

by Ian Linden

'I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream. I see an American nightmare.'—Malcolm X.

'And the white Lt.-Colonel from the civilized USA jumped back, snorted and said: "My good man, where I come from we don't eat people when we kill them. We're civilized." And the chief said, "Well baby, why you kill them?"'—Stokely Carmichael.

By Summer the American public will be as accustomed to the idea of racial riots as to a well-advertised eclipse of the sun. The actuality of events, sifted through the mass media into print, polls, radio and television, stays comfortably once removed from the affluent. Most Americans watch the auguries of doom on the TV with the numbing disbelief of a rabbit caught in a truck's headlights; erudite predictions of urban chaos substitute for immediate reform; election charades are played out with unusually large audience participation, and the administration plead for unity and patriotism. It all seems unreal.

In March while President Johnson played golf in Puerto Rico, conspicuously absent from the communal confiteor of churches and liberal establishment, the public glanced at the findings of his commission on civil disorders. The report, a literary genre popularized by the 1966 McCone Commission report on the Los Angeles riots, told them that there was a racial crisis. In New York it was the time of the interregnum; priests were working feverishly on a policy statement while the laity passively awaited a seventh Irish-American Archbishop to ascend the throne of 451 Madison Avenue. Bishop John McGuire published a short pastoral which stated: 'Indecision and inaction mean social and moral irresponsibility; our inheritance of racial exclusion, prejudice and discrimination must now be reversed. Positive social, political and economic action is a moral imperative.'

Although no-one had remembered that Sunday to send it to other churches in the archdiocese, what was said at St Patrick's was strongly worded, much appreciated and, in the opinion of many negroes, ten years too late.

¹This article arrived from New York the day after the news of the assassination of Martin Luther King. The Postscript was mailed later.

Civil rights to Black Power

The last ten years had seen the growth and decline to extinction of the civil rights movement. The 1958 statement by the National Conference of Bishops, 'Discrimination and the Christian Conscience' came four years after the Supreme Court ruling on school segregation. A survey taken in early 1959 showed that only two of over 750 parochial schools in the deep South were, in fact, integrated. North Carolina, thanks to its courageous bishop, Vincent Waters, was an exception; as early as 1953 he had integrated church services despite angry mobs; schools and hospitals had reluctantly followed suit.

Civil rights first touched the American conscience, in distinction to the law-courts, with the 1960 lunch-counter sit-ins. When scenes of jeering white thugs intimidating respectable middle-class youths were repeated in major towns all over the South, the psychological impact was immeasurable. But when it came to something more significant than buying a hamburger, and SNCC workers went into South-West Mississippi to stir the local communities into political consciousness, the media suddenly went dumb. Being black the SNCC groups were invisible. White men such as Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman murdered in Mississippi made banner headlines. The dozen blacks murdered for the same reason by the same racist elements made the back page. The Mississippi experience could not but effect black militants: 'There they were shot, beaten, gassed, whipped and jailed. They learned that Northern corporations owned the racist mills in Danville, Virginia, and the segregating factories in Birmingham. But they still believed that America, if shamed with enough redemptive suffering, would honour its old pledge of equality for the black man.'¹ It took only five years to dispel this belief.

As a climax to years of dull, repetitive community organization 64 rural negroes and four whites comprising the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenged the segregated contingent from Mississippi at the 1964 Democratic Convention. The black party was offered two seats and a promise that future convention delegations would be integrated. After the sacrifice and death it was not enough. SNCC's refusal at Atlantic City, despite pressure from Martin Luther King, to enter traditional political structures can be seen in retrospect as a turning point for the New Left. A refusal to compromise has marked the subsequent evolution of the movement.

Throughout this period the Church's consciousness of civil rights issues was growing. The 1963 Washington march included over 600 priests, and in March 1965 the massive Christian participation in the Selma-Montgomery march and the supporting parades over America, produced a moving sense of brotherhood and commitment to the black poor. But under the emotion the mood had changed

¹*A Prophetic Minority*, by Jack Newfield.

greatly from the halcyon days of sit-ins with clean-cut sophomores and ugly racist sheriffs. Central Harlem exploded in 1964 and the next Summer Watts followed. The good guys had stopped wearing ties. Before the first voting rights bill was passed liberals were starting to move out into less complex issues such as the Vietnam war. The rights movement was already burnt out when in Autumn 1966 at Nashville, Tennessee, SNCC elected Stokely Carmichael and rejected the integrationist position of John Lewis and the Black Panthers. No sooner had the Church become accustomed to nuns flying by the hundreds to protest demonstrations than their presence became unwelcome. Well-intentioned liberals that had dutifully learnt to say 'negro' (Knee-grow) instead of 'nigra' had to learn all over again to say 'black'.

Neo-Tom-ism. In a sense the Church had inadvertently exploited the civil rights movement. The black man became the 'negro cause', terminus of charitable activity and moral object on which the social activism unleashed by the last Council could focus. A case could be made out that the sometimes impractical, often romantic, utterly sincere religious helpers damped the impetus and drive for black political power. Whether black militants were driven into extreme racist positions by the recognition that their suffering had not moved America to honour its pledge of equality, that moderates such as Roy Wilkins of NAACP, Whitney Young of the Urban League and, to a lesser extent, Martin Luther King, had simply failed to force appreciable reforms, or whether they felt intuitively that the Church's entry would divert a revolutionary movement into its own embourgeoisement, is a moot point. There was no longer a place for well-meaning whites in the ghetto. With hindsight, it seems unreasonable to expect the black radical, caught in the vacuum left by the disintegration of his Southern rural culture, yet on the verge of discovering a new urban identity, with groups like the black muslims, to sell out for a house in the suburbs, deinked hair and a coat of Christian whitewash. The need for spiritual and political self-discovery, the great expectations and the manifest lack of concrete change meant that few even of the moderates were impressed by the amateur poverty programmes and tentative religious support. Black Power was not only a political but a psychological necessity.

Changes in law had rendered certain manifestations of the oppressor-oppressed relationship illegal without touching the underlying social structure. Even if civil rights legislation had been complied with wholeheartedly—and a look at the labour unions dispels that illusion—the creation of affluence on the American scale would still produce its effluent of poverty. Today 38% of America's 26 million blacks are technically poor. In more emotive terms, in Spring 1968, there is chronic malnutrition in Mississippi with child mortality at 51 per 1,000 live births, three times the white rate. Comparable statistics for the ghetto are readily available. Almost as

if to emphasize the capitalist facts of life, congress slashed 15% off New York poverty programmes this year to finance a war against an under-developed Asian nation.

On top of these gross injustices there is the constant humiliation of subtle prejudice: being called by Christian name, being unable to get a taxi, the look on white faces in the subway at night. Added to unequal schooling, housing and employment opportunities, apparently trivial *slights* become insupportable. Many of the non-violent black civil rights workers ended up on the psychiatrist's couch suffering from what one prominent negro doctor called 'acute suppressed rage'. This rage had to be expressed somehow.

This is not to suggest that the black power habit of turning political debate into group therapy sessions furthers the radical cause. SNCC rhetoric, aimed at putting as much guilt as possible into and scaring the hell out of whites, may be a necessary stage in the regaining of self-respect, but it has split the New Left at a crucial time. The jumble of Garvey-Dubois back-to-Africanism, Marxism and hate is the despair of the white radical mandarin class. But to date Le Roi Jones, Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown have been satisfied to pantomime Franz Fanon, playing as much to the white as the black gallery. Unfortunately many black youths take the frequent incitements to 'revolution' at face value and it hardly needs pointing out that with the police armed like panzer divisions this is an invitation to go out and get massacred. This conclusion was amply confirmed this February at Orangeburg, South Carolina, in the course of a demonstration against a segregated bowling alley. The unarmed students had built a protest bonfire on a major highway and were surrounded by state troopers, local police and national guard, when a few started throwing stones and clods of earth. One trooper was hit in the eye and ten others 'panicked'. In a burst of firing 28 youths were gunned down, 16 shot in the back, 3 fatally. Just how little this sort of demonstration was about civil rights in the old sense—no negro seriously wants to play bowls—rather than an affirmation of dignity, a refusal to be manoeuvred and repressed by a white master-race, could be gauged from one student's dying words, overheard by a newsman as the boy was clubbed out of the way, 'You can hit me but you can't hurt me now'.¹ Black Power wishes to give the American negro a self-affirmation other than in suffering and death. Irish, Jewish and Italian political strength was certainly not achieved by the way of the Cross in New York.

The Church, an integral part of the white power structure in the USA, could not reasonably be expected to understand or approve the motivation and aims of black nationalists. In New York there are 60,000 black to 1½ million white Catholics and only 6 black priests. Most black Catholics are in, or aspire to, the middle-class, so that contact with militant groups in the ghetto is minimal.

¹*The Nation*, March 1968, editorial.

Indeed, many negro Catholics are as suspicious of Black Power as whites. Catholic schools in Harlem form part of the springboard to the suburbs; St Pascal Baylon parish in Long Island has a congregation made up almost exclusively of Harlem ex-residents and it is typical of black suburban parishes. White radicals professing to be Catholics are almost equally as rare, though many of the New Left are ex-Catholics. Tom Hayden who as head of SDS worked and crusaded in the Newark slums is now celebrated since his trip to Hanoi on a peace mission. A lot may be inferred about the institutional Church in the USA from the calibre and dedication to social justice of men that have left it. There is, of course, no articulate group comparable to *Slant*. Berrigan and Catholic workers live out a Gospel-originated rather than a Gospel-ratified Marxism. *Ramparts* throws a lot of mud but is not rigorously analytic, and Bishop Fulton Sheen who is supposed to be 'the butterfly of the Catholic New Left' tends to get caught up in the dramatic rather than the political.

The institutional Church therefore finds itself an outsider in the ghetto, the benign face of white power, with almost no in-roads to the revolutionary centre of the black community—if there can seriously be thought to be such a thing. But to make the hierarchy the chief whipping boy for this situation is unjust.

The American Church is now structured like a huge wedding cake with three tiers linked by heavily iced struts. On top is the approximately 250-strong national conference of bishops, then priests in senates and unions of varying types, with the lay lumpenproletariat on the bottom in national associations of four years' standing. Not only does the structure as a whole have maximum inertia but the different tiers often seem to work against, or certainly independently of each other. In race relations the laity run inter-racial councils, the priests do social action and the bishops build hospitals and community centres. Only recently with national programmes such as Project Equality has the Church moved as a whole and therefore as a powerful force for social change.¹ Thus when the hierarchy are 'doing their thing' they are magnanimous. St Mary's hospital in Bedford Stuyvesant is costing 18 million dollars and there are the Lt. Joseph Kennedy and Martin de Porres centres, apart from diocesan Catholic Charities which had served the poor long before civil rights. But when it comes to providing money for other forms of social commitment, priests heading departments of social action have had to struggle for funds, and inter-racial councils often get nothing but the proceeds of occasional charity dinners. This, of course, prescinds from the fact that it is the laity's money in the first place, they have no say in its allocation and showcase community centres smack of Neo-Tom-ism to modern negroes.

The fact that there are only 60,000 black Catholics compared to over 400,000 members of Protestant churches in New York is part

¹*Herder Correspondence*, June 1968.

historical accident and part the result of Catholic introversion. (It was bad enough being a black in the South without being a Catholic as well.) The Catholic Church, unlike the Protestants, did hold onto all its property in Harlem at a tremendous loss and was rewarded in the 50s by a wave of conversions. Over 50,000 black children are educated in Catholic schools in Harlem and the seven parishes are still open, though with dwindling congregations. True, for a Church that calls itself the Church of the poor, is headed by the 'servant of the servants' and operates out of the richest diocese in the world, the overall outlay is scandalously small. Action has always followed rather than led federal initiatives and been 'too little, too late, and too lily-white':¹ but it has not been a total 'malfeasance of office'.²

Perhaps five years ago massive intervention with Church money in the ghetto might have temporarily alleviated the situation. It would certainly have disguised the true source and cause of ghetto poverty, the racialism of the white social structure. But the time has come and gone. Today such gestures risk being seen in terms of 'counterfeit nurturance', oppressed minorities' feeling that the helping hand is another version of the mailed fist. And, of course, in the Marxist framework they are correct. Whites now working in the black community require unusual, indeed heroic, sensitivity; after so long in the capitalist bind of victim-victimizer relationships, even fraternal help is liable to be seen as white saviour-black sinner.

Summer in the city

Under such circumstances American Catholics concerned with truth and justice are pulled between the two incompatible poles of the New Left: existential openness to the world and the dictates of a consistent Marxist ideology, non-violence and the need for revolutionary action. With the immediacy of social issues there is no escape possible into perpetual debate, however analytic and illuminating, and little risk of intellectualism. And in a country which has made of naked force the norm of political, army and police action, there is not much chance of sustaining illusions about flower or any other power that does not come out of the barrel of a gun. The choice of non-violence, inasmuch as it finally means martyrdom, has an eschatological perspective that no amount of faith or talk can turn into practical politics for Central Harlem. It is no longer possible even in relatively unsophisticated towns such as Memphis for SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) to maintain peaceful demonstrations. Despite agreements with black nationalists it seems unlikely that Martin Luther King can stop violence from splinter groups in Washington this April. The admissibility of violent actions is no longer a theoretical question. Priests in South America faced with the 'violence' of sustained oppression are forced to decide on revolution; SCLC is being dragged leftwards fast.

¹Mathew Ahman, *America*, 10th February, 1968.

²Fr Dubay's letter to the Pope concerning Cardinal McIntyre of Los Angeles.

The archdiocesan-sponsored, non-sectarian 'Summer in the City' programme using federal money shows the opposite polarity in the New Left. Working out of store fronts in mainly Puerto Rican neighbourhoods, religious, paid artists, dramatists and local residents co-operate to produce creative activities for the ghetto: papier mâché bullfights, balloon festivals, pavement art, plays with local gangs, dances, bands, block parties and evenings with national dishes, soul food night and Spanish night, remedial reading.

All this is intended to inject hope into the ghetto, to make city life more bearable; the positive ideological basis is the concept of 'celebration', life as art, a canvas to be filled whatever the frame or the materials. The word ideology is used advisedly because the existential emphasis and the ignoring of politics is, in its very insistence on being non-ideological, an ideology. The achievements have been impressive: a riot stopped through a daring procession through the streets of nuns and priests together with local volunteers; blocks cleaned up by mixed suburban and ghetto groups; programmes for teaching police Spanish in Puerto Rican homes, in order to break down the polarization of society; and, in the Summer, hundreds of children amused.

However, it is doubtful whether Manhattan's 65,000 unemployed black youths between 16-20 without recorded fathers were touched. Artists seriously questioned the idea of teaching creativity, especially to children who had to make do with beer cans for their fun. There were tactless incidents like the non-Spanish teacher of Spanish dance bemusedly tolerated by local men with far more sense of rhythm than the import; a priest introducing a truck driver with: 'This is Pedro. He's a beautiful person.'

On the other hand much Catholic social action falls under the 'nitty-gritty' cliché. Fr Harry Browne's Strycker's Bay Neighbourhood Council, through which South Harlem residents direct the urban renewal of their area, is a pragmatic conglomeration of pressure groups operating within the city's political superstructure to combat exploitation from downtown. It is highly effective. There are similar groups and lone priests in Brooklyn operating in welfare rights, community organization, schools, housing and employment. This is in contrast to 'Summer in the City' which has, as chancellery apparatchiks put it in the hushed voice of those referring to the mentally ill, 'a mystical quality'. To maintain an ability to respond immediately to situations as they arise, a flexibility and openness, Mgr Fox left his own 'Institute of Human Development' in Autumn 1967, a further movement towards an existential secular Christianity.

The trouble is that to leave the structures intact like this is an illusionist trick. The nuns have to wear their habits for safety and most will go back across the frontier at the end of the day. Compared with SNCC workers they seem superficially to have sacrificed very little, the convent grind for the privilege of being with the poor.

Even giving out flowers is a political act. When a community is pressured into painting their hall with a psychedelic design instead of the dull cream they would have chosen, this has the makings of a political campaign. For while the ghetto watches Mgr Fox's balloons rising above Central Park, Columbia University is quietly appropriating Morningside Park—given in trust to the city for Harlem residents—to build a gymnasium for university members only. While black children paint pavements with highly paid artists, their mothers are at work in poorly paid jobs, paying taxes for federal poverty money that will give them this privilege of having their sidewalk chalked. Religious volunteers *are* from the white power structure. No nun has had to make sure that her baby is not bitten by rats at night, no priest leaves school for the street at 14, no white Catholic has to grow up with pimps, prostitutes, dope-addicts, muggers and gamblers on every stairway, has to fight with illegitimate children, welfare offices, landlords, school boards, drunks. From the ghetto, stopping a riot—the expression of the black man's despair and rage—with a religious procession can come to be seen as another more subtle form of repression. The white man kicks you and then smothers you in love as you try to hit back. If white Catholics are so concerned about blacks getting hurt and killed, it has to be asked why they are not there with them in Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant, like the *Catholic Worker* on the Bowery, with a real stake in the neighbourhood, sharing the life of the tenements. If the Church loves the ghetto, where is the Catholic protest against the transformation of the police into a para-military army of occupation? When were there demands for a civilian review board with the vigour of an anti-abortion or Catholic school campaign? The handful of experienced priests serving the ghetto is not enough.

It is doubtful whether militants will have sufficient organization before this Summer to either start or stop riots. There will be the same spontaneous uprisings of disparate groups, individuals grabbing at and destroying the symbols of white affluence that have eluded them, yet which they have grown to need and hate. The great danger is retaliatory raids by white vigilante groups and racist elements in police and army. Last year's indiscriminate manslaughter is now covered by law with the passage of a statute permitting police to shoot on suspicion that the person apprehended is carrying a weapon. What the Church finds paramount in Poland and Czechoslovakia, a demand for freedom and truth, is apparently dispensable or naively thought to be guaranteed in the capitalist world. There is no cry of anguish at this law, no protest when peace marchers are gassed and clubbed, and no explanation asked of how it was that none of the over 100 riot deaths in 1967 resulted from snipers' bullets.

Painful as the realization is, untrained white helpers in the ghetto may now retard the growth of black political consciousness and drive for equality. The concerned Catholic's place clearly lies in the white

community, in the slow process of re-education. In Lonergan's words the Church must act as a blotting paper for violence, stopping its resonances and amplifications as hate responds to hate. This may mean literally soaking up violence by stopping vigilante gangs, trying to break up white gun clubs, forming groups that will enable police to integrate in society and identify with the people they will be 'protecting'. But all this would be a form of irresponsibility if there were not an equal commitment to alter the current political structure of the country.

Thomas Paine was surely right when he concluded: 'Whatever the apparent cause of any riots may be the real one is always want of happiness. It shows that something is wrong in the system of government.' Translating this observation into action against an impenetrable bastion of military and industrial power while squaring it with the imperative demands of the Gospel, was not something Paine had to accomplish. It is the intractable task before American radical Catholics today.

P.S. -The martyrdom of Martin Luther King has taken from the black community the last reasonable hope of peaceful social reform. As a leader he spoke to the great negro Christian tradition and to the culture of the South. He was respected but little heeded in the North; the urban militants thought of him affectionately as 'de Lawd' but were unimpressed by the effects of non-violent protest. His dedication to the poor cut across racial boundaries so that the coming march on Washington was to include all minority groups. It was even to be protected by the violent United Black Front. But since the prophetic speeches at the height of the civil rights protest, at Washington in 1963, he had become increasingly a figurehead, a representative of a heritage that was dying in the urban ghettos. Many radicals had written him off. The mobilization for the poor people's march proved them wrong.

Once dead he gained many surprising allies. Once Washington, Chicago, and 116 American cities started to go up in flames, white America suddenly discovered it believed in non-violence, at least for the poor and oppressed. A reactionary Congress has been shocked into the passage of another more sweeping civil rights bill. The question now is the tactics of militants. Will they work through the riots, issuing guns for snipers or will they begin selective killing of white police in the style of the Algerian FLN during the French occupation? Is it just talk? While in cold rational matter of fact, on 5th April one white man killed one black man in Memphis, and while it is clear that any leader runs a statistical risk of assassination at the hands of lunatics, for every black man it was White America that murdered Martin Luther King and said no to peaceful reform. This 'No' equals 'Yes' to Rap, Stokely *et al.* Whether the USA is on the verge of what will amount to civil war is now in the hands of the only remaining leaders, the militants and nationalists.