

# RESPONSE TO "MANIFESTO" OF 33 THEOLOGIAN\*

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## OPINION

On 17 March, 33 professors of theology published a manifesto "against the resignation that exists in the Church". Catholic opinion has reacted in very different ways according to countries and regions. In Belgium, for example, the Flemish-speaking papers devoted a certain attention to it, laying stress on the names of professors from Nijmegen who had signed this text. On the other hand, French-speaking papers, even those of progressive trend, gave only a few short lines to the statement. It was the same in France, where the paragraphs on the manifesto gave the impression of a certain dissatisfaction, without explaining why. In other countries, on the contrary, certain environments reproduced the complete text. It is necessary, therefore, to examine it briefly. It is not a question of being polemical; the Church today has been only too ready to set the example of dissension to a world that expects from it a testimony of peace and harmony. We cannot be silent, however; we should be accused of rejecting dialogue, and, furthermore, we should lose the opportunity of discussing unjust accusations and regrettable contesting projects. *Qui tacet consentire videtur.*

## THE SIGNATORIES

In such a case, one thinks instinctively of reading the signatures first of all. It is in the nature of man to attribute at least as much importance to the persons speaking as to the arguments put forward. "Thirty three professors of theology" is a very small number. If compared with the number of pro-

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\* This article was taken from *L'Osservatore Romano*, May 11, 1972

fessors teaching in the faculties and seminaries, five or six thousand in the whole world, it is certainly not a large percentage. One wonders, too, how the authors of the proclamation got together and what meaning is to be given to the list makes it possible to find a solution to the first question. Two schools of theology are represented substantially: Tubinger with seven names, Nijmegen with five. The most advanced group of *Concilium*, in particular some organizers of the 1969 congress and the spearhead of the collaborators of the review bearing the same name, also appear here. It is known, of course, that the various councils of the sections of this review gather a large number of professors and researchers. But the fact that they up 15 of the 33 names is very significant all the same. Closer membership of this movement certainly explains, moreover, the presence of certain more isolated signatures, in Madrid, Vienna, Philadelphia, Toronto, Bonn, Lucerne, for example. The absences, also conspicuous, should be studied. I learned by chance that a very well-known theologian had been paid a visit by the organizer of this manifesto and had refused to support it, saying that the text did not correspond either to his problems or to his ecclesiology. These are important words, pregnant with meaning, which are well worth thinking over.

### THE MEANING OF THE DOCUMENT

To understand the meaning of this protest, it is necessary to set it in the general movement of ideas. Since the end of the Council, innumerable pontifical and episcopal texts and theological writings have had as their purpose to bring the teachings and directives of Vatican II into theology, pastoral life and institutions. The success of this immense effort is certainly not complete; this is clearly seen by the way the Sovereign Pontiff is continually coming back to, and stressing the lessons of the Council. Certain regrettable expressions of opposition have appeared, but we must take into account, above all, the slowness of movement of ideas. After each of the great councils, historians note, it takes 25 or 30 years before the message is completely assimilated.

But some people have become impatient. It seemed to them that the ways opened by the Council were not getting anywhere; so they looked for others. This movement of the "post-Council" had expected to triumph at the Brussels Congress, but it was forced to realize that it had no backing. It renewed its

efforts in 1971 to condition the Synod; the Holy Father publicly noted the action of pressure groups, particularly to modify or suppress the law of ecclesiastical celibacy. In the course of the summer of 1971, veritable press and radio campaigns were organized as regards particularly notorious defections which, as was cynically said, should "make the Synod think". A new theology of the priesthood was insistently proposed. It practically suppressed the difference between the ordinary priesthood and the ministerial priesthood. The Christian assembly was to be the determining element in conferring the priestly or episcopal service.

The Synod was not impressed by these ideas. It recalled that the powers of the bishop and the priest come from Christ by apostolic succession, that the Eucharist makes present the sacrifice of Christ, the mediator between God and men, that it could not therefore be confused with a meal of brotherly communion. Under these conditions, the priest is a man consecrated to God and his involvement in secular values (profession, politics, family) must be different, without however discrediting these values, to which laymen are witnesses by the grace of Christ.

The progressive movement did its utmost to discredit the Synod. The fact is now well known to make it unnecessary to stress it further. As a result it lost some of its sympathizers, who realized they had been harbouring illusions. To defend themselves personally and to rally their routed troops, the partisans of a "beyond the Council" are forced to take a new path: contestation. What they are afraid of above all is to see the discontented abandon the fight. The manifesto of the 33 merely says more harshly and clearly what they had been hinting at for six months. The tactic it presents, is what might be called an ecclesiastical "guerilla". The authorities are to be harrassed by interventions of small groups, and apparently harmless reforms are to be put forward to prepare for greater ones.

### IS THIS THEOLOGY?

It is very curious to see that, in countries in which the press merely summarized the document, it mentioned the fact of discontent with the Church and its criticism of the Church, but passed over the "strategic" and longer part of the document. This can be regarded as a sign of uneasiness with regard to such undignified maneuvers on the part of priests and professors.

Christians as a whole, even those who criticize the present situation, hesitate on seeing professors of theology commit themselves to contestation. Some people even see it as being a sign of clericalism, for the reform of the procedure of episcopal nominations and the consultations asked for in the document concern laymen as much as ecclesiastics and theologians. One cannot help feeling — however much they protest — that it is the action of tiny, noisy minority trying to deceive people about the value of their aims and methods.

Is that really what the Christian people expect from theologians today? In many countries, the faithful are scandalized by the doctrinal and moral lapses of those who ought to have served as leaders of opinion. What the whole Church wants today, in the great light of Vatican II, is to be increasingly faithful to the Gospel, without denying human values. Constant study of the message of the Revelation of Christ in its eternal and contemporary meaning, this is what the faithful expect of professors of theology. John XXIII, Paul VI, *Guadium et Spes* laid great stress on the method of the "signs of the times". It is a matter of Christians being more sensitive than ever before to human aspirations and comparing them with the faith in order to keep what is praiseworthy, and strengthen it by its insertion in Christ. In this pastoral work, theologians have a specific role, for they must not be content with a certain knowledge of Revelation or of public opinion. They must study the Scriptures, with the aid of literary and historical sciences, according to the faith and in fidelity to the magisterium. They must find an analysis and a Christian understanding of the new human sciences, just as St. Augustine and St. Thomas re-interpreted Platonism and Aristotelianism in a Christian context. This is not remaining extraneous to the life of the Church, as the 33 say. It means preparing the patterns of thought and action by which the magisterium will be inspired, if it considers it opportune by virtue of its pastoral charism, and by which the Christian will live in the renewed joy of being more of a man because he is a Christian and more of a Christian because he is more of a man.

### NO FALSE RESIGNATION!

In our turn, let us adopt the slogan of the 33 to apply it to their own manifesto. To the extent to which it takes this text into account, Christian opinion has two paths before it.

Some run the risk of refusing all renewal, maintaining that severity and strictness are the only ways of ending contestation. They are not completely wrong. No community can accept declarations from some of its members however few, that they wish to undermine the group from within. But, on the other hand, if we attach importance to a bad-tempered gesture, are we not falling into a trap? Is it not better to adopt a positive attitude? There is no error that does not contain an element of truth. The 33 ask for more co-responsibility. This is also what the Holy Father and so many bishops have done since 1965. We must continue in this direction, but keep in mind the fact that anarchy and contestation are not gestures of responsible Christians, but risks of irresponsible childishness.

The Church proclaims freedom *ad extra* but not *ad intra*, the document declares. But as a matter of fact, if there is a conflict between authority and freedom, the immense majority of the faithful feel that freedom has prevailed over authority. They sometimes wonder what they must still believe and practise, so many are the voices raised in contestation and denial.

They ask for a return to a certain authority, understood essentially as a service of the truth that Christ entrusted to Peter and to the Apostles. Cardinal Garrone showed this clearly in his courageous answer to the document of the 33. But is a discreet exercise of authority possible without self-discipline? Must not theologians be more vigilant than ever not to propose personal opinions, ideas that are not mature or justified, as certainties.

Meditating upon the text of the 33 in the perspective of faith and charity, we must all see in it an appeal for increased vigilance, ever greater faithfulness to Christ and to the Church. The 33 are wrong to preach contestation to us, and we must say so. Let us not give them the opportunity, however, to play the part of the misunderstood. It is in the very name of faithfulness to Christ — which, I like to think, we share with them — that we refuse the ways of disobedience and contestation.