

Wars of National Liberation: A Catholic Response

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In 1834 the French priest Félicité de Lammenais wrote *Paroles d'un Croyant*, in which he asserted that it would not be a nation or a king or a church that would bear the future destiny of mankind but "the people." Lammenais and the *L'Avenir* group in Paris had appealed in 1831 to Pope Gregory XVI, advocating that the Catholic Church abandon its traditional alliance with the thrones of Europe to align itself with and become the champion of the freedom of the people. In the encyclical *Mirari Vos* Gregory XVI repudiated Lammenais's appeal and reaffirmed the mutually reinforcing relationship between the true religion and established political power as the one guarantee against "an ever-approaching revolution-abyss of bottomless miseries."

In 1847 Karl Marx observed that the "social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling and an oppressed class, and all they have for the latter is the pious wish the former will be charitable." As if to confirm the observation Leo XIII, in the encyclical *Quod Apostolici Muneris*, published in 1878, asserted:

If, however, at times it happens that public power is exercised by princes rashly and beyond bound, the Catholic doctrine does not allow subjects to rebel against a ruler by private authority, lest the peaceful order be more and more disturbed and society suffer greater detriment.

In the face of extreme political provocation the Pope recommended "Christian forbearance" and "fervent supplication." The reasons for this approach, as Leo XIII explained to Cardinal Guibert, the Archbishop of Paris, was that "amid political vicissitudes and changes, it is necessary that the Apostolic See continues to treat of affairs with those who govern" in

the pursuit of its primary goal, namely, "to safeguard the Christian interest."

Leo XIII's encyclical *Graves de Communi* of 1901 warned Catholic social activists that in looking after the interests of the working class they should not neglect the upper classes of society. He explained that "no matter how great Our devotion may be to helping the people, We should all the more keep Our hold upon the upper classes, because association with them is proper and necessary . . . for the happy issue of the work in which We are engaged." Two years later Pius X made quite explicit the sociopolitical assumption upon which the policy of the Catholic Church had been traditionally based. He pointed out that it was "in conformity with the order established by God that there should be in human society princes and subjects, patrons and proletariat, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, nobles and plebians."

The official Catholic moral teaching concerning resort to armed conflict has to be understood in the light of the Church's commitment to and support of established structures of political and economic power. In fact this teaching involves a double standard throughout the whole of the modern period. While the Catholic Church has consistently endorsed the right of nation-states and of established regimes to go to war under conditions enunciated in the theory of the just war, it has just as consistently rejected any right on the part of oppressed classes, races or groups to resort to arms to overthrow the structures of oppression, that is, to engage in revolution.

As Jean-Paul Sartre has pointed out in his essay "On Genocide," the war in Vietnam is an instance of the kind of war which has emerged since the close of World War II. It is a war for national liberation in which the guerrillas, using tactics appropriate to their inferior technology and with the support, at least tacit, of the mass of the people, struggle against a legally established government of dubious legit-

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imacy, supported both militarily and economically by an alien power with a superior technology. The Catholic Church was neither theoretically equipped nor sociologically oriented to deal adequately with this kind of war. When the Vatican Council addressed itself to the question of war, it was preoccupied with the threat of nuclear war between modern nation-states. It almost completely ignored the question of guerrilla warfare and the struggles of national, racial or class liberation, although Paul VI subsequently outlawed guerrilla war. Indeed, the official teaching of the Church, influenced chiefly by the horrendous prospect of conventional modern wars or the proximate possibility of the use of nuclear weapons, had withdrawn the restoration of violated rights from the catalog of causes justifying resort to war. Hence, although it did not condemn the use of modern weapons as such, this proscription nevertheless discriminated against people who remained subject to colonial domination or economic imperialism.

This discrimination was somewhat inadvertent. The Church does not, however, allow for the valid resort to arms on the part of political groups against established regimes. This type of war, recognized in international law, the Church keeps in a separate moral category and has repeatedly condemned both the phenomenon and the guerrilla strategies necessary for and appropriate to it. Thus while the Vatican Council had words of praise for "those who are pledged to the service of their country as members of its armed forces" as "making a genuine contribution to the establishment of peace," it had no word of praise for those pledged to the service of their people as members of guerrilla forces making a genuine contribution to the establishment of justice. During his 1968 visit to Colombia, the homeland of Camilo Torres, Paul VI quashed any interpretation of his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* which might countenance resort to revolution. This proscription was complemented by an appeal to the rulers and the élites expressing the pious wish that they would be charitable toward the masses.

There seems, however, to be some inconsistency in Catholic attitudes between the intransigent principle concerning revolution and the accommodating policies toward Communist regimes. The Church regards revolution as a fundamental violation of the social order designed by God. Yet the accelerating pace of social change, the growth of historical consciousness and the proliferation of social revolutions have made belief in a social order established by God untenable. John XXIII and Vatican II attempted to disengage the Church from its overcommitment to its European cultural heritage and from its overidentification with a particular sociopolitical structure. This commitment and identification proved more and more embarrassing in

the post-World War II era with the emergence of the new nations recently emancipated from European colonial tutelage and with the Communist states controlling the lives of millions of Catholics. Though the Church had only recently—under the reign of Pius XII—officially adjusted to the social order of bourgeois capitalism, *de facto* accommodation had prevailed ever since the bourgeoisie, finding itself threatened with proletarian revolutions, quickly lost its secularist irreligiousness and anticlericalism and sought an ally in the Church against the new disruptions of the social order.

The "aggiornamento" of Vatican II in its political implications was not as profound as at first appeared. Cardinal Suenens claimed at the time that the Church was in the process of emerging from the age of Constantine. The charge was not, however, that the Church was repudiating its propensity to align itself with Constantine. It was, rather, that in the modern world there are quite a number of Constantines. The renewal required a backing off from too specific a description of the characteristics of the social order designed by God so that the Vatican would have room to maneuver in its dealings with each of the national regimes while the Church within the nation could adjust to the new set of political circumstances. In its thawing relations with Tito, Moscow and other Communist regimes, the Church is not endorsing a revolutionary philosophy or stance in relation to the historical process. It is dealing with state power, with established regimes which, while appealing to the rhetoric of the Marxist revolutionary dynamic, can be expected to be no more radical than their capitalist counterparts. Though many East European Catholics are irked by the apparently cynical *realpolitik* of Vatican diplomacy, the Catholic Church is simply pursuing its traditional practice of subsequent adjustment and adaptation to a new state of affairs in the historical pageant.

Nevertheless, in the last decade the Catholic Church has repeatedly described itself as the church of the poor and has consciously sought to reverse its image as an ally of the powerful by a more explicit identification with the exploited and the oppressed. John XXIII in his message to the world at the opening of the Vatican Council asserted:

Confronted by the under-developed countries, the Church presents herself as she is and wants to be: the Church of all men, and in particular the Church of the poor.

The crucial question in a revolutionary age is just how the Church will identify with the poor. Three modes of identification are possible:

1. Spiritual or mystical identification with the poor through an evangelical idealization of

poverty and an ascetic emulation of the deprivation of the poor.

2. Philanthropic identification which entails the development of projects for the exercise of Christian charity (which serve an apologetic function for the Church) to alleviate the effects of poverty in the personal domain and the elaboration of policies and the organization of concerted action for social, economic and political reform in the public domain—which serve to demonstrate the relevance of the Church.
3. Political identification with movements to transform structures which demand poverty and perpetuate oppression and exploitation. This would involve prophetic confrontation of the structures of power, creative eradication of the psychology of submission and effective support for and engagement in struggles for liberation.

The first two modes have been characteristic of the style of identification of the Church with the poor. It is only recently, in Latin America and against formidable opposition within the Church, that an explicit theology and movement of political identification have emerged.

The main obstacles to the political identification of the Catholic Church with the poor and the oppressed is that such an identification would require a fundamental reinterpretation of the Christian mission and a radical reorganization of the structure of Catholic consciousness. The very nature of Catholicism, as this has been understood for hundreds of years, is involved. Yet this is the basic issue raised by the response of the Catholic Church to the Vietnam war as a war of national and class liberation and to other revolutionary struggles. The nature of the dilemma and the profound moral choice facing the Catholic Church at this point in history can be highlighted by focusing on two essential characteristics of Catholic consciousness and the political implications of these characteristics.

As Ernst Troeltsch has pointed out, the Catholic Church exemplifies his sociological category of church-type. This type of response to or interpretation of the phenomenon of Jesus Christ is characterized by the objectification and routinization of the "salvation" which Christ brought or represented. Salvation objectified is controlled by the Church and communicated through its teaching network and its sacramental system. The Church, therefore, thinks of itself in terms of power, power to teach, to govern and to sanctify, and of salvation in terms of submission to that power. Human equality, community and emancipation, as well as the other "utopian" ideals and aspirations embodied in the Christian vision, are conceived, in the classic Catholic interpretation, as realizable in a transcendent realm

as a consequence of access to the sacramental means to this realm.

There are two clearly discernible effects of this theology. The *first* effect is that the Church is primarily concerned with maintaining both the ecclesiastical structures which make salvation possible and the access of men to these structures. This concern demands that the Church deal with the principalities and powers most likely to guarantee this access, and their guarantee is usually insured at a price in political allegiance and social circumspection. The *second* is that since the ruling élite in the Church is defined in terms of power, there tends to be a natural affinity between those who exercise spiritual power and those who exercise political power. The whole apparatus of Vatican diplomacy exemplifies and reinforces this affinity. Vatican diplomats and, in a more indirect way, the whole Catholic hierarchy become part of a reference system and a web of significant relationships, no matter how informal, that includes those who wield political and economic power, but does not include those who are latently or actually in conflict with structures of power. This web of relationships functions as a socializing process and tends to establish perimeters of discourse congruent with the orthodoxies and concerns of established power structures. The most the Church is likely to accomplish within this framework of relationships is advocacy of reformist policies to eradicate the harsher contradictions within the prevailing structures. It is not likely to use the language of revolution and radical social change within the perimeters of discourse acceptable to those who represent established worldly powers.

The second essential characteristic of Catholic consciousness is the theoretical resort to the concept of nature, the natural law or the natural social order as the complement of the order of grace and salvation, on the assumption of the ultimate unity of truth. Grace, through the mediation of the Church, suffuses, transforms and elevates nature. The natural order of things and natural virtue are only materially efficacious for salvation: that it be formally efficacious the natural order must be infused by grace. The Protestant reforms denied the material efficacy of the natural order for salvation. Liberal Protestants and Catholics tend to attribute formal efficacy to the natural order. The difficulty that the Catholic Church has faced throughout the modern period, however, has been that of specifying just what precisely is the natural order. It is constantly embarrassed by the accelerating pace of social change. To use this conceptual device is to be chronically in the position of having to make adjustments to and belated endorsements of a new state of affairs, the one that was previously opposed. John Courtney Murray was the apologist of the American social order before the international Catholic forum just when dynamic movements within that order were calling for its transformation. It is

one of the ironies of history that at a time when the Catholic Church was about to endorse and embrace modernity and its sociopolitical structural forms, the culture of modernity was faced with rising pressure for its own historical transcendence. This is not the place to suggest an alternative to the grace-nature conceptual framework used by the Church for hundreds of years. What is immediately important is the recognition of the dysfunctionality of the device in both human and Christian terms.

Lawrence Kohlberg has elaborated a typology of levels of moral reasoning ranging from the pre-conventional through the conventional to the post-conventional. The highest level of moral reasoning is that which is exemplified in men like Jesus Christ and Gandhi who could see the immoral and humanly destructive effects inherent in the prevailing orthodoxies, legal processes and moral conventions of their society. The problem with the conceptual device of natural law as it has been used by the Catholic Church is that the Church tends to induce and reinforce strictly conventional modes of moral reasoning and insures that its members will live in stolid repudiation of the style and the message of Jesus Christ. Or, from another point of view, the appeal of the Church to natural law constantly deprives it of an effective *methodology of both historical and ethical initiative*. Such a methodology is crucial for an organization which makes claim to being in the vanguard of moral perception.

In the conflict between the Catholic hierarchy of the U.S. and the Catholic liberals over the war in Vietnam the hierarchy has shown a greater degree of consistency and realism, even though this may have been an instinctive response rather than a rational analysis. Many antiwar liberals have thought that the opposition of the hierarchy to U.S. involvement meant simply a shift in policy. It entails a great deal more, however. The Vietnam war raises an issue in political form which began to take shape in the Vatican Council in theological form. Is the Catholic Church going to continue to make subsequent adjustments to each new stage in history or will it assume some kind of initiative in history? In either case, can it move into either a new phase or a new role with its traditional organization and rationale intact? The conservative interpretation of Vatican II is that it was a "pastoral" council in the sense that the traditional organization and consciousness must be presented to the modern world in more appealing and compelling ways but without any basic changes in rationale or political commitment. The liberal interpretation is that "pastoral" implies substantial reinterpretation of the Church and its message in the light of contemporary experience. The radical interpretation is that "pastoral" implies a transformation of the world in the light of the Gospel vision and

a repudiation of conservative reaction or liberal adjustment to established cultural matrices. Both the liberal and radical understandings of the significance of Vatican II require a whole new rationale or theology which in either camp is still only in embryonic form. What is more important, both camps need to control the commanding heights within the Church for their interpretations to prevail. Every indication today, ten years since the beginning of the Council, is that the conservative interpretation is dominant in those Church positions which control the prevailing definitions of ecclesiastical and theological reality.

The opening message of Vatican II asserted:

Faith, hope and the love of Christ impel us to serve our brothers, thereby patterning ourselves after the example of the Divine Teacher, who came not to be served but to serve. Hence the Church too was not born to dominate but to serve.

There has not been too much evidence of this spirit in the Church since the Vatican Council. Much of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy at all levels has assumed a more tolerant style and mode of exercise of domination within the Church which has drawn on the techniques of repressive tolerance characteristic of advanced industrial society. But belief in the power of the Church and in salvation as mediated by that power has not substantially changed. It would not be possible here even to begin to spell out a rationality or a theology which would correspond to the above claim of the Church to be of service to the world. Two of its features can, however, be suggested.

According to Ernst Benz in *Evolution and Christian Hope*, the classic structure of Christian theology and ecclesiastical organization grew out of a twofold crisis: the failure of Jesus Christ to appear again and the need to come to terms with the Roman Imperium. If the Church is effectively to emerge from the age of Constantine, it must embark upon a program of radical political realignment, identify with the "anawim," the outcast and the oppressed in the full political sense of the term, in the belief that these bear the promise of the Kingdom. The Catholic Church has been characterized in the past by its social and political realism, but this has been the conservative political realism of institutional growth and enhancement within a given sociocultural context statically conceived. What is called for now is a radical or revolutionary realism which sees history in dynamic terms as representing the real possibility of a thrust toward the full human community through the abolition of structures of domination and oppression which divide men and destroy community.

The new pacifism within the Church seeks for a moral stance that is specifically Christian. The case could be made, however, that the New Testament

does not instruct us whether or not we are to be pacifist but on what side we should be in the conflict between those who exercise power and those who are subject to it. The attempt to transcend natural and predictable human propensities through doctrinaire pacifism can often mean stepping out of the dialectical process and the difficult responsibilities of history. It is arguable that identification with the exploited, the renunciation of class allegiance and the rewards of status, prestige, property and privilege which go with loyalty to one's inherited state in life or national birthright are just as clearly a defiance of natural human propensities, without the consequence characteristic of the sectarian response of disengagement from the dynamics and the responsibilities of the mainstream of history. A resolute pacifist stance can have important prophetic and tactical effects. It should not be made, however, the organizing principle for a responsible and realistic Christian social ethic. That organizing principle has to grow out of a specifically Christian response to the principalities and powers of this world and the way in which Christians and the Church relate to those who are subject to those powers.

The path to Christian transcendence is not that of philosophical dualism nor that of the moral schizophrenia represented by the various denominational forms of Christian realism but that of political commitment to a class of people—the exploited and the oppressed—which emerges in each new stage in history and under every regime. The Christian has to be committed to those who are subject to the power of the captains of capital as well as to those subject to the apparatchiks of the socialist world. The advantage of this political path to transcendence is that it provides a therapy for ideological commitments and distortions as well as a methodology for historical and ethical initiative. Ideological distortions arise as a consequence of submission to a rationalization of existing patterns and institutions of domination and submission. The only historically reliable way to transcend the distortions is to identify with and learn from those who refuse submission. This happens also to be the path to new levels of moral perception and, therefore, provides a methodology for ethical and historical initiative. This identification is a fundamental orientation or disposition within a political context. It does not assume any prepackaged set of answers or strategies for the difficult tasks of social transformation. Addressing the specific strategic problems is the next step.

Protestant theology, influenced by the tradition of the Social Gospel, has dealt much more thoroughly with the issues and problems involved in the goal of transcendence through social action and commitment than has Catholic theology. But the intense social consciousness generated in this tradition has failed

to exercise any profound leverage on the attitudes of the mass of the Protestant churches because of the fragmenting effects of the congregational principle. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, has maintained intact a hierarchical organization which transcends national boundaries, but the potential of this network for creating a transnational human consciousness has been profoundly vitiated by the ahistorical character of Catholic thought and the structured propensity of the Church to align itself with, endorse and reinforce precisely those forces which fragment the human community along both horizontal and vertical lines. What is needed is an international ecclesial organization which, though winning allegiance, is not a structure of spiritual domination but a network of communication which transcends and, therefore, constantly relativizes national allegiances and ideologies. Its basic political commitment would be to the powerless, in both international conflicts and international struggles, as bearing the repressed potential for historical transcendence and a more inclusive structure of human species identity. From this commitment would emerge a rationality antithetical to and designed to replace the theology which grew from an ecclesiastical accommodation with the Constantines of this world.

Exactly how long local allegiance would last to a church which, instead of instilling mystical, sacramental or biblical pieties, dedicated itself to challenging political pieties is difficult to say. Nor is it easy to predict what practical forms political commitment to the "anawim" would assume. One very modest and simple yet crucially important form that commitment could take would be that of listening to the spokesmen of those who are subject to power and struggling against it. How many Americans have heard a Black Panther or an Arab guerrilla or a Vietnamese liberation fighter state his case, describe his social conditions or explain his tactics? The Church could function as a medium of communication or a forum, not provided by the most liberal of the media of communication, in which those engaged in the struggle could explain their own case, reveal their essential humanity and make direct contact with their fellow men free from the ideological stereotypes, disguises and distortions imposed on them by the clichés and categories of the conventional means of communication.

The second and more general task of the Catholic Church is that of living up to its rhetorical renunciation of power and claim to service to the world, to enter into an alliance with the World Council of Churches with the ingenuity and vision it usually reserves for alliances with Constantine, as a creative move toward establishing a communication network which could provide a proleptic structure of the transnational, transracial and classless human community.