

EDITORIAL

On September twenty-ninth the second session of Vatican II will commence. Because of its international repercussions, the communications media will give it their full coverage. In newspapers and magazines, on radio and television, men will discuss, review or prophesy about the ecumenical council. Undoubtedly among the many commentaries we will again hear and read the terms "conservative" and "liberal" applied to the members of the council. Reports of opposing factions will emerge—to the scandal of some, to the joy of others. Misunderstandings will arise, as they did during the first session, because of the so-called "lining up" of parties. Perhaps this is inevitable in dealing with historical events of major moment. Yet it seems that confusion can be lessened if we understand what is being said; if we look soberly at the situation, devoid of drama and sensationalism.

Apparently one of the major causes for misconceptions about the council is the reported emergence of opposing parties—the conservatives and liberals. Some news articles tell us that the liberal element in the council holds the majority; others claim control for the conservatives. One report claims some individual to be liberal; another describes him as conservative. What is meant? In an ecclesiastical context, what do conservative and liberal signify?

It seems certain that there is a need for these terms. Whether we say conservative or liberal, traditionalist or progressive matters little. What is important is the concept the term conveys and how it applies to a situation, in this case to the Vatican Council. We do desire to know the positions and trends within the Church. We want to be aware of the paths the Church will take through the post-modern era. Conservative and liberal do give us an idea, do describe a position, a trend, a path. We may legitimately decry the degree in which these terms are used but to resist them altogether would be to fight a straw man.

What do the terms describe? Here many answers are forthcoming but most picture a conservative as one who looks keenly to the past for answers to present difficulties. Experience and time tested solutions appear to him to be the best, the safest procedure. Caution is his password. He does not abhor new experiments or change but he does tread lightly. The Church has

survived many crises in the past and will do so until the last days. Haste could only jeopardize her temporal position.

Likewise most would depict a liberal as a man who looks to the present with a view to the future. He sees and experiences existing situations and desires action now. He is not imprudent; he does not scorn the past. He is impatient with mere waiting. The liberal feels that something must be done immediately if the Church and its teaching are to be an effective force in the world of today.

Such general descriptions may validly be applied to the members of the Vatican Council. For that matter they may be applied to almost any man. It is in this sense that conservatives and liberals have always existed and will exist in the Church. To speak of one or another side winning is unworthy of serious consideration, for the position adopted by the Church will be a combination of both. In some matters the council, with the approval of the Holy Father, will make changes. In others, tradition will be the only safe and sure answer.

These terms, however, become dangerous when indiscriminately used. Then a conservative becomes an extremist—opposed to all change, a champion of the *status quo*. A liberal is an ultra-liberal, seeking change only for the sake of change. To view the Fathers or the council itself in such a context would be a grave distortion of the facts. Respect would be lessened and the value of this great event in the life of the Church would be undermined. It is unfortunate—but true—that in some cases this is precisely what has happened. Terms have been used and accepted indiscreetly. Members of the council have been branded extremists; the council has been regarded by some as only an international religious rally.

The council will soon reconvene. To approach it with sober judgments and clear insights, dispelling the vapors of confusion and misunderstanding is the more Christian course of action. We have been chosen to witness a demonstration of the supernatural unity which characterizes the Bride of Christ, a demonstration never before equaled in history. It is urgent that our witness be true.