method in which it became possible to see how 'events' could edge their way into theological reflection. This partly explains why *Pacem in Terris* was a popular success: it spoke to people about needs and aspirations which they recognized in themselves. It took the inner dynamism of their own desires seriously and related them to the gospel. Olivier Messaien set it to music, a task that would have proved difficult with most previous encyclicals.

Pacem in Terris appeared on 11 April 1963. It provided the Council, after an unsatisfactory and inner-directed first session, with a method which was used, chiefly but not exclusively, in what became *Gaudium et Spes*. The 1964 text, prepared at Zürich under the chairmanship of Bernard Häring, began with an introduction on 'signs of the times' which set out to be a neutral, objective and non-moralizing description of some tendencies of the contemporary world. It even included the alarming phrase *Vox enim temporis, vox Dei est*,⁶ which did not survive in the final redaction. Much revised and extended, the Häring *proemium* became the Introductory Statement of *Gaudium et Spes*.⁷ Inevitably it was a pretty general statement, a *pot-pourri* of sociological and psychological observations that could be criticized for vagueness and imprecision. One english bishop, asked what he thought about it, replied that he found it 'impenetrable'. French bishops, with a more optimistic faith in the grace-laden possibilities in man, were happier with it, while germans insisted on injecting an edge of pessimism and an awareness of the ravages of sin. These counter-balancing forces produced a description which brings out, in the end, the fundamental ambivalence of the 'signs of the times': 'The modern world shows itself at once

⁶ 'The voice of the times is the voice of God'.

⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 4-11.

powerful and weak, capable of the noblest of deeds or the foulest'.⁸

It is time to examine the presuppositions inherent in this method of approach. They are four, in ascending order of importance.

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The first is the simple observation that one should look before pronouncing. A recognizable empirical starting-point is indispensable. The more accurate it is and the more it leads people to say 'yes, that's the way it is', the more subsequent reflections will carry weight and credibility. Put like this, it might seem that the 'signs of the times' approach is a mere dodge, designed to lure the unsuspecting into an *a priori* trap by use of an *a posteriori* method. But it is simple common sense that distortion and inaccuracy in one's appreciation of the visible world do not inspire conviction in the account one gives of the world invisible. If I can only see my visible brothers through a misleading fog, I am not likely to advance far in the cloud of unknowing. Respect for the 'facts', which is a form of humility, is illustrated in Pope Paul's Apostolic Letter to Cardinal Roy.⁹ The letter is characterized by restraint and a sense of its own limitations, but it opens up new topics. It 'draws attention' to problem areas which threaten the very future of man, and sets down some of the conditions which have to be met if there is to be any human future for man at all. Thus it raises the question of urbanization and the 'new loneliness' that it can bring.¹⁰ It stresses the urgency of rebuilding community on the local level and devising 'new modes of neighbourliness'.¹¹ It shows itself not unaware of the demands of the Women's Liberation Movement, though it rejects 'that false equality which would deny the distinction laid down by the Creator'.¹² It points out that in urban life there is often a 'new poor', the handicapped, the maladjusted, the aged and all the fringe members of society.¹³ Topical problems such as the right to emigrate, highlighted by the difficulties experienced by the Russian Jews, are also dealt with.¹⁴ Throughout the document there is a new attentiveness to what is actually going on, an attempt to describe situations with some precision, which recall and bring more up to date the introductory statement of *Gaudium et Spes*. Moreover it places the responsibility for the work of discernment

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹ 14 May 1971. English translation in the *London Tablet*, Vol 225, no 6833 (22 May, 1971), pp 506ff.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

squarely on the shoulders of the local churches.

It is up to these christian communities with the help of the holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who hold responsibility and in dialogue with other christian brethren and all men of good will, to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed.¹⁵

The buck stops there.

Another recent document, the working-paper prepared by the Justice and Peace Commission for the 1971 Synod, shows the same respect for actual situations. It notes that 'young people manifest a growing scepticism towards any doctrinal message that turns out to be unable to achieve the liberation of man' and reminds the synod that the witness of life is in the end decisive: 'The synod will have to speak to the conviction of all men today that whoever presumes to talk of justice must first of all himself appear just in the eyes of men'. The working-paper stresses the need for a fresh analysis of the 'signs of the times', which it defines as 'new historical situations that call for a frank re-examination of the christian message, a courageous return to the essence of the gospel'.

It is important, then, to have grasped and expressed the real situation with all the resources and sub-disciplines that are available. But this requirement brings out the second presupposition of the 'signs of the times' approach: the whole difficult enterprise, which is never completed once for all, implies that the Church is learning from the world and that it may not always be in the van of progress. When this claim and this admission were made at the Council, there were protesting voices. Cardinal Ruffini thought that it was most damaging and undermining to admit that the Church had anything to learn. In a picturesque and revealing phrase, he declared that the Church should not go down on its knees to the contemporary world, that such a posture was in his eyes undignified and ridiculous. He would not so stoop. But these pleas of a disappointed triumphalist were rejected, and *Gaudium et Spes* devotes a whole cautious section to 'The help which the Church receives from the modern world'. It sees the Church as constantly challenged and stimulated by ideas and events. This is partly a matter of the language of faith and 'accommodated preaching', partly a matter of the social structure of the Church.¹⁶ Incompetence is not regarded

¹⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

as an asset: 'The Church must rely on those who live in the world, are versed in different institutions and specialities, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes both of believers and unbelievers'.¹⁷ There is the frank recognition of the possibility of anonymously christian actions: 'For *whoever* promotes the human community at the family level, culturally, in its economic, social, and political dimensions, both nationally and internationally, such a one, according to God's design, is contributing greatly to the Church community as well, to the extent that it depends on things outside itself'.¹⁸ Gladly would she learn and gladly teach, one might say. Cardinal Ruffini can rest in his sicilian grave; the Church has not abdicated:

With the help of the holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word.¹⁹

Learning, of course, can take many forms: one can learn from opposition, contradiction, challenge or simple questioning – but learn one must, or the authority to teach will evaporate. And learning starts in listening.

But we have not yet reached the heart of the matter. To stop at this point would be to produce a truncated and lop-sided view of 'signs of the times'. To ignore 'what is going on' is bad enough: to turn it into the norm of christian faith would be a comparable error and lead to a canonization of whatever is. So one must go further. *Gaudium et Spes* develops two theological presuppositions which qualify all that has already been said.

The first is best illustrated by an example taken from the pastoral constitution itself. Speaking of the defence of human rights and where the impulse to defend them comes from, it says:

God's Spirit, who with a marvellous providence directs the unfolding of time and renews the face of the earth, is not absent from this development. The ferment of the gospel has aroused in man's heart a demand for dignity that cannot be stifled.²⁰

The 'demand for dignity' is attributed to the holy Spirit (and the latin text puts it positively: *Spiritus Dei . . . huic evolutioni adest*). Some of those who experience this demand and express it in political action will no doubt be totally unaware of any such possibility:

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

what they know is the sense of oppression or injustice. But the text clearly implies that the ferment of the gospel has produced the demand. Ferment: the word was not chosen lightly. It refers to the power the gospel has of disrupting comfortable and conventional ways of thinking and acting. Moreover it further implies that the ferment of the gospel, once released in the world through the preaching of the Church, can apparently break loose from its original moorings and invade what we think of as secular society. Nevertheless, even when this happens, there is still a real relation between the aspiration towards human dignity and the holy Spirit.

It would follow from this that the holy Spirit can be speaking to the Church in the most unlikely places. What have Marx, Freud and Mao to say? Not, plainly, in their doctrinaire or ideological systems, but in the aspirations which they translate and express. One can, for example, apply to Marx what he himself said of religion: he could be read as the expression of real distress, the sigh of the oppressed creature. The visible Church, though the privileged *locus* of grace, is not the only means of grace in the world. This is the basic foundation of 'signs of the times' theology, and it makes dialogue possible. There is one Spirit who speaks both in the Church and in the men and movements of our time. We are traversed by the Spirit, and one of the essential tasks of the Church is to discern the points of intersection.

Along with the pneumatological basis for a 'signs of the times' theology, *Gaudium et Spes* provides a christological basis: Christ is the Lord of history, the alpha and the omega, and the Church's task can be expressed as that of filling out the alphabet. Salvation is possible for all men without explicit knowledge of the gospel, but not without some relationship to Christ. There is only one vocation for all humanity and it is revealed in Christ:

For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers to every man the possibility of being associated in this paschal mystery.²¹

This text does not imply that we will always be able to detect the 'gospel without the gospel', but it impels us to make the attempt. This is where dialogue can begin. The unity of the human vocation must be stressed. One cannot oppose 'being human' and 'being a christian': they must ultimately come down to the same thing, since

²¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

Christ is the second Adam, the man according to the mind of the Father, the head of renewed humanity. Therefore *Gaudium et Spes* can conclude: 'Whoever follows Christ the perfect man, becomes himself more human'.²² And though the building up of the Kingdom cannot simply be identified with human progress, there is a real relation between the two.²³

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The approach that has been sketched out has many advantages and some risks. It provides a starting point in all catechetical, pastoral or dialogue situations (which should not be confused with each other). A christian will not want to impose an *a priori* framework on anyone: he will accept a multiplicity of possible starting points, and inch slowly forward from the values which his partner in dialogue has perceived or aspires to. Rahner has a useful phrase about a 'christology from below' which is based on the fumbling and hesitant grasp people already have of values. The 'christology from below' is met and fulfilled, and more than fulfilled, in the christology from on high, the gift. Charles A. Reich's book, *The Greening of America*, could be read in the light of this principle. One basic task would be to dispel the many illusions in Reich's account of american youth, without destroying the idealism. Dialogue involves being able to say 'no' as well as 'yes'.

More generally, one can say that the 'signs of the times' approach offers a way out of an *impasse* which has bedevilled christianity at least since the french revolution. It has taken a sharper form in protestantism, and all christians can learn a lesson from history. Ever since the nineteenth century, there have been many attempts to grapple with and speak to the contemporary world, and one can distinguish two types of protestant response. The first tendency can be called fundamentalism: it clings to an uncritical understanding of scripture and theology, and stubbornly refuses to make any concessions to the modern world. It has its psychological attractions, but it does nothing to solve our problems. The other strand has been liberal protestantism: its basic aim has been to understand christianity afresh, and make its teachings acceptable and intelligible to contemporary man. But whereas fundamentalism runs the risk of being in the end purely marginal and totally irrelevant, liberal protestantism runs the risk of working the miracle of Cana in reverse, and turning the wine of the gospel into the water of

²² *Ibid.*, 42.

²³ *Ibid.*, 39.

secular thought. The option has been between sectarian irrelevance and adulterating accommodation.

Much post-conciliar controversy within the catholic Church has taken the same form, or at least the charges and counter-charges have taken that form. Both positions must be resisted. Neither has a future. Either could split the Church. 'Signs of the times' offers a *tertium quid*, provided it is something more than a theoretical framework. Without complacency and without devising a form of neo-triumphalism, it should be possible to see a way forward which involves dialectical interplay rather than choice of an extreme. From the point of view of sociology, Thomas F. O'Dea suggested the following reasons why the catholic Church might be able to cope with this crisis:

Roman Catholicism alone has the basic characteristics without which success in this venture can hardly be deemed attainable: unity of various tendencies and the possibility of communication between them; a depth and reality of faith on both the popular and élite levels; a world-wide communion reflecting, potentially at least, a great variety of cultures; a real rootedness in the past.²⁴

Gregory Baum made the same point theologically in *The Credibility of the Church Today* (especially in chapter 4 which gives its title to the book). He sees the Church as equipped to deal with the tensions between local diversity and universal unity, as well as between past and present. These themes were also expressed in *Ecclesiam Suam*, where Pope Paul, after insisting that 'perfection in the Church does not consist in remaining changeless as regards external forms', recalled that *aggiornamento* had been the motto of his predecessor. He went on:

We want to recall it to mind as a stimulus to preserve the perennial vitality of the Church, her continuous awareness of and ability to study the signs of the times and her constantly youthful eagerness in 'scrutinizing it all carefully and retaining only what is good' (I Thess 5, 12) always and everywhere.²⁵

None of this dissolves tensions. But at least it locates them and suggests how they might begin to be creative. Fidelity without openness to innovation becomes rigidity; innovation without fidelity become arbitrariness. Institution without charismata becomes lifeless, charismata without reference to institution are wayward

²⁴ 'The Catholic Crisis', in *The World Year Book of Religions* (New York, 1968/London, 1969), Vol I, p 297.

²⁵ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1964, p 632.

and unstable. Inspired individual effort peters out.

All christian communities have the task of scrutinizing the signs of the times. Even if they do not want it, it is imposed on them by events. The world provides the agenda for the Church. One does not have to look far for the subject-matter, since the frontier between Church and world runs through our own hearts. There is compenetration. At the very least one can say that there will be over-lapping values between the christian and his world, not perfect coincidence, but a common area. And this will be the ground of meeting, the basis of dialogue, and the stimulus to renewal. It does lead to fierce arguments as new needs, differently appreciated, come into collision with established habits and inherited works. History can put an albatross round the neck of a community. One has to try to substitute discernment for argument. The word recalls the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius; but what Ignatius uses to help spiritual direction and gain self-knowledge can be applied to the situations in which a religious community today finds itself. At its humblest level, discernment simply means seeing, but seeing in difficult circumstances, first dimly perceiving an outline and then focusing it more sharply. It has to be a collaborative community exercise in which the sensitivity of some can be balanced by the hard-headed knowledge of others. But it has to be done to break up the log-jam and free the contemporary Church for the relevant service of the world we live in. What has to be discerned is the summons or appeal or question of the holy Spirit addressed to us in the coded message of events. There are risks, as there always are when one moves out into frontier regions. They can be borne, provided there is an optimism, not just of temperament, but of the holy Spirit. Its other name is hope, and it is the combination of realism and hope which makes 'signs of the times' a key to our present situation. I find both in the words of Sister Ethne Kennedy who was speaking to the Catholic Press Association:

Those of us who remain, who know themselves enriched by the painful growth of these years, look with great compassion on the Church, groaning in travail for the new world to come. We regret the sterile talk of defections, the futile attempts to draw back from decisions and risks courageously taken. We think that our recent experience of moving from conformity to free choice could create a more positive climate in the Church community – if people would listen (25 May 1970).

That is another sign of the times. And a far cry from Cheltenham.