

Comment

Religious deciding to break the law

On the news it is getting more and more common to hear that priests or nuns have got themselves arrested for their involvement in some action of civil disobedience. These actions are usually symbolic in nature, being designed to call attention to some pressing moral problem—abortion, nuclear arms and the pollution of the environment are examples which come to mind.

Actions of this sort can be most effective, because they cause controversy within society and within the church. Often, when members of religious orders are involved, the controversy within a religious community can become rather heated. Are direct-action programmes of this sort really a new form of social evangelization, as the four recently-arrested young Dominicans who wrote the *March Comment* in this journal claimed? Or are these programmes just opportunities for certain individuals in a distorted way to satisfy their egoism? Should not the church make unity its work, not conflict? So the questions run, but what is really at debate here?

From its very origin the church has taken risks to proclaim Christian moral truths. What have changed through the centuries are the concrete issues for which the church is willing to take risks and pay the consequences. To take only one example, some of the very qualities that help to make some men excellent candidates for the priesthood can also help to make those men vulnerable to alcoholism, and repairing alcoholic priests costs the church a lot of money.

How often do we hear the leadership of the church express concern over the taking of such high risks with the clergy, even though our experience tells us that those risks can be very costly? Yet many leaders have expressed grave concern over the danger of civil liability incurred through civil disobedience. Part of the objection is rooted in the fact that this type of preaching is rather new to the churches, but also I think we must face a real bias among us. That is, we consider questions of personal morality to be much clearer, and its problems more acceptable, than those of social morality.

It is a fact that at certain times members of the church have taken positions of conscience and in so doing have brought danger to the larger

church. But what about the 'egoism' charge? I think a sure way of testing the truth of that is to examine how such a person (and that person can, of course, be oneself) relates to the community of faith.

Are we willing to suffer the critical comments of the community, to explore the truth of our actions? We have some excellent examples of people who have even suffered having silence imposed on them, and in obedience have found their convictions purified, and through these experiences their standing strengthened. Yves Congar, one of the great thinkers of Vatican II, was, in the 1950s, willing to wait when instructed to do so, and has enriched Christian thinking for us all. Prophets must have an integral contact with the faith community or they will speak only for themselves. We have the example of a Mgr. Lefèbvre, who cannot submit his conscience to any form of authority within the church and has broken the basic unity of the Catholic Church. Those involved in civil disobedience, and their critics, could learn much from those two figures of our time. One in unity was able to bring us all to a greater truth, the other has made another wound in the Body of Christ.

The most critical question put to us by the involvement of clergy and religious in civil disobedience is not 'How big are the risks of liability?' but 'Are these people in the fullest sense in communion with the church?' Are their actions signs of a love for the church that desires it to be a better church, or do they want to hurt the church? Most of those I have known want, I think, to help the church to reach greater perfection in its mission. They have been willing to enter into a true dialogue with others to explain what their consciences see as needing to be put right. They wish to train their sense of judgement so that it is well informed and will accept the critical observations of others.

Also important is that those involved do their ministry with a sense of responsibility. If priests, nuns and religious brothers are going to prison in protest against social ills, are they aware of the practical effect of this? If they are acting in unity with the church, others will surely be willing to continue their services to the community. If they act alone, those who must take on their duties will feel put-upon.

Personally, I see a great value on occasion in some of the clergy taking a public stance even with risks to themselves and to the institutional church. I believe in this because its value is rooted in a communion which brings the church into engagement with the more pressing issues of our day. It is 'a problem', but a very good problem, one which must be faced with an openness to the truth.

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