

Conversation With Bernard Häring

Gary MacEoin

Bernard Häring is one of the foremost theologians of the Catholic Church. His theological skirmishes and battles over the last several years are a record not only of a personal journey but of the contemporary vicissitudes and transformation of the oldest continuous institution in the Western world.

Häring's difficulties with the Holy Office, the Vatican's once-powerful heresy-hunting tribunal, began during the first sessions of the ante-preparatory commissions for Vatican Council II. Employed as a professional theologian by the German bishops, he ran into immediate difficulty with Cardinal Ottaviani and Archbishop Pietro Parente, the two top men at the Holy Office, and with the violent-tempered Franciscan, Ermenegildo Lio, Defender of the Bond, whose persistent efforts to smother any suggestion of progress in the documents to be debated at the Council were constantly and successfully challenged by Häring. Häring had the advantage of having written a revolutionary three-volume manual of moral theology called *Das Gesetz Christi* (The Law of Christ) that was being translated into most modern languages and being hailed as a breakthrough in ethical and moral teachings, taking into account as it did contemporary sociological and psychological scholarship. The second volume of *Das Gesetz Christi* had received an accolade on its appearance from Archbishop Giovanni Battista Montini, who called for its immediate translation into Italian.

After Montini became Pope in June, 1963, between the first and second sessions of the Council, he invited Häring to give the following Lenten exercises to himself and the Roman Curia, thus breaking with a long tradition that restricted this retreat to trusted

Italian preachers. In his personal instruction, Pope Paul admonished Häring to speak *sine timore*—without fear. The German Redemptorist took full advantage of the opportunity to outline the program of Church reform then being advocated by the leading progressives at the Council, in whose confidence he stood high, from Cardinals Léger and Suenens to Patriarch Maximos IV Saigh of the Melchite rite and his own archbishop, Cardinal Döpfner of Munich.

Those were the days when Häring's Vatican stocks ran high. His slim volume on the Johannine Council had pleased Pope John. One of John's last acts was a reminder to his secretary, Monsignor Loris Capovilla, to contact Häring and thank him for a book which—John said—had captured the concept of what the Council should accomplish. As the Montini phase of the Council progressed, however, Häring's stocks gradually fell. He continued, nevertheless, to influence the proceedings, particularly in the commissions dealing with what became eventually the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

Häring is seldom caught off guard, but it happened when Pope Paul tried to lock the Church forever into the rigid position on contraception formulated by his immediate predecessors. Häring had been one of the first moral theologians brought into the Pontifical Commission on Population and Family Life which Pope John set up to study the Church's stand on birth control. On the basis of his moral theology and his long pastoral experience, he was convinced of the need for a radical change. When the bombshell of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* burst in July, 1968, he blurted out to a group in Conception, Missouri, "We must rescue the Pope from the Curia." He later added in a formal statement: "My reverence and love for the Holy Father would keep me from comment, if only my own beliefs were at issue. But the credibility of the church in its totality is here at stake. Many are shaken in their faith and their confidence in the church." He also signed the

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statement prepared by a group of theologians at the Catholic University of America which charged that the encyclical had identified the Church with the hierarchical function and failed to give due weight to the witness of the Church.

Häring quickly decided, however, that he did not want to cut his lines of communication with the Vatican, and he had his friend, Archbishop Emanuele Clarizio, who was then nuncio to the Dominican Republic, raise the issue with Paul when he visited Bogota the following month. "I know exactly what he said," the Pope told Clarizio. "I will not interfere with his theological opinions, but please ask him not to appeal to the public again." The request was repeated to Häring in person by Cardinal Cicognani, the Secretary of State, later in 1968.

That same year also marked the last direct effort of the Holy Office, by then renamed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to silence Häring. At a stormy meeting, he finally turned on his interrogators and demanded that they go after several professors in Roman universities who were calumniating the memory of Pope John and downgrading the effects and teachings of the Council. The curial prelate's response was, for Father Häring, the supreme compliment. "Ah, Father Häring," he said, "the views you express make it obvious that you do not wish to make a career within the hierarchy."

I first met Father Häring in Rome in 1963. He was one of the experts who each afternoon during the Vatican Council explained to newsmen the historical, sociological, biblical and theological background and implications of the interventions the Council Fathers had made at the morning meeting. Not yet 51, he was somewhat shy, but self-contained, with downcast eyes and an ascetic withdrawal that seemed a hangover from his Redemptorist training. But he was one of two panelists—the other being Father Gustave Weigel, S.J.—who, for me, quickly stood out from all the others. They would accept a question, evaluate it, give the questioner the full evaluation with complete disregard for outside factors. The chips fell where they fell.

The day the issue of worship in common with other Christians came up for the first time stands out particularly in my memory. It is hard to recall today what a hot issue it then was. The report from the morning session was simply unbelievable to anyone familiar with established Catholic teaching. Some Fathers were supposed to have said that Roman Catholics might not only pray in a Protestant church but even in some situations share with "heretics" in the Eucharist.

"What's this business about *communicati in sacris*?" I asked. "Do I understand that what our theology manuals rate a most grievous sin may not be sinful at all, may even be virtuous?"

A long, self-conscious silence. When it became

clear that the other panelists were not eager to reply, Father Häring spoke. "When I was in Russia," he began in his low, calm voice, with its strong German accent, "when the village people learned I was a priest, they would come to me to baptize the children and celebrate the liturgy. I baptized the children. I celebrated the liturgy. I didn't ask if they were going to raise the children as Roman Catholics. I knew they weren't. I didn't ask if they accepted papal supremacy before we joined in the eucharistic liturgy. Or, if we were going into battle, I would call the men together. 'This may be anyone's turn,' I would say. 'Are you ready to meet your Creator? I will absolve all who are sorry for their sins. I will give the Eucharist to those who wish it.' I didn't ask them if they were Catholics or Lutherans or anything."

What was he doing in Russia, I asked a colleague later. "He was a medic in the German Army in World War II," he said. "They didn't have chaplains under the Nazis, and priests volunteered for non-combat duty so that they could function informally as chaplains. Häring survived Stalingrad, took charge of a group of men when the front collapsed, and led them all the way back home."

This background was in my mind when I recently talked to Father Häring for an hour in the cheerless, high-ceilinged parlor of Sant'Alfonso, the bleak generalate house of the Redemptorists which is also the seat of the Accademia Alfonsiana. A kind of supergraduate school affiliated with the Lateran University, the Accademia—thanks primarily to the Häring impact—is the world's most prestigious source of professors of moral theology. Just about every major theology center around the world boasts of at least one of its alumni in a key chair. "And that fact," comments a colleague of Häring's, "will ultimately have more impact on Catholic attitudes to birth control than Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*."

You have achieved the enviable status where you have to do only what you yourself want, I began. *Tell me how you spent the last year. What I am really curious to know is what are the activities you regard as most important and most urgent at this particular moment of your life and of human history?* With the years he has grown more relaxed, more sure of himself. He is clean-shaven, almost a scrubbed look, hair short and neatly brushed, plentiful, benignly gray. He is trim as an athlete, no ounce of superfluous fat. The last nine years have mysteriously failed to leave their mark. Now near sixty, he could pass for fifty.

"I have been doing various things. Let me state priorities. I work for Church renewal, above all for a synthesis between renewal of structures and renewal of heart and mind. I think it very important not to concentrate exclusively on structural changes. I'm not a Marxist. I don't think structural change auto-

matically makes better men. At the same time, the environment is very important. God has entrusted the world to us. Unless we build a better world, we cannot be better men. But I also work in many ways for the renewal of the life of prayer, giving more place for spontaneity, caring more for synthesis between love of God and neighbor, synthesis between the vertical and the horizontal."

So concretely, in addition to your constant work at the Accademia, how have you expressed this general purpose?

"Within my theology and in many talks and meetings, the house-of-prayer movement has been a part of my life, namely, that the Church and the world should come together, not a cloistered Church cut off from the world. However, my main task in the past year, to which I give priority in my studies, was medical ethics. I have just completed a book on this issue. It will appear simultaneously in French, Italian, Spanish and English. Medical ethics, I feel, is the great field. That is what I tell the students at the Accademia Alfonsiana. Each of them must choose a specialization in the field of moral theology, and I urge the most talented ones to specialize in medical ethics. It is decisive for the future of mankind."

And within medical ethics what aspects do you see as in most urgent need of moral evaluation? Are you thinking of the whole process of the making of man?

"Yes, the making of man. You know where science is today: spare-part surgery, preselection of sex, manipulation of genetic factors for strategic or ethical purposes, chemical and electrochemical control of behavior, drugs to alter consciousness and even the entire personality. Our contribution as moralists is then to help ask what man is meant to be. In which direction does man have the right and perhaps the obligation to shape his nature? It is a question of interdisciplinary dialogue."

Do you feel, in terms of principle, that there is a limit, or that there is no limit other than intelligence, to the decision-making process? Does man enjoy in the moral order complete freedom to modify his nature in whatever direction he judges existentially desirable?

"Yes, subject only to agreement on what intelligence means. It is the totality of shared experience and shared reflection. In this respect, moral theology has followed the whole process of secularization. We have moved beyond the myth of a fixed physical nature. There are no taboos. No tradition has an absolute value. However, there are absolutes, namely, the dignity of man as being in the image and likeness of God. Man has a purpose. He is meant to become a mirror image of God, who is love. His purpose is to reciprocate love, to build a better world. So the judgmental process cannot be limited either to physiology or to a sacred biology. Much research is still needed

in order to understand how man can truly evolve his main capacity, a capacity to love and to discern, to discern what is genuine love and justice, and to build a better world. That is man's tremendous responsibility."

Human progress is achieved by trial and error. You must then permit experimentation, even harmful experimentation.

"Undoubtedly. What we are now doing is trying to establish criteria for experimentation, personalistic criteria, the history of freedom. I would reject all forms of experimentation that would finally manipulate man's freedom. Respect for freedom must be a part of experimentation, freedom combined with responsibility."

In our search for the perfection of man as human, we have to try different things. So you must allow an area of discretion.

"Absolutely. However, mankind is now gaining a tremendous power of experimentation. We can shape the genetic code, and so on. We have to reflect more on the direction we are taking, and here is the theologian's specific role. However, we theologians do not feel we have a monopoly even in this area, but it is our responsibility to stimulate and encourage serious honest thinking. We try to present the best of contemporary reflection in the light of the Gospel on today's issues, to point out the specifically Christian aspect, namely, that redeemed humanity is striving toward a better world, and that this mankind must remain open to all horizons, including the transcendental."

You are, I know, familiar with the official Catholic stand on abortion in the United States. Do you think it reasonable in the light of the criteria you have been formulating?

"A great part of my own study, the manuscript now going to the publishers, discusses the beginning of life, within the framework of an interdisciplinary dialogue. I present all the theories, whether—for example—human life as human and personalized begins with the fertilization of the egg, or with the implantation in the womb of the mother, or with the moment about the fourteenth day when a twinning or a tripling is no longer possible, or when the typically human cerebral cortex is formed about the fortieth day. All this has to be faced, and we cannot speak meaningfully to the modern world if we do not test the degree of probability of the arguments for all these theories. Each element has a bearing on the morality of abortion. The degree of gravity is not the same if the interference occurs before the egg is attached to the womb of the mother; not that I would authorize interference or say the egg is not to be respected before attachment. It is a miraculous process. But embryology now tells us that about forty to fifty per cent of all fertilized eggs are lost from natural

causes. We know also that between implantation and formation of the typical human cerebral cortex, another ten per cent are lost. So if others are convinced—and scientific knowledge about the various stages of development gives weight to their conviction—that before the formation of the cerebral cortex there is not yet ensoulment, as the ancients said, namely, not yet hominization, we must not talk about murder. We have then to prove that it is wrong to interfere with this tremendous marvelous process of development. We must conform to our own conscience. Since we are not sure, and since human life may already exist, it will be something like murder for me if I feel this probability; but if others are convinced it is not yet a human being in that full sense, I must not then speak to them about murder. Instead, I must reason with them on other grounds. So we have to speak with full knowledge of the scientific data. Only then can we be convinced and convincing. However, I want to make one thing clear. I am very concerned about the present situation in the United States. It is interesting to contrast it with that in Germany.”

In what sense?

“Germany is now discussing a change in the section of the criminal code dealing with abortion. The medical profession maintains a very strong stand for the protection of human life. It is proposed to authorize abortion in extraordinary situations, but public opinion as well as the medical profession seems to favor the view that the decision not be left to one woman or one doctor. The medical profession is very concerned not to abandon its dignifying function as protector of innocent life, of human life. In the United States, however, now that the war in Vietnam is winding down and the mood is one of anger, opinion seems to be growing—in what looks like an orgy of self-punishment—in favor of wholesale destruction of human life in the mother’s womb even in the fifth or sixth month. I have personally met nurses who told me how they suffer. Their daily frustration is tremendous as they see the fully developed fetuses still alive. They watch the process of dying of fully formed children who are just thrown away. It seems a kind of self-punishment.

“However, I feel there will be healthy reactions in the next few years in the United States, when the nation realizes the tremendous consequences of such a concept of motherhood and relates it to the issue of euthanasia. There is now great concern about determining accurately the moment of death so as to guard against transplanting a vital organ before the donor is certainly dead. It is equally important to determine the beginning of human life. Otherwise, the next step will be euthanasia. A society dedicated to success and utility will tell people most emphatically that they should not stay around, that they should get out of the way by demanding euthanasia

as their right. You saw the bill that almost passed in the United Kingdom. It would have affirmed the patient’s right to ask for euthanasia. Now if abortion is glorified and proclaimed to be useful, then the right of the old person to demand euthanasia will next be strongly emphasized. In practice, what it will mean is that they will be told to die in peace because they are in the way of the living.”

You have indicated one limit beyond which abortion is certainly undesirable. How about the other limit? What is your opinion of the pill taken after intercourse, the “Tomorrow Pill”? Technically, it can only be abortifacient. Do you think that theologians should be less certain in the present condition of knowledge than we traditionally have been in the Catholic Church as to whether this is always wrong?

“The medical profession all over the world is not so certain. I hope, nevertheless, for better solutions. The day-after pill doesn’t operate well. Its side effects are worse than those of any other method. The prospect of better means of birth control is good. Besides, I personally feel that even here there should be respect for the fact that this may be a human person.”

But we are discussing a de facto situation for some people here and now.

“I know that the day-after pill which inhibits implantation is quite different, because of the very high percentage of fertilized eggs lost naturally. However, I want to be quite clear I am against it.”

For medical reasons, or theological ones, or a mixture?

“Above all, for human reasons, respect for life that may already have begun.”

That is assuming there is an alternative for the individual in a concrete situation.

“I feel that all the scientists should work harder in the search for acceptable means of birth control, including the fostering of better sociological and psychological conditions for the rhythm method, determining the moment of ovulation, and other methods less disturbing of conjugal unity than some of those now in use. I don’t think the pill really helps, not only because of side effects but because of uncertainty as to what will be its long-term effects on the whole world economy.”

Will you forgive me if I say that our conversation so far has not been dealing with mankind but with the bourgeois class to which we both belong?

“I am talking about mankind now, not just the bourgeois class. I spoke in many medical training centers in India, schools for nurses and midwives, and the problem for them is quite different. In Africa, for instance, I heard only expressions of disdain and anger about McNamara [Robert S. McNamara, head of the World Bank] and other Americans who would make a birth control policy a condition for develop-

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ment help. Take the situation of Zambia, where last year I gave fourteen workshops, speaking on each occasion to a number of lay groups, nursing and training schools, and so on; and what everyone there says is that they still have forty or forty-five per cent infant mortality. Zambia is as big as France and West Germany together, with only 4,100,000 inhabitants. What they need is a more nourishing diet and better care for children, because they must have more people to do the necessary labor and to organize themselves. So they believe in birth. It is a totally different approach. They find it an imposition and a seduction when the so-called development helpers come in and acquaint the girls with the pill and advocate abortion. Some girls do it, but at the same time they feel very angry against the foreigners who push it."

I am familiar with this, and I agree with you; but I also think of the actual situation in a city like Santiago, Chile, or in the whole of the country of Uruguay, where—without any help from these outsiders—the traditional figures for abortions are at least half those of the live births.

"Even in those situations, the impact of the mentality I have been talking about dominates the press, including the medical literature. That cannot be denied. However, it is also clear to me that the Catholic Church has to be more careful to distinguish radically and totally between abortion and birth control. If we speak first, as Pius XI did in *Casti Conubii*, with tremendous sharpness against all methods of birth control, and then—after the semicolon—refer also to abortion, we can become a major force promoting abortion as presumably a lesser evil. Similarly, if we do not foster social change to favor the unwed mother, instead of narrowing her options to either marriage or abortion. There is so much we can do to promote healthy family life, better marriage preparation, better marriage counseling, a sense of respect for the child. Today the United States has an obsession as distorted as was witch-hunting in its time. Now the enemy is the unborn child, the greatest enemy in a nation with so much territory.

"In India, of course, the situation is quite different. I was in India recently. It has only one-third the territory of the United States and already more than 570 million people. In less than two years it will have passed 600 million. In proportion to size, that would be 1.8 billion for the United States, nine times its present population. The land in India is less fertile

and less developed. There is no general starvation right now because of the new 'miracle' rice which yields two and a half times as much as the old varieties. The projection, nevertheless, is very grave. We have to think of effective means of birth control, though not of abortion.

"Or take Japan, with over 100 million people. Each patch of ground even in the cities is planted to rice, with not a square foot wasted. I have seen that all over Japan. For me it is a tremendous crime that Australia, a continent with well over twice the area of the United States and only 13 to 15 million people, can lock the door against its Japanese neighbors. The Japanese would make a garden of Eden out of the desert. It is an international crime. And the Japanese would prefer to emigrate and cultivate a continent rather than have recourse to abortion. They, too, are now very worried. They have had over 20 million abortions registered in the last twenty years. I heard a high government official say that if the Catholic Church would only give greater support with her tremendous moral prestige, making a clear distinction between abortion and contraception, it would help the efforts of the Japanese to solve their problem by contraception."

You mean that official Japanese policy is now concerned about the impact and effect of mass abortion. My next question follows naturally. As you see it in your worldwide perspective, how is the United States living up to its self-proclaimed role of moral leader of the world?

"Before I answer, I must—because I am a German—mention the old German slogan that German attitudes will heal the world. What those attitudes did was to lead us to the tremendous catastrophe of World War II and Hitler's crimes. When I visited Poland a few months ago, I spent four hours in Auschwitz going through all the barracks of the concentration camp. I cannot describe how depressed I was at the end of those four hours. With that introductory reminder, I now dare to say what I think about the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In my various contacts with people in Asia and elsewhere, again and again I hear the same refrain: unless the United States repents expressly and publicly for dropping those atom bombs on open cities after having formulated the condition of unconditional surrender, it can provide no moral leadership in Asia. This was the miscalculation about Vietnam. The ob-

jective of stopping communism was a reasonable one. What was forgotten was that by the unreasonable proviso of unconditional surrender, they involved China in the war against Japan, thus contributing to the loss of China because the Chinese abandoned all trust in the moral leadership of the United States. Similarly, in my lecture tours in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, people constantly comment on the contrast between their films and television and those of the West. They are not in agreement with everything the Communists do, but they insist that in these things they are ahead of the West, especially of the United States. The enormous violence that characterizes the movies and television is not a mark of moral leadership.

"There are, nevertheless, favorable elements. You have the tremendous generosity of the people of the United States in regard to foreign aid, the great readiness to contribute to collections and to any kind of works in favor of underdeveloped countries. I also recognize the prophetic role not only of the Berrigan brothers but of American youth in general. Young people do not want any imperial role for the United States. They want to be a nation among nations and set an example so that might will no longer make right. These are very hopeful signs."

And what about the Church in the United States? Do you think its allocation of resources meets the priority needs?

"I see one very positive development, namely, a recognition that the pastor can no longer spend money at his uncontrolled discretion. In the past, he would spend thousands on a statue with no artistic value, and nobody could question him. Now a pastor or a bishop finds it prudent to consult the people before undertaking any major outlay. There is a new awareness of the meaning and significance of co-responsibility. There is also a growing recognition that priorities must be worked out for personnel."

Do you see the United States Church as having a special, a specific function in the building up of the universal church?

"I feel that very strongly. The United States, whether you like it or not, has accumulated the most dynamic forces of Europe. Lazy people and cowards did not emigrate from Europe. In consequence, you have tremendous resources of intelligence and initiative. The many ties, both traditional and new, with so many parts of the world give ground for hope that the Church in the United States will not be self-centered in its use of this creative dynamism."

Do you find that this positive action around the world is today limited because of an excessive subservience of the United States bishops to the State Department?

"I am familiar with this criticism. However, I think that the bishops are more criticized on this score

at home than abroad. Outside the country, there is not the same awareness. What I do come across is the suggestion that the method of selection of United States bishops is not calculated to produce a prophetic voice. In practice, new bishops are nominated by the Apostolic Delegate. Take the recent case of Hartford. Before leaving office, Archbishop O'Brien asked his priests to submit three names, and it seems that not a single priest proposed the man who got the post. There are other similar cases. That is an injustice toward an adult church, the people of God in the United States. In Austria and Germany, by contrast, the diocese has a very active role in the naming of a bishop. It would be most unusual for the Holy See to present one who is not wanted. It is high time to place the adult church of the United States on the same level. Indeed, all local churches should have more involvement in selecting bishops. If that were the case in Italy, its episcopate would be less tied to the establishment."

Are you saying that the subservience of bishops to government in matters of foreign policy results from the influence of the Roman Curia?

"The whole status quo thinking in the Church is involved. The classical original sin in this area, or at least the high point of that original sin, was the 'sacred alliance' entered into in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna between the Pope as monarch of the Church-State and the emperors of Prussia, Russia and Austria. The linking of the Pope as head of the Church and monarch of the Papal States with these great powers has ever since influenced theology, has influenced the naming of bishops, and many other things. We still have to come to a full consciousness of this reality and do penance for it in order to free ourselves from such thinking."

To come back to the United States, a recent survey showed that forty per cent of young Catholic priests are thinking of leaving the ministry, as compared with twelve per cent of Protestant ministers. Do you agree with the conclusion of the pollsters that the principal reasons for the much higher proportion of Catholic priests thinking of leaving are lack of leadership on the part of those in authority and the slow tempo of change since Vatican Council II?

"I agree in part, but I think we must add a third major reason, namely, a typically American impatience. A deep renewal takes time. What is needed is more endurance. People in the United States are open-minded toward change. Young people protest, and they are right to do so. But if things are not changed immediately, they drop out, turn to drugs and so on. To protest is fine, but in addition to energy and initiative, we need more endurance."

That brings me to my final point. I find a growing concern on both sides of the Atlantic, a growing suspicion that Vatican Council II is being betrayed and

that we are going back in the Church, not forward.

"We don't go back. Some are scared and anguished and concerned. Thousands are disturbed. However, taking everything together, there is much force and strength in the Church to carry it forward."

You see no possibility of this being defeated?

"There are critical moments. But history goes on in the Church. It is like winter coming before the spring. So many things seem to be bogged down, and then the opening suddenly appears. For example, when the so-called final document on liturgical renewal was issued some time ago, saying that the process is now practically over, what it did was to give new impetus to the movement. It made some people angry or scrupulous, but the more common reaction was that this was beautiful because the authors of the document had now betrayed their intentions as contrary to the Council, which had said the renewal would always continue. In that way they destroyed their own authority."

Does this not create problems of conscience for many people?

"Not too many, really, only for a few people who were already scrupulous. I'll give you an example. Shortly after that document appeared, I was invited to give a day of talks here in Rome at the central house of a missionary congregation. They had brought in their men for a course in renewal, and there were also men from other congregations as well as nuns. They asked me if I would be the main celebrant of the liturgy. I pleaded I would be too tired but said I would concelebrate. I wanted to see what they themselves would do. They had a good style, a creative celebration, well-prepared, with spontaneous prayers and a dialogue homily. Priests and nuns were ranged around the altar together, with no concern whether priests or sisters went first to the altar to take the consecrated bread and wine, each taking the wafer and the chalice in his own hands. Not a single person was disturbed, although all of them knew about the new instruction. I think it symptomatic that no question of conscience arose. It is also interesting that some of those in authority have not yet realized that there is an authority crisis because of the unwise use of authority. Those responsible for this instruction must surely be unaware of the nature of the present authority crisis. They do not understand that each unreasonable and unrealistic use of authority defeats the office holders themselves."

Do you judge that disregard for the law in such situations represents a maturing of Christian understanding?

"I see it as a maturing. However, I regret thorough-

ly the unwise laws and the unwise insistence on the letter of the law, the failure to allow the freedom necessary for the exercise of initiative, which destroy very important functions of authority. I don't want to destroy authority. What is needed is another style. Take that other recent instruction from the Congregation of the Clergy headed by Cardinal John Wright. It insisted most emphatically that children must confess their sins before they receive their First Communion. A lot of cardinals and archbishops insist that children must confess their mortal sins. They are totally ignorant of what psychology says, or even what theology says, and this does grave harm to authority. We must find a different way to promote people to leadership positions in the Church. We cannot get real leaders through a diplomatic career or through the naming of men who lack competence. I would radically abolish the cardinalate because the road to it is a diplomatic career or a career in church administration, things that have nothing to do with the priesthood. Promotion is by survival, and finally the man reaches the top as a cardinal and chairman of a congregation in which he has never worked and in regard to which he has no competence."

Meanwhile we have to live in this distorted institution, and what I understand you to be telling me is that the Christian has to judge for himself when authority is abusive.

"Yes. Not, however, in an individualistic manner or in splendid isolation. He must act in constant contact with exemplary Christians, with Christians who love the Church."

And in dialectic tension with the institution?

"Exactly; and also speaking to the institution, speaking in frankness but in love, never writing off those who are in the institution. Maybe we should contact them more directly. Maybe they should also make it clear that they have an open door and are ready to listen to us when we speak directly to them."

As I rose to leave, my mind went back to my first experience of Father Häring. "You spoke a moment ago about the continuity of history in the Church," I said. "Do you see a similar continuity in your own life? I have long entertained the theory that your complete unconcern about the Holy Office, your constant refusal ever to be muzzled, your independence vis-à-vis a church you obviously respect and love, that all these attitudes were developed by your experience during the Second World War. Having been through death, you no longer fear the living."

His face lighted up as he studied the thought and found it to his liking. "Of course," he said, "of course all of that played a part. I was never afraid of Hitler. I would be ashamed to be afraid of my own church."