

THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

By JAMES QUINN

THE CHURCH grows in silence, as it were by stealth, through the mysterious leavening of grace. The Church is always more than she seems to be, for her real growth remains a secret hidden from the eyes of men. The graph of grace is the only true measure of that growth, and only the eyes of faith can discern, however imperfectly, the working of the holy Spirit within the Church.

The growth of the Church is corporate rather than individual, though it is neither without the other, for the Church is before all else the mystical body of Christ. At a very different level, it is a social growth, developing within the living world of human relationships. Inevitably, therefore, our human judgments about the Church reflect our judgments about human life: we tend erroneously to assess her growth in terms of numbers, influence and efficiency.

An evaluation of this kind may be a valuable pointer to real growth, to areas of the Church's life where the tide of grace is flowing strongly. But true growth lies always at a much deeper level than these superficial and human judgments suggest, for the Church is more than a social phenomenon, however massive in scale, more than a business empire of however unworldly a kind. The Church rides serene above such verdicts, which leave untouched her essential nature. She remains inscrutable to any purely human judgment.

The areas of growth

The Church grows through the flowering of her supernatural qualities: true growth is always in her case growth in faith or hope or charity, and nothing less. Yet grace works through nature, and so pervades the whole of human life and conduct, leavening each part of it. This means that, though the Church's growth lies entirely within the domain of grace, it is possible for the man of faith to feel in some sense the motion and swell of grace, and so to chart its currents. To do this he must be sensitive to those areas where true growth is to

be looked for; he must know too the conditions which make growth possible, and the means by which in fact maturity is achieved.

Human life and conduct in all its rich variety is the harvest-field of grace. No aspect of man's relationship with God or with nature is excluded from the maturing influence of grace, and so from the possibility of growth. There is strictly no line of demarcation dividing areas of growth from areas of non-growth.

Yet it is possible to select four broad areas of the Church's life where the opportunities for growth show themselves most clearly, and so can be studied most fruitfully. These areas in the life of the Church correspond to parallel areas in the life of the individual. Just as the individual in growing to full maturity must develop physically, morally, intellectually and spiritually, so too the Church must follow a similar pattern of growth. She must grow to full stature as a mature community, even of the strictly supernatural order, through a balanced and harmonious development in all these areas.

In the first place, the Church must grow physically, in numbers. Until she reaches full stature at the end of time, she must in every generation receive her due increase, an increase which, in the plan of God, knows no boundaries other than those of the human race. The Church is potentially and by vocation co-extensive with the human family. Her limit of physical growth is never less than the whole of mankind.

The missionary impulse of the Church, at home and abroad, wherever she may be, is therefore basic to her vocation. The physical map of the Church is indeed one of the most striking things about her; to the superficial observer the physical expansion of the Church may seem to be the most important aspect of her growth, perhaps even its only aspect. But growth in numbers may be accompanied by a decline in other areas where maturity is even more vital. There would certainly be decline instead of growth if the Church placed more store on numbers than on the adult quality of the christian lives of her members. The Church could be physically an adult but in other respects an adolescent or an infant.

To be mature, the Church must also grow morally. She must grow not only in sheer numbers but also in moral stature and so in influence. The influence she seeks is not her own prestige but the pressure of God's grace upon the counsels of the world. Her sphere of influence is the entire world, and the whole course of the world's history. To fulfil her task in the moral order she must educate the world's conscience by her own example of large-hearted charity and

genuine compassion. To form the world's conscience she must also be ahead of the world's needs. Her social teaching must confront intelligently the problems of the day, but it must also seek to guide the social history of the future by foreseeing its developing pattern.

The Church's growth includes therefore for its due balance a maturity of intelligence. To live as adult christians we must live intelligently in the real world, of nature as well as of grace. Too often we are content to live in the world of grace alone, forgetting that our growth in grace depends among other things on our service of God in the real world of nature. This too is God's world: the world of technology, of psychiatry, of public relations, of culture, of commerce; a world that is based in the last analysis on the raw material of all sanctity, human relationships. This is the world that we are called to live in and to sanctify. To be mature as christians we must seek to make the world of nature one with the world of grace. There is in fact but one world, God's world.

The Church must above all grow spiritually. This is the goal of all development within the Church, leading to the very source and crown of the christian life, divine charity itself. The Church is essentially a communion of saints. The vocation of the Church is to make the whole world – of nature and of grace – one single temple of God's glory, wherein he dwells and wherein he is adored. The whole of creation, natural and supernatural, and every aspect of life and thought and activity, are caught up into this vocation. This is the very reason for creation's existence.

It is the Church alone which enables creation to achieve its purpose, for she alone is the reconciling instrument of Christ in the world. The whole universe becomes articulate in Christ and in his Church. Through him and through his Church the whole creation is enabled to join in the new canticle of adoration and love for which it was called into being.

The conditions of growth

If these are the broad areas of growth, what are the conditions under which real growth is possible? The greatest single factor governing growth is surely the Church's spiritual awareness of herself, her understanding of what she really is, and of what her vocation is in time and in eternity.

What is the Church? She is the divine mystery which enshrines the love of God in the world, cherishing that love and returning it to its source in the bosom of the eternal Father. Hers is therefore a

vocation of adoration in love, of love in adoration. Whatever else she may feel called to do, if she fails in this she fails in all. She is the embodiment of divine love. Within her flows the current of divine life, in the sacramental signs of love and no less in the immense riches that she bears within her in those charismatic gifts of the holy Spirit which too often go unrecognized and are yet so necessary for her spiritual maturity.

She must be aware too of her mission to the world. She is the servant of the world, ministering to the world the spiritual bounty of God's grace. When she speaks only for herself, she is untrue to herself; if she is to be herself, her voice must speak for all mankind. There is decline instead of spiritual growth and vigour when the Church fails to see herself as always and everywhere and uniquely the mystery of divine love outpoured upon the world. When she turns in upon herself, she denies her vocation of universal love. When she forgets to speak the language of divine love and uses only dry judicial tones, she belies herself and her origins. Only when she sees herself for what she is can she grow into what God means her to be: the perfect sign that reveals God's love to all mankind.

The Church must therefore be aware of what is human and transitory in her life. Inevitably, as an institution, she reflects and incorporates the human, social values of each age. The human situation is the very fabric of her life. She must in consequence be ever on her guard, refusing to allow herself to be fettered by merely human values. There is always need for her to stand apart from the world in which she must live and in which she must fulfil her divine vocation. She must maintain the absolute sovereignty of her own divine standards. It is the very condition of renewal and of growth that the Church should be spiritually aware of her separation from the world.

The Church can grow to full maturity only if she is in undisputed control within her own domain, completely free from outside constraint. Equally, within her own borders the spirit of freedom must prevail. Freedom is the adult's privilege, and a basic condition for moral and spiritual maturity. If the Church is to grow morally and spiritually to her full stature, she must be supremely the mistress of her own choices, poised and balanced. She must also educate her subjects in the right use of freedom, and in its true meaning. True freedom is adult freedom, freedom from undue pressure from within the community and from outside it.

Freedom is one of man's chief glories, in the realm of nature as in the realm of grace. Man is not fully man unless he is truly free.

Freedom is born of personality; without it, all that is characteristic of man cannot come to flower. It is the prime condition of personal integrity, just as it is the basic requirement for faith. It flourishes within the framework of responsibility, which alone gives it meaning. True freedom respects the personal discipline, the community vigilance, that enable it to be adult freedom. The greatest proof of adult freedom in a community, whether religious or social, is a sound public opinion, which is also its greatest safeguard. While unrestricted liberty or unreasonable constraint is always damaging to human dignity, an intelligent, balanced and freely expressed public opinion can never degrade it. The spirit of adult freedom is the cleansing wind that blows refreshingly through a healthy commonwealth.

Freedom, however, and especially spiritual freedom, must always be seen within the context of divine Providence, within the context too of ecclesiastical authority. The freedom which the Church must promote among her members is mature spiritual freedom, which recognizes the claims of spiritual authority. The Church is rightly described as a servant, but her authority is nonetheless real: a God-given authority, not usurped. Her servant-status means only, in this context, that her authority is a gift to her for the sake of others, not for self-advantage. But she must, because her authority is real, claim obedience, even – and especially – from free men. If true freedom lies, as it does, in the development of one's whole personality along the lines that God has laid down, obedience becomes not only a service of God; it is also a service to oneself. It is the highway to the discovery of one's true self. And we must remember, in examining the relation between authority and freedom, that not all God's children, perhaps not many, are completely adult, especially in matters of the faith.

Growth in freedom means also the quest of an ever larger freedom of the mind, and with it the courage to follow truth wherever it may lead, with the unshakeable conviction that it cannot contradict the faith. Perhaps the greatest fear today is fear of the intellect; precisely because it is fear it is also a danger to growth. The courage that springs from mature freedom in the faith is its antidote. From the serenity born of faith and courage comes an attitude of openness and receptivity which is itself an important condition of growth.

This attitude of openness is flexible, not static; outward-looking, not complacent; desirous of growth, not simply intent on preservation. It implies a readiness, indeed a desire, to use any situation as a providential situation, offering opportunities for growth. All situa-

tions, in fact, because they are governed by God's providence, are opportunities for growth, but we have to recognize each for what it really is. It is the attitude of spiritual openness, of intelligent alertness, that enables us to see the ever-present potentialities for good that lie all about us, awaiting recognition.

When we are confronted with a situation that seems fraught with danger to the faith, we may take up either of two attitudes. We may ask ourselves: How are we to safeguard the faith in this situation? Or we may ask ourselves: How are we to enrich the faith precisely through this situation? The first attitude diagnoses a crisis, the second an opportunity. Often the path of danger lies, not in venturing forward with a prudent trust in divine Providence, but in living always in the past. If the Church is a sign to the world, our constant question must be: How are we to make the Church more clearly a sign to the contemporary world? It is this attitude that has enabled the Church in our own day to gain spiritually from the tragedy of disunity. The result has been a creative renewal throughout christendom, an enrichment of classical theology and the development of a whole new ascetical theology of spiritual ecumenism.

The means of growth

We turn now to consider the means of the Church's growth. How does the Church grow? We might phrase the question differently and ask: How does the Church become aware of herself and of her mission in the contemporary situation, and able therefore to exploit that situation as a growth situation?

In general, there are two very different ways which lead to this self-awareness on the part of the Church. Both are necessary because they correspond to two essential, complementary truths about the Church. The first is the way of disengagement from the world; the other is its direct opposite, the way of active engagement in the concerns of the real world.

The first corresponds to the contemplative nature of the Church. The Church must keep turning aside from the world's tumult into a desert place, where she can hear the voice of God addressing her in the stillness. There is, of course, a danger if the Church finds the desert too congenial and remains in more or less permanent retreat from the world. This would be a source of decline rather than of growth. Even if the Church were to stay in the desert to do vicarious penance and make intercession on behalf of the world, she would be failing in her duty of preaching to the world and of reconciling the

world to God. She would then be God's reluctant prophet, a latter-day Jonah.

At this point we may well ponder the paradox of the contemporary good samaritan, the atheist who practises, however selectively, the christian virtues, and feels a christian anguish for the travail of the world. In cynical moments one is tempted to think that the social conscience is more highly developed in humanists than in christians, as if it varied in inverse proportion to the religious conscience. Whatever truth there is in this, there is at least this amount of truth, that it is a paradox, and therefore an indictment of the Church if she refuses to be morally an adult, with an adult's sense of social responsibility. It is unfortunately true that some christians practise what we may call a purely 'clerical' christianity. Their spiritual horizons are the sanctuary and the sacristy, and they show no concern for the world that waits outside: the world of poverty and cruelty and injustice, of loneliness and lovelessness and famine of the spirit. Yet this is their parish, the parish of the world.

The second way of self-awareness for the Church is her active and intelligent engagement with the world. The Church's vocation is not only contemplative but active. To grow in a balanced way she must live and work and pray and be in anguish in the midst of the world. The Church must listen to the judgments made by the world, perhaps too casually, about herself, and, with greater wisdom, about the world's needs. She must try to assess their value, not by the world's standards but in the light of her own self-understanding. In this dialogue with the world, the most valuable of all the world's statements may well be the unspoken criticism of contemptuous unconcern.

There could be, however, too great a desire on the Church's part to meet the world on its own terms. The problem of communication with the world must be solved legitimately. There are different ways of compromise, some more insidious than others. Essential statements of belief can be made deliberately more vague. Doctrine can be played down, and undue emphasis placed on activism, even in a good cause. These are clearly ways of decline. Perhaps the most insidious of all is the corrosive influence of 'ethical' christianity, more dangerous than open scandal. This is the christianity which thinks only in terms of moral and intellectual growth, and in practice equates the christian message with the social gospel. It flourishes in many disguises, even – though not characteristically – within the Catholic Church. It is in fact an outwardly respectable but completely

bogus christianity, living at the level of natural goodness and social responsibility, a high enough level in all conscience but not the christian level of grace. It spells the gradual decay of christianity. Doing good, caring for human needs, is an important and essential part of christianity; but christian goodness, in order to be christian goodness, must spring from supernatural faith and hope and charity. The growth of the whole man, of the whole community, of the whole world, depends ultimately on true supernatural sanctity, not just on moral goodness. Christian goodness is not an indiscriminate, free-floating goodness practised for its own sake and for the sake of happiness on this earth; it is firmly anchored in the supernatural destiny of the world.

The Church's dialogue with the world involves listening to adult, contemporary questions addressed to the Church by the world, an intelligent world that will not be put off with superficial answers. This is a very different kind of dialogue from the silent dialogue with God in the desert of contemplation, though it too is ultimately a dialogue with the same God. This kind of dialogue takes place in the shock of conflict. The conflict may arise in different quarters: from the hostile world outside the Church, from the world of the good pagan, from the world of separated christians. The shock of conflict may arise too within the Church itself, where questions may be asked which seem scandalous to ears unattuned to the new phenomenon of dialogue within the Church.

Conflict, from whatever source it may arise, is always capable of generating new insights into the real meaning of the Church. It can do so in either of two ways: by forcing the Church to re-assert her teaching, with a deeper understanding of her reasons for it, or by compelling her to re-examine her position from an entirely new standpoint. Every situation, even – and perhaps especially – a situation of conflict, is potentially, under Providence, a growth situation. But it needs intelligence and faith and moral courage on the part of the Church if there is to be spiritual growth through the shock of conflict.

The point at which the Church and the world meet is therefore the point of growth or the point of decline. Decline sets in when the Church is culpably unaware of the possibilities of growth, or – what is less likely – deliberately refuses the opportunity for growth. There is danger on two fronts: when the Church is either too immersed in her own world (or what she imagines to be her own world) to listen to the voices outside it, or when she is too immersed in the dialogue

with the world to remember what manner of person she is. The Church, if she is to grow to full stature, must be at once conservative and adventurous, contemplative and active, inward-looking and outward-reaching. If she is all of these, she could be standing on the threshold of the most exciting chapter in her history.

The guardianship of the world

What is the true relationship between the Church and the world? Many christians today speak of the alienation of modern culture from Christ, and try to construct a 'religionless' christianity to solve the problem of the breakdown in communications between the Church and the world. Whatever may be said of this particular approach to a solution, the place of the Church is in a very real sense 'in the world'. The world is the place of the Church's mission. It is therefore the place where the Church must be found, and is in fact found, perhaps in stranger forms than we think, for grace does not always flow through orthodox channels. This much we can say: there may indeed – and perhaps must be – alienation of the world from the Church, but there must be no alienation of the Church from the world.

There is, however, a very much deeper sense in which the Church must be in the world. The world has in fact been given over to Christ. On every title it is his, made for him, made to be one in him. The Church must be in the world to claim the world for Christ and for herself.

Is there here a confusion between nature and grace? Is not nature the realm of the world, and grace the realm of the Church? There is, of course, a radical distinction between nature and grace, but at the same time there is a very intimate connection. The distinction between them may not be drawn in such a way that they form two empires sealed against each other. They are rather two dimensions of the same life. And both dimensions are the concern of the Church. We must not forget, as we so often forget with our heads in the spiritual clouds, that the work of Christ – and with it the work of the Church – extends throughout creation. The christian vocation demands not only the formal adoration of God but the implicit adoration that ascends to God from a conscious reverence for nature and a responsible use of nature's resources.

The christian assumes for Christ the guardianship of the world. Not, of course, in a political sense but in a moral and spiritual sense. He must show his reverence for Christ's world by his concern for the

controlled and intelligent development of the whole world and its potentialities. He is the guardian too of human dignity, of all human values and institutions, and of the one society of all peoples. These are conditions of his growth in Christ, and of the growth of the Church. Nature will always remain nature, but man's attitude to it and his guardianship of it form important elements in his supernatural service of God.

The world of nature is caught up by Christ into the world of grace by his consecration of it to his heavenly Father. The christian joins with Christ in offering the world of nature to the Father in the perfection of all natural relationships, between person and person, and between persons and the world in which they live. This is the beginning of growth, which reaches its high point with the fulfilment of all vocations within the universe, when the world in its totality and plenitude, the world of nature and the world of grace, is handed over by Christ to his Father. Meanwhile, the sovereignty of all that is belongs to Christ, but its guardianship he has made over to his Church. The account of her stewardship will be the measure of her growth.