

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR KENNEDY—I

It is not only foolhardy and presumptuous but impossible for a Protestant to reflect directly on the theme of Professor Kennedy's interesting and very helpful paper on "Being a Catholic: Does it Make a Difference?" But it is no more than foolhardy and presumptuous if I change the title a bit and reflect on a theme that overlaps his and that may be possible for me, namely "There Being a Catholicism: Does *that* Make any Difference?" As will be evident, my remarks, although centered around a slightly different question, will cover much the same ground as his excellent paper. In reply to that query, I would like to say: it makes all the difference, since I believe that the health and redemptive powers of the Christian Church as a whole in the immediate future depend more on the creativity and strength of Catholicism than on anything else. Despite her present internal turmoil, uncertainty about herself and apparent lack of definiteness, unity and direction, the Catholic Church, it seems to me, contains more promise for the immediate future than any other Christian communion. That the Catholic Church is in deep crisis all agree. My suggestion is that, as is often the case in history, a deep crisis, a shaking of the foundations, presents also the possibility of immense new creativity and new relevance, of a re-birth of Catholicism that can redeem both herself and the whole Church.

My argument is a paradoxical one. Those elements of Catholicism, it seems, that are potentially creative for the present situation of the whole Church are nonetheless in their traditional forms—and because of their traditional forms—precisely what have brought about the crisis in the Catholic Church herself. By these essential elements, I refer first to the deep sense of community, of being a "people"; next to the strong sense of and respect for tradition, necessary for any community's life; third to the sacramental presence of the divine in the life of the community, the central element to me of the Catholic tradition; fourth to the pervasiveness of *caritas*, of tolerance, humanity and compassion, throughout her life as a people; and finally to the insistence that the divine mystery manifest in tradition and in that sacramental presence

be in so far as is possible penetrated, defended and explicated by the most acute rational reflection. Community, tradition, sacramental presence, *caritas* and rationality are the essential strengths of Catholicism, its *esse* so to speak, and each has, surprisingly, immense relevance and promise for our situation. But the present form or structure of each is also and paradoxically precisely what has precipitated the crisis.

For the community, the unique people, has been maintained by the unifying force of hierarchical authority to which an increasingly heteronomous obedience was required; the tradition has been expressed and communicated through changeless dogmas and changeless, binding laws unrelated to present experience and yet to which adherence was obligatory; the sacramental presence was mediated by objectified and often extrinsic acts and controlled by a separate and therefore separated clergy; *caritas*—compassion, tolerance and deep humanity—was generated and made possible by a two-level ethic that required perfection but left it to the few and so allowed all to be human without the loss of the ideal; and rationality was made possible by a division and then a synthesis between traditional and in part anachronistic forms of philosophical reason on the one hand and uncriticizable forms of doctrine on the other, a synthesis that could seem the very opposite of true rationality. Absolute authority, changeless dogmatic forms, extrincism, supernaturalism, and a seemingly irrational rationality have been the elements that for great numbers of Catholics became suddenly questionable and that have in the last two decades perpetuated the crisis. For each of these elements in its own way contradicted the most creative aspects of modernity. Thus wherever the spirit of modernity: a spirit of autonomy and inwardness, of relativity and historicity, of this-worldliness and empiricism, seeped into Catholic minds and hearts, the intense crisis has appeared. The depth, ultimacy and seriousness of the crisis is precisely here: that what has been attacked by the liberalizing forces as anachronistic: absolute authority, changeless dogmatic structures, extrincism and clericalism, supernaturalism and irrational rationality—these, “problem” elements for liberals understandably embodied and expressed for many other Catholics precisely what has always been essential and precious to Catholicism since they were the forms within which the essential elements of Catholicism were incarnated. Thus while to the liberals the reformation promised to free

essential Catholicism from anachronistic and debilitating fetters, to many others it appeared as a mortal attack on Catholicism itself. My suggestion is that in a way both are right, and thus is the crisis so intense and moral. In any case, let us note that the crisis centers in ecclesiology, not on other doctrinal and certainly not on philosophical issues, that is, it concerns the meaning of authority, of community, of tradition, of sacramental presence, of *caritas* and of rationality within the community. If the crisis is to be overcome and the promised new creativity manifested, the theologians and philosophers of the Church must boldly and forthrightly tackle the explosive subject of ecclesiology and its relation to the modern themes of modernity: historicity, relativity, inwardness, autonomy, temporality, worldliness and empiricism—and not, as has often been the case, merely apply these modern themes only to other, less mortal doctrinal subjects.

Let me speak in slightly more detail of this dual reality of crisis and promise in three of these elements of Catholicism: community and tradition, sacramental presence, and rationality. It is clearly the modern sense of historicity—of the relativity of all our thought and action to the cultural epoch in which we are—that has for many unseated the absolutist elements of traditional Catholicism, its absolute modes of authority, its changeless and absolute dogmas, and its changeless and absolute laws. But by the same token, the modern sense of historicity—that we come to be, we are, we think, and we do in historical communities—brings back into the center the religious community and its tradition as formative of and necessary for any spiritual, intellectual, ethical and religious life. Meanwhile a technological and mobile society dismantles our other communities before our eyes, changing American social communities into masses of isolated individuals with only temporary, external, expedient relations. Thus is real community, “belonging to a people,” one of the haunting voids of modern life. Protestantism has shown signs of rapidly becoming a mass, not a community. And Protestant identity with the bourgeois mass allows none of the distance from its society necessary for a creative religious community and for its critical and redemptive role in its world. The traditional absolutist forms of Catholic community create part of the crisis; the essential reality of Catholic community is a necessary ingredient of contemporary Christianity and an aspect of Catholicism’s creative

promise for the future.

Of all the elements of Catholicism regarded by the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century as most anachronistic was its sacramental and liturgical center, the mediation of the divine through a variety of concrete, visual, and material symbols and actions. Correspondingly the Protestant emphasis on verbal mediation of the divine and an exclusively moral content to religion seemed to be the religious form appropriate to the modern enlightened age. And yet it is precisely the sacramental center in Catholicism that has the greatest promise in the religious present and future. For modern life has recently reappropriated the meaning of the bodily, the sensual and the aesthetic: liturgy and sacrament, the presence of the holy on the basis of common action and on the level of feelings, thus takes a central not a peripheral role in contemporary religious life. Moreover, and surprisingly, the contemporary experience of the relativity of all finite objects and words is less threatening to sacramental mediation than to verbal mediation. All sacramental media are by nature finite and relative; but the divine can be present in and through them without divesting them of their finiteness and concreteness. But relative words and propositions—in Scripture, in preaching, in doctrines—have more difficulty mediating the transcendent through their relativity once that relativity is recognized and felt. Then relative words slip quickly into mere human opinions—or, as a reaction, are made absolute again, as illustrated in the present uneasy vacillation in Protestantism between liberalism and fundamentalism. In the new sensate, earthy and relativist culture into which we seem to be moving, a sacramental and liturgical mediation addressed to the whole person seems to hold more promise in communicating the holy than a verbal Protestantism addressing itself only to the conscious levels of belief and of decision.

The drive towards rationality, and so for philosophical comprehension and expression of the faith, has been vast indeed in Catholicism, as any Protestant who teaches young Catholic theologians quickly realizes. And yet traditionally it has, to an outsider, combined in a most strange way the unquestioned and even unquestionable authority of tradition with a likewise uncriticized philosophy. One might say that in traditional Catholic life the speculative but not the critical power of reason was accepted—and thus did Catholicism run directly counter to the

main themes of the later Enlightenment and of modern empiricism which have stressed these critical powers as a necessary if not a sufficient condition of any relation to the truth. Part of the intellectual crisis lies here: once critical reason was accepted on the part of many Catholics, the whole rational edifice of the tradition collapsed into what was to them unreason.

Generally, it seems to me, the success of the traditional synthesis of reason and faith was dependent on a division of labor between a speculative philosophy that dealt with the experienced realm of nature on the one hand and a sacred doctrine on the other that could be separated from the threats of critical philosophy because it was founded on a definitive revelation of truths coming from and concerning a transnatural and so transrational divine realm. Thus is there still—to the surprise of a visitor to Catholic faculties—a distinct separation not to say yawning gulf between a Catholic philosophical faculty and a Catholic theological faculty, between clerical philosophers and clerical theologians—as if what each talked about (the one with no restrictions and the other hemmed in) had little or nothing to do with the concerns of the other!

Now my point is that I don't think this traditionally sharp division between a philosophy concerned only with natural experience—and so not with theology—and a sacred theology concerned only with the propositions and dogmas of revelation—and so not with philosophical criticism—can make it any more. And if this is correct, then this division and the synthesis based upon it must be revised if the rationality of Catholicism is to be creative in the present and in the future, as surely it can and must be. An illustration of this new interrelation between the realm appropriate to philosophy and that appropriate to theology is the fact that most of the themes in modernity that have challenged traditional Catholic theological foundations, and raised the ecclesiastical issues I pointed to, are philosophical themes, or better, ways of viewing man and his world that have been most potently expressed in modern philosophies. More formally, the entire relation between philosophy and theology has been transformed in the intervening period since this division between the two was first formulated centuries ago. Inevitably in the present the two overlap and interpenetrate, and thus they cannot be neatly separated into natural and supernatural compartments as once was the case.

There are, I think, two reasons for this fundamental change in the relation of philosophical reason to faith and so for the transformed relation of the two disciplines to each other. The first is that the division between nature and supernature, the one realm appropriate for an autonomous philosophy and the other for an autonomous theology, is no longer tenable in the older form. In some strange way we live now in one world, the pervasive structures of which are appropriate for philosophical inquiry and the depth of which is appropriate for theology—but no clear line of division is possible between them; consequently the two are interdependent in ways not characteristic of the traditional division. If philosophy now be considered quite autonomous and so given unlimited range, there is then, as most modern philosophy shows, no room for theology at all—a point which Catholics enthusiastic for unlimited philosophical rationality might take to heart. If theology now be considered autonomous within this one world there is no room for philosophy, as Protestant neo-orthodoxy shows. If both are to be there, they will have to be seen as interpenetrating in new ways. Thus Catholic theologians are driven to be also philosophers and Catholic philosophers—if they be Catholic—may have to find the roots of their philosophy in the religious depths of experience and thus at the most fundamental level join with Catholic theology—as Father Rahner beautifully illustrates. Faith and reason do not deal with different realms. Rather they are different aspects of every passive, cognitive and active encounter with reality. Catholic philosophy and theology in this new world must not remain merely side by side—or one on top of the other—lest so isolated each wither and die.

The second reason for the new relation between Catholic reason and Catholic faith is that divine revelation does not come to us any more in unambiguously sacred and so authoritative propositions which are thereby autonomous or independent of experiential grounding and so ultimately independent of philosophical questioning. We cannot merely deduce our theologies by historical inquiry and speculative thought from given sacred data since, as Father Lonergan has noted, such sacred data simply are not there at all. Theology, therefore, if it is to find a ground for its own authority and its own content, is of necessity much more intimately related to experience than it once was, and so to philosophical criticism and thematization of that experience.

Just as a Catholic philosopher must now recognize the religious and so theological roots of his philosophy if it is to make room for the theology he also espouses, so a Catholic theologian must—and this has already happened—recognize the dependence of his theological ideas on contemporary philosophical themes and explications.

Most important of all, if Catholicism is to fulfill its immense promise for our future—and it must if the whole Church is to survive—it needs to combine all of its vast intellectual vitality on the task of rethinking, as I have suggested, its fundamental theological doctrines, especially its ecclesiology, in the light of the modern world we all live in, and in terms of which we think all we think. It must use modern phenomenological analysis of our experience and modern ontological understanding of our world to interpret in a contemporary vein the traditional doctrines elaborated by theology. And for that the work both of Catholic philosophers and Catholic theologians, united in some new way, is required. For Catholicism's powerful, serious and dedicated philosophers to leave untouched the explosive issues of church doctrine and ecclesiology may reduce to a minimum the level of angst among the philosophers, but it will risk the substance of the Church—and this is perilous for us all. And for her theologians to ignore the deeply subversive, transformative and creative implications of much modern philosophy may reduce the ulcers in sacred theological faculties—but in the long run it will strip the theological foundations of the Church of any relevance to the modern people who worship there. Above all, it will leave untouched and so unredeemed the most vital issue of all—vital because it is at the heart of both the Catholic crisis of the present and the Catholic promise for the future—ecclesiology. Catholicism—and the whole Church—will live in the future, as it has in the past, only if a dialectic of mystery and of rationality is maintained, if the divine mystery is made intelligible without loss of its mysterious depth and wonder. Thus has Catholicism so much to offer—but only if it bravely reinterprets the relation between theological mystery and philosophical intelligibility so that instead of areas isolated in an anachronistic way from each other, they themselves interpenetrate and support one another—as the abyss of the Father and the logos of the Son are together in the Spirit one God.

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