

CATHOLIC REFORM AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Of the items that were considered in the second session of Vatican Council II few were of such widespread interest as the discussion on religious liberty. Writing from Rome, Kyle Haselden placed this discussion in a context which would make it more readily available to those who are not Roman Catholics. His comment appeared in the December 18 issue of The Christian Century, a weekly ecumenical journal of which he is managing editor.

Appraisals of Roman Catholic reform should distinguish between official and unofficial changes in the structure and the life of the church. Official reform—whether by papal decrees and encyclicals or by council decisions which become papal promulgations—rides on two rails which tie it to the past and strictly limit its range. These delimiting rails are the law of continuity and the law of development. By the law of continuity the Roman Catholic means that the church cannot hold as truth or teach today anything inconsistent with what it has believed and taught in its long past. The church's doctrine, it is held, is always self-consistent and always remains the same. Nothing the church taught in the past was erroneous and nothing it teaches today can deviate from or contradict previous doctrine.

The second law—the law of development—is a corollary of the first. It means, in the Roman view, that the truth always consistently held by the church unfolds progressively to meet changing conditions in society. In his presentation of the religious liberty chapter of the schema on ecumenism Bishop Emile-Joseph DeSmedt of Bruges, Belgium, explained the law of development: "The ecclesiastical magisterium adapts, explains, and defends genuine doctrine according to the demands of errors which are spread, and according to the needs which arise from the development of man and society. By this progress the mind of the church is led to search more deeply into doctrine and to understand it more clearly." The image portrayed is that of a church which is never false to the truth in its teaching—though confessedly it may sometimes be in its practices—always progressing, never regressing, never "out of character," bringing the new interpretation of its ancient truth out of an old treasury according to the needs and demands of the social context.

The astute Protestant will discern in the applica-

tion of such laws—whatever merit they may have—a wide opening for occasional sophistry and, more frequently, for the pushing of scholastic argument to the point of absurdity. How much wiser, easier and more honest it would be, the Protestant will say, to admit, as history indicates, that the church was often wrong in teaching as well as in practice in the past, and to get on with the business of what should be done now. It is well and good for the Protestant to say this, but such a suggestion demands a radical and entirely unlikely change in Roman Catholic doctrine. The Catholic Church does not and will not see itself as a fallible institution progressing by trial and error; by definition it considers itself a doctrinally inerrant church progressing by the unfolding of truth from truth.

•

However much sensitive Protestants may be justifiably piqued by a Roman Catholic logic which to Protestants appears arrogant and both logically and historically indefensible, the question for them to ask about Roman Catholic reform is not *how* but *where* the reforming church arrives. As Cardinal Joseph Ritter, archbishop of St. Louis, Missouri, said in another connection, "The goal to be achieved is the principle of all motion." Is the Roman Catholic Church, however haltingly and however circuitously, moving toward the truth? Are Roman Catholics in their own peculiar way moving toward an ecumenically shared truth? If so, let there be no chiding of their delay and no carping about their method.

Moreover, Protestants should ask this question with the utmost sympathy for those Roman Catholic churchmen who move the church forward despite the crippling doctrines of continuity and development. There are many men in the Roman Catholic fold, a considerable number of whom are here at this council, who know how doctrine, fixed and immutable, can paralyze progress. Speaking of ecumenism recently in the general congregation of Council Fathers, Cardinal Paul-Emile Léger, archbishop of Montreal, Canada, said: "It is our privilege to have the opportunity to investigate with our separated brethren the unsearchable riches of Christ. Immobilism in doctrine is a serious obstacle in the path of unity. We can usefully recall the words of St. Augustine: 'Seek that you may find and then continue to seek that you may find more.' Genuine

Christianity has no room for immobilism." In some respects seeking is harder for a Roman Catholic Church burdened as well as strengthened by tradition and precedent than it is for a Protestant church which, if need be, can refute its intervening past and return to Scripture for judgment and new direction. When, therefore, Protestants see the Roman Catholic Church moving belatedly to positions Protestants have long held and claiming that they do so without a break with the past, the occasion is one for Protestant joy rather than petulant complaint.

At no time will Protestants more need to see these facts clearly than in their reactions to the council's deliberations on religious liberty. To be sure, there is at this moment little possibility that the bishops will at this session even accept the proposed chapter five of the schema on ecumenism as a basis for discussion. But as of November 19 the council had before it a draft on religious liberty which if adopted with minor emendations will sweep the Roman Catholic Church into the midstream of twentieth-century thought and action in the field of religious liberty. And Bishop DeSmedt's closely reasoned, impassioned preface to that chapter has seized world opinion even as in its initial delivery it gripped the minds and hearts of the bishops and drew from them the loudest, most general and sustained applause given to any speech in this session.

The immediate reaction of Protestants will be, "We tried to tell you this 400 years ago and you would have none of it." Secularists will say, "What's new about this? How does it differ in applicable principle from the United Nations' Universal Declaration on Human Rights?" Conscientious Roman Catholics will answer, as Father Gustave Weigel did to me: "There's nothing new here but theological argument. The only new thing here, if the church adopts this chapter, will be that the church has said it." And basically, beyond the church's *ipse dixit* and the deference to doctrines of continuity and development, there is in the chapter no scriptural argument for religious liberty which Protestants have not preached for centuries. Key sentences from DeSmedt's *relatio* will strike responsive chords: "Each and every man, who follows his conscience in religious matters, has a natural right to true and authentic religious liberty. . . . No human person can be the object of coercion or intolerance. . . . The greatest injury is to prevent a man from worshipping God and from obeying God according to the dictate of his own conscience."

•

A Protestant response to Roman Catholic talk about religious liberty which does not go beyond

this immediate and superficial reaction will miss the whole point of what God is doing in this day to liberate his children as well as to unite them. Protestants did not invent religious liberty nor did they abstract their defense of it rationally. This innate freedom and its biblical and theological apology are from God, who endowed all men with elemental dignity and to some men sooner than to others gave the knowledge of the gift. Protestants' fidelity to the truth as they have received it prescribes that they pray for and, in every way they can, ease the way for other men to come to the blessing of religious liberty which is preliminary to faith.

The solicitude of Protestants is invited by the uncertain future of this subject in the council. Unless there is a papal intervention in the closing days of the session there is no chance that the chapter on religious liberty will be promulgated during this session. This is so despite the Conciliar Fathers' enthusiastic reception of the proposal and despite the longing of half the world for a council statement on religious liberty. The simple explanation is that time has run out. The religious liberty chapter was for some reason—perhaps a practical one—included in the schema on ecumenism, where in the opinion of many bishops it does not belong. The result was that after much debate the council voted to accept as a basis for discussion the first three chapters of the schema on ecumenism, eliminating and postponing for future action the chapter on the Jews and the one on religious liberty. This means that no one knows definitely when the question of religious liberty will be raised by the council, or whether it will be raised at all.

Through several bishops the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity strongly championed the inclusion of religious liberty in the ecumenism schema. But to this reporter it appears that the stronger the argument for embracing religious liberty by the schema on ecumenism became, the greater appeared the reasons for dealing with religious liberty independently. Certainly, as Cardinal Ritter said, religious liberty is "a basic and prerequisite for ecumenical contacts with other Christian bodies. . . . Without such a declaration, mutual confidence will be impossible and serious dialogue will be precluded." But religious liberty is not merely a means to unity; it is valid in itself as a means to faith. Religious liberty not only preconditions men to unity; it also enables man to be man. The subject belongs, then, not in the schema on ecumenism nor, as proposed by some, in the catch-all schema 17 on the presence of the church in the world but, theologically at least, it belongs in a schema or chapter on the nature of man. At the moment no one knows when or how

the church will make known its current will on religious liberty. With millions of Roman Catholics living in lands where freedom is denied, and with the rest of the world eagerly awaiting the official Catholic view of the free conscience, it is difficult to imagine the council's postponing its decision on this subject beyond the third session. Meanwhile, Protestants should pray for the coming of that day in which the whole Christian family proclaims the right of every individual to the free exercise of his religion.

•

As I noted at the outset of this report, there occurs in the vast and complex life of the Roman Catholic Church an unofficial as well as an official reform. When the Ecumenical Council is seen at close range there appears a very definite sense in which Vatican II records rather than initiates reform. Just as a state periodically adjusts its laws to society's changed mores, so the church slowly brings its canons abreast of fermenting moods and ideas in its widespread parishes. All developing tempers and thoughts cannot be honored by the church since some of them are mutually contradictory and some would be considered heretical. But the church in council cannot lightly dismiss the massive, informal messages which come to Rome from major blocs in the widespread ecclesiastical empire.

The unofficial reform of the church is demon-

strated also by the popularity of the religious liberty theme in this council, and particularly by the fact that the theme has been promoted by bishops and council experts from the Western democracies. (The prolonged applause given Bishop DeSmedt's introductory remarks on religious liberty was not aroused merely by the fact that he presented a welcome subject; it owed as much to the adroitness with which he shaped his presentation to the demands of "continuity and development.") Behind DeSmedt's oratory many American observers and council experts could see the pen of Father John Courtney Murray, S.J., professor at Woodstock College in Woodstock, Maryland, who has for years made religious liberty his field of special interest. In a press interview Father Murray was asked, "It is rumored that you wrote much of Bishop DeSmedt's *relatio*; is that true?" To this pointed question Father Murray replied with a warm, disarming and wholly evasive "That's really news." Whether or not Father Murray contributed to DeSmedt's *relatio*, his country and the other Western democracies—and Protestants in large measure—helped draft the chapter on religious liberty. Whether we Protestants know it or want to admit it, some of our dearest hopes for mankind have been entrusted to the Second Vatican Council. And for the good that has come and will come from the council we can give thanks and rejoice in the fact that we have been a part of the church's unofficial reform.

books

Castro's Cuba, A Tragedy of Escalation

Christianity and Revolution: The Lesson of Cuba by Leslie Dewart. Herder & Herder, 320 pages. \$5.50.

by Alan Geyer

Just five years ago this month, Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba. The extraordinary person of Dr. Castro himself, together

The Reverend Alan Geyer is chairman of the department of political science at Mary Baldwin College.

with the political phenomena associated with his revolution, has called forth a shelf of volumes which seek to unfold the "real" story of the establishment of a Communist regime in Latin America. Fidelismologists (original word here!) differ radically in their interpretations. Some have imagined that Castro was a Communist from the beginning who concealed his true identity for tactical reasons. Others have concluded that he was duped by the Communists and remains their

captive. It is said by a third school that United States policy drove Castro into the arms of the Communists. Yet another group claims that he made an eyes-open choice of a most pragmatic kind: he found after the revolution that he *needed* Communists for his own purposes.

Leslie Dewart's *Christianity and Revolution: The Lesson of Cuba*, while building its case partly on the latter two theses and emphatically rejecting the former two, provides a new perspective of spe-