

The Church at Century's End

"Remember, I am sending you out to be like sheep among wolves; you must be wary, then, as serpents, and yet innocent as doves." —Matthew 10:16

A VAST SUBJECT like the one proposed by the editor of *Modern Age* requires what the Germans call an *Ortsbestimmung*: a realistic, unadorned overview of the place of Christianity on the threshold of its third millennium. A striking, but generally ignored facet of such an overview is the following: While during most of the first two millennia (from 313 A.D. to the nineteenth century) Christianity and the Catholic Church in particular appeared in association with the State, around 1900 the separation of the two created an altogether new situation. For about fifteen centuries State and Church had their distinct areas of authority (unlike the Palace and the Temple before Christianity which fused in an ethnocentric cult); yet they also cooperated in the preservation of moral and public order, the one inconceivable without the other in Christendom. To be sure, the State was not called upon to supervise the citizen's ethical consciousness, but it was supposed to provide the framework within which the Church may guide the souls to their supernatural end. Medieval thinkers, up until William of Ockham, could not imagine another but a Christian *civitas*; it was not shocking, it was normal that the citizen's loyalty was solicited by both Church and State, but the claim each had on him did not coincide. They shared the citizen's guidance and divided accordingly their mission and vocation. It is noteworthy that although moral and political cooperation between pope and ruler was not devoid of deep and violent conflicts—at times shaking the

christiana republica to its foundations—the interests of public and moral order remained uppermost: The Church relied on the "secular arm," and the State counted upon the clerical discipline under Roman (or Protestant) authority.

We may regard the separation of Church and State (the former's "disestablishment" is a more adequate term) as an event of greater importance in modern history than, let us say, the French and the Russian revolutions or the two world wars. The separation did not take place as a spontaneous move; it had been for centuries on the agenda of liberal ideology and the civil society shaped by it. Civil society as such always existed; next to State and Church, it consisted of transactions among citizens whether in business, education, or culture. The striking thing is that civil society, while its activities were always regulated by the State (laws, issuance of money, supervision of contracts and of corporations) and by the Church (prohibition of usury, the placing of guilds under patron saints), never became a political institution with a manifest political power of its own. The monopoly of politics belonged to State and Church, the joint guardians of the *res publica*.

The latter's main thrust in modern times has been directed against these guardians. Ever since the ethical valorization of economics, starting with the seventeenth century, and the concomitant substitution of the ethics of interest (Mandeville, Montesquieu, Adam Smith) to Christian morality, liberal civil society became

conscious of itself as a political power: a power no longer exercised indirectly by holding the purse for kings, princes, and churchmen, but directly, by organizing the social space according to the main activities of economic articulation. The last two centuries witnessed the successful efforts by civil society to reduce the State to the "nightwatchman" status, and the parallel efforts to marginalize the Church by privatizing it as a mere pressure group, a signatory of the "social contract" like any other lobby in a pluralist society.

The many centuries-long triangular rivalry—State, Church, civil society—thus temporarily ended with the latter's victory. There is nothing strange in this: the Church (papacy) triumphed in the eleventh and consecutive centuries; the State (absolute monarchy), from the sixteenth to the eighteenth; civil society is now the undisputed holder of monopoly in the political space, itself transformed into a socio-economic space of theoretically equal and competing groups. It is natural that the Church, separated from the State and deprived of public power, has entered upon a different relationship with civil society than it had had with the State. In spite of the allegedly ill-sounding expression, "alliance of throne and altar," this alliance, also described as the "Constantinian Church," was beneficial to the latter. The bishop-statesmen of the fourth to sixth centuries—Eusebius, Ambrose, Augustine, Gelasius, Gregory—were not prompted by political ambition when they opted for partnership with the secular power. They knew that that was the only way of moderating the latter's methods of governing and power-engendered arrogance.

It is obvious that the invisible contract signed by the Church with civil society is essentially different from the alliance with the State. The *idée reçue* in this respect is that the Church gained thereby a genuine freedom for the first time, a better condition than subservience *vis-à-vis* the State. Almost the opposite is the case. We do not speak here of State-managed churches: the Anglican, the Russian since Peter the Great, the Lutheran State Church of Den-

mark so vigorously castigated by Kierkegaard in the person of Bishop Mynster. We speak of the Catholic and even of the Byzantine Church, the latter by far not as submissive to the Eastern Roman emperors as some historians used to point out. In the West the Church was in positions either of too much power over the State (from Pope Innocent to Bonifacius) or in an unstable equilibrium with it, but never docile—except when coerced by regimes where totalist ideology began stirring, whether of Joseph II of Austria or of Napoleon. Generally the Church was free to implement ecclesiastical interests and the magisterial teaching. The relationship with the State secured the amount of power that is indispensable for any institution in charge of human beings, even in charge of their souls. In the Church's case, the dogma of incarnation actually dictates involvement with mundane affairs and, therefore, with a measure of political presence in the area of power.

What has changed when the new relationship was "contracted" with liberal civil society? The latter's concept of the common good is not the same as that of the traditional State. Liberal ideology posits only individuals and voluntary associations; out of their inevitable clashes there does not arise what we would consider the common good, but a pragmatic *modus vivendi* with "freedom" as a vague yet supreme value. This is a formal concept applicable to business deals as well as to moral and legal relations. It is blind to associations based on tradition, hereditary loyalty, non-rationalistic premises, beliefs, and discipline; it is, above all, hostile to systems of transcendence. As a consequence, the Church is regarded as a counter-society, inimical to liberal this-worldliness, democratic choice, and religious pluralism. If a contract with it is nevertheless signed, it can only be a provisional one since mankind, tending, in the liberal perspective of history, toward the maximalization of individual freedom ("human rights"), is expected sooner or later to desert the cult and its irrational, mythical object; Christianity, together

with other myths, constitutes but a phase in the annals of this one-directional progress.

While the contract remains valid, the Church is expected to behave like any other pressure group; she may lobby for her constitutional rights, but not for the universal rights of God and thus not as God's representative. In other words, the Church is tolerated as a temporal institution (like a sports club or a literary circle) on condition that her spiritual activity remains private, keeping out of the public space. The reason why this central fact of our century has scarcely been commented upon is that until recently civil society was managed by men still formed by the religious world view; they were liberal and not Christian (for example, free-masons or agnostics), but their so-called values had been shaped by centuries of Christianity. With Vatican II it suddenly seemed that Rome itself authorized its own liquidation (the expression used by Paul VI, who also spoke of defacement, in French *dénaturer*), pluralization, and democratization, briefly its *aggiornamento* in the spirit of liberal society. The recent Council put the seal of approval on the process of accommodation with the world, accepting in effect society's new religion—secular humanism—as the early Christians never accepted the cult of Caesar! (Consider, for example the ambiguous attitude of the American and many other episcopates before the mass-murder of embryos and other obscene sexual laws.)

Confronted with a situation stamped largely by her own sins of commission and omission, the Church finds herself in the worst posture of her history: subservience to the politics of liberal civil society whose avowed ideological objective, not unlike the objective of Marxist regimes, is the liquidation of faith in a transcendent God. The liberal process is less overt and expeditious than the Marxist one; it is more subtle, it promotes the gradual extinction of Christianity through relativistic morals, scientific ("factual") education, technological progress and its ideological derivatives. Its culture is permeated by

"values" opposed to religion, from the free market of pornography to films degrading Jesus Christ. The sporadic protests by the Church are silenced in the name of pluralism. There can be, therefore, no systematic resistance because in recent decades the Church has erected adjustment into a quasi-conversion to the liberal environment and world view. Attraction to the world always existed, Christ warned against it. Now it is stronger than it used to be in feudalism, in Renaissance humanism, in the absolute monarchy, in the century of Enlightenment. Adjustment is fueled by the flimsy but widely advertised events of the fifties and sixties: decolonization, the unification of the planet, de-Stalinization, socialist humanism, a Catholic president in America. Such occurrences persuaded many that utopia is on the threshold. The Protestant theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, admitted in an autobiographical work that he and his colleagues had been carried away by enthusiasm, believing that residual Christianity—with standard-bearers like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Teilhard de Chardin, the new theologies of the "death of God" and "liberation"—would fuse with secular social movements. Many believed they stood before a decisive and marvelous mutation.

Part of the accommodationist option was accredited by the Church's desire to avoid losing new social classes. The lesson came from far: Rome had lost the Enlightenment *philosophes*; in the next century she lost the Voltairean and Darwinian bourgeoisie, then the proletariat; the twentieth-century mass-middle class is so dangerously de-Christianized that a further loss was envisaged, after which, in Paul VI's words, the Church would shrink to a remnant. His words are worth quoting:

The Church will continue to open and conform itself to the world, thus to disfigure its own nature. Yet its supernatural substance will be preserved, limited to a residual minimum, and its supernatural end will be pursued faithfully in the world by this remnant. There corresponds to the Church's false expansion, as she dissolves herself in the

world, a gradual contraction and impoverishment in numbers. They will form a minority, seemingly insignificant and dying, but this minority contains a concentration of the elect, giving firm testimony of the faith.

Hence we witness the policy of dialogue, ecumenism, and finally the espousal of liberal and leftist causes, in politics and culture, and a desperate clinging to the world, wherever it leads. In other words, the Church seems to have elaborated her own "Gramsci-ism": courtship of youth culture, espousal of syndicalist aspirations, and the searching out of masses in the framework of organized spectacles (papal visits, etc.).

It is arguable whether Rome has two options or only one. Until recently we have seen liberal societies and socialist regimes with distinct programs. As the century draws to its close, the two societies with their respective ideologies attain a fusion, thus displaying similar features: vacuous values and spectacular techniques, laxness in educational and sexual matters, dissolution of authority. The Church's choice becomes gradually narrower, in proportion as its clerical personnel adopts the bureaucratic *modus operandi* of the secular/technological world. Priests, theologians, bishops, nuns, and, in fact, entire orders call faith, doctrine, and morals into question, urging the Church to renounce her illusory primacy, exclusivity of offering salvation, and claim to represent more than just another myth that has run its course at one stage of the evolution and now ought to vanish. Catholic faithful are meanwhile bewildered, lose faith, become indifferent, and insist on writing their own bill of fare of what they are willing to believe and practice. The Church itself is split—according to the principle of pluralism preached by civil society—between official Rome, which goes through the movements of governing, and the counter-Church, which claims to speak for the Council. Cardinal Ratzinger summed matters up when he said that the "conciliarists" have turned Vatican II into a dogma close to their heart: the utopian schema of sacralizing

the world and the simultaneous desacralization of the Church. This is, after all, the substance of most heresies.

The Church finds herself in an ever-renewed dilemma: the choice between the mission that the Founder assigned and the ways of the world. The first lifts up to grace, the second pulls toward gravity, a natural pull, or, as Simone Weil called the two, *la pesanteur et la grâce*. The dilemma is inevitable because Incarnation dictates both supernatural and this-worldly involvement, that is, the pursuit of faith and salvation and also the moral interest with which the Church accompanies men and women in the life of their communities. Politics is therefore inseparable from the Christian religion, but the question is, How much of it and by sacrificing what else?

From the time of Constantine, the Church welcomed political power because she regarded it as the condition of preserving a Christian commonwealth. It is easy to declare that there occurred many excesses in the alliance with the throne, but we have seen that partnership with civil society also leads to excesses. In the past, facing powerful secular rulers, the popes were obliged to create a political network of their own and resort to mundane instruments of power in the various conflicts. We are told that the situation is different now, that the Church lives in peace, that the humanitarian ideals which permeate society amount to a secularized Christianity. The truth is that today's neutralization of the Church is more damaging to her integrity and mission than were past confrontations. Even nominally Christian princes and governments ruled within the Christian cultural framework and the overarching norms were set by Christian concepts and values. The social mimesis functioned in the general interest of religion.

We saw that things drastically changed when political power came into the hands of civil society. The latter is addicted to change (Christopher Dawson called it a "half-way house"), although it stabilizes itself with the help of rigid liberal dogma. Even revolutionary regimes—lib-

eral as in 1789, socialist as in 1917—install a set of dogmas the morning after celebrating freedom of thought and action. The hidden dogmatism and its monistic philosophy are essentially hostile to the Christian religion and its two-layered world, the sacred and the profane, the supernatural and the workaday human.

Yet the Church pursues her political vocation as if no basic change has taken place since the time of separation from the State and her present membership in civil society. She wishes to ignore the latter's radically mundane character and ideological orientation; she acts as if civil society were another Roman empire, ready for Christianization. For one thing, the Church does not want to sustain another major loss, social and civilizational; for another thing, she has been exaggeratedly attentive to thinkers like Jacques Maritain and J. Courtney Murray who believed that modern liberal democracy would respect the Christian faith and allow Christians to pursue their otherworldly vocation—provided they abstain from evangelizing the public square.

It may well be that the Church's wager is justified and that her survival in these perilous circumstances without a loss of substance opens new vistas. But it may also happen that these entirely new circumstances require on the Church's part a withdrawal from politics, a benign neglect *vis-à-vis* liberal civil society. Let us emphasize that the leading social models of the age, the liberal and the socialist, have actually excluded (privatized, marginalized, persecuted) the Church from their agenda. The latter lives on sufferance, as a target of vulgar and blasphemous attacks from "private citizens" and "private groups," and from the quasi-monopolistic owners of words, shapes, and ideas: the universities, the media elites, the opinion-leaders. The Church's non-resistance to, the offensives of the latter can only be explained by her own liberal-democratization, her desire to blend with the milieu, an operation conducted by an ecclesiastical nomenclatura, a self-directed bureaucratic class which no longer obeys doctrine and magisterium.

In the kind of monarchic/aristocratic society that the Church was until 1960, bureaucracy was an integrated branch of the total operation; the present democratization in the Church, for example, the new structure of "episcopal conferences," brought with it centrifugal assemblies which deal with matters that lie outside the bishops' competence and discretion, and for this reason require a swollen bureaucracy whose objective is to render itself indispensable. The consequence is that the Church becomes entangled in the bureaucracies of civil society and cannot sever the daily, routine links. She not only accepts a subordinate role in this unequal partnership but also lives by it parasitically, as if fascinated by the social model that reduces her to impotence. A self-induced loss of memory forbids her to remember the days of alliance with political power.

Withdrawal from partnership with civil society and the kind of politization that this partnership imposes would not be a betrayal of the Church's mission to be present to men. Clearly, liberal society is beyond spiritual rescue, it is a quagmire in which all institutions, including the Church, are trapped. We have heard of the "naked public square" that Pastor Neuhaus believes the Catholic Church would be able to fill with potent messages to other religions, to national culture, to the nation's sense of political vocation. I confess I see absolutely no such silver lining on the edges of the accumulating dark clouds. In Western countries the Church has become a lobby, not necessarily for the rights of God, but for the moment's fad or her own material interests: building projects and tax exemption. The Church in today's Western world is a kind of tolerated association—tolerated for the auxiliary social services she renders—which has no sociological justification or a permanent place in society. Her contribution to schooling, to culture, and public morality presents a mediocre record. We no longer hear of the Church's sponsorship of great music, architecture, or philosophy; what she builds is in atrocious taste, not

distinguishable from the neighborhood cinema, firehouse, or factory; her great music has been jettisoned together with Latin and the Gregorian; and the philosophy she produces consists of the faddist tracts of her rebels. Paul VI himself admitted the degradation of Church art and the drift toward mass culture when he declared: "The Church is sacrificing her own language, sacred, beautiful, expressive and elegant. . . . It is the sacrifice of many centuries of tradition, the unity of language that all her people used to share. . . ."

Let us assume that this is not the decadence that bites into once great institutions, corporations, and empires. Yet, as historians, we observe all the symptoms of decay in the contemporary Church, manifested in their classical forms. The alternative diagnosis suggests an exaggerated, near-pathological state of adjustment to civil society (the irresistible attractions of pluralism, prosperity, progress), a more thorough form of accommodation than has ever been practiced *vis-à-vis* other civilizations. From the fourth to the eighteenth century there was no talk of doctrinal accommodation, and the Protestant crisis itself was met by a vigorous Counter Reformation. Today the Church is too panicky to counterattack, even to defend herself. Society, to which she ought at least to present a better moral model, practices the whole gamut of public sins without a word of condemnation from church authorities. When sporadic but vague reminders are sounded by popes, episcopal bureaucrats shelve them, aware that the secular power—media, universities, a conditioned public opinion—will eagerly offer to them a soap-box and a microphone.

The question in its nakedness is, Can the Church renew herself? But not, let us add, through such tools of accommodation as dialogue, ecumenism, and grotesque spectacles like the one at Assisi in October 1986. Such performances are symptoms, not remedies. Remedies can be obtained only from spirituality, sacrifice, discipline, and the use of authority. But is such a renewal possible in a Church which

is too deeply immersed in Western societies? Does the "social contract" the Church has signed with them allow her any spiritual affirmation? It seems that the modern experiment recommended by thinkers like Maritain, Bonhoeffer, Schillebeeckx, and many others has been an immense failure. Doubtlessly the Church needs a certain amount of power. Only her adversaries and her heretics have claimed that the jewel of spirituality need not be set in the hard metal of politics.

Soon after 1945 Romano Guardini joyfully stated that the world is ready for spiritualization; unfortunately, he phrased his statement in such a way as to suggest that, at long last, the Church was opening herself to charity. Twenty years later, the "opening of the Vatican's windows" showed what kind of charity it was to be: kneeling to the world. The Church always had an abundance of charity, she did not have to wait for 1945 or the Vatican Council to learn it from her Founder. Yet, Guardini's words can be put to a better use than what his meaning suggests. The non-Western world still possesses spiritual resources, unsuspected in the arid wasteland of the West. It is still receptive, in many places, to the divine breakthrough. Let us be careful, however, in our assessment: The world outside the Western heartland has been immemorally invested by a few large blocks of traditional religiosity. They are Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Animism, and some other, syncretistic ones. These blocks are very strong, with deep roots, and are set in their resistance to Christian penetration. Nevertheless, the cultural areas in which they operate are still sacralized, in contrast to the totally secular character of the West. Across the theological and philosophical barriers, the Church's spirituality and charity are still better apprehended in Asia and in Africa than among the European and American intellectuals in whom Karl Rahner wanted vainly to resurrect the hidden divine magma. The language of the sacred and man's dependence on a cosmic or extra-cosmic (divine) mystery is

better understood by Moslems and Animists, and even by Hindus, than by Western professors for whose majority nothing is comprehensible except the fantasies of their own celebrations.

Catholic missions among adherents of non-Western religions and credal systems are nothing new. Long before Mother Teresa, thousands of missionaries fecundated not only the spirit but also the local social structures which gratefully responded to Christian charity combined with practical ideas and realizations. This charity was the first to organize institutions unknown to many lands: orphanages, hospitals, homes for unwed mothers and the old, trade schools to train the young, centers for the handicapped and the mentally malformed. In the present circumstances, new tasks could be added to the traditional ones, as summed up in the word modernization. When the Western industrial-technological impulse arrives, it upsets conditions mercilessly, with no regard to family structure, neighborhood, sexual mores, and the often invisible hierarchy. All these seem backward to the Western, "Faustian," mentality, which then works with special local interests, ignoring the levels on which people live. In short, aware or not, Western penetration bribes a particular stratum, and together they destroy the traditional, including the religious, networks. As far as local religions are concerned, they are generally unable to offer resistance to savage and haphazard modernization, and their eventual efforts are overcome by their own immemorial ways, now seen as inadequate to meet the challenge. Their doctrinal ossification is easily ridiculed by the new generations.

The Church would be the natural

mediator between the old, rigid ways and the drive for modernization, just as she was in post-Roman times when she built bridges between the empire's administrative genius and the barbarian-tribal communities. The positive aspect of Vatican II was to carry out the earlier-planned indigenization of the clergy, a reality today. The Church understood—and this shows a marvelous vitality—that the West has succumbed to materialism and atheism, that is, a rapid decline, and that her own mission field in the third millennium is the rest of the planet.

The true meaning of the new emphasis is not the desertion of the West where the Roman Church remains anchored. It is rather the liquidation of the "Constantinian" legacy, in fact a second chapter of that liquidation since 1870 when the worldly rule over the Papal States was given up. What the Church then did geographically, she will have to do now spiritually: Her devastating experience with the alliance of "the altar and the office building," as Carl Schmitt sarcastically but aptly called it, must be followed by a sobering reevaluation, an *Ortsbestimmung*. The Church cannot renounce political involvement since, as Aristotle taught, the political is the continuation of the ethical. This, however, is not recognized by non-Western regimes which have neither the Hellenic nor the Hebrew heritage. In their midst the Church will be far less politicized and its energies will be turned in other directions. This is not a utopian program, only a reasonable forecast that the Church will again learn from history while imparting lessons to it.

—Thomas Molnar