

# Commentary

1962. A new year is at least a mark on a map: a direction can be taken. And though the territory seems confused, anyway it remains. It might have been erased altogether, and still it may. The hollow hopes of conferences and jet-propelled consultations can easily be derided, and Christians can sometimes seem to do more deriding than charity—patient as it is—can commend. Their hope is ultimately hereafter, it is true, and our time is littered with the ruins of human hopes, the confident assumptions that better knowledge, a little good will, would end some of the old antagonisms—and peace might begin. It has not happened so.

But none of it is new. The horizons of disaster are nearer now; the prophecies of nuclear annihilation have become a commonplace. Could they become a bore? Yet from the beginning the Church has offered no fall-out shelter in terms the world could want. Her expectations of human happiness are necessarily small, if happiness be equated with the end of fear and no surprises. It was when she seemed to offer the assurances of privilege and an unquestioned power that the Church most obviously satisfied the human need to be reassured. But that too was the age of *Dies Irae* and the dooms on the cathedral walls.

And yet the simple alibi will not serve. The knowledge that only one judgment matters—the last, that the only signs and wonders that can disturb are those that will mark the end of all: this can never absolve the Christian conscience from a duty that his very humanity confers. He awaits the end, and sees all else within its terrible context. But there is a present duty too, slender as it seems when confronted with the huge problems of an awakening world and even of worlds as yet beyond our reach but perhaps soon to be less mysterious than India was to medieval men. It is a duty above all of understanding, of seeing the Christian revelation as casting its light on areas unimaginable till now.

The background of the forthcoming Council can be nothing less than this, and the Pope has emphasized the Church's duty to confront the world as it is—not as it might be—with the truth that is hers to mediate to men. That is why those who ask that the Council should speak of the morality of warfare are not merely seeking a simple answer to an agonising dilemma. They point to a whole range of

problems which call so urgently for Christian judgment. And conscience remains, and its inalienable rights.

LACORDAIRE. No man spoke so surely to his time as Lacordaire, and the centenary of his death has naturally emphasized his providential importance for his own century and for France. But it would betray the measure of his achievement to think only of the preacher of Notre Dame and to wonder a little how that faded rhetoric could ever have commanded such rapture. He was a romantic, uncritical it may be, and even his political interventions can seem curiously naive. But his love of truth and freedom, his desire above all else that the Church should manifest them to men, gave to his preaching and writing a strength that remain. It is his attitude to his times that matters to us, and that was positive, free from nostalgia or regrets. He accepted the French Revolution and its legacy, unlike most Catholics of his generation, and found his vocation in addressing himself to the real needs of the Church in a new situation.

'I claim only one thing for the priest: the freedom of the Gospel the freedom to preach Jesus Christ'. Lacordaire's claim may seem modest enough, but its real implications reach very far. And the French Dominicans, who are the inheritors of Lacordaire's vocation can claim with justice to have exemplified that freedom in the revived life of the Order of Preachers in France, which remains Lacordaire's lasting monument. It is not simply an intellectual achievement, impressive though that be. Nor is it only the fact of the religious life and its immeasurable worth to the Church. Lacordaire exercised his ministry among persons, and he was infinitely sensitive to their own needs as his enormous correspondence shows. For the Church, and any Order that exists to serve her, is to make Christ present among men. Her credentials then, as now, are those of understanding and compassion—of truth that is commended through charity.

FIVE HUNDRED. With next month's *BLACKFRIARS* this review reaches its five hundredth number. There will be special contributions to mark the occasion and we may perhaps be allowed to remind our friends that this can be an opportunity for them to introduce *BLACKFRIARS* to new readers.