

## FREEDOM AND OBEDIENCE

In the great renewal now in progress within the Church, a long, hard look is being given to the relationship between freedom and authority. This relationship is being examined at various levels: between bishops and their priests; between religious superiors and their subjects; between pastors and the laity entrusted to their care; academic freedom between faculty (especially lay faculty) and administration in Catholic colleges, and so forth.

This re-evaluation of freedom and authority is due to many factors. Certainly one of the most important is the milieu of the modern world. In our culture, there is an aversion to accept anything that does not seem reasonable. Modern man wants to re-think everything. He wants to take the universe apart and see what makes it run. In the religious sphere, he is no longer willing to accept truth on blind faith, and the say-so of someone else. He wants to investigate, to weigh, to probe, to become convinced by his own rational powers. The man of today is anxious to see everything, to read everything, to hear everything, and to explore everything. The call of the Second Vatican Council, urging the members of the Church to a more active role in her life and mission, has struck a responsive chord in the minds and hearts of many. The Council has raised great hopes; it is very important that these hopes be kept alive and strong.

Speaking on the responsible freedom of the layman, Bishop Primeau of Manchester said some vigorous words during the second session of the Council:

We can safely say that today's layman, aware of his own abilities, will no longer put up with being treated as a passive member submitting blindly to the authority of the Church as a silent sheep.

. . . We often speak too much about the need of obedience, reverence, and submission, and do not put enough emphasis on individual responsibility, on freedom of initiative, which must be recognized in the layman in a positive spirit . . . . They should not be constantly lectured about their duty of

subjection and reverence, as if their whole vocation were summed up in four words: believe, pray, obey, and pay. . . . We should not forget that the dedicated layman has great respect and love for the Church, but he wants to take an active part in the mission of the Church, to be no longer treated as a mere delegate of the clergy and hierarchy. . . .<sup>1</sup>

The Bishop pointed out that, in his opinion, unless the Council answered the question concerning the relation between freedom and authority, three things would happen to the laity;

1. there will be a growing bitterness on the part of laymen toward the authority of the Church;
2. there will be an increase of indifference among laymen who will passively observe the laws of the Church, but take no active part in her life and mission;
3. in some cases, there will unfortunately even be apostasy from the faith and the Church.<sup>2</sup>

What can be said of the laity can likewise be said of many of the clergy. There is no doubt that many priests and religious feel frustrated and dissatisfied because the attitude of their superiors precludes any meaningful communication. No one in authority seems to care what they think. Indeed, many superiors leave the distinct impression that they would feel much better if their subjects did not think at all. Such an attitude is intolerable to modern man. Blind obedience and arbitrary authority are no longer attractive. Men of today look for frankness, sincerity, and freedom.

No one doubts that this modern outlook contains certain dangers. But no one should doubt that it does likewise contain many opportunities. The more modern man is treated like a free, responsible, human being, and the less he is treated like a puppet, the more effectively will he respond. The Church is not interested in compliance with the rules; she is interested in consent and commitment. Strict obedience and docility are necessary virtues. However, in this

<sup>1</sup> E. Primeau, "Responsible Freedom of the Layman" *Council Speeches of Vatican II*, editors: Küng, Congar, O'Hanlon (Paulist Press: Glen Rock, New Jersey, 1964) 83, 85.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

world, which Christians must re-make from the roots up, we cannot afford to ignore zeal, resourcefulness, and imagination. We do not need mass-produced Christians. We need apostolic Christians.

It is true that, with certain outstanding exceptions, the general attitude of the Catholic laity is one of apathy. It is hard to understand this in the face of the Church's repeated calls urging the laity to take their rightful place in her life. It is said, with some truth, that the average layman is not interested in playing his part. Perhaps, however, the real reason for this apathy is that the layman does not believe we are sincere when we call upon him to assume his role. What the layman wants today is an open dialogue between himself and the hierarchy so that the special role of the layman in the apostolate can be made clear. I am sure that an open dialogue with the hierarchy is also the fervent wish of many priests.

Another factor influencing the re-evaluation of freedom and authority is the deeper understanding of the nature of the Church current in present day theology. For too long a time, the Mystical Body of Christ has been viewed almost exclusively as a power structure—almost a pyramid of power. According to this concept, the pope, with the fulness of power which is truly his, was at the pinnacle; the bishops were a little lower down; then came the rest of the clergy; and at the base was the laity with no other obligation but to pray and obey. Today we are stressing the Church, not so much as an organization, which it is, but as an organism, which it also is. This organic nature of the Church was very clearly brought out in a definition of the Church offered to the first session of the Council by Cardinal Suenens and the present Pope when he was still the Archbishop of Milan. They said that the Church is the family of God, nourished by the liturgy and God's holy book, each member with his specific task in God's world. This definition underlines the fact that although Christ set up his Church with a hierarchical structure, he nevertheless did not limit the carrying out of his mission to the hierarchy. Every Catholic, according to his position in the Mystical Body, is responsible for the salvation of the world. What is becoming more and more evident today, is that the Church cannot fulfill the mission of Christ unless there is responsible com-

munication, consultation, and cooperation among the various levels of membership. This cooperation and consultation will not be responsible or meaningful unless there is a certain freedom of speech and freedom to criticize. No one denies that there are limits to this free speech and criticism. There are areas within the Church where they simply do not exist. However, when we make a careful distinction between what is truly essential within the Church and what is not, we have a wide field where free speech is essential if the Church is to fulfill her mission.

Today we are very acutely aware that although the Church is a divine institution, and thus is irreformable in her essentials, she is also a human institution and thus open for reform in her accidentals. The Church is not only for men, it is of men. To see her exclusively as pure, spotless, blameless, holy, concerned only with the salvation of men and the glory of God is unrealistic. Nor is it uncatholic to say that it is quite possible "for the actions of the hierarchy to arise from human motives, mistaken information, or a failure to recognize the needs of the day. It is uncatholic to be always assuming, on a basis of general anti-hierarchy feeling, that such things are so . . . but it is equally theologically false to assume that such things can never be so."<sup>3</sup> The Church is a divine institution. She is also a sociological human structure. She is God's holy Church. But she is made up of men, sinful men. Because of the human element in the Church, there is a permanent need of renewal and of criticism.

### *Criticism*

Criticism of the Church is looked upon by some as disloyal—an attack on religion and God himself. For these people, everything the Church does must be either approved or excused. However, the honest Christian realizes that "as a Church of men, sinful men, the Church, though of divine foundation, needs criticizing; and that as the Church of God, she is more than any other institution, worth criticizing."<sup>4</sup> Criticism of the Church is not a license to give vent to

<sup>3</sup> K. Rahner, S.J., *The Christian Commitment* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963) 34.

<sup>4</sup> H. Küng, *The Council, Reform and Reunion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961) 44.

resentments and petty prejudices. There is always much more to thank God for in the Catholic Church than there is to criticize. Therefore, criticism of the Church must be motivated by love—a desire to build up, and not to tear down. In his book on the council, *The Council, Reform, and Reunion*, Hans Küng gives three basic characteristics which must be present in any criticism of the Church. Criticism based on love must be *constructive, committed, and constrained*.<sup>5</sup>

Criticism must be constructive. Fr. Küng says: "One will not go in for bad-tempered grumbling, sterile faultfinding, fundamentally and exclusively negative criticism for criticism's sake, but will produce positive, constructive criticism. One will not be intent on tracking down abuses, whether with delight or disgust, but will be trying to establish norms."<sup>6</sup>

Committed criticism demands that the critic be heart-and-soul committed to Christ and his Church, including the legitimate authority of the Church. Committed criticism is characterized by reverence and respect toward the Church and its hierarchy.

Constrained criticism is intelligent, fair, and balanced. It does not go beyond its competence; it never indulges in personalities; it is not angry at counter-criticism; it knows how to distinguish between essentials and accidentals, and finally, it knows when to speak and when to keep silent. This type of criticism, constructive, committed, and constrained, will be invaluable for building up within the Church a healthy and respectful public opinion.

### *Public Opinion*

Public opinion is the attitude of a majority of the people toward certain topics. There is no doubt that we use the term "public opinion" in regard to the Church in an analogous way. The Church is not a democracy where the majority rules. The government of the Church comes from above and not from below. Nevertheless, the Church is a human society made up of thinking human beings. In

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 48-49.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

every society of human beings, public opinion is a normal part. Speaking to the International Press Congress in 1950, Pius XII said:

Public opinion plays a part in every normal society of human beings . . . wherever there is no expression of public opinion, above all, where it has been ascertained that no public opinion exists, then one is obliged to say that there is a fault, a weakness, a sickness, in the social life of that area. . . . Finally, we should like to add a word about public opinion within the fold of the Church—about things that can be left open to discussion, of course. Only people who know little or nothing about the Catholic Church will be surprised to hear this. For she too is a living body, and there would be something missing from her life if there were no public opinion within her, a defect for which pastors as well as the faithful would be responsible . . .<sup>7</sup>

As in every statement of the pope, we must try and see what doctrinal note he attaches to it. This speech was printed in *Osservatore Romano*, but not in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*. We cannot, therefore, give these words of Pius XII a doctrinal import he did not intend. In such addresses, it is not usually the intention of the pope to settle theological problems, but merely to state truths which seem to him to be self-evident and a part of the already settled teaching of the Church. This, however, makes the pope's word most interesting. He seems to be taking it for granted that public opinion does exist in the Church and moreover that it is necessary for the Church.

What is the function of public opinion within the Church? It is a means whereby the authorities can get an all-round view of what is going on in the world, how the present generation of Catholics is thinking, what are their needs and aspirations. The Church in her accidentals must always adapt her existence to contemporary conditions. It is the function of public opinion to make these conditions known to the authority of the Church so that they can take them into consideration. It is easy for bishops and priests to be on the fringe, out of touch with the flesh-and-blood world. It is easy for

<sup>7</sup> K. Rahner, S.J., *Free Speech in the Church* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1959) 5.

us to know only a sheltered and clerical segment of life. It is easy for the authorities of the Church to try and direct her from a remote ivory tower.

If the authorities of the Church want to know what is going on, then they must not only protect but foster intelligent public opinion. There is a widespread feeling among many of the laity that the clergy simply do not know what is going on—they live in a world of their own, unaware of what real life is like. I think this is the opinion of a great many Catholics when it comes to the problems of marriage. As one layman put it:

The marital state, as it is depicted in most clergy-written books, has little to do with the reality experienced by millions of lay Catholics. The priest's understanding of the family vocation is frequently quite as deficient as the layman's understanding of the priestly life. Both know the general outlines of the other's vocation in a bloodless, schematic way, of course. But there is a kind of knowledge that can be purchased only by experience, and in both cases it is lacking.<sup>8</sup>

It seems to me that marriage is one area where a great deal of dialogue between clergy and laity is necessary before the teaching of the Church becomes meaningful in the lives of many.

The present state of the world does not allow us the luxury of ignoring honest public opinion. We are living among the ruins of Christianity. Our own country is a pagan country with a Christian background. God and religion have become irrelevant in many lives because the essential message and truth are cloaked in concepts and terms which have no meaning for the contemporary world. Karl Rahner has described the present existence of the Church as a "diaspora existence." The Catholic Church is diffused throughout the world, but everywhere it exists as a diaspora—a minority religion surrounded by pagan ideals and culture. He says:

Christianity (though in varying proportions) exists everywhere in the world, and everywhere as a diaspora. It is effectually in terms of numbers, a minority everywhere; nowhere

<sup>8</sup> J. Cogley, "In Search of Honesty," *Commonweal* (LXXIX, No. 24, March 13, 1964) 706.

does it fill such a role of effective leadership as would permit it to set upon the age, with any force or clarity, the stamp of a Christian ideal. Indeed, we are undoubtedly in an era which is going to see an increase in this diaspora character, no matter what causes we may assign to it.<sup>9</sup>

This is the situation in which God has placed the modern Church. She is to serve and to save the world of the twentieth century. She has to preach the old faith to a new age. She must do it in a new fresh way. The Church cannot do this unless the aid of the whole Church is enlisted. Each individual Christian has a responsibility for the Church's mission. Every Catholic, cleric or layman, has some contribution to make. No Catholic can fully make his contribution unless discussion, consultation, free speech, and public opinion exist within the Church.

### *Honesty*

Public opinion and free speech—within the limits set down—demand honesty. There is present in the Church today a certain fear of honesty, of the expression of one's honest opinion. How many priests are really honest with their bishop; how many religious are truly honest with their superiors? Do we say what we think? Do we say what we think they would like us to say? Are we truthful or are we prudent? This lack of honesty also involves the relations between clergy and laity. The layman has one way of speaking to his fellow layman and a different method when addressing a priest. The clergy also has a special language and manner for the laity. The good layman feels that there are certain words, attitudes, and beliefs that should not be mentioned in the presence of a priest.

Writing in *Commonweal* John Cogley hopes for:

. . . the creation of an atmosphere within the Catholic community, where there would be more confrontation of theologian and untutored layman—untutored in the science of theology that is; less fear of incorrect or imprecise expressions of theological concerns on the part of the laity; more patience on the part of theologians and willingness to understand what the laity are trying to say in their own uncultivated language;

<sup>9</sup> K. Rahner, S.J., *The Christian Commitment*, 17.



less concern for the niceties of theological terminology, and a strong emphasis on genuine communication. I would like to see laymen feel free to express their convictions, doubts, and dissents, without fear of "violating orthodoxy", or seeming to be brash, and I would like to see the theologians as anxious to master the factual realities of life as the moral principles of their trade before they make their pronouncements.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

Criticism, free speech, and public opinion must be informed. A Catholic has a right to free speech and criticism. However, before he can exercise this right, he must know his religion. Anyone who wishes to take part in the public opinion within the Church must know clearly and exactly what the Church teaches and the binding force of this teaching. If a person is not willing to make the effort to find out what areas are open to free speech and what areas are not, he forfeits his right to criticize. There are areas where it is not a question of free speech but of faith.

Ultimately, in discussing freedom within the Church, the problem of how this freedom can be concretely implemented must be faced. Writing in the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, Fr. Andrew Greeley says:

Even though the recent popes have stressed the need of a "public opinion" in the Church which will keep superiors informed of the needs and problems and insights of the rank and file, the institutions by which such a public opinion can be formed are only beginning to come into existence, and the channels for moving this opinion upward do not exist at all.<sup>11</sup>

There are two problems. First, subjects must feel free to express their ideas, feelings and problems to their superiors without being thought of as malcontents and cranks. Secondly, authority must make it clear that honest opinions are wanted, will be taken into consideration, and may have some effect on decisions. I would be inclined to think that very few suggestions are being offered to superiors in most of the dioceses, parishes, and religious communities

<sup>10</sup> J. Cogley, *op. cit.*, 706.

<sup>11</sup> A. Greeley, "Fraternal Authority in the Church," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, LXIV, No. 7 (April, 1964) 565.

of this country. There are two basic reasons for this: fear of getting into trouble, and the conviction that making suggestions is a waste of time since the authority does not want any. Superiors must become convinced that they cannot fulfill their God-given duty unless they are willing to listen to and, in some instances follow, honest and informed public opinion. They must also be prepared to remove the obstacles which prevent them from hearing this public opinion.

It seems to me that Fr. Karl Rahner, S.J., has gotten to the heart of the problem between freedom and authority. He points out that, according to modern canon law, there is no recognized or legitimate way of making public opinion felt within the Church. In the revision of canon law, he would like to see a chapter devoted to the rights of free speech and public opinion. Norms and standards of conduct could be laid down and the whole question given legal backing. Such legal backing would remove the stigma of "crackpot" from anyone engaged in the expression of legitimate opinion. It seems to me that ultimately this would be a realistic way of making public opinion effective and effective in the right way.

DONALD CAUL, S.A.  
*Catholic Information Center*  
*Brockton, Mass.*

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

##### *Books*

- H. Küng, *The Council, Reform, and Reunion*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961.  
 G. B. Montini, *The Church*. Baltimore: Helicon, 1964.  
 K. Rahner, *The Christian Commitment*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963.  
 K. Rahner, *Free Speech in the Church*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1959.  
 L.-J. Suenens, *The Nun in the World*. Westminster: Newman Press, 1963.

##### *Articles*

- J. Cogley, "In Search of Honesty," *Commonweal*, LXXIX (no. 24, 1964).  
 A. Greeley, "Fraternal Authority in the Church," *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review*. LXIV (no. 7, 1964).  
 M. Novak, "When is Doctrine Pure," *Commonweal*, LXXX (no. 8, 1964).  
 E. Primeau, "Responsible Freedom of the Layman," *Council Speeches of Vatican II*. Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1964.  
 J. Ratzinger, "Free Expression and Obedience in the Church," *The Church: Readings in Theology*. New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1963.