

CHURCHES IN FOREIGN POLICY DEBATES

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Exploration of the role of churches in foreign policy debates is shot through with complexities. As a prerequisite for discussion of the role of churches in any secular matter, or even in many moral or religious discussions, precision is demanded in the meaning of the word "Church." Yves Congar suggests that perhaps nine times out of ten the word "Church" signifies the hierarchy of bishops. In an effort to eliminate one complicating factor from an already bewildering array of difficulties it might be well to attempt a definition of the episcopacy. While acknowledging that the definition may compound the complexities, it is offered as a point of reference for later discussion of the major topic.

The proposal here is simply to define the episcopate as the body of men duly consecrated in the lineage of the Apostles who devote themselves to leading the liturgical prayers of the assembly and preaching the Word. This definition is taken from the distinction made by the Twelve when they were confronted with their first recorded occasion of choice regarding the allocation of their time and the use of the power of their office (Acts 6:1-4). Further qualification of the role of the episcopate is found in Peter's exhortation to his confreres and subsequently to their successors. In his first encyclical, Peter tries desperately to summarize the exactness his Lord used in describing the manner in which the episcopal ministry is to be exercised (Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22: 24-27; John 13: 12-17). The hierarchy is to lead the people in prayer and preach the Word "without using constraints or lording over anyone" (1 Peter 5:1-3). In brief, the episcopate is the group of men who, presiding as humble servants, makes ever present, through word and sacrament, the exhilarating events of the Good News.

Once this has been stated it must also be acknowledged that the commission of our Lord to the apostolic (episcopal) body of the Church is at best an awesome assignment for mortal men. Careful reading of the Gospels discloses the extraordinary candor the writers used in describing the human weaknesses of the original twelve bishops. Episodes revealing the glaring

weakness of the first bishop are particularly frequent and remarkably frank. The events which follow the first Pentecost are a 2000-year history of these men—bishops spiralling in and out of promise—*sin-metanoia*; an almost exasperating account which severely tests the credulity of our Lord's promise to be with the Church "even to the end of time."

The episcopal body is part of the human scene. Daniélou even speaks affectionately of the "Church which is mud-splashed from history." Church is human as well as divine. The paradox for Christians — and perhaps the obstacle for others — is the belief that Almighty God entrusted to frail humans the precious message of proclaiming His mysterious presence among men. But belief in the Church demands acceptance of paradox. Morris West's recent expression is helpful: "There is the one hand and the other hand and the Church is to show you how you may walk justly in between." Certainly the frailty of countless bishops, in whom believers erroneously see the totality of Church, discredited the claims of the Roman Church for Wycliff and Luther, Davis and Kavanaugh. Perhaps the disturbance for these unbelievers was not so much that they fell out of love with the Church but that they had had too great expectations of the episcopacy. Five years after Luther broke with the hierarchy he noted that the newly formed Protestant congregations were threatened by "strife, rioting and rebellion," and he expressed the desire to see the "true episcopal office reestablished."

The number of specific truths which have been held in unanimous agreement among the body of bishops — throughout the history of the episcopate — are remarkably few; astonishingly few (perhaps, even too few) for those who have an over-clericalized, that is hierarchialized, view of the Church. Possibly one of the chief realities about the Church is the extraordinary fact that Sacred Scripture has managed to resist countless corrosive assaults for over 3000 years. It is to the credit of churchmen of ancient Israel and the successors of the Twelve that this treasure is available to us today. The episcopate, in season and out of season, often poorly, and at times with great charisma, leads the celebration of word and sacrament, so that the assembly of believers can continue

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making the Church present for the world.

However, to expect the episcopacy to provide major leadership in the promotion of secular affairs is to define Church too narrowly; it presumes the Spirit of the Lord is contained too excessively in the episcopate; it defies the evidence of the history of Christianity (perhaps thereby proving the non-believers' thesis that the Church's claims are fraudulent). Langston leading the political march against King John, Fisher defying Henry — these men are rare. Their prominent involvement in secular affairs illustrates only the possibility of action by individual churchmen rather than pointing to the advances led by the corporate body of bishops.

There was a notable absence of leadership of the hierarchy in the great monastic reforms of the early Middle Ages. Bishops were deterrents to the European peasant revolts of the 12th-15th centuries. The success of the popular revolutions in France, America and Russia in the last two centuries owe scarcely anything to the hierarchy of the Roman, English or Orthodox churches. The contribution of the hierarchy to the solution of the American scandal of slavery was that it maintained Church unity while the nation ripped itself apart, and the wounds are still not healed. The support given by the German hierarchy in the thirties to the Nazi party is perhaps only a more obvious example of the ineptness of the Church in secular affairs; but what was the announced position of the American, French and Italian episcopacy regarding the German solution to the Jewish problem?

What can concerned Christians validly expect from the voice of the episcopal body regarding secular affairs? Although documents of Vatican II are not silent on the matter, those in search of a simple unequivocal position will be disappointed. For example, in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* the bishops alert the laity to the fact that clerical competence is extremely limited in secular affairs; allusion is even made that it is not the role of the hierarchy to "inscribe the divine law in the life of the earthly city."

"Laymen should not think that bishops are always so expert, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission." (Article 43)

But then, evidently fearing some might conclude that the episcopacy admits to no competence or concern in the secular realm, the bishops attempted to add balance to the above citation. In the *Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office* they stated:

"Bishops should set forth the ways by which the

very grave questions are to be solved, concerning ownership, increased and just distribution of material goods, peace and war, and brotherly relations among all peoples." (Article 12)

In the midst of this cross-fire the question might be raised: Does the hierarchy think it has a mission in secular affairs or does it not? But perhaps a more realistic question must be asked: What is to be done if "the ways by which these grave matters are to be solved are not forthcoming"?

Pope Paul VI, seeming to anticipate this question (and prompted by his urgent concern for the billion people in the Third World), addressed himself to this issue about eighteen months after the Ecumenical Council. In his Easter 1967 encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, he specifically states that:

"... laymen must act, without waiting passively for orders and directives (from the hierarchy) to initiate freely and infuse Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which they live. Changes are needed; basic reforms are indispensable." (Article 81)

The chief bishop is here warning the laity not to place an unwarranted reliance on the role of the hierarchy in the secular arena. Laymen waiting for the call to action by the episcopacy must wait in vain. The sin of waiting (sometimes inaccurately called prudence) may be the bitter fruit of a distorted understanding of the doctrine of infallibility. This doctrine does not hold that everything said and done by the episcopacy and the papacy is necessarily right. It holds, rather — to put it more simply and in a positive term — that the position of the hierarchy at any given time is *adequate*. Infallibility promises that the hierarchy's pronouncements and actions will not destroy the Church. The corollary is that the Church is indestructible. Human, frail, even incorrigible bishops cannot kill the Church. The Church has survived mutilations at the hands of hierarchy and laity, but the creed of the orthodox Catholic is that the community of believers, the Church, is imperishable. The doctrine of hierarchical infallibility is a function of the belief in ecclesial indestructibility.

What has been attempted here is a partial definition, and thereby a circumscribing of the role, of the episcopal body of the Church in secular affairs. The intention also is to express implicitly the wide range of action open to the laity. In secular matters laymen should not expect too much from the hierarchy, but they should push it toward the public arena. Still, in this perplexing matter of the Church's involvement in the modern world, the essential task of the layman is not to secularize the hierarchy but to bring Christian values to the secular arena.