

THE PILGRIM CHURCH

By BERNARD COOKE

VATICAN II has marked an important advance in the Church's thinking with regard to the attitude of christians in the world. It told us that we are to take the world seriously because it is the creation of God. It reminded us that we, as the community of faith, are in the world because this is the will of God. We are in the world not just as uninvolved observers but as a community of persons who are meant to remake the world according to the image of Christ. Perhaps nothing has more strikingly drawn attention to this than the insistence of the Council that the Church is the entire community of the faithful, not just the priests and bishops, and that the laity bear a particular responsibility for changing the environment in which they live.

At the same time, the conciliar documents, particularly the constitution on the Church in its chapter on the eschatological nature of the Church, have reminded us that there remains in the life of a christian a basic tension: The people of God are in the world, but they are people 'on the march'; neither as individuals nor as a community have they yet arrived at the goal of their existence. This is the paradox of the christian situation as the Council has outlined it for us. No religion must take history as seriously as does christianity, yet no group of christians at any point in history is justified in tying itself irrevocably to the forms of life and human advance which that period in history represents.

We might re-phrase the problem from another point of view, which the Council has also stressed: the Church is a sacrament, not in some vague sense but in the sense that its entire life is meant to translate through the process of history the basic mystery of incarnation: a mystery which says that the power of God is present in and speaks through the realities of visible human existence. Throughout history the Church is necessarily a sign in the midst of man, effective of redemption. This necessitates the wedding of the christian community to the world in which it lives. It is committed to taking seriously everything in the world which is not sin, for it comes from the hand of God. Yet the Church is in this world in order to pass beyond what the world already is; for it is part of the

mystery of christianity that, if christians live in the world as they should, the world itself can come to be part of the mystery of the resurrection of Christ.

The christian community, as the Council describes it for us, is a pilgrim; and we might learn a great deal by reflecting upon the situation and the lot of the pilgrim. First of all, the pilgrim is one who passes through a constantly changing situation. No place where he abides at a given moment is to be a place of permanent lodging. Nor does he pass through a situation of continuing conformity. Rather he goes from place to place; he must constantly adjust his language, his reactions to cultural patterns, his whole point of view. And so also the christian community faces a constant need in history to adapt itself to each situation it encounters, and yet adapt itself in a way which does not involve loss of its own identity. For the purpose of a pilgrim is not to lose himself at some place along the pilgrimage, but to come to the end fulfilled and purified by the experience which has been his.

Really what is involved in this point is the basic religious problem of continuity and discontinuity. Christianity, as no other religion, faces the need of maintaining a constant contact with the traditions out of which it has emerged. If we were to lose essential contact with these traditions, it would cease to be what it is. In the case of christianity, this is not just a matter of retaining certain practices and certain doctrines. It is a question of retaining living contact with the mystery which is the risen Christ himself. But precisely because the principle of continuity and christianity is Christ himself, christianity must always stand in basic challenge not only to the world which surrounds it, but to anything that it itself has already become. The genuine mystery of Christ is always something new. It is always the unexpected, as was the apparition of Christ to his disciples in the post-resurrectional manifestation. Christianity should not only expect a certain amount of surprising change; it should even anticipate it, and leave itself constantly open to ways of expressing the mystery of Christ which it has not yet seen.

In our own day we are greatly bothered by the problem of mobility, as it touches human culture in general and, more specifically, the patterns of religious life. The stable dwelling of man, the attachment to geographical locations, the homeland or language which had been principles of preserving tradition in past generations, are apparently as such a thing of the past. Man is mobile as he has never been before, and there is every indication that this mobility

will increase rather than diminish.

But this need not be for christianity a threat, for the history of both Israel and the Church teaches us that God has been most sharply present to the awareness of the people when the people were involved in a mystery of pilgrimage. It was when Israel was on the move in the exodus that they were aware of their greatest dependence upon God, a dependence which was not so sharply felt again until the days of their babylonian exile from their homeland. And so also the early Church, in the days before it was settled into stable patterns, seems to have been aware of the moving presence of Christ in his Spirit to an extent that has not always been true of our more institutionalized and static periods of christian history.

This brings us then to another characteristic of the pilgrim state, which we might apply to our present christian situation. A true pilgrim cannot rest at some stage of the journey as if it constituted the attainment of his goal. If he is faithful to the vision which moves him in his pilgrimage, he must always pick up from where he now rests and move on until he has come to his destiny. And so also the Church of Christ: the community of faith can never be complacent and static in any given historical or cultural situation. Exciting and satisfying though the expression of christianity might be at any given situation of mankind, it can never represent the fulfilment of the eschatological being of the Church. Thus a historical type of archaism is in its roots radically incompatible with the genuine eschatological nature of christianity.

Again, while it must always situate itself in the world, the christian community can never betray the mystery of Christ by tying it too absolutely to any given world view, be it that of scientific or popular cosmology or that of a given political theory of civil existence. Any such cosmology or societal view is always some kind of myth, and christianity is not a myth. It is, by way of contrast to myth, a mystery, that is to say something which defies translation and remains always inscrutable even though it be increasingly known to man. Moreover, it is of the genius of christianity that it be catholic, which means that it cannot tie itself to any given world view, whether it be that of a given culture or a given period of history.

At the same time, the cosmological or societal translations that christianity has taken in the course of its history are not incidental to its being or to its identity. Like a living person it retains in its consciousness, in its self-identification, the memory of all the forms

that it has taken, for all of these manifest in a unique fashion an insight into the multi-faceted mystery of Christ himself.

But the Church again would be untrue to itself and to its Lord were it at a given point to settle down to reflecting only upon the things that it has been and the things that it has done, forgetful of the fact that it must pick up its burden of history and move on to the discovery of new forms of which it has not even dreamt. The Church cannot allow itself to grow old and senile, to spend its time in fruitless reminiscing. Its Master has told it that having put its hand to the plough it must not look back and must best move on with the zest and the expectancy of youth. In doing this it will retain a youthfulness, which will stand in the midst of cultures growing old and obsolescent as a challenging sign raising the question in men's minds: 'Whence comes this youth, this capacity to revitalize itself, this fulness of life which defies apparently all the laws of human existence and growth'?

A third thing about a pilgrim that we might apply to the Church is that a pilgrim is not one who wanders about aimlessly. A pilgrim is one who, though he may have difficulty finding his path, is set out upon a course which is determined by the goal that he wishes to attain. And so the Church, if it is to be a pilgrim church, must in each stage of history live in alertness, trying to discover what is the true path. This, of course, is a task which is far from easy, for the true path leading into the future can never be simply a continuation of what the Church has been or done in previous generations. What is required is a power of discernment guided by faith and hope and motivated by love, a power of discerning those elements in life which contribute to the development of Christ's kingdom, a discernment which becomes increasingly difficult as man's civilization itself becomes a more complicated affair. On the one hand, christians must be careful not to be seduced by false promises of progress, tying their hopes and their efforts to dreams which are either unattainable, or in some kind of opposition to the true human development which is meant to characterize the progress of christianity. It is so easy for men to forget the fact of their frailty, forget the fact of their sinfulness, forget the fact that in order to attain their destiny they must depend upon Christ for the redemption which alone will make it possible for them to attain their goal.

While the Church must be careful not to give way to fads nor too readily tie itself to this or that movement as the hope of the future, it must at the same time resist the temptation to confine itself to

certain institutional forms and practices and viewpoints as if these were eternally permanent. In the last analysis there is in the Church very little that is absolutely unchanging. There are many things which will always be in the Church, precisely because the Church is a living community. These very elements of permanence are themselves elements which develop and grow and come to fulfilment.

It is this problem of sorting out the various alternatives of activity, discovering which are truly compatible with the mystery of Christ and which endanger its genuine and authentic expression, that confronts Catholics today. It is so easy to classify points of view as either conservative or liberal. It is so easy to over-simplify the questions that history has given us as an inheritance. It is so easy to write off the opinions or the efforts of others as being a danger either to the genuine movement of the Church or to the stable permanence of its life. What is required in the midst of the present situation is the wisdom based upon a vision of history which is grounded in the gospel. Perhaps we might state the problem by saying that a critical need of the pilgrim's search is one of leadership. For if a people are to advance historically as a community with authentic growth, direction, wise counsel and fearless guidance are required. That such can and will emerge in the Church we must trust, because Christ would not have given the pilgrim vocation to the Church without at the same time providing for a fulfilment of that destiny.