

■ The changes you see are not always the ones that really matter. True, the new buildings invade what is left of the urban sky and demand to be noticed. The jets are sleeker and the freeways are faster and the television programmes are more insistently mindless than ever. But even after only eighteen months away – separated, too, by President Kennedy's assassination and all that has happened since – you are aware after a while of a hidden stream of change, a shift of accent and attitude that is hard to define but is none the less decisive.

You could call it a mood of self-appraisal, a critical undertone that is a new note in the carefully orchestrated harmony of America's need to conform. Of course the harmony was always a celestial hope rather than a terrestrial reality. The very structure of the United States has meant a constant tension between 'the truths we hold' and the local understanding of their application. The Supreme Court gives its judgments, the federal agencies move in to implement them, but Alabama is not greatly affected – yet. Nevertheless the change is there; sometimes publicly plain in such events as the sit-in protests on the Berkeley campus of the University of California, more commonly reflected in less sensational ways.

In the evolving life of the Catholic Church in America the external changes are indeed evident enough. Improvised altars facing the people have sprung up everywhere: unlikely trestle-tables that carry on a silent war with the shrines of St Jude and the fitted carpets. Rushed musical versions to fit the emancipated texts, with their echoes of negro spirituals and a meditative jazz: the new scripture readings that speak of 'Mary and Joseph being engaged' and of their 'going on their customary trip to Jerusalem': the brand-new Anglican hymn books that provide the rousing assembly hymns even in Benedictine abbeys that have abandoned their plainchant overnight. The new churches reject ornament with a holy zeal that the Shakers might envy. And a whole vocabulary of 'renewal' has already created its clichés, with every sermon a 'homily' that speaks of 'salvation history' and 'the kerygma'.

But the emancipation that has come to the Church in America is much more than a matter of liturgical change, though that indeed is the external sign of a revolution that would have been unimaginable

even five years ago. For no territory of the Church was the Council so providential an awakening as it was for America. There were many reasons why this should be so, not least the fact that Pope John's initiative came at a moment when American Catholicism was at last emerging from the preoccupations of growth into an awareness of adult responsibility. An imposing system of schools and colleges, vast armies of priests and religious sisters, chancery offices of impressive efficiency which were the training ground for bishops whose interests were primarily administrative: this achievement, without parallel in the history of the Church anywhere, was not matched by a comparable intellectual vitality. 'Have you checked with the Chancery?' was the usual reaction to any innovation, and an obsessive concern with apologetic advantage found little room for the sort of enquiry that might challenge the entrenched attitudes of a confident establishment.

The change has been dramatic, and sometimes seems disturbing. The pragmatic element in American life, sometimes more concerned to ask whether a thing works than to question its validity, has its religious echoes. But, however naive the new enthusiasms may occasionally seem to be, the awakening of the American Catholic conscience is a powerful factor both in the life of the nation and in the life of the Church at large. It is important in the context of civil affairs because the old Church-State controversies have suddenly seemed irrelevant. No doubt there is a sound case in justice to be made for federal aid for parochial schools, but there is even a sounder case for the Catholic contribution to education as such and, further, for theology as such. The recent development in the San Francisco Bay area of a Graduate Theological Union, drawing together some ten theological colleges and seminaries in a common programme of post-graduate work leading to a doctorate in theology, has implications of a profoundly ecumenical significance. And the participation of St Albert's College, the House of Studies of the Californian Province of the Order of Preachers, alongside the colleges of Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans and Unitarians (and later, it is hoped, of Greek Orthodox and Jews as well), is more than a gesture of good will. It is a recognition that the Catholic contribution to higher education must be both serious and disinterested. The tradition of a separated intellectual ghetto is fast disappearing, and such initiatives as that of the Californian Dominicans are the sign of a wholly new approach to the function of Catholics in a mixed society. And what happens at the level of higher education must profoundly affect the whole intellectual climate of the nation.

The social and moral issues which in recent years have emerged into the forefront of American life have not always commanded the public commitment of the Catholic conscience. There have been historical reasons for this hesitation; the suspicion of secular humanism and the

tendency to look for Communist motives in apparently neutral causes have inhibited Catholic co-operation in movements to end racial segregation or to question a defence policy that is based on nuclear arms. There has, too, been the over-riding legalism of the very structure of American Catholicism. It had the important effect of binding Catholics in a sense of common, if narrow, purpose. Nowhere in the world, one may suppose, is the standard of Catholic practice so faithfully maintained. But now that the Council (in its debates, if not as yet in its actual decrees) has given so strong an impetus to the critical appraisal of the Church's role in the world today, a solid and increasingly well-informed body of American Catholic opinion has seized the new opportunities with enthusiasm. The American bishops, who seemed so silent if not bemused at the opening of the Council, have for the most part responded generously to its intentions. They, of all the national hierarchies, are the best placed to implement them. The structure of American life itself is favourable to the open action of the Church in a contemporary society, and what happens in the United States during the next few years can radically affect the Church's mission everywhere. The strength of numbers and of material means is not the only American contribution to the Church at large. A vigorous intellectual awakening, a generous acceptance of social obligation, an adult awareness of the limits of obedience (and of freedom as well) : all this can give powerful support to the work of Christian renewal throughout the world.

Not the least important area of Catholic change is that of religious life. And American religious superiors are perhaps the most disappointed at the Council's uncertain response (at least in its formal acts) to the call for a radical renewal of the religious vocation in terms that correspond to the pastoral needs of the Church today. But much has happened in America itself to give vitality to traditional patterns, too often regarded as sacrosanct for reasons that are of sociological rather than of theological significance. An obvious, and much publicized, instance is that of the religious habit. The new designs may sometimes appear to be creating merely a new convention : religious sisters are not always going to be twenty-five years old, dressed as a sort of social worker with a veil. But the impulse behind the experimentation is part of a much larger purpose, and here once again the American experience is going to be of much more than local importance.

It is certainly significant that the president of the Association of Major Superiors for America, who attended the third session of the Vatican Council as one of the women auditors, should herself be the Superior General of a congregation (the Sisters of Loreto of Nerinx, Kentucky) that has in a remarkable way reflected the spirit, and indeed the very methods, of the Council. For its recent General Chapter, commissions were set up in advance so that every Sister might have the

opportunity of making the freest representations on such matters as the theology of the active religious life, the need for adaptations in the congregation's rule, habit and training. A frank recognition of the inhibiting inheritance of past customs, good and necessary in their time but valid no longer, was only possible because of a soundly based theological understanding of the true basis of religious life. This in its turn was greatly assisted by the specialized guidance of Sisters who had a firm theological training. (The Congregation has been a pioneer in giving such training to its Sisters, and 'theology' in this context has meant more than a merely academic study). As a result of this preliminary work, the General Chapter's proceedings reflected a uniquely apostolic approach to the new factors that are everywhere affecting women religious in their community life as well as in their external work.

This example can be mentioned with confidence because, in the particular context of the religious life, it illustrates what one may believe will characterize the American Catholic awakening as it emerges from its first surprised awareness of what the freedom of the Spirit really means. In the meantime there is much in the life of the Church in the United States that reflects a fidelity and generosity that can never be adequately measured. The contemplative life for men, as in such great monasteries as Gethsemani Abbey, is a silent but infinitely precious reminder of the values that abide. The hope must be that, without in any way betraying the special vocation that is theirs, the professional contemplatives (if one may call them such) can influence the total understanding of what the vowed obligations of religious men and women must mean in a renewed Church. No part of the Church is exempt from the movement of the Holy Spirit, and all religious orders – both of men and women – are going to need a greater realization of the common purpose that unites all the members of the Body of Christ.