

FAITH AND THE CHURCH: A REPLY TO THE CRITIQUE*

If one shows the necessity of the Church, something of its role has already been established; the inverse proposition is open to doubt. With this premise of Fr. McBrien I can agree provided that he is referring to conditioned or hypothetical necessity, which is the only type man encounters in his experience of either the finite or the Infinite.¹ Indeed this assumption prompted me to concentrate on the relation that holds between *Christian* faith and the Church. That meant of course paying less attention to the reality and notion of faith as such. Fr. McBrien has pointed out this restriction but asserts that I have stated my thesis clearly. To further the present discussion he has posed four questions. In his opinion none of the papers dealing with the general topic of the Church's necessity and role has answered them all clearly, directly, and explicitly.² The first pair of those questions deals with the relation of faith as such to the Church. Although I obviously did not have those questions when I wrote my paper, my failure to respond to the first pair was the result of a deliberate choice. Sometimes such a limitation of purview is not motivated by a desire to avoid issues but to prepare for facing them in a way that is rightly or wrongly calculated to be more effective. Such was the case in the present instance as I should like to explain.

My first reason for choosing to center in on the relation of Christian faith to the Church was that the former is the object of such

* [This response was summarized in the panel discussion held after the presentation by Fr. McBrien, cf. *supra*. The author thinks it should be pointed out that Fr. McBrien had not seen the text prior to that time. Ed.]

¹ The qualification is not pedantic in a universe where the triune God has related himself irrevocably to man's needs and their fulfillment. I have attempted to treat this in a philosophical context elsewhere; cf. "Divine Necessity and Contingency—a Note on R. W. Hepburn" in *The Thomist* 33 (1969), 150-61.

² The papers to which reference is made are those of Gregory Baum, Kilian McDonnell, and my own; all are to be published in these *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 25 (1970).

divergent assessments by believers at the present time. I did not base any case at all on a supposedly changeless, eternal nature of Christian believing.³ I described that faith as it is subjected to critical theological reflection today and then I submitted that the tension thus revealed fairly well represents an actual state of affairs for many Christians. It was in this context that I asked whether the Church is supposed to have anything to do with such faith in its existential condition at the present time. My answer was affirmative but that involved posing and answering the question: "What is it that makes Christian faith Christian?" There is, I maintained, general agreement that the event giving rise to the New Testament (and this includes the faith springing from that event), is the norm or criterion serving this purpose. It was as a consequence of this that I asserted the necessity of the Church today. By that I meant this. Present tendencies to polarize on grounds of experience or expression as determinative of Christian faith call for a community in which both can be mediated, this precisely as a condition for the possibility of that same faith. I further stated that in my opinion this required a community in which among other offices there existed one over against individuals and groups with the vitally necessary function of making the norm of Christian faith live. My conclusion was that Christian faith today has an intrinsic and non-casual relation not only to a church but to *such* a church.⁴ Had I intended to ask directly of the relation between faith as such and that Church, I would have begun there. Instead, as Fr. McBrien notes, that is where I ended. To have done otherwise would as I see it have involved a clear assumption. It would simply have taken for granted that a necessary nexus between Christian faith and the Church as described is a premise all reasonable men or at least all educated and reflective Christians can accept without reserve. There are a few premises so privileged

³ I do not at all deny that the reality of Christian believing has characteristics that are necessary for it to be what it is. I find it harder now than formerly to determine concretely what they are and prefer "pattern" to "changeless essence underlying accidental variations" as a label to designate the results of the analytical work involved in their recognition.

⁴ Such a Church is, as I see it, described by E. Schillebeeckx in his article "Catholic Understanding of Office" in *Theological Studies* 30 (1969), 567-87.

in my opinion and this is surely not one of them today. I consequently chose to treat it as a conclusion.

There is a second reason for my concentrating on the Church precisely as required by the reality of Christian believing today. I consider this a promising way to approach the two questions Fr. McBrien poses in the first place within his schema. The Church viewed in the context of Christian faith's requirements offers a valuable perspective for considering that same Church in relation to the needs of faith as such.

What I am saying is this. The Church is required today for Christian faith to be Christian. In my paper I put it this way. Christian faith today requires a church or community in which God's Word spoken in Christ can live through their Spirit, who inspires men to overcome evil with good. To me that is more than saying that Christian faith requires a community in which God's active presence among men is acknowledged; indeed much more and in a trinitarian sense. I am willing to admit with regret that this has not always been sufficiently realized by many Catholic Christians. But what I am contending is that today Christian faith must be a unique experience and expression of Ultimate Intelligibility, Truth, and Value as wellsprings of human hope, mutual trust, and brotherly concern among men. To be such that faith requires the Church as the precondition of its survival and growth. That same faith in my opinion is necessary, again both as expression and experience, for other men who may never embrace it but who can be influenced by it in their efforts at self-understanding and improvement. Consequently I see not merely Christian faith but likewise the Church as related to faith as such in an intrinsic fashion. I realize however that this position is far from self-evident and should like to point out the reasons leading me to it.

I am asking what Christian faith and the Church have to do with the growing inability of men to trust one another, to have faith as such in fellow human beings, much less in an ultimate meaning of life.⁵ Along with words of deserved praise, Yves Congar has

⁵ In this I agree with the analysis given by B. L. Crowe, "The Tragedy of the Commons Revisited" in *Science* 166 (1969), 1103-7. The pessimism with regard to moral solutions is something I do not share.

rather strongly criticized Hans Küng's treatment of the Church for its failure to stress doctrine as part of the Church's mission to the world.⁶ I should rather put the matter this way. Christian faith does serve faith as such through the Church. That Church must be a realization of Christian faith today as trinitarian experience and expression in the context of human needs. But in being such is it also a necessary service to faith as such? I answer affirmatively though again the necessity is conditioned, which neither *means* nor *precept* is in my opinion calculated to express accurately. Let me conclude by spelling out this trinitarian reference to which I rightly or wrongly attribute such ecclesial and secular import.⁷

Man's needs today cannot be properly sized up without introducing his understanding, judgment, and responsible choice. In fact those needs resolve themselves into a complex need for a proper ordering among the latter. To be sure, various assessments of what that ordering should be are possible and have been forthcoming throughout human history. One of the most well-known of these diagnoses places greatest emphasis on the need for a maximal degree of common understanding among men. This becomes a primary objective with the assumption that it is the precondition for collective judgment and responsible development of human destiny. Through this sequence universal peace, justice, and happiness are to be expected. There is however another diagnosis. It gives a primacy to the exercise of fraternal benevolence exceeding justice. This benevolence gives rise both to a faith in terms of which to judge what it is to be benevolent in various circumstances and to a hope of a com-

⁶ Yves Congar, "L'Église de Hans Küng" in *RSPT*, 53 (1969), 693-706.

⁷ It is a most encouraging development to see more systematic theologians concerning themselves with the Trinity as an hermeneutical principle for man's self-understanding. I did not find in these sources the schema that I have proposed but do acknowledge an indebtedness to the writings of: Karl Rahner, "Toward a Theology of Hope" in *Concurrence* 1 (1969), 23-33; Idem, "Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte" in *Mysterium Salutis, Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, Vol. II, (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1967) (English translation, New York: Herder-Herder, 1969); Bernard Cooke, *Beyond Trinity*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1969); Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *De Deo Trino, Pars Systematica*, (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1964); H. Muehlen, *Una Mystica Persona. Die Kirche als das Mysterium der Identität des Heiligen Geistes in Christus und den Christen: eine Person in vielen Personen*, (Paderborn, 1967).

mon understanding which can be achieved only gradually and which is always for mankind a "not-yet" in any present "now."

The former paradigm, I submit, has been widely accepted especially since the time of the Enlightenment. Its successes have been real but limited. The latter paradigm has in my opinion much to commend it in our day. Philosophical in itself, it nevertheless corresponds to the New Testament ordering of the triune God in his man-relatedness. For man has been affected by a goodness exceeding justice and now lives in its abiding presence as a wellspring for fraternal concern, faith in the value of human existence, and hope that all this will not prove futile. The presence of the Spirit inspiring good is the consequence of the Christ event giving rise to and now mediated by the New Testament. In all of this the believer reaches for common understanding, the goal of hope in the future. The primary need of man in such a trinitarian perspective is for benevolence to and from others. This need is interrelated with another, the need for a faith that such benevolence is worthwhile and possible in a world of intellectual and moral muddles because it is conducive to meeting yet a third need. That is the need of hope for an ever greater understanding among men, one leading to the day when the hoped-for will be fully realized, when human understanding will be complete, and God as Father will be all in all.

Man as such experiences the need for benevolence from his fellow human beings, a benevolence at once tested by and sustaining a faith. That faith grounds the hope that benevolence is worthwhile, that faith in the value of human life is not futile, and that for all men the future can realistically be better than the past. Christian faith is both an experience and an expression of those same needs and their fulfillment; in both senses it is trinitarian. For this to be so today the Church is necessary; otherwise Christian faith will likely be one or the other but not both. Because man as such has these needs of benevolence, faith, and hope, a good case can be made for the necessity of Christian faith and the Church. Their conscious presence and influence may not be required for each and every human being or for every world order that may be possible besides the present one. But in this economy, Christian faith and the Church embodying it are necessary for faith as such.

I refer of course to a conditioned necessity, the condition being a trinitarian creation; one in which all men live and seek fulfillment for trinitarian needs of benevolence, faith, and hope; one in which not all men diagnose those needs in such a fashion, but one in which such diagnosis is necessary for the human race to prevent those same needs from being interpreted in such wise that far from being fulfilled outside Christianity, they may lead humanity to disaster. My contention is that the Church is necessary for Christian faith to be Christian; and that means trinitarian as experience and expression for the believer. It is as well necessary because the experience and expression of those needs precisely as trinitarian on the part of Christians is vitally important if those needs lived by others in faith as such are not to be calculated by more and more in humanly tragic ways. I do not hold that all faith as such is ever destined to become Christian. I maintain on the contrary that in an imperfect universe faith as such may well be the necessary condition for Christian faith's constant purification. But on the opposite side, I see Christian faith as a necessary condition in this world for assisting and sustaining faith as such in the value of human existence. Hence I consider the Church necessary for Christian faith and faith as such.

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