PROVIDENCE AND THE CHURCH

The Church in constant self-renewal

By JOSEPH B. GAVIN

EVER SINCE the sixteenth century, and at least until Vatican Council II, the expression 'reform of the Church' has been near anathema to many Catholics. Several factors, admittedly, have contributed to this, but one stands out: influenced by generations of anti-protestant polemics, catholic ecclesiology placed heavy emphasis upon the sinlessness and indefectibility of the Church and, especially since the nineteenth century, upon its juridical and hierarchical nature, notably upon the papal supremacy. As generations passed, there was more and more concentration on the distinguishing marks of catholicity than upon essentials of the faith. To paraphrase Yves Congar, the Church gave in to its perennial temptation, pharisaism.

All this, however, was to change with Vatican Council II, whose greatest achievement was to take a contrary direction to this older ecclesiology. It set forth a radically different interpretation of the Church: that is, of a Church which continues Christ's work by serving others in suffering, humility and love, of a Church which is constantly guided by God's loving Providence, but which ever stands in need of self-renewal, reformation and purification, since she is composed of weak, sinful people. This Church, as described by the Council, is a paradoxical union between the human and the divine: she exists in time and is subjected to history; but because she is also divine, she moves always beyond man's history to her final completion and union in God.

The idea, however, that the Church in her individual members is always in need of reformation to Christ's image was not a discovery of Vatican Council II. It is a doctrine expounded in the New Testament, and later on, amongst the Fathers of East and West. Certainly too, if one clear lesson remains from the history of the western medieval Church, it is that the need for reform is endemic in the life of the Church. The reform movements of the

early and high medieval periods, from the hildebrandine reforms, through the growth of the mendicant friars, to the extreme *spirituali* movements in southern France, attest to this. The whole body of the Church militant needs reform and renewal from time to time; no matter how holy the Church is, no matter how confidently she may rest in the knowledge that God continually guides her with his Providence, she is still in need of renewal.

One consistent feature of the earlier reform traditions, which has its place in practically every proposal for reformation throughout the history of the Church, is the belief that to be renewed the Church must return to her roots, to her primitive, apostolic form. This is common to the thought of all reformers: if the ideal of a more vital, spiritual and dynamic Church is to be achieved, one which would measure up to contemporary problems, then she must become more biblical, more historical and indeed more simple in her approaches and structures. Both Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century thought in this way: great and original thinkers, like Erasmus and Nicholas of Cusa, spoke in terms of a restoration of the 'image', a kind of platonic view which harmonized with pauline and patristic thought. Many believed that if they applied humanistic tools to the literary sources of Christianity – the scriptures, the Fathers, ecclesiastical law, they would eventually discover the true nature of this primitive and ideal Church; and that if this ideal were revived, the contemporary Church would adapt more easily to reformation according to Christ's image. Interestingly enough, Vatican Council II similarly envisaged a more biblical, more simple notion of the Church as surviving through the vicissitudes of her historical existence, and still existing in the twentieth century.

We now understand why this approach, this looking backwards on the part of the earlier reformers to find a model and standard for the Church of their time, was doomed to failure. It had two fatal short-comings: not only was it unattainable, but it did not meet the temper of the times. Very many of the earlier reformers and humanistic writers, especially those in the late medieval and early modern Church, saw the primitive Church through rose-coloured spectacles. In several instances, their backward-looking was really reactionary: but perhaps more profoundly, their searches obscured the essential purpose of a contemporary Church. Nonetheless, this looking backwards for a model did help to effect the protestant reform. Changes were certainly necessary before large

sections of the catholic community finally awoke to the realization that there was a definitely sinful element in the Church. Undoubtedly, the Renaissance revealed a deep spiritual malaise and disquiet; the Church was failing to respond to the new spiritual and social forces at work in the world. She was out of touch with the true spiritual demands of society as it was developing in the Europe of the early sixteenth century. Writers like Erasmus were correct when, in their attempts to draw the attention of their contemporaries to the tremendous upsurge of spiritual renewal and desire for reform present in the Church, they insisted that 'the world thirsts for the Gospel truth'.

To draw parallels between the Church of today and of the sixteenth century may not be all that helpful, and may even be misleading. Yet there are similarities, as many have pointed out, between the crisis of the reformation period and the tensions of today. Pope John XXIII, credited with beginning the modern catholic reform movement, sounded to many like a voice from the past. In his very first encyclical, *Ad Petri Cathedram* of 29 June 1959, he declared, much to the surprise of many, both within and without the catholic world, that the Church needed to reform herself. His expressed desire that the modern Church must listen to Christ's summons to renewal, became with ever-increasing prominence the key-note and theme of his pontificate, as well as of the Second Vatican Council:

> Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is an institution of men here on earth. Therefore, if the influence of events or of the times has led to deficiencies in conduct, in Church discipline, or even in the formulation of doctrine (which must be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith), these should be appropriately rectified at the proper moment.

No catholic document had previously been so willing to admit guilt so clearly.

This admission of guilt, this awakening, this new awareness of her several weaknesses, continues into our own times. For a decade or more, contemporary Catholics have been discussing the need for further renewal, for improvements and reforms in the Church. Once again the Church is feeling the shock of reappraisal, induced by the recognition that many of her pastoral attitudes and her structures may well be unsuitable to the times. This present quest

for renewal – and it was the same in the sixteenth century – can be fulfilled only when the Church distinguishes between those elements in her life and history which are essential and those which are merely transitory: when she remembers, that is, that she is always weak and dependent upon God's help during her earthly journey.

Since Vatican II there has been remarkable evidence of a nascent vitality and renewal in the Church. In no small way this is due to a new-found concern with the history of the Church. Today, we are blessed with a historical sense which was lacking in earlier periods. The historian Hubert Jedin explained the extreme importance of possessing this historical sense when he wrote that an ecclesiology starved of Church history is like a frame without a picture. Thinking historically involves a knowledge of the causes of events; so that, for example, we no longer view the break between the eastern and western Church, as we did in the past, in purely dogmatic or political terms. Nor do we think of the crisis occasioned in the western Church by the Reformation in the apologetic or dogmatic manner so common in past times. We have outgrown the simplistic we-are-right-and-you-are-wrong attitudes. The Council insisted that the divisions among Christians today are the result of sin on both sides: 'Quite large communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church: developments for which, at times, people on both sides were to blame'.[1] Again, we are today no longer so concerned, as once we were, with the morals of churchmen, but rather with the Church's negligence in adjusting and responding to the times, or in getting down to essentials in christian living. Perhaps as never before, or at least not since the sixteenth century, we are sensitive to those opportunities lost in the Church because of human fault and sin, as well as from the causes and consequences of the needs of the time. We have become especially conscious of wrong presuppositions which came to dominate our thinking and acting, of our past failures, of the prevailing tendency to delaying tactics in containing or directing the spiritual aspirations of people whom the Church professes to serve, of her own slowness to renew herself internally to meet the crises of the particular age.

These reflections on the past have their particular relevance today when the need for renewal, change and adaptation in our

[1] *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3. Quotations from the council documents are taken from W. M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York, 1966).

contemporary Church is becoming so obviously pressing in face of the reawakened apostolic mission of the Church. 'Although the Church needs human resources to carry out her mission, she is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim humility and self-sacrifice, especially by her example' (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). As the Council noted, if the Church's mission is to succeed today in awakening the consciences of mankind at every level, she must renounce every privilege and power or any kind of triumphalism within herself which is at odds with the gospel: 'Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and under oppression, so the Church is called to follow the same path in communicating to men the fruits of salvation (*ibid.*). To achieve this end, she must show forth an increased 'fidelity to her own calling'. She must be willing to begin afresh at all times, to recognize that, despite her divine foundation and Christ's perpetual care over his Church, sin does exist within her ranks. Yet, given that the Church of faith and the Church of history are the same, we have to discover for ourselves where precisely our guilt lies, both in history and in contemporary life. In the final analysis, we will discover this only when we are willing to discover where the Church needs to submit to the tensions of reappraisal concerning her structure, her pastoral approaches and her relations with contemporary life: all of which contrast so sharply at times with the actual state of society and with the way in which the Church consciously sets herself to serve the whole family of mankind. Only then can renewal be fruitful: only then shall we be 'unceasingly renewed in him': only then will the Church fulfil her mission 'to speak to all men in order to shed light on the mystery of man, and to co-operate in finding the solutions to the outstanding problems of our times' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 10).

To be of service to the modern world, we must steer carefully between over-emphasizing the humanness or the hiddenness of God in the Church on the one side, and the Providence of God working in all human historical events on the other. Some theologies of history have too readily claimed that Providence cannot be easily revealed in secular events. Others have come closer to saying that the religious significance of every historical event is as obvious as anything ever can be. The first of these views has led to the separation between the sacred and the secular by preculuding any acceptance of Providence in human history; the second has led, notably through certain catholic historians, to a facile providential theory of history which has all but destroyed human responsibility

and has created an unbalanced ecclesiology.

The idea of history as the work of man was dominant in historiography from Machiavelli to Gibbon. It probed and exploited the weaknesses of Augustine's providential theory of history. Machiavelli never really argued against Providence in human events; he ignored it. He was interested only in human motives and in secular causes. From one point of view, implicit in this historiography was a remarkably pagan emphasis on man as self-created. The historical philosophers of the Enlightenment similarly pulled Augustine's theology of history down to earth. They quickly transformed his vision of man's spiritual progress from Creation to the Last Judgment into a history of human progress only. Condorcet gave concise expression to this confidence in man without Providence: 'No bounds have been fixed to the improvement of human faculties; the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite'. This view of history as the sole work of man exaggerated his freedom and power with respect to God, to himself and to nature. Nowhere in Condorcet's understanding of history can we discover any belief in human sinfulness, in the organic development of institutions, or in the mysterious events so often beyond the control of human purpose, history and progress.

Ironically enough, this absolute confidence in man is strongly similar to Augustine's absolute confidence in God as the Lord of history. In neither case is there any point in worrying about the outcome. In Condorcet's view, history is in man's hands: in Augustine's view, it is in God's hands.

The overthrow of Augustine's providential theory of history, which began with the Renaissance, was carried much further by the sixteenth century Reformation. The objections, for instance, of the english reformers and of many later anglican thinkers to the Catholic Church rested on their respect for the humanness of the Church's history and life. In consequence of this, they rejected the Catholic Church's claim to infallibility and to perfection in this world. In a similar way, the continental protestant reformers emphasized the humanness in the Church's history, although their objections were sometimes even more radical than those of the English to the Catholic Church with her Canon Law, her devotions and popular cults, her papal power and centralized authority, and her claims to indefectibility. And of course, the reformers easily found in the Church's history, particularly in that of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, sufficient examples to

justify their objections. The medieval Church, they believed, by her human authority superseded the absolute primacy and sovereignty of God. It is no accident that in their anxiety to assure God's omnipotence, the reformers in many ways succeeded in making him almost unreachable, utterly inscrutable and aloof.

It was against this exaggeration of human authority that the reformers set themselves to search for some kind of guarantee or yardstick for authority which would stand outside the Church herself. This, they concluded, had to be faith. The Church was not the rule of faith; rather faith was to rule the Church. There was only one Church in Jesus Christ, and she, although composed of the 'visible' and the 'invisible' members, was not to be identified with any human form. The historical institution or 'visible' Church was not indefectible. This could only be said of the 'invisible' Church, that Church hidden in the passage of time among the true faithful.

It is clear now that there was much in all this which was of immeasurable importance; it contained the germ of a great christian revival, both catholic and protestant, and helped to open up the way towards a new conception of the Church. Whatever might have been invalid in the reformers' approaches, they did aim to distinguish clearly between the Church in history and the 'ideal' Church. They posited a Church of history which tended towards the holiness of Jesus Christ, but which, like its human members or perhaps more accurately because of them, was both 'just and sinful'. Their accusations that the medieval Catholic Church very nearly abolished the distinction between the 'visible' and the 'invisible' was not without foundation. Until Vatican Council II, the Catholic Church, in its development of the doctrine of the Mystical Body, reduced more and more the tension between the 'visible' (especially the hierarchical) Church and her Founder. Protestants traditionally have objected to this trait in catholic ecclesiology. The Council attempted to restore the tension by picturing the Church as being face to face with Christ, her Lord and Master: his subject, united to him by a union of alliance, yet ever struggling to purify herself:

> Christ, the one Mediator, established and ceaselessly sustains here on earth his Holy Church, the community of faith, hope, and charity, as a visible structure. Through her he communicates truth and grace to all. But the society furnished with hierarchical agencies and the Mystical Body of Christ are not to be considered as two realities, nor

> the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things. Rather they form one interlocked reality which is comprised of a divine and a human element .... While Christ, 'holy, innocent, undefiled' (Heb 7, 26), knew nothing of sin (2 Cor 5, 21), but came to expiate only the sins of the people (cf Heb 2, 17), the Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal (*Lumen Gentium*, 8).

The condition of the Church is therefore paradoxical indeed. The Church, 'that Jerusalem which is above, ... the spotless spouse of the spotless Lamb ... whom Christ loved and delivered himself up for her that he might sanctify her' (Eph 5, 26), whom he united to himself by an unbreakable covenant, and whom he unceasingly 'nourishes and cherishes' (Eph 5, 29), must, while on earth and 'journeying in a foreign land away from her Lord', regard herself 'as an exile' (*ibid.*, 6). Already made by God, the Church is still to be made by men and history. The material of human history must lend itself to the building up of the Church so that she can continue 'a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind' (*ibid.*, 1). Holy, yet made up of sinners, she must while here continue to seek and experience 'those things which are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, where the life of the Church is hidden with Christ in God until she appears in glory with her Spouse' (*ibid.*, 6).

Inevitably, tensions will always be present here. The history of the Church is and must remain a history of accepting and trying to solve this paradox. Significantly, Vatican II made it very clear that our responsibility is to face and accept this paradox, since we of the contemporary Church are the ones who have received the mission to proclaim and to establish among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of his Father: 'She becomes on earth the initial budding forth of that kingdom. While she slowly grows, the Church strains toward the consummation of the kingdom and, with all her strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with her King' (*ibid.*, 5). Obviously it is not enough simply to believe that history is in the hands of God alone. This is particularly evident when we consider, according to the Council, that the movements by which God desires the Church to carry out her mission today are rather largely dependent both upon the movements and developments of our history, and upon the recognition that the Church is frail and

sinful, and thus is in need of constant renewal. As in the past, the Church must be ever alert to the challenges raised by these movements in history lest, in lacking this alertness, she leaves her mission unaccomplished and, again as formerly, fails to serve God's people.

The movements of history consist of all the achievements of man: cultures, the genius of peoples and of societies, technical developments, elaborations of thought, and so on. The history of the Church is a succession of attempts to assimilate these phenomena, to synthesize and to adapt to them, some of which were successful, others less so. And yet, to follow these movements too closely, to assimilate herself to them indiscriminately, as happened in the late medieval epoch and in a different way in the nineteenth century, is most perilous. Indiscriminate assimilation can never be a substitute for the authentic assimilation – to Christ Jesus. This is why the idea of evolution applies only imperfectly to the Church, and why her reforms must always be referred to her source as the criterion of her judgments on contemporary problems, and of her forms and purposes: the source which is Jesus Christ as revealed in the gospel. But in such referral, she has the obligation to seek more than a renewal of theological formulations and of externals. She must direct the reform and renewal of christian life itself: that is, the lives of her individual members. In the end, as Vatican Council II hinted in so many different ways, to realize this, all authentic renewal must be based on the truth that we in the Church are made to the image of God, that this image has been and can be disfigured by sin, and that the life of the Church is a reforming of itself to the true image of Christ.

Any attempt to summarize the many efforts at evolutionary adaptation by the Church to the new forces in the spiritual and in the material order alike must not obscure or obstruct this fact: there always has been and there will continue to be tensions in the Church between the maintenance of principles and traditions, of formulations and externals and the call to christian renewal in a contemporary setting, between a care for 'purity' of doctrine and for reform of christian lives in the world, between concentrating on the distinguishing marks of Catholicism and the essentials of the faith. We must, of course, be on our guard against over-simplification. There are some in the Church who seek reform only to protect the 'purity': theological formulations, liturgical forms, the manner of clerical life and other expressions of 'Catholicity'. Such efforts are

often made without an historical sense or without any concern for the movements of history, and thus they become imprisoned within their own categories. In fact, too frequently, these would-be reformers have no desire to consider history at all, no desire to accept the light which emanates from the inevitable connection of the Church with the movements and forces of history in all human spheres. Nonetheless, it is precisely the history of the Church which must be examined and understood if she is both to enter on the path of renewal and fulfil the true object of her mission in the world: the lifting up of man to a share in the divine life. There are others, of course, who hear the call of history, who are aware of the inevitable inter-relations and inter-dependencies between the secular and ecclesiastical, between the human and the divine. But their following leads either to a revulsion from what they find, or to total innovation or slavish imitation. They tend to miss the path of christian 'penance and renewal' in imitation of Christ. They too must realize that reformation in christian life proceeds not by returning to history to find the one ideal, but rather by returning repentant and sorrowful to Jesus Christ, 'subject to him in love and fidelity'.

Church renewal takes place, no doubt, wherever we embark on the quest for essentials. It was the way of the sixteenth century reformers, catholic and protestant; it is the way of Vatican Council II; it is also the articulated and unarticulated way of many presently in the Church. True, we have made some progress since the sixteenth century. But one point still remains clear: the more we ponder the history of the Church, the more we see that the sinfulness of God's people has been a constant in her history. To absorb this truth with equanimity, to face the tensions resulting from the paradoxical union of the human and the divine, the Council desired the renewal of a number of elements bequeathed to us by history which were hardly apparent in the gospel message. And no doubt most importantly, it also desired the total renewal of contemporary christian lives. Fortunately many, accepting the mystery of the Church, stand weak and humble in recognition of their need for purification. They receive, 'by the power of the risen Lord', the strength 'to overcome patiently and lovingly the afflictions and hardships' assailing them. Thus they fulfil the Church's mission under Providence, 'to show forth in the world the mystery of the Lord in a faithful though shadowed way, until at the last it will be revealed in total splendour' (*ibid.*, 8).