



# THE BISHOP IN THE MIDDLE

By MARIO PATRICIO

**M**ORE orthodox than the Vatican" is a typical and often-heard estimate of Catholicism in the Philippines. The description is probably false or merely ironic, but it is certainly characteristic of its conservatism that the local Catholic hierarchy should look at this charge as though it were a badge of virtue, and the Filipino Catholic as though it were just a matter of course.

Even so, Filipino Catholicism has not remained exactly untouched by the wave of renewal that has possessed the Roman Catholic Church ever since the ascendancy of Pope John XXIII. As would Catholicism as a whole has been drawn into the arena of modern life (confronting not just questions of faith but those of politics, economics, society and individual freedom), there has gradually emerged within both the Catholic hierarchy and the laity a small and growing minority addressed to the questions of change and renewal. Their work may be mainly quiet and unobtrusive, but there is no question that their outlook

is closely allied to the new radicalism of many of the world's Catholics. By themselves, they have created a problem of synthesis — the synthesis of what is new and old within their Church.

Monsignor Mariano Gaviola, secretary-general of the Catholic Bishops Conference, is neither an arch-conservative nor a radical. In outlook, age and style, he seems to embody in his person the present polarity of inclinations within the Church. On the one hand, he has often seemed to demand strict orthodoxy and obedience from his flock; on the other, he has identified himself with the social and other contemporary concerns of the new Catholic intellectuals. One might best describe him as a bridge between these outlooks.

Sometime in late February, he made the front pages of newspapers in the course of giving testimony at a Congressional hearing on the proposal to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 years. At the hearing, he expressed misgivings saying that "18 year-old youths do not enjoy enough independence

from the their parents and are not educated enough to participate actively in partisan politics." He observed, however, that the Catholic hierarchy might be inclined to favor the proposal.

What was singularly interesting about this was not so much what he said, but his very presence in Congress. For it curtly reveals a new and real interest in public issues within the Church — something unheard of ever since anti-clerical uproar defined the separate realms of the state and the Church.

When asked whether this, indeed, indicates a new tone in Church position, Bishop Gaviola says: "Ever since the 2nd Vatican Ecumenical Council, the Church has taken a renewed sense of interest in secular matters. This is based on the view that man is not merely spiritual, that he has a definite role to play in this world.

"It is wrong to describe this change as the emergence of a New Church; it would be more accurate to see this as a renewal in the Church. In earlier centuries, the Church played a critical role in public issues, but there ensued after the 18th century a rigid separation of Church and State relations."

One of the current projects of the Church which Monsignor Gaviola considers as evidence of its greater participation in society is a resettlement project being undertaken with the Marcos Administration in Rizal. The objective of the project is to resettle some 1,500 families with the government providing the land and the Catholic hierarchy covering the overhead expenses.

It may be for this reason that the President had chosen Monsignor Gaviola to head the current observation of Social Action Year. At 46, the Bishop is decidedly more than an able spokesman of the Catholic hierarchy. As a secretary-general of the Catholic Bishops conference, he has sought not only strict adherence to hierarchy decisions, but also Church institutions and the layman, between the Church and the government.

It may be around this kind of approach, where the Catholic Church will find finally the enduring synthesis of its diverse interest and outlooks. **PM**