THE CATHOLIC PRESIDENT DEBATE

The March 7 issue of Christianity and Crisis carries a lead editorial by Dr. John C. Bennett on "A Roman Catholic for President?" A footnote emphasizes that the editorial is not intended to indicate support for any candidate but rather to discuss the general principles at stake in a major national argument. The editorial is here reprinted.

The issue raised by the possibility of a Roman Catholic candidate for the Presidency is the most significant immediate problem that grows out of the confrontation of Roman Catholicism with other religious communities in the United States. There are a great many Protestants of influence who are inclined to say that they would never vote for a Roman Catholic for President. Many of them refuse to say this with finality, but there is a strong trend in this direction. Our guess is that it may be stronger among the clergy and among official Protestant spokesmen than among the laity.

Aside from crude forms of prejudice and a reluctance to accept the fact that this is no longer a Protestant country, there are two considerations behind this position that have some substance. The first is that the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church is at variance with American conceptions of religious liberty and of church-state relations. There is a fear that a Catholic President might be used by a politically powerful Catholic Church to give that church the preferred position to which, according to its tradition, it believes itself entitled.

The other consideration is that there are a few specific issues on which there is a Catholic position and, short of any basic change in our institutions, the nation's legislation and policy might be deflected by a Catholic President toward these known positions of his church. One example that is not often mentioned is the intransigent view of the problems of the Cold War that was expressed in the American Catholic Bishops' statement late in 1959. (We could not vote for any man, Protestant or Catholic, who takes such a view.)

On matters of this kind most Catholics are more likely to be affected by the position taken by the authorities of their church than would a Protestant. Even though they may not agree with the bishops, it would be embarrassing to oppose them publicly. Catholic bishops do their debating privately; American Catholicism on the hierarchical level, therefore, gives the impression of a united front that no Protestant churches are able to give.

We want to direct three comments to those who take a negative view concerning a possible Roman Catholic President:

(1) If the American people should make it clear that a Catholic could never be elected President, this would be an affront to 39,000,000 of our fellow-citizens, and it would suggest that full participation in American political life is denied to them as Catholics. This would be true even though Catholics are governors, senators, congressmen, and Supreme Court justices. We believe that this situation would wound our common life and damage our institutions more grievously that it would be possible for a Catholic President to do even if he chose to. We are shocked that so many Protestants seem unwilling to give any weight to this.

(2) We are justified in ascertaining what view of church-state relations and of the basis of religious liberty a particular Catholic candidate holds. We may learn this without grilling him, for his record of public service and its implications would be an open book.

There are two main views of religious liberty that are held among Catholics. The traditional view regards as normative the idea of a Catholic state with the church in a privileged position and with at least a curtailment of the liberties of non-Catholics. This view is an inheritance from an earlier period of history, and many Catholic theologians and ecclesiastical leaders now reject it. They believe in religious liberty for non-Catholics on principle and not merely as a matter of pragmatic adjustment to the American situation.

This more liberal view is not limited to this country; it is held widely in Western Europe. It is one view held in Vatican circles. Those who hold this view believe that Pius XII was at least open to it, and they are even more sure that this is true of his generous-minded successor.

In emphasizing the importance of ascertaining the Catholic candidate's views on these matters, we are supporting a contention of Bishop James Pike in his Life article (Dec. 21, 1959). We are sorry that he seemed to suggest that American Catholics were arrayed against Catholics elsewhere and against the Pope.

The Roman Catholic world is divided from top to bottom on the question of the basis of religious
liberty, whether it is to be accepted only pragmatically in a pluralistic country or whether it should be defended on Christian principle, even in situations in which the church has the power, through its influence on the electorate, to impose its will on the state.

The American laity are emphatically on the side of the more liberal interpretation. It is quite certain that any Catholic layman who reaches the point where he can be considered a likely candidate for President will be sufficiently influenced by the democratic ethos to represent that position. This was true of Alfred E. Smith as it is true of Senator Kennedy. But anyone who is troubled about this matter is justified in asking where a Catholic candidate stands on this question.

We believe that it is quite possible that a Catholic in the Presidency who is himself liberal on this matter and who is sophisticated enough to know what is happening in the church might be better able to deal with Catholic pressures than a Protestant. He would be in a better position to measure them and to appeal from one part of the church to another.

(3) So far as the specific issues on which there is a known Catholic position are concerned, there are very few that come to the desk of the President. More of them are dealt with by mayors and governors, and the Republic has survived many Catholic mayors and governors. And on many issues within the purview of the President, the Catholic community is divided—even, for example, on the appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican. (It was a Baptist who made the latest appointment to the Vatican.) Furthermore, a President is subjected to so many pressures and counterpressures that he is less vulnerable to any one form of pressure than most other public servants.

There is the vexing problem of birth control. As a domestic problem it belongs chiefly to the states, and it is fortunate that many Catholics, while they do not reject their church's position on birth control in terms of morals and theology, do not believe there should be a civil law that imposes the Catholic moral teaching upon non-Catholics. As one element in a program of foreign aid, this may belong to the President's province. (We may say in passing that President Eisenhower has one as far as the Catholic authorities in rejecting its inclusion in governmental programs.)

Among the various alternatives open to a Catholic President, Father John R. Connery, S.J., suggests in *America* (Dec. 12, 1959) that the President could allow a foreign aid bill, of which he basically approved but which included financial provision for a birth control program, to become law by ignoring it for ten days. This procedure presupposes that there would be in his mind a conflict between his religiously directed conscience on a specific point and his broader judgment as to what was good policy.

There is general agreement that this country should not urge on another country a birth control program but that it should cooperate with a country that desires it. The birth control feature of a broader program of economic development could be paid for by the government of the aided country while the United States government would support the program as a whole. This merely suggests a possibility that might enable a Catholic President to handle this issue constructively.

However, it must be noted that the idea of birth control must be weighed along with all the other issues that are at stake in an election. Even if a Catholic candidate were to take a line here that we might regret, this would not necessarily outweigh all the other considerations of which we need to take account. Furthermore, we do not know what line a Catholic President would take in a complicated situation, for Catholic moral theology gives a high place to the virtue of prudence.

We should like to add to these considerations a more positive note: a Catholic President who is well instructed in the moral teachings of his church would have certain assets. (It is chiefly in the areas of sex and medicine that the Protestant finds elements of intolerable liberalism in Catholic moral teaching.) If he is of an essentially liberal spirit he may absorb the best in the real humanism of Catholic thought.

A Catholic President might have a better perspective on the issue of social justice than many Protestants. He might be guided by the ethical inhibitions present in Catholic views of the just war so as to resist the temptation to make military necessity paramount in all matters of national strategy. He might have a wiser and more seasoned understanding of the claims of the person in relation to the community than many a one-sided Protestant individualist.

We are not now speaking of any particular Catholic candidate, and there are elements in Catholic moral doctrine that we reject. When these are interpreted by the narrower type of ecclesiastic, we often find them repellent. But Catholic teaching has its better and more humane side, and it is the repository of much wisdom that could stand a Catholic President in good stead.