

Not long ago, Father W., a priest well known for his work for peace in the slums of one of our more violent cities, asked his bishop for a little money to help with some project he had in hand. It is said that regretfully refusing the request, the prelate remarked: 'You must understand, Father, that the Catholic Church is not a charitable institution'.

There are several senses in which the bishop was quite right about this, but let us consider the one he intended. He evidently meant to say that the Church does not exist to organize collections for the poor or to rival other agencies engaged in social welfare work. We know from the New Testament that this was a major preoccupation of the early Church and, indeed, that it has been so ever since, and yet the bishop was surely correct in suggesting that the mission of the Church goes well beyond this. The question is: How far beyond and in what direction?

In the perspective provided by St John's gospel a major effect of the love that God has for the believer is that he emerges into the light. He is able to see the truth and no longer prefers the darkness to the light. He is willing to look candidly at himself and at his world. Secure in the certainty of the Father's love we can dare to face the truth and the truth will set us free. For this theology, the mission of the Church is not defined first of all in terms of loving our fellow-men; there is first of all the transforming love that comes to us from God and, by liberating us into truth, makes love possible for us. The task is to reveal the truth, not so much by telling people facts that they may have missed but by making them able and willing to see the truth for themselves. To have faith is not primarily to have new information about the world or about what transcends the world, it is to be released from the mystification, the illusions and self-deceptions that prevent us from seeing what is there. It is a safe generalization that every situation of injustice, violence and cruelty is rooted in untruth and itself, in its turn, gives rise to further untruth. It is not a fault in the liberal academic to believe in the overwhelming importance of getting the facts straight; if he has a fault it is merely in not seeing how difficult this is and the kind of conversion required both of the individual and of the media of communication if the truth is to become perspicuous.

Given that the mission of the Church is one of truth, it is particularly depressing that the Low Week Conference of the bishops of England and Wales should have decided to abolish one of the institutions through which Christians were trying to reveal the truth. This was the Peace Committee of the Justice and Peace Commission. The process of abolition is, I need hardly say, described as a

co-ordination or unification by which the Peace Committee will be absorbed back into the commission as a whole. The fact that, so far as can be ascertained, no members of the Peace Committee will be on the reconstituted commission is not felt to be important. The status of the commissions, which were rather hurriedly set up because that was what was decided at Rome, has always been ambiguous and the bishops were understandably anxious to clarify the position; in particular they didn't like statements about 'current affairs of national importance' which looked quasi-official emerging from the commissions without 'full authorization' from the Bishops' Conference. What this means in practice is that the commission, and in particular the Peace Committee, had been coming up with a number of home truths about such matters as Rhodesia and Northern Ireland which were unwelcome in conservative Catholic circles. There is a simple test of this; we shall wait and see how many statements about current affairs of national importance are made under the new dispensation with the full authorization of the Conference. My guess is that these will be few, late and innocuous. We shall have a lot of that silence which is such an eloquent endorsement of the *status quo*. Of course, there can be good reasons for silence—if only that incessantly speaking out on any and every fashionable issue rapidly devalues the currency of protest—but what is certainly not a good reason is that a statement may offend 'distinguished' well-to-do Catholics. Yet it seems at least possible that in deciding whether to authorize a statement, the judgement of a team of well-informed and dedicated men and women who have gone to some pains to study a political situation in the light of the gospel may be over-ridden by the puffings of some squalid little businessman with investments in southern Africa. Individual bishops have made splendid and courageous stands during the last year—we remember in particular Archbishop Dwyer's Advent pastoral and the Bishop of Leeds' remarks on racism—but as a group they are likely to be more timid.

There are those who think it rather old-fashioned to expect bishops to speak out on such matters, anyway; is it not, after all, a relic of a paternalist view of the episcopacy? To these we can only say that if it is old-fashioned to believe that bishops should preach the gospel then it is old-fashioned to believe in bishops at all; and preaching means discerning the impact of the gospel on our present situation, whether personal, social or political. This is what bishops are for, they are not just the administrators of a 'charitable institution'.

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