

## **The Church - Agency of Social or Spiritual Reform?**

This time they came to demonstrate not within the college or university campus nor against a school administrator, but in front of an episcopal palace and against a high ranking Church administrator.

From where we stand, the whole affair seems to bring to focus a basic question: *Is the Church an agency of social reform, or of spiritual reform?*

When the demonstrators demanded more bread, clothing and shelter and less Eucharist, more employment and less preaching of the Word of God, they assumed that the hands of the Church were fashioned and hallowed by the chrism to distribute earthly goodness and not goodness of divine grace; to clothe human bodies instead of raising them to the dignity of the sons of God. And the strange thing is, all this was being done in the name of the "spirit" of Vatican II! Shades of Vatican III

To unduly emphasize the social service of Christianity, and to minimize the vertical dimension of the love of God, of prayer, of worship—is this the spirit of Vatican II? To empty Christianity of its supernatural and eschatological dimension and reducing it to an instrument of social transformation—is this also according to the spirit of Vatican II?

No amount of research will bring out a single conciliar text to support this contention. On the contrary, the whole array of ecclesiastical traditions summed up in the conciliar texts repeats with boring consistency the doctrine that the immediate and proper purpose of the Church is clearly not institutional reform and the

advancement of the material standard of living. This is the job of the State and not of the Church. The Church is to procure the sanctification of men through the teaching of the truths of religion and the administration of the sacraments. In his address of Oct. 11, 1962, inaugurating the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII stated that while the "Church desires to show herself as the loving mother of all, she does not offer modern man riches nor promises them mere earthly happiness. Rather she distributes to them goodness of divine grace." And *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church-World document *par excellence*, states: "Christ, to be sure, gave His Church no proper mission in the political, economic, or social order. The purpose which He set before her is a religious one." (n. 42). The Church then must lead men to God, in order that they may be given over to Him without reserve. She cannot afford to lose sight of this strictly religious and supernatural goal, for the meaning of all her activities down to the last canon of her Code, can only cooperate directly or indirectly in this goal.

The norm of conduct affirmed here is a faithful understanding of the meaning of the apostolic teaching: "It would not be right for us to neglect the Word of God so as to give out food; you, brothers must select from among yourselves seven men of good reputation, filled with the Spirit and with wisdom; we will hand over this duty to them, and continue to devote ourselves to prayer and to the service of the word." (Acts 6:2)

Christ did not refuse to give bread to the famished multitude and to restore health to the sick. Always, however, when He did this, He gave at the same time the reminder that it was not for this that he had come and that "the true bread is that which comes down from above." The danger against which Christ Himself was always on guard was that of seeing Himself used for a temporal end, while the essence of His message was to reveal to man the transcendent dimension of his vocation. The Church is heir to the same mission.

Do we then refuse to see her commitment to the temporal order? Definitely not. The purpose of the Church is essentially religious, not to be an agency of social reform. But since in this life man's

spiritual soul operates through the medium of his material body, the Church does however, take a deep interest in the physical welfare not only of her members but of all mankind. She must exhort and inspire—and if need be—even look for practical remedies. This is a theological imperative in line with the very nature of the Church. She is wholly a mystery of the supernatural order, her essential mission is a supernatural one. But, since she cannot accomplish it without being "incarnational", in a manner analogous to the Incarnation of Christ, her head, her influence penetrates deeply into the temporal order.

But we should avoid confusion here. The Church should not be expected to involve herself in the temporal order in the same way and degree as the State. The State is the direct and proper agency of social reform, of economic upliftment, but not the Church. The Church contribution is quite other than a recasting of temporal society; it is divine life, an interior principle of personal renovation. And the effect of this personal renovation redounds to the whole social life. This is how the religious mission of the Church, while remaining essentially spiritual and supernatural, reaches and influences the temporal and material order. Out of her religious mission of sanctifying men, comes an energy which structures and consolidates the human community according to the divine law. Thus the virtue of faith, hope and charity for example, bring light of a higher order to bear on the whole moral life of man; and the whole of life—religious, social, economic—becomes thereby capable of being raised to the supernatural level.

It is altogether clear then that while it is unfortunate to posit a de-emphasis of the spiritual mission of the Church in order to see Her involved in the material advancement of the standard of living, it is however, a gross distortion of the Vatican II to impute to it this very same thing which it repudiates.

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