The Hatch and Brood of Time

John P. Sisk

There was a time during the sixties when Catholics, intoxicated with what we were convinced had come to us bottled in bond from Vatican II, were among the most optimistic predictors around. In our more extravagant moments some of us talked and wrote as if we were inspired by a scenario drawn up at a summit meeting presided over by Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan. Some of this optimism was still present when Commonweal brought out its "Church in the Year 2000" issue (October 31, 1969), though by then the more pronounced thing was the wrath of those who had begun to discover how laggard the Church was in its efforts to live up to the scenario that had been prepared for it. Even the objectors to the recent statement "Against Discouragement in the Church" must admire the timing of the thirty-four theologians responsible for it.

At the moment, of course, the pessimistic predictors are having their day—although to put it this way is misleading, since many of them are the very optimists who now painfully discovering their illusions. Robert G. Hoyt's "Baffled Bishops" (Harper's, October, 1971), Newsweek's "Has the Church Lost Its Soul?" issue (October 4, 1971) and Malachi Martin's recent Three Popes and the Cardinal are typical expressions of the new crisis-conscious mood. Typical too is the caution—not to say skepticism—of which the eight predictors in the National Catholic Reporter's prediction issue (January 14, 1972) peered into the coming year. It makes a difference, of course, when the future you are trying to predict is already breathing down your neck, ready to make a fool out of you before your words appear in print. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that if these people had been asked to predict on the same issues of Catholic life eight years ago they would have been more optimistic.

One must concede that the predictors of doom have a good deal of evidence to extrapolate from, whether their interests happen to be the state of authority in the Church, sexual morality, family life, parochial school enrollment, respect for doctrine and dogma, participation in sacramental life, ecumenical effort, liturgical renewal or morale of clergy and nuns. Whether, all things considered, we are worse off than some of our predecessors who also believed they were badly off (or indeed whether we are worse off than many who were able to believe because of a scarcity of information to the contrary that they were well off) is not the question here. Hans Küng may be right when he reminds us that "All prophecies about the death of religion and even about the death of the Catholic Church have proven to be very poor prophecies." Nevertheless, many of us believe that we have come on especially evil times and we predict accordingly.

It might seem reasonable to predict that current pessimistic predictions will prove as inaccurate as the earlier optimistic predictions—that whatever shape the Church has assumed by the year 2000 will be nothing like the shape that now seems inevitable. But this is not the sort of thing that people learn from the repeated inadequacy of past predictions. From the failure of optimistic predictions they learn to be pessimistic predictors; or, less often, they learn to examine both past and present more carefully so that subsequent predictions may be more accurate; still less often do they learn to be skeptical or ironic predictors. What they do not learn is the folly of all prediction—not without falling into despair.

That their predictions may continue to be as inaccurate as ever, whatever they learn, is not the point; men in time can manage themselves only by predicting. The alternative would be a situation in which each successive moment had to be an utterly fresh start. Prediction may be a series of tricks we play on the yet-to-be-born, just as history, according to Voltaire, is a series of tricks we play on the dead, but
our heirs must learn to bear with us just as their heirs will have to learn to bear with them (unfortunately, our predecessors must suffer in silence). Humans must believe that there is a continuity, a moment-by-moment relevance running from past through present into future, even though they constantly discover that they must revise their theories about it. Man is a predictor insofar as he is determined to survive. If he is consciously undisturbed by his own bad record it is in great part because he has learned on some level of his being that however often his predictions turn out to be fictions he cannot examine his present without them.

This much can be said, then, for pessimistic Catholic predictions: that they are ways of concentrating on present problems and should be seen as a phase of the critical effort which we conveniently begin with Vatican II, though it started long before that. However, the pessimistic predictors don't necessarily see themselves in this light. If they were once optimistic predictors the present may seem to be less their object of critical concern than the Vatican II past, which they now have to revise in order to make it properly anticipatory of a grim future. But as Orwell has made sufficiently clear, historical revision serves present need no less than prediction does. Besides, there is always the possibility that gloomy revising liberals will discover the reasons for the past glooms of conservatives and so come to see both the conservatives and themselves in a new and more Christian perspective.

Of course, this is not all that can be said about Catholic predictions of doom. Often there is a great deal of anger, even rage, in them, as if the predictors were willing a punishing fate on the Church for having failed to deliver on real or imagined past promises. Sometimes one senses in their predictions the same perverse conceit that the biologist-humanist René Dubos sees in much American pessimism: If we cannot be a total success then let us at least be a total failure. This conceit is often an extremely personal thing: Because the Church (nation) has not come up to my standards it deserves the worst fate. Sometimes (rarely, one hopes) it is even a solipsistic or paranoid thing: Let the Church (nation) go; I will myself replace it with something better. And there is always the possibility that projections of doom are on the one hand the nervous projections of radically insecure and catastrophe-prone people, or on the other the wishful projections of those for whom an atmosphere of impending catastrophe is the best possible answer to boredom, alienation and anomie. For the latter there is no grander prospect than that of the imminent collapse of Catholicism—or better still, of Christianity generally.

One of the most paradoxical things about pessimistic predictions, and especially about predictions of downright doom, is the extent to which they function as morale-building devices whose aim is to prove the predictions false. Religious reformers use pessimistic prediction for this purpose, sometimes to the extreme of holy blackmail: Follow me or I will turn the bad future loose on you. On the other hand, they are just as likely to use optimistic prediction with the effect of holy blackmail: Follow me or I will deny you a possible desirable future. No doubt it is often hard to know whether the best way to arouse people is to induce them to hope for too much or to make them afraid they will get nothing at all. In either event we are talking about strategic prediction, where the real aim is not so much to realize the prediction as to improve conditions. In quite another category are those naive predictors who expect to be taken literally (like the twelfth-century Gnostic Joachim of Florè with his promise of a Third Reich beyond which there could be no other). Perhaps the most naive of the latter are really trying to blackmail the future itself: Be my way or cease trying to be any way at all.

Nevertheless, the more obvious thing is that pessimistic predictions are the expression of discouragement, bewilderment and anxiety among people genuinely concerned about the Church and the handing on of the faith. Their predictions express various degrees of demoralization and at the same time they tend to further demoralize. For this reason it is important to look at them closely. They may be completely unrealizable, but they affect our actions in the present in proportion as we take them seriously and thus can have the effect of plans which even in the process of going away turn out to be factors in the realization of highly undesirable futures.

One's predictions depend upon what he believes to be the true relation between present and past, and the fact that this relationship is so complex is an important factor in the failure of predictions. In the fifteenth century, for instance, Catholic thinking about the future of the Church was conditioned by the understandable conviction that the Reformation could be explained as an entirely religious event, whereas it became clear in time that it was also an economic, political and sociological event. Similarly, Catholics now tend to explain the Church's present—say, with respect to problems of authority and sexual morality—as entirely a development within the Church: that if it had not been for Vatican II conservatives, or Trent, or scholastic philosophy, or Constantine, or St. Augustine, or what have you, we would not have the problems we now have nor the grim future we now face. This is a kind of provincialism, even a kind of naive egotism, that Catholics share with other groups and that appears to be an historical consequence of achieving identity as a group. We are what we are, in this view, because of the forces at work in an identifiably separate history, and these are the only forces we must consider when we predict.
The Church appears to be a worse predictor than we thought

Unfortunately, few groups have the historical autonomy that in the interests of morale most groups need to believe they have. This is why Monsignor E. Harold Smith can say in “The Catholic Crisis” (Commonweal, January 7, 1972) “that the malaise from which all religion in the Western world is suffering has little to do with the question on which Vatican II principally and necessarily expended most (but not all) of its time and energy.” Certainly Catholicism is what it is today not only because of what is obviously “Catholic” in its past but also because of its reciprocal relation with all of Western civilization. Church history tends to become melodrama in proportion as its involvement with forces outside itself is ignored (Trent becomes the birthplace of those rustlers whom nobody headed off at the pass or, conversely, of that band of intrepid heroes whom the rustlers are forever conspiring against), and prediction, whether optimistic or pessimistic, tends likewise to be melodrama.

At the same time, Catholic predictors, like most predictors, assume that past, present and future are linked together as seed, shoot and blossom in the kind of vital relationship that suggests Warwick’s words in Henry IV, Part II:

There is a history in all men’s lives,
Figuring the nature of the times deceased;
The which observed, a man may prophesy,
With a near aim, the main chance of things
As yet not come to life, which in their seeds
And weak beginnings lie intreasured.
Such things become the hatch and brood of time... .

Warwick here is not giving expression to an evolutionary view of history; if anything, his view of history is rather cyclic. Nevertheless, I have quoted this passage because for us it states so superbly the traditional wisdom about the grounds for prediction. It even anticipates Leibniz’s doctrine of continuity, according to which, says sociologist Robert Nisbet in “Has Futurology a Future?” (Encounter, November, 1971), “Each living thing, including institutions, nations, and civilisations, is indeed big with its future, just as the past was once big with our present.”

But, says Professor Nisbet, to think of the relationship of past, present and future in this fashion is to be bemused by the metaphors of growth and genealogy. These metaphors, which make sense for living organisms and true genealogical sequences, are together responsible for the “attractive but utterly fallacious assumption that continuity of time is matched by the continuity of events.” Against this fallacy he sets this thesis: “The future does not lie in the present. Nor did the present as we know it ever lie in the past.” In practical terms, Warwick’s “seeds and weak beginnings” that “lie intreasured” do not “become the hatch and brood of time,” because of random events (wars, invasions, migrations, catastrophes) which, says Nisbet, “by no stretch of imagination could ever be deduced, or projected from analyses of structure,” and because of the impact on history of geniuses, prophets and maniacs.

If Nisbet’s thesis is sound (and an examination of past prediction would suggest that it has a lot going for it), it is bad news indeed for all those futurologists—Marxists, Comteans, apocalyptics with or without computers—who, if they cannot forecast the hatch and brood of time, are lost indeed.

The biologist J. Bronowski has equated the making and storing of tools for subsequent use with the discovery of the future. In this view, stored tools are predictive; if you have enough of them on hand and they are sufficiently sophisticated, they begin to predict with a loud and insistent voice. This is the hubris of tools. An institution is also a kind of predictive tool: a way of organizing human effort so that undesirable futures may be prevented. When it becomes overimpressed with its past successes we have the hubris of institutions. But in the meantime the institution very compellingly—and unavoidably in the very act of existing—not only proves out in history a doctrine of continuity but teaches the habit of expecting continuity. It is therefore the best possible environment in which to experience Professor Nisbet’s “spell of metaphor.” Moreover, when you reject the institution because you no longer want the kind of future it predicts, you will probably simply reinstitutionalize according to habits learned from the rejected institution.

Successful institutions thus remove much of the burden of prediction from the individual, which is to say that they remove much of the sting of time and change. An institution like the Church, by refusing to take the forces of change at their own valuation (which is not necessarily the same thing as refusing to take them seriously), promises the kind of future in which believers will be able to go about business as usual. This is a mixed blessing; indeed, it is inconceivable that this bless-
ing, which all institutions attempt to confer, could ever be anything but a mixed one. What helps to mix it is the special vulnerability of the members when the promises fail.

The promises are always bound to fail to some degree. As a result, the Church in its historical dimension appears to be a worse predictor now than we used to think it was. Indeed, it appears to have been a worse predictor all along than Catholics used to think it was (though for two thousand years it has successfully predicted its own survival). This might have been expected. Institutions of any complexity tend to be mysteries to themselves; they make their predictions out of the daylight areas of their being which they understand, and these can be very small in relation to the dark areas where powerful forces are at work countering those predictions.

Catholics have always been insufficiently aware of the precarious balance of secular and sacred forces that is Catholicism and of the higher potential for heresy that is in this balance. The Church carries its heresies like latent genes, and its history has been extremely dependent on the largely unforeseeable pressures that have agitated them into life. Who among Vatican II progressives foresaw how quickly Pelagians, Antinomians and Spiritual Libertines would make a reappearance? Who among the conservatives foresaw that the rigorism of the Montanists would prove to be as attractive as Richard Neuhaus has shown it to be in his essay "The Geography of Heroism" (see Worldview, February, 1972)? The Church's effort to extend itself into the future in an orderly manner is at least as bedeviled by geniuses, prophets and maniacs—in all of which guises heretics may appear—as any institution in history. This is to say nothing of those prediction-spoilers, the saints, who may also be geniuses and prophets and who often appear to be maniacs. Indeed, the Church's effort to predict is in part an effort to rule its saints out ahead of time, since by being prediction-disturbers they are also institution-disturbers.

In proportion as the Church, or any institution, removes the burden of prediction from the individual it also removes the burden of history. Thomas F. O'Dea puts it this way in an important essay, "The Role of the Intellectual in the Catholic Tradition" (Daedalus, Spring, 1972):

One consequence of the defensive stance of modern Catholicism and its alienation from intellectual life was that it tended to become unaware of history in a deeper sense. It came to confuse the vertical dimension of its religious experience of transcendence with a spurious sense of being somehow not really imbedded in history.

In actual fact, of course, the Church is imbedded in history to its ears; hence the often noted paradox that Catholicism should be so historically rich on the one hand and Catholics so conspicuously without historical awareness on the other. One might say that they have acted on the assumption that the Church has adequately demonstrated its capacity to take care of the hatch and brood of time.

If the Church were indeed the only significant force at work in history, such an assumption would result in a relatively surprise-free future, one that would validate for Catholics their traditional disinterest in past and future. But it is not the only force at work even in its own history, and in proportion as this fact has come home to Catholics they have had to assume the burden of past and future—a burden for which they have had little preparation. This has especially been the case since Vatican II, when the old institutional predictions have come to seem so unacceptable.

In the euphoria of their liberation from the old predictions many Catholics became convinced that time would hatch a utopian brood. They began to dream of getting beyond structure to essence, beyond myth to meaning, beyond nurture to nature, beyond convention to reality, beyond diversity to unity and beyond the Church to Christ. At its most extreme the new Catholic prediction suggested a compulsion to a Catholic Woodstock in which an ecstatic condition of mergence had been achieved and all gaps forever closed: between person and person, male and female, rich and poor, native and foreigner, layman and priest, priest and bishop, bishop and pope, Catholic and Protestant, believer and atheist. In one of its manifestations the dream of Vatican II could have been realized only in a state of Gnostic closure, in the time-annihilating unity of a Permanent Pentecost beyond which no further disunity was possible—a sort of holy parody of Trotsky's Permanent Revolution.

Tantalizing fragments of this dream can be found in Father Anthony Gibson's "New Heaven and New Earth" in Commonweal's "The Church in the Year 2000" issue. Here the future of the Church is seen in a context of interplanetary travel and migration; of a dawning integral common consciousness and world government; of community-enriching organ transplants, a conquest of contagious disease, malformation, retardation and possibly of death itself; of "a breakthrough to a higher dimension of consciousness" and the emergence of the true Superman. If this sounds like holy science fiction, it is hardly more extravagant than the world-renewing and world-uniting Event, with respect to which, according to Malachi Martin, John XXIII and Cardinal Bea saw Vatican II as a mere occasion. Unfortunately, in the three years since Father Gibson wrote, we seem to have traveled away from, not toward, the state of affairs he predicted; and if Mr. Martin is correct in his "Cambie" theory of Vatican II, it is obvious enough that John's hope to bring off a second Pentecost led only to unanticipated headaches.
But suppose that our present pessimistic predictions no less than the previous optimistic predictions have been conditioned by our misunderstanding of Vatican II, so that, as Monsignor Smith contends, we not only expected the wrong things from it but failed to appreciate its most transcendent achievement? Most of us understood the Council to be what we wanted it to be: a prediction of triumphal renewal. “But what Ecumenical Council,” asks the Monsignor, “has ever renewed the life of the Church?” To him the really significant thing the Council Fathers did was “to move the Church squarely into the stream of world history,” so as to effect a transition from classicism to historical consciousness. Given such an accomplishment (and Professor O’Dea’s essay would suggest that it was badly needed), one can safely predict neither startlingly quick renewal nor disaster, but problems. But to predict the exact pattern of problems, their interaction with secular problems (to say nothing of their interaction with madmen, geniuses and prophets), or the nature of their resolution, becomes a precarious enterprise, because now as an historical affair the Church “is affected by all the relatives of history.”

But to be affected by all the relatives of history is apparently to be left, compared to the old Church, naked to change and strongly tempted to take change at its own evaluation. To take change in these terms—that is, as an absolute—is to predict a future congenial only to personalities so protean that if they are imagined as coming to exist in sufficient numbers one must also predict the likelihood that they will lose their sense of change for lack of an opposite to define it against. It is also, as Professor Nisbet pointed out in an earlier essay (“The Year 2000 and All That,” Commentary, June, 1968), to confuse really significant change “with mere motives, activity, and movement.” It is not hard to see why post-Vatican II Catholics would be especially subject to this confusion, protected as they had been for so long against the temptation to take change at its word.

The pre-Vatican II Church did not make this mistake and so, over a long period of time, was spared the embarrassment of much bad prediction—or to put it another way, it was spared the frustrations that are the consequences of falling into the prediction-trap of securitlity. It was therefore in anticipatory agreement with Professor Nisbet about the importance of inertia and persistence in human behavior—factors which optimistic Catholic predictors have had to downplay or ignore (as the old Gnostic predictors had to downplay or ignore them) because they are such prediction-spoilers. “Looking at the matter from the point of view of the gambler’s odds involved,” says Nisbet, “one does best to predict continuation of what one sees around one.” One would, of course, lose here and there, but at least he would be predicting in accord with the fact that the “amount of certifiable change in history is extraordinarily small in comparison with the amount of sheer persistence and inertia, which of course include much random motion, action and interaction that often give the illusion of change.”

As I read Nisbet, his assumption is that inertia and persistence are givens in the human condition, and without them human life would be impossible. This is quite different from the assumption that they are unqualified evils that have somehow come to inhere in institutions, and that there is no future worth thinking about unless they are eliminated, perhaps along with institutions. The latter is the assumption of some Catholic predictors, whether they are optimistic or pessimistic—the pessimists are simply overwhelmed with the persistence of inertia.

Neither is Professor Nisbet counseling us to take inertia and persistence at their own evaluation, for to do so would lead one to conclude that the need for meaningful change is illusory or unfulfillable. Nothing in his approach to prediction implies that there will come a time when it will no longer be necessary to oppose the forces of inertia and persistence: a time, say, of a final unity beyond alienation or of a sublime and undivided species consciousness. Nor is it his position that human beings can or should stop predicting. We advance into the future equipped with a great deal that we have found to be so true we have every reason to believe that it will continue to be true, and if it were otherwise human existence would be impossible. Human living and prediction are inseparable; what needs to be separated are human living and the Leibnizian assumption that has us in thrall. Nisbet asks us to see this paradox: that Leibnizian prediction, by straining for a surprise-free future, actually guarantees a surprise-rich future, since it leads us to expect a brood not likely to be hatched.

Sports provide a paradigm for this paradox. In football, for instance, three different tactics can be distinguished. In a given play all three may be involved but generally one predominates and sets the tone. Two of these, the power tactic and the disguise tactic, are predictive. In the first you act as if you believe that you can determine the future of the game simply by overpowering your opponent, however he may dispose his forces, with relatively forthright attacks. In the second you plan to determine the future of the game by deception—reverses, trap plays, play-action passes, confusing pass patterns—that induces the opposition to overcommit itself to your advantage. Both of these tactics are vulnerable to surprise: The opposition may turn out to be stronger than you anticipated or not so easily fooled. In the third, or option, tactic you concede that the future is bound to be a surprise and concentrate your efforts on the development of your known capacities.
for counteraction (pass or run, keep the ball or lateral it away), depending on the moves the opposition makes.

Professor Nisbet would seem to favor the option tactic with its postulate of the fundamentally surprising nature of the future. In this view we may truly enough need sophisticated machines and carefully gathered information, but even more we need the capacity to live with the fact of our innate urge to be futurologists in an environment that is bound to frustrate that urge almost in proportion as we are inclined to give in to it. If we had this capacity we would be less inclined to structure what we believe will continue to be true into full-scale scenarios, and more inclined to cultivate a capacity to act effectively with established skills and knowledge whenever unforeseen events make it necessary to oppose the forces of inertia and persistence. This would mean less acting with a view to the long run (remembering, with John Maynard Keynes, that in the long run we are all dead), but perhaps more acting that would incidentally prove effective in the long run.

It seems to me that Professor Nisbet's implied option tactic ought to be both attractive and useful to the Christian, particularly in a time when power and deception tactics have been discredited. In fact, it has a good deal in common with the presently underrated Christian virtue of detachment. Detachment is commonly identified with a despising of the world and so gets a bad name in a time when so many forces are inclining the Christian to involve himself in the world. But the "world" from which the Christian was in the past urged to detach himself was really apprehended as one damned thing after another. The "world" is clock time, secular time—"chronos" as distinguished from "kairós," the season or point in time which, Frank Kerplode says in The Sense of an Ending, is "filled with significance, charged with meaning derived from its relation to the end." To be attached to the chronos-world is to be prediction-prone, since prediction is the secular substitute for faith and hope, as well as the act that promises to discover the continuity and pattern that will make chronos-time tolerable and faith and hope unnecessary.

However, the problem for the contemporary Christian with his new historical consciousness is how to achieve a detachment that will keep him from being overwhelmed by all the relatives of history. There is no reason why this detachment has to be modeled on extremist forms of asceticism found in the early Church. If the Desert Fathers, for instance, fascinate us now, it is likely to be for the wrong reasons—as archetypal hippies, say, nursing a flame of virtue far from the corrupt and doomed world. What they had too little of we need most: irony. Indeed, Christian detachment must now more than ever be defined as Christian irony. Without it the Christian engaged in redeeming time too easily takes on the anxious attachment of those who have accepted the world's view of what will redeem it.

This anxious attachment that makes prediction so necessary and surprise so inevitable gets Christ's attention in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:34), and so we are urged: "Be not... anxious about tomorrow; for tomorrow will be anxious for the things of itself." This anti-Leibnizean position is part of what Father Charles E. Curran calls the "radical, seemingly impossible ethical teaching of Jesus." This ethic, says Father Curran in "The Ethical Teaching of Jesus" (Commonweal, November 24, 1967), induces an eschatological tension that can be lived only if one has the Christian virtue of hope (a virtue no less necessary for those Catholic intellectuals who must live with what Professor O'Dea calls "Socratic tension," which is the consequence of subjecting one's values to constant examination). The Church itself is prone to relieve eschatological tension by inducing a false security: in effect, by predicting that it will continue to moderate Christ's radical ethic. Those for whom the Church loses credibility are likely then to be left "hopeless" and, horrified by meaningless chronos-time, desperately in need of new security-promising predictions. Thus Father Curran observes the irony that "some Catholics have abandoned a triumphalism in the Church only to embrace a triumphalism of the world or secular city."

Perhaps the implication is that eschatological tension is one of the defining burdens of the Christian, just as Socratic tension is the defining burden of the Catholic intellectual—with the further implication that the refusal to accept this burden is the Christian's failure of nerve. It is this failure that Iian Illich seems to have in mind when he says in "How Shall We Pass on Christianity?" (The Critic, January-February, 1972) that one of the difficulties in handing on the faith "is that we are perhaps too concerned with insuring what the future will be like." Only in the present, he points out, does the Lord redeem the Church. "We have no idea if there is a future," he continues. "To live as a Christian means to live in the spirit of the Maranatha—the Lord is coming at this moment. It means to live and enjoy living at the edge of time, at the end moment of time."

A nervy way to live, whether now or in any time! Perhaps this is why Monsignor Smith must say at the end of his essay: "Above all, the Scriptural admonition to possess our souls in patience would seem almost the most important lesson to learn." The admonition of course implies a prediction: if we manage to live it out we will be less vulnerable to the surprises of the unpredictable future, but, more importantly, we will be better Christians.