



The Council's Call to Change

Timothy Myers, O.P.

The Challenge

A good many people are becoming increasingly alarmed with the reports that have been coming out of Rome these days. Change is in the air. And this thought is disturbing to many, especially those who have been close to the life of the Church.

We hear talk of a new Christian era filled with unforeseeable consequences approaching, that the Church is now confronted with a world crisis such as has rarely occurred in the past, that Vatican II is trying to do for our times what Trent endeavored to do for the sixteenth century. How should a loyal Catholic react to Pope John's challenging call for updating the Church and to Pope Paul's decrees that have recently been promulgated?

To answer these questions it would be well to ask another. What

should be our approach to the changes of everyday life? We hear a great deal today about people who have accepted themselves for what they are, and of others who are not so fortunate. And we read in current books and magazines that one of the most serious maladies of our time is that which disturbs so many men for whom the unfamiliar brings insecurity.

It is perfectly natural for us to experience some apprehension about the future. Psychologists tell us that this is good as long as it is controlled by reason, for it makes us prepare for things that are likely to happen. Some fear will always be found with change, and the two carry within themselves a potential that reason can utilize so as to bring great things out of a man.

A Law of Life

Change, we might say, is a law of life. What does this mean? Well, take for instance the story of the father whose teen-age daughter had just entered high school. One evening he asked her what she was studying. She happened to be reading her history assignment at the time, and she replied, "I'm reading up on a square by the name of Hitler." This reply startled her father. Not so long ago people called Hitler many names. But no one ever called him "a square." In just a short time things had greatly changed, at least for that man's daughter. And it brought home to him the fact that in his own life and in his own outlook there *had* to be change. He had to adjust himself to this new condition: considering Hitler as an historical personage, even though the effects of his life perdure. Now, this man knew long before his daughter made that remark that there was always need for constant adjustment in his life. And he knows that as time goes on he will receive many other intimations, warnings and perhaps real jolts. He will discover the inevitable changes that will take place in all the aspects of his life. He will read in the evening newspaper of crises developing in Cyprus, Vietnam and South Africa. And he will have to face the perennial family problems within his own home. The condition of his work will change with the eventual take-over by automation. In a few years his daughter will be thinking of a home of her own. Perhaps it may not be too long before he receives a shock similar to the one he experienced on that fateful black Friday of last November when he heard the most unexpected piece of news: that President Kennedy's "head exploded in blood" at the impact of an assassin's bullet. All these various events speak of change in strikingly different ways.

Change must be seen as a fact of life, as something which confronts

us every step of the way. It demands on our part the development of a certain buoyancy to roll with its initial impact because this is what life exacts from us. Of course everyone reacts somewhat differently to a particular circumstance since our reactions depend in large measure on our nature, temperament, background, and education. A man who tends by nature to be conservative will react to change with more caution than another who is apt to be progressive. But each of us must learn to have a mixture of both conservative and liberal elements if we are to lead balanced lives. We have to be conservative in holding on to the things that are essential. And we should be progressive in looking to the good in the new and assimilating it to the traditional.

Change within the Church

With due regard to the necessary qualifications, this principle of change and its proper response can be found throughout the history of the Catholic Church. Like the householder of the Gospel, the Church has always discovered in her treasury old things and new. The Jewish Christians of Palestine had to adjust themselves to the innate missionary quality of the Church, which was destined to embrace all the scattered sons of Adam into the Kingdom of God under Christ. From that point onward the Church has had to confront every type of crisis imaginable. We see her clashing with the problems of heresy and schism; internal corruption and revolt from within; violent persecution from without; and personal indifferentism from all sides. Yet, in all those two thousand years, Christ's Church has preserved in its entirety all the consistency that was in that original seed. And so it was to demand of those within the Church a certain resiliency in adjustment.

This can be clearly seen in the American Church, whose years of existence is quite short when compared with the ancient Church. Her beginnings take place with the coming of the European immigrants: a class of people who were poor, uneducated, without social standing and discriminated against. Because of these circumstances, there was only one position the Church could assume: the defensive one. Preserve, protect, defend—these were the marching orders of the hierarchy and clergy for a century and a half. And the accomplishments that we see all around us today were due in great measure to the clarity of their orders and the single-mindedness with which they concentrated on this one objective. Solid dividends came because these outstanding men of vision were able to adjust themselves to a very special set of circumstances.

Facing Today's Needs

Here in America—as well as throughout the world—the need for change today has been decisively conditioned by the society in which one lives. Still living on the remnants of Christianity, the world about us is evolving with startling rapidity. It is rethinking, revising and at the same time exploring everything. It is an age in which moral anarchy is becoming more and more prevalent. New standards have begun to replace old values. The current emphasis on the dignity of man has become distorted and has evolved into a sort of deification of man—making a god in himself, responsible to neither his Creator nor his fellow man. It has imbued him with the deep-seated conviction that whatever he wants, he should have, regardless of the cost. Materialism and secularism are exerting increasing influence on man's mind by limiting his vision to only one segment of reality: the material, tangible one. Most of man's energies are being absorbed by an unflinching pursuit for material goods. He is becoming indifferent to his moral obligations and is even allowing the consciousness of sin to die out within himself.

The pastoral letter of the Italian bishops, dated March 25, 1960, asked whether there lies at the root of today's enormous difficulties a single basic error from which all the others arise. They replied that there is. It consists in a

"tendency, or more exactly a mentality, which rejects, systematically and emphatically, any influence of religion in general, and the Catholic hierarchy in particular, on human life and institutions. We are confronted with a purely natural conception of life, in which the pronouncements of religion are either expressly rejected or confined to the secret domain of conscience and the mystic twilight of the Church, without any sort of right to interfere in or influence public life, whether in the philosophical, legal, industrial, artistic, scientific, social, or political spheres. . . . In building the *civitas terrena* it wholly ignores the prescriptions of the Christian revelation and disputes the Church's claim to a mission to act, on spiritual grounds, in the temporal order, by directing, informing, and stimulating its activities."

This is the bleak situation which confronts the Church today.

The Church's Response

The Church recognizes these immense problems and has responded with nothing less than an ecumenical council. Pope John XXIII empha-

sized in his inaugural address to the Roman Diocesan Synod that the Church must respond to the changing needs of the times. Her very catholicity demands that she be continually concerned with the social, economic, political and cultural situations of the world in which she lives. So the Church has called Vatican II, then, in an attempt to work out solutions and arrive at answers that are in keeping with the solid Christian principles of her ancient heritage. Here bishops and experts from the world over have met to discuss what must be done to bring back into the world the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. Pope John expressed the hope that the Council would renew the power of the apostolate and prove to the world that the Gospel has strength to elevate mankind. This is its great mission: to restore all things in Christ by first presenting to the minds and hearts of men the unmistakably divine and triumphantly victorious Risen Saviour, to whom we all owe a total commitment. The Church wants to bring us the deepest kind of life—the life of Christ. For, the Church insists on telling us that we Christians are the ones who, by our own vital living, must put meaning and direction and life into all the varied facets of this Twentieth century.

Your Response

What, then, should be your response to the new climate produced by the Council? To prepare ourselves now for the new outlooks and changes that lie ahead, we must undoubtedly renew and strengthen within ourselves the virtues of the Christian life.

We need greater *faith* and *confidence* in the assurance that these new changes are part of God's will in the gradual unfolding of His plan. We must have vigilance in not letting the opportune seasons or moments which God appoints for a particular work slip by. For, these opportunities are not of our making, but come from the Holy Spirit.

We must have courage to stand up and be counted among those who follow Christ, for we cannot hide our light under a bushel. We are witnesses! We are living testimonies of the Risen Saviour, whose light must glow on the mountain top for everyone to see. We must proclaim Christ by our lives and try to bring His message of love and salvation to all with whom we come in contact. This can simply mean setting a good example for others to imitate. But it should particularly connote some kind of involvement, a sharing in Christ's apostolate. This commitment can take any number of forms extending from home activities to demonstrating for social justice. Sooner or later the eternal struggle between grace and nature

is going to be re-enacted in each one of us as we decide how we will respond to the Master's ageless invitation, "Come, follow Me."

Patience is another key virtue that will be more urgently demanded on the part of young and old alike. It is not an easy thing to change. Deeply ingrained habits of acting cannot be changed without offering a battle. So it will not be easy for older people to adapt, for instance, to the new liturgical practices. Their memories, family customs, prayers and other religious and emotional experiences of a deeply personal character are all involved here. And these elements which comprise the total human response to God simply cannot be replaced over-night. So, it will take a long time for many of us to adjust to these innovations, and the young must be patient. On the other hand, patience and restraint will be asked of those who might regard the younger generation's youthful energy and ambition to get things done in a hurry as somewhat precipitous.

It will certainly take an added degree of *obedience* and *docility* to follow out the wishes of our bishops. Once they have determined what the course of action will be, then it will be our responsibility to respond generously and bring their designs to fruition swiftly. This is very important since their success will ultimately depend on how well we co-operate with them.

But most of all we must broaden and intensify our *charity*—that indispensable virtue without which everything we do lacks substance and meaning and direction. The Apostles and disciples learned from our Lord in a very concrete, existential way that all men are brothers. Jesus showed them how to love one another by personally associating with the despised and downtrodden and by manifesting His concern for the poor and the afflicted. We too must become more consciously aware of the fact that all men are persons, and all persons must be loved. This can really be done by seeing Christ in them. For it is by God's love-bestowed grace that we are all brothers of Christ and adoptive sons of our Heavenly Father.

To grow daily in the Christian life, to really live the Faith all the time requires a good deal of self-sacrifice, not to mention, of course, God's constant bestowal of grace. It demands at times being unpopular in the midst of a social milieu that puts a high premium on popularity. But it is something that must be done if we are to honestly call ourselves Christians. But if we do not hold back from Him, Jesus will strip us of ourselves and of everything we call our own, so that in dying with Him we will share His risen life.

What then will be your response in this age of renewal? The success

of Vatican II will, in the last analysis, depend upon it. For unless we are prepared to make the Council live in our lives, then it will come and go with little or no impact upon us. Thus, each person has a grave responsibility, by reason of his Christian vocation, to make a wholehearted commitment to this new challenge.

Now is the time to look within ourselves and examine our motives and ideals and see just how meaningful our relationship is with Christ. Are we really living in this world in the years of the New Frontier in such a way that it will never be quite the same again because of our response to the call of the Council?

This is the hour of grace for you and me!