THE CURRENT PROTESTANT CRITIQUE OF CATHOLICISM IN THE UNITED STATES

It may have been a pleasant extravagance on the part of G. K. Chesterton when he maintained that there was no such thing as the American *mind,* there was only the American *mood*; but even allowing for the extravagance, there is a certain shrewdness to his observation because the fact of the matter is that mood plays a larger part in forming American likes and dislikes than mind does. The facile substitution of the word "feel" for the word "think" on the part of millions of Americans indicates that thought, in too many instances, is equated with emotional states. As an approach to this seminar discussion of the current Protestant critique of Catholicism in the United States, it may be helpful if we first take note of that critique in terms of its mood before we consider it in terms of what it actually says about Catholic doctrines and practices.

Every mood is a predisposition to an emotional state. The mood of Protestantism towards Catholicism is a predisposition to a complex emotional state embracing fear, suspicion, and distrust of Roman Catholic claims and activities. The mood is common to both the fundamentalist wing and the liberal wing of American Protestantism. In the case of the fundamentalist, it expresses itself in a fear and distrust of the Church as a religious institution; whereas in the case of the liberals, it expresses itself in a fear and distrust of the Church as a political force. In each instance, the end product of the mood is fear and distrust of the Church. For that reason, it must be taken into account in any discussion of the current Protestant critique of Catholicism.

There is nothing new about this mood. It has existed since Colonial days and has remained a considerable factor in American social, political and religious life. At times, its power to sway and affect its possessors is stronger than at others. At the present time, it is extremely strong. Much of the success, and it has been a considerable success, attained by Paul Blanshard through his two books and his innumerable lectures may be attributed to the skill with which he has

evoked this mood and turned it to his own advantage. Anyone who has attended his lectures can testify to the adroit way he has worked on the mood of his audience so as to arouse fear and distrust of the Church—a tactic involving little argumentation, but calling for a maximum of innuendo, sly asides and whispered charges unsupported by evidence.

The use of "loaded" words such as "fascist," "authoritarian," "Inquisition," and "Dark Ages," to mention but a few, is effective in setting up in the mind of the hearer or reader a train of associations making it difficult for any clear or reasonable picture of the Church to be obtained. There are certain assumptions which accompany this mood of which we are speaking and they are: (1) America is a Protestant nation; (2) American political institutions and ideals are Protestant in inspiration and reflect a Protestant outlook and temper; and (3) Catholics are an alien force in American life who have yet to give proof that their allegiance to Rome does not compromise their allegiance to America.

President Truman's proposal to send an Ambassador to the Vatican not only evoked a widespread mood of bitterness in Protestant circles, but it showed to what degree the above three assumptions are still operative in Protestant thinking in this country. An analysis of editorials and articles on the Vatican appointment which appeared in Protestant publications reveals how highly charged are Protestant emotional reactions to the Holy Father and the Vatican. It would be difficult to assess this reaction to the President's proposal without taking note of the assumptions which have already been indicated. One cannot imagine a lay state or a secular state, which is on record as not having any particular religious affiliation, waxing as warmly as America did over the question of an Ambassador to the Holy See. The extra fillip added in the proposal made by many prominent Protestant editors and clergymen that American Catholic Bishops, in the event of an Ambassador being appointed to the Holy See, should be registered as agents of a foreign power, shows how deeply rooted is the assumption that Catholics are second class citizens and should be penalized for an action which they neither initiated nor showed great enthusiasm for. Underlying the whole Vatican Embassy question, there is the assumption that we are a Protestant nation enjoying

a freedom which has been gained through Protestant auspices and that we have no need whatsoever as a nation for any diplomatic tie with the Holy See. It served no point at all to indicate that Great Britain, Egypt, Germany, and France maintained diplomatic representation at the Vatican, even though these governments had large numbers of non-Catholics in their constituencies. The mood of suspicion and distrust of any formal governmental tie with the Vatican carried the day so far as public opinion was concerned in the United States.

So much for the mood then! What about the actual Protestant critique of Catholicism in the United States? It may be said to express itself in two ways: one unfavorable, the other favorable. In the first way, it expresses itself in a sharp and often contentious criticism of Catholic doctrine, discipline and practice, and in the second way, it expresses itself in an unconcealed admiration for certain aspects of the Church which have a powerful appeal to non-Catholics.

One would expect that there would be a sharp critical attack upon the Church and her nature—an attack which would go into her historical and her scriptural claims, which would make a battleground of the bold assertion on the part of the Church that she and she alone is empowered by God to lead men to salvation. Such is not the case, however. In no popular Protestant periodical is much time or editorial space given to the nature of the Church and her claims. The exclusiveness of the Church is a subject at times for carping editorials, but the reason for that exclusiveness is never seriously discussed. What has taken place is a kind of default whereby Protestant editorial writers refuse to consider the Church in terms of her own definition. They shift the ground of attack by adopting their own definition of the Church and then scold the Catholic Church for not accepting that as her own definition. The typical Protestant today who speaks or writes of the Church visualizes a broad body encompassing many denominations, a Church which by its nature cannot have a precise and infallible teaching authority. Within such a concept of the Church some place is accorded Roman Catholicism, but it is not difficult to see how such a concept challenges at the very outset the fundamental claim that the Catholic Church makes in her own behalf.

In his book *Be Glad You're a Protestant,* Harry C. Munro defines "the Church" as follows:

> The church is Christ's present earthly body through which His spirit is expressed and His word goes forward. There are differences, of course, as to what constitute the true Church. But what any Christian considers to be the true church of Christ becomes for him Christ's present living body.[1]

W. Burnet Easton, professor of Religion at Lawrence College, defines the Church as:

> . . . any group of persons who confess our Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament. . . . In other words Protestantism believes that the church is a fellowship of believers united by their common loyalty and faith in Jesus Christ as the revelation of God for man and his salvation.[2]

These two definitions are fairly typical of the concept of the Church which prevails in Protestant publications and they reveal how far apart Protestants and Catholics are in their basic concept of the Church. Little, if any space, is given any more to the Catholic Church's claim for exclusiveness. The impression is conveyed that if the Church will not abandon her insistence that she and she alone has been founded by Christ, there can be no longer any meeting ground for controversy. Actually, it would be a much more fruitful thing if Protestant publications would pay less attention to their criticism of certain social and sociological aspects of the Church and expend more time in examining her theological and historical aspects.

As matters stand now, the nature of the Church as revealed in Scripture and history is given too little attention while the big guns of the Protestant editorial world are trained upon the manner in which the Catholic Church manifests herself in society.

There runs through Protestant books and current magazines an attempt to equate the Church with a form of political despotism of the Right, either monarchy or fascism. On the other hand, Protes-

[1] Harry C. Munro, *Be Glad You're a Protestant* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1948), p. 15.

[2] W. Burnet Easton, *The Faith of a Protestant* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 49.

tants in their critique of the Church always seek to identify the "Protestant ethic" with democracy, with a government based upon popular sovereignty. To substantiate the charge that the Catholic Church, by her nature, tends to be identified with political despotism, Protestants point to the authoritarian and hierarchial structure of the Church herself. Psychologically, they say, it is inevitable that a Church which is constructed as the Catholic Church is, where her lay members have "little freedom to determine for themselves" what is or is not Catholic teaching and dogma, should manifest herself politically in an authoritarian regime. Spain always becomes the subject here of special illustration. Enlightened Protestants do not deny the facts of history that "the great Protestant movements" began with a philosophy of compulsion and uniformity and a subsequent lack of freedom. What they say, actually, is that Protestants and Protestant countries have learned to change, while Catholics "particularly the Vatican" generally have not. W. E. Garrison, literary editor of the *Christian Century* for over thirty years, has expressed this idea in a manner typical of most Protestant thought.

> The early Protestant movements all began with the philosophy of rigidity and compulsion. This was one of the things they carried over from the medieval Church, unchanged for a time except that each operated in a limited governmental area. They not only believed but practiced this theory of compulsory religious unity. Only gradually did the great Protestant Church abandon the method of compulsion. They did this as they came to understand more fully what was involved in their own principles, as the use of the freedom they had claimed for themselves led them to discover in the gospel the charter of freedom for all men, and as civil liberty developed in those countries which had freed themselves from the imperialistic Church. They have learned that lesson, more completely in some places than in others, most completely (we think) in the United States. The Vatican has never learned any part of it, though many individual Roman Catholics have.[3]

This critique that the Church is intolerant, that freedom of religion, which in this context means the freedom men, by their nature,

[3] W. E. Garrison, *A Protestant Manifesto* (New York: Abingdon, Cokesbury, 1951), p. 185.

have to pick their own way of worship regardless of the doctrinal error which may or may not be involved, is being widely developed in Protestant publications at the present time. It is further charged that the Church is not only intolerant in her theological structure and political outlook, but is intolerant of other religions. To corroborate this charge, Protestant spokesmen inevitably fall back on the Syllabus of Errors and the encyclical *Immortale Dei.* In America the volume of Boland and Ryan, which most Protestants accept as a definitive statement of Catholic political and religious philosophy respecting liberty and civil rights for non-Catholics, is the most widely quoted single text. Bitter Protestant criticism is directed at what Garrison calls the official Catholic position that the Church "has a right to use force or to enlist the police power of the State in order to suppress dissent, prevent separation from its communion, silence or liquidate heretics, and insure the religious homogeneity of the entire population in the one Church under that ruling body." [4] Garrison and other Protestant spokesmen point out that this position is more in keeping with what they call "official Vatican policy" than with the action, at least by outward appearances, of the Catholic Church's position here in America. This, they attribute to the fact that Catholics in the United States are as yet a minority group. There seems no doubt that if the day comes when Catholics become the majority religious body, the same intolerance and restrictions will be placed upon Protestants in America as have been placed upon them in Spain, for example. No one seems to have made any study of Eire as an example of what can happen to Protestants when Catholics are the outstanding religious majority. In summary, then, the Protestant critique of the Church in the United States here examined indicates that the Church by its structure and by its exclusiveness is intolerant and will, when numerically strong enough, invoke the secular arm to restrict the religious liberty of non-Catholics.

From a purely practical standpoint and certainly from the standpoint of exercising an effective apologetic approach in this country, it does seem necessary to have a clearer and more precise statement of the Church's position on such basic concepts as democracy, popular sovereignty, the limitation of majority and minority rights, the status

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 184.

of the dissenter, religious or political, in a free society; and it seems extremely important for Catholic theologians to give a clearer picture of the manner by which the authority of the Church on religious matters is to be reconciled with political democracy and with the personal freedoms inherent in a democratic structure.

The limitations of time will make it impossible to go into areas in which the Church is subject to sharp criticism and attack although it may be mentioned here in passing that no single subject seems to occasion a more bitter response than the subject of Mariology. When the Dogma of the Assumption was proclaimed, great space was given in Protestant publications to criticism of it, more emotional than theological. Among Anglicans, it was felt that the Dogma drove a wedge between any hopes for a reunion of Christendom. The most repeated charge was that there was no scriptural support for the Dogma. The *Christian Advocate* charged that the Church had set up a new canon side by side with the Scriptures:

> The arresting and startling circumstance is that the Catholic doctrine of tradition, ranked with that of Papal infallibility, should start setting up a second canon side by side with the Scriptures. This makes the Dogma exceedingly dangerous and the Church that proclaims it dangerous, too.

The charge of medievalism got into the picture. It was made by the *Christian Herald* (December, 1950):

> We simply do not see how a sensible Bible reader can subscribe to the Dogma or how anyone living in this day and age can fail to regard the whole idea as medieval. The only conclusion to which a rational person can come is that, by Catholic understanding, religion and life are two separate categories and that neither has anything to do with the other.

When a group of physical scientists in Chicago got wide publicity for their statement that the Assumption was physically impossible because a human body would have been consumed at the height of 50,000 feet for lack of oxygen, it prompted a newspaperman with a streak of Chesterton in him to remark that 50,000 feet didn't bother him at all, the real trick was in getting 100 feet off the ground and he presumed that anyone who could arrange that would also see that

all other physical requirements would be taken care of from there on up.

Reference should be made, if only in passing, to Protestant criticism on the Catholic position regarding mixed-marriage. The most concise statement of Protestant objections is contained in a brochure written by Dr. Leland Foster Wood for the Federal Council of Churches entitled: *If I Marry a Roman Catholic.* This pamphlet has been the primary source material for many magazine articles written on this subject. The most stringent criticism is aimed at the pre-nuptial agreement which the Protestant must sign. It is "unfair, undemocratic, and negates the freedom of the Protestant world." The psychological effects of mixed-marriage on the non-Catholic member and upon the Catholic children are stressed. The idea that children brought up in a home which is so fundamentally divided on this basic question are bound to suffer is accentuated. The added fact that the Church permits no reciprocity or marriage in a Protestant church grates on Protestant sensibilities. "Such demands mean that a Christian person who believes his own Church to be a true Church of Christ is asked, when he marries a Roman Catholic, to act as if his Church were no Church at all, but a dangerous organization." There is a definite retaliatory movement growing among Protestant denominations to forbid their members from marrying Roman Catholics altogether. If it gains sufficient ground, it may be pointed out that the Church arrived at this position a long time ago and that it has never had any great enthusiasm for mixed-marriages. One of the most widely circularized articles ever to appear in the *Christian Century* was one written by Mary Elizabeth Sargent titled: "Why Aren't They Like Us" and it is concerned with mixed-marriage. Mrs. Sargent's conclusion is that Catholics, because they are instructed in their Faith, are in a much better position to defend the truths of their Faith than the Protestant who has usually only an emotional experience of his religion and hence is unequal to the challenge which deeply held convictions of the Catholic party presents.

It would be unfair to suggest that the Protestant critique of Catholicism in the United States is all destructive or even combative. There are many aspects of the Church which continually elicit the admiration of editorialists and feature writers in Protestant publica-

tions. The Mass, particularly, is the subject of much comment. In an article entitled: "Where Rome is Right," John R. Scotford, formerly editor of the official organ of the Congregational Christian Churches, urged "Protestantism to compete with Rome where Rome is strongest." To the common man, Scotford writes: "The Roman Catholic Church renders two great services; it gives him an awareness of the presence of God and it makes him part of an institution which appears to be both universal and eternal." The real genius of the Church according to Scotford is the Mass. When the Host is elevated, the "hush that comes over the congregation" is real, . . . "something is really happening in the hearts of many of the people. . . . The power of the Mass is a fact which Protestants cannot escape; it must be faced."

The second source of strength attributed by Scotford to the Church is the appearance of universality:

> Her people do not join a local society; they are confirmed by the Bishop as members of the Church which claims to be founded by Peter, the Church whose worship is the same throughout the world and whose authority extends beyond the present into eternity. For the individual this can be a great experience. Instead of traveling through life alone, he is part of a mighty host.

The contrast with Protestantism is particularly painful here according to Scotford:

> We join a local church which is a semi-social, semi-religious institution that may or may not have out-of-town affiliations. People come to church to see their friends rather than with any great expectation of encountering God.
>
> A Catholic Bishop once told the writer that Protestantism is a *muy seco,* which means very dry. So it seems to many. If we are to carry our heritage forward into the future, we must give the common man a religious experience comparable to that offered by Rome. We must compete with Rome where Rome is strong.[5]

[5] John R. Scotford, "Where Rome is Right," *The Christian Century,* July 4, 1951.

In a sermon preached by the Rev. Arthur Ackenbom, a Brooklyn Methodist minister, it is significant to note that he paid the following tribute to the Church:

> I like Roman Catholicism because it is the mother Church. The bulk of our traditions have been preserved by this great institution. I like Roman Catholicism because it is Catholic, it is a Church militant which always has had a passion for souls. I like Roman Catholicism for its discipline. In this day when we are discovering how important to health and happiness is peace of mind, it is well to re-examine the basic principles of confession. I like Roman Catholicism most of all for its realism. It is the one Christian Church which takes itself most seriously. When a Roman communicant comes to the Mass, he comes to the presence of Christ. There is no room in his Faith for any doubt of this reality.[6]

In many sections of American Protestantism, especially among the Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists and Congregationalists, there is a growing interest in ritual. Liturgical services are taking the place of extemporaneous prayer. Vestments are supplanting the preachers' robe. The St. James movement among the Lutherans lays stress not on preaching, but on the Eucharist. Its members wear chasubles and copes and in one church of the Missouri Synod reservation is practiced. Among the Episcopal Churches, if one can judge from the articles and advertisements appearing in the *Living Church,* there is a widespread movement away from services which feature preaching towards services which emphasize high-church ritual. In the field of church architecture, a striking change may be noticed—a change which will allow for liturgical worship. The altar, rather than the pulpit and choir grouping in front, occupies the central place in many new Protestant churches. The new chapel and library of the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Austin, Texas, has made generous use of religious symbolism. Spiritual direction under the name of "pastoral counseling" is being given by many ministers at stated hours and it is an attempt to supply for a need which Protestantism is acutely conscious of, particularly in view of the appeal which con-

[6] Arthur O. Ackenbom, "Why I Like Roman Catholicism," Reprinted in the Brooklyn *Tablet,* August 18, 1951.

fession has for Roman Catholic members. These latter indications point out more than any words can the great appeal that the Church, living her life out in a liturgical cycle and sustaining troubled souls with her sacramental ministrations, has for men and women of genuine religious convictions.

The noisy element of American Protestantism which insists upon evoking bitterness and distrust towards the Church may carry greater strength so far as headlines and editorials are concerned, but it would be a mistake, I think, to underestimate the appeal that the Church does have for large groups of men and women in the United States, who yearn for security in their lives and who look for that balm in Gilead which the Church possesses as her most precious unction.

Digest of the Discussion

In general a great deal of the debate is on a superficial level. It deals all too frequently with what was essentially peripheral problems. The end result is that often we Catholics choose bad terrain for our part of the debate and carry it on in a purely polemic rather than an irenic attitude of mind. We stay in the framework of our own Catholic atmosphere and premises and the Protestants in theirs and hence we never really meet in fruitful or effective debate. Thus the central problem for us is to place this debate where it belongs, viz., the theological level where the real problems and points of divergence lie. By way of solution was adduced the *Una Sancta* movement in Germany which concerns itself primarily with establishing the *Status Quaestionis* of the whole issue rather than laying down what's what from the Catholic side in a purely *ex Cathedra* spirit without explanation or understanding. Exemplifying this larger approach would be the accurate confrontation on the historical level and the theological nature of the elements that enter into the Protestant origins of the sixteenth century. Here would be avoided such things as reliance on Luther's *Table Talk* for ammunition and instead dealing with the central realities and assumptions of his theology and religious experience.

In connection with this approach several of the members brought up points which seemed to them either to interfere with or inhibit such discussions and debate.

Monsignor McCarthy pointed out that very often the character of our public protests and criticisms sets up a real and insuperable antagonism. It is not so much a matter of what we say as how we say it and implement it. We simply pronounce our judgment without explaining the premises upon which it rests and then support that judgment by pressure organizations which in turn tend to classify our tactics and mental attitude with those of the Communists.

Monsignor William O'Connor supplied evidence that not infrequently the critics of Catholicism apply a double standard in their criticism of our tactics. They do not want us to engage in public protest on various issues but yet expect us to accept anything said against us in the name of free speech and religious tolerance.

Monsignor McCarthy agreed with this and referred to the ambivalence of the general Protestant attitude toward Mr. Blanshard's attacks on the Church. However he called attention to the fact that many of the tactics we take are looked upon as employing a double standard of our own. Thus we call for a strong public protest against the treatment of Cardinal Mindszenty and resent Protestant neutralism which arises from situations such as Spain and Colombia. For granted a confused situation here and much provocation by Protestants in these countries still a strong and clear statement of the Church's attitude might serve very useful ends. Very often, too, we take too much interest in tactics before any real over-all strategy is worked out.

Father Reinhold remarked on the need for some honest self-criticism on our part and the recognition that such things as a straight black and white picture of the religious struggle of the sixteenth century are in the long run harmful. Hence there is a real need of textbooks that give an objective picture of the various historical situations in which the Church has been involved.

By way of positive approach a number of points were discussed in some detail.

Father Jasinski called for a study of the theological possibilities of intercredal co-operation. What is the exact status of this avenue of approach; what are its possibilities in our present situation; what are the limitations imposed on it both in terms of private and public discussion?

Father Weigle, S.J., described one of the movements at the University of Rome where Catholic faculty members open their homes to non-Catholics for discussions of Catholic doctrine and discipline. The spirit that motivates these discussions is not directly the conversion of the non-Catholic participants but to bring about a change in attitude. There is no question of retreat from dogmatic principles but rather a discussion in an essentially amicable as opposed to a polemical debate. Father Weigle was of the opinion that such efforts should be confined to small groups drawn from academic and professional levels.

In connection with this academic aspect Monsignor McCarthy asked Father Murray, S.J., for an opinion on his experience as a member of the faculty at Yale University. Father Murray replied that it was difficult to generalize but that he felt that there was much ignorance together with a great deal of curiosity. He thought that despite whatever Mr. Buckley had said about it that a fair majority do give an objective presentation of such subjects as the Reformation. The chief phenomenon as it appeared to him was the complete absence of the Catholic Church as an academic factor. By and large the students had an open mind and what hostility there was, was mainly negative. When a Catholic appears on the academic scene fruitful debate is possible. Under the aegis of academic freedom we can state our case clearly and fully. The debate here however is not so much with Protestantism but the academic outlook that simply searches for the truth without any real hope of finding it. However there is present a basic honesty and so a real impression is possible when a priest presents the case for Catholicism on their level. They will give a real hearing to such a presentation.

Monsignor McCarthy added that his experience with the editorial world and the press services confirmed this appraisal. These men do not want to print misleading or badly deficient news stories and so, on the whole, are willing simply in the name of good reporting to hear the Catholic position on the points at issue.

Monsignor Murray of Boston thought that one of the things that might very effectively be referred to, emphasized, and developed is the Catholic teaching on the sovereignty of conscience which plays a large part in the basic issues at debate. He also thought that ac-

tivities such as the rural life work of Monsignor Ligutti offered very many favorable points of contact with the issues and segments that must be met in the present crisis.

Father Murray, S.J., expressed the opinion that while the crisis was an intellectual crisis it was in a very special way a crisis on the level of holiness and that this represents a real difficulty. There is a real need to convince non-Catholics that Catholicism is a religion looking to the holiness of its members and not a power organization. That institutional religion is not an obstacle to holiness and does not crush the heart of personal religion.

Father Coyle, C.SS.R., enlarged on this point by referring to the problems involved in instructing inquirers who wonder what organized religion has to contribute to vital human actions such as holiness and education to holiness. He felt that once they were shown that such things as the Mass and the sacraments are not questions of organizational pressure but matters and means of holiness—that Catholicism is a religion of love not of fear and pressure then much of this original difficulty was overcome or dissipated.

EUGENE M. BURKE,
Washington, D. C.