

A RESPONSE (I) TO FATHER FRANSEN

It is undoubtedly true, as Father Fransen says at the beginning of his talk, that "concern for the humanizing of man is one of the characteristics of Western culture." It is also, fortunately, true that Roman Catholic theology is showing more and more concern for human freedom and dignity, while at the same time manifesting a deeper sense of God's transcendence. But there are other elements in our culture today which are moving in the opposite direction.

By way of contrast with Father Fransen's theme, consider the title of B. F. Skinner's recent book, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Skinner argues that his behaviorist psychology has rendered obsolete the notion that man has freedom and dignity; that we can control human behavior by manipulating the environment; that what remains for us is to develop a "technology of behavior" in order to ensure that men act in constructive and proper ways.¹

Now several things might be noted about Skinner's thesis. First, there is a strong tendency for people of religious or simply humanistic leanings to rise up in horror against Skinner, to come to the defense of freedom and dignity. But the notions of freedom and dignity which Skinner attacks are not the orthodox Christian vision of man; they are, rather, the Pelagian and rationalistic ideas which have been current in our culture for some centuries.² It becomes important then for us theologians to define rather precisely what we as Christians mean by human freedom and dignity. I believe we have the resources, in Biblical theology, in transcendental philosophy, in humanistic psychology—in the work of men like Father Fransen

¹ B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 18 f.

² *Ibid.*, p. 101: "In what we may call the prescientific view . . . a person's behavior is at least to some extent his own achievement. He is free to deliberate, decide and act, possibly in original ways, and he is to be given credit for his successes and blamed for his failures." See also pp. 37 and 58 for further description of this "autonomous man" whose "dignity" depends on the credit he gets for his good actions.

—to do this. My point here is simply that we should be careful. Let us not, in our new enthusiasm for the humanizing of man, rush to defend notions of freedom and dignity which are neither theologically nor psychologically tenable.

There are, however, greater threats to human freedom and dignity than either faulty theology or faulty psychology: I mean, the political, social and economic structures which oppress much of humanity. Let us consider these.

Father Fransen proposes that further development of our theology of grace should be firmly grounded in reflection on human experience, especially the contemporary experience of world-wide human brotherhood. I only wish that he, and all of us, might put the greatest possible stress on the necessity and on the difficulty of such development.

The task before us is not simply to make our theology "communitarian." We must rethink our notion of grace in social and political terms.³ Thus it is not enough to ask how God speaks to us through interpersonal relationships, in encounter groups, in charismatic prayer groups, and so forth. If we are to see the impact of God's grace on *all* dimensions of human life, we must also turn our attention to social structures, to political forces, to movements for human liberation. We must do so, not in order to form moral judgments and issue commands for action, but in order to understand how God is present and acting both in problematic situations and in humanizing actions that are already being undertaken.

A few years ago Pope Paul used the aphorism: "The new name for peace is development"—meaning full human development, including social and economic development on an international scale. In such terms, it is not too much to say, the new name for grace is development. In fact, it is too little to say that. More recent writers insist that "development" is too weak a word, that what is needed is "liberation" from de-humanizing structures, and that in some situations this calls for revolution; if this be so, then the new name

³ Cf. the article by J. B. Metz on "Political Theology" in *Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) V, 34-38, with a "political" definition of faith, hope and charity on p. 38.

for grace would be revolution. But Pope Paul has insisted that violence is not the Christian path to humanization. Perhaps we could conclude: the new name for grace is non-violent revolution.⁴

It is, unfortunately all too easy to use such language vaguely and abstractly. We have got to be concrete, to reflect on the experience of grace in the lives of men and women and societies affected by specific problems and specific actions. I think, for example, of the movement for unionization of the farm workers. Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers are not waiting for a theological blessing before they act. Rather, they have been acting, and we, to be authentic theologians, must reflect on what men and women like them are doing. How is God speaking to us through the farm workers' movement, for example? What is he saying to us? How does it affect our lives? Some of us, reflecting on these matters, have concluded that such non-violent movements as the lettuce boycott are manifestations and incarnations of God's power acting to liberate us from fear and injustice. To put it rhetorically: the new name for grace is "boycott"!

If it sounds strange to hear the lettuce boycott mentioned at a theological conference, then that indicates something about the present stage of our theology. With respect to a "political" theology, we are, I think, where we were before the Second Vatican Council with regard to "personalist" theology. Ten or twelve years ago, a few thinkers had made real breakthroughs in thinking of grace as a personal relationship; many others were beginning to see that this was the proper direction for theology to go; while some still did not see what "personalism" was all about.⁵ Today it is a truism, even a cliché, to say that grace refers to an "I-Thou" relationship with God. Perhaps in another dozen years talk of boycotts and ballots will be as familiar in a theological context as talk of interpersonal relationships.

⁴ For comments on Pope Paul's statements, see Rene Laurentin, *Liberation, Development and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1972), pp. 14 f. and 152. See also Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Liberation and Development," in *Cross Currents* 21 (1971) 243-56.

⁵ See my article on "The Theology of Grace: Present Trends and Future Directions," in *Theological Studies* 31 (December 1970), 692-711.

If we are to make that kind of progress, we must base our theology on experience. We must, somehow, share in the world-wide experience of solidarity in the search for humanization. It is clear, we cannot construct a humanizing theology without being human, nor a Christian theology without being converted Christians, nor a personalist theology without being involved with other persons; likewise, we cannot develop a "political" theology, a "theology of liberation," unless we ourselves participate—somehow—in the movement for justice and peace. I am not saying that we should all give up theology and become politicians. I am urging that our theology should be an authentic human word about God, a word that will help to make the world human, an expression of ourselves that includes action, reflection and verbalization.⁶

In short, I believe that Father Fransen has described well the direction in which theology has been going, and has suggested the way it will continue to develop. But I am convinced that the path ahead is a long one, and that travelling it will not be easy.

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⁶ The explanation of "word" as "praxis"—action and reflection—is found in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), pp. 75 ff.