

# Conscience Emergent

by F. H. Drinkwater

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It is not often in this country that the official or semi-official Catholic line on controversial questions receives the close attention devoted to it in Mr Walter Stein's formidable article in the November *Blackfriars*. Its subject (the reader will recall) was nuclear weapons and the morality of their possession and use. There-may-well-exist-possible-lawful-targets; We-should-leave-it-to-our-governments-and-experts: H-bombs-are-just-the-counters-of-diplomacy; Possessing-them-is-only-an-occasion-of-sin-which-a-good-intention-could-render-remote; Do-not-we-need-an-up-to-date-ethics-of-bluffing? Any-how-was-Hiroshima-so-very-different-from-Dresden? All these recent instances of casuistry (when the need was for witness) inside and outside of the Council, on the part of prelates, theologians and editors, were patiently examined by Mr Stein; and he had no difficulty in showing their 'appalling irrelevance' in face of the 'massively murderous commitments *here and now*', the existence of which all the Catholic nuclear apologists admit though boggling at the idea that Christians should do anything practical about the situation beyond favouring disarmament by general consent. It is all very criminal and crazy (say our official Catholic representatives in effect) but there is nothing that a Christian can do about it beyond what any atheist or communist can do and is indeed doing already.

If that is the situation at least for us in Britain and U.S.A., the question arises urgently: why the boggling? Why have Catholics become so helplessly habituated to what our critic calls a falsely-prudent 'legalist lifemanship', a 'diet of casuistic pusillanimities'? One tempting explanation might be a kind of irresponsibility; a serious layman might imagine he saw in the clergy (high or low) an inability to face realities, an almost charming immaturity as of schoolboys who do not grow up, for whom loyalties mean more than truth or justice.

On the contrary, if the present writer might offer a view, the above situation is to be explained not by lack of a sense of responsibility, but rather by an excess of it; an over-anxiousness arising out of pastoral solicitude. Pastoral responsibility is a situation experienced only by the clergy, and only by some of them; but for them it is an ever-present preoccupation. Teachers feel responsibility towards their pupils to some extent, doctors towards their patients, journalists towards their employers or their public or anyhow to their own

wives and families; a parish priest or a bishop feels responsibility towards, or for, the whole people of God, or that portion which comes under his care; and in all the aspects of their lives, because all aspects come within the 'Kingdom of God'. Ethical behaviour is one aspect, and he knows that most of 'the faithful', simple or otherwise, need some guidance sometimes about this, and that the best way for them to get it is through 'the Church', that is (like it or not) through himself. This, amongst other things, is what he is for, to declare the law of the Lord.

So far so good, and anybody who quarrels with all this is quarrelling with the nature of things and with the Founder of the Church. But giving guidance is one thing, and giving orders is another, and the ecclesiastical mind does not always realise the difference. Perhaps this is one of the reasons (we may wonder) that made Bishop de Smedt invent that inelegant and educational word 'triumphalism' for the benefit of his fellow-Fathers at the Council. Faced with some moral problem – in the present case the problems raised by nuclear war – those of us who have the ecclesiastical-pastoral mind tend to say to each other: 'Shall we allow it or condemn it? If we allow it, such and such consequences might follow, and people might say it was our fault. So perhaps we ought to disallow it? But then we should have to follow up our decision with sanctions: a law without sanctions is no use. What sanctions then? Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, we can't burn people any more, the secular arm has turned unco-operative. Even the natural penalties of social and economic pressure can no longer be relied on except in an all-Catholic population. There remain only the spiritual penalties of the Church; we can always refuse absolution and communion. Can we apply these penalties to this business of nuclear war, or should we only be making ourselves look foolish if we did?'

At this point the ecclesiastical mind does some rapid mental arithmetic, and realises that our governments, western and iron-curtain alike, are so fully committed to preparing for nuclear war that almost the whole population is affected. To set its face firmly against this communal 'sin', the pastoral clergy would have to refuse absolution to a large part of the armed forces, all the heads of state and their ministers and civil servants, all the nuclear armament-makers and their millions of employees, even the women; in fact, to something like the whole Catholic adult population, at least in some districts. 'This' (says the ecclesiastical mind to itself) 'would never do; it wouldn't work, we shouldn't be obeyed. Since we cannot refuse absolution for this, we had better not say it is a sin; in other words, we must find some way of calling it lawful.' The theologians in their ivory arm-chairs, and the editors with their nose for an exciting non-stop controversy, immediately catch the idea, even without being told, and so we have the extraordinary feats of theological loophole-finding which Mr Stein, having no pastoral responsibilities

whatever, finds it so difficult to understand. The net result seems to be a moral paralysis of 'the Church'. At what point have things gone wrong?

Surely we may say that (in this particular moral problem anyhow) things go wrong when the ecclesiastical mind begins to think of authority as being domination rather than service, and sees its own teaching 'magisterium' as exercised by compulsion rather than by guidance. Not that Catholics are the only religionists to fall into such a mistake. The Jewish religion did the same before them, and some strict orthodox Jews seem to do so still. So do some Muslims, and various small Protestant sects, not to mention the Communist religion, for such it is. Doubtless Christians ought to know better, since their Master and Lord took such trouble on Maundy Thursday evening to show them the true attitude. But we are always forgetting, so sometimes the chief difference their religion makes to the Christian authoritarians is that they are extra slow to issue any guidance of the negative kind (always excepting matters of sex of course) because they feel they would have to follow it up by spiritual penalties to enforce it. Other instances, as well as preparation for war, will readily spring to the mind of the thoughtful reader. The Popes have been writing social encyclicals for a hundred years now, but how shy, how excessively prudent, Catholics have been in every country about applying them to local conditions or even making them known to the faithful! Think of those Latin or South American regions where large landowners are the chief social problem, and continue to be so lifetime after lifetime, in spite of a theoretically all-powerful Church, until some reddish revolution takes over and does the job. Perhaps 'the Church' was right not to try excommunicating a few landowners, but it could never have been right for the high ecclesiastics to be hand-in-glove with the landowners, and to have to sweep the social teaching of the Church under the carpet. In the more up-to-date countries too, as soon as the historian digs below the decorous surface, he would find similar situations involving 'the Church' with the industrialists or the finance-capitalists of a given period, with a consequent soft-peddling of subjects like the living wage or usury or the reform of company law. How could one preach the responsibility of shareholders (the pastoral mind would ask itself) without refusing absolution right and left to the most relied-on benefactors of the Church? Much better leave such topics to the Pope. Wait till Rome speaks, and then wait till it speaks again.

Reverting for a moment to the military scene, one may find another example of 'the Church's' partial paralysis in moral teaching in the question of conscientious objectors, which Archbishop Roberts has so valiantly tried to keep before the eyes of the Council Fathers. He was able to point to U.S.A. and Britain as two great countries where the right of conscientious objection to a war deemed unjust,

or even in some cases to any war on principle, is recognised by law. But he was obliged to add that in some cases Catholic conscientious objectors had found themselves without any support from their Church. One would have to go in for considerable research to uncover the reasons for this; but most of us from our own experience could easily imagine how the ecclesiastical mind might react to such claims of individual conscience, and might angrily ask such an individual how he could possibly claim to know better than his government and his bishop.<sup>1</sup> Here again we have a case of guidance seeking to become dictation; perhaps it came out even more clearly in the speech of Archbishop Florit to the Council against the idea of approving conscientious objection. Perhaps he thought that the Italians, a common-sense and unwarlike people, would refuse *en masse* any call to war if given the least loophole by Church and State. At any rate it seems fair to count his speech as an instance of favouring the directing of consciences by compulsion.

One hesitates to mention birth-control in this discussion, because the subjects of birth control and nuclear war have so often been wrongly coupled together by dint of an ambiguous use of the term 'natural law'. Nevertheless it does provide a good instance of the difficulties 'the Church' gets into by trusting to compulsion and penalties, even if only spiritual penalties, instead of to guidance and education. What in the end is the actual juridical practice about this marriage problem? Roughly the position is that men can always get absolution for their kind of contraception but women cannot get absolution for theirs; one must say 'roughly', because such a statement is over-simplified and inaccurate without further explanations. It must be understood in connection with the ordinary principles of moralists when writing about *recidivi*. But when all the stone-walling and face-saving qualifications have been made, it does remain broadly true; and the horrific birth-control impasse alone might be enough to make any pastoral-minded bishop think twice before declaring the manufacture and possession of nuclear bombs to be intrinsically and mortally sinful.

Could it be that these hesitations and argumentations and silences, even in the Vatican Council, about the morality of having or using nuclear arms, should really be interpreted as the Catholic mind feeling its way towards a not-so-authoritarian style in the moral guiding of the faithful? Less Casuistry, please, and more Witness, Mr Stein seems to say. Between Casuistry and Witness there may often be a third alternative, Silence. Witness has its very real difficulties, perhaps not so much for the lay journalist, or the priest-writer with a whole religious order behind him, but certainly for the pastoral-minded prelate or parish priest; or even for a Pope, as that

<sup>1</sup>The case of Franz Jägerstätter, the Austrian peasant who was beheaded for refusing to join in Hitler's war, is a magnificent dramatizing of the whole issue, and everyone should read the fully documented book about it by Professor Gordon C. Zahn.

play of Hochhuth's reminded us all. Giving 'Witness' is *ipso facto* a minority occupation, and the very fact that in the ecclesial vocabulary the word 'witness' is also the word 'martyr' is enough to remind us of the occupational hazards, which are as likely to come from inside the Church as from outside. Not that any ecclesiastic, worthy of his baptismal salt, would quail in the face of the crown of martyrdom, if it ever came to the point. But there are many lesser martyrdoms that bring no glory, but much distress and disturbance to others as well as to the Witness. It is almost a definition of Witness that it can do nothing for its Cause except witness to it. The blood of martyrs is not usually the seed of the Church, unless in some very long-term divine planning; and when the martyr dies not ostensibly for the Church, but for justice and truth as he sees it – let us say, Jan Hus – he usually has to wait many centuries before somebody does justice to his memory. All this is not to discourage Witness, least of all witness against nuclear war, or indeed against any indiscriminating warfare or unjust war-making.

Perhaps an anecdote might help. During the Suez crisis there was one week-end when the issue, at any rate for the ordinary newspaper-reader, hung in the balance; the ultimatums had been sent, the troops were moving, the shooting had not begun. One parish priest, known to the present writer, in a quite small mostly working-class parish, felt strongly that this war for a canal would be a clearly unjust one, using war as an instrument of policy and so on. Accordingly he read out at each Mass a short statement to that effect telling his people that in his opinion anyone either in the armed forces or in civil life would be justified in refusing to co-operate with the Government in this military action. Having done this, he sent the statement to his bishop by way of information. He had sent it already to the local daily newspaper in time for its appearance on the Monday, but the local newspaper printed nothing about it. As for his own parishioners, he thought they were impressed, but they said nothing either way. Neither did his bishop. By the next Sunday the Suez crisis had passed into history, which was very convenient from the priest's point of view. But suppose it hadn't? The incident could be used to open some discussion at Spode House or somewhere. Did the priest do right? True, he eased his own conscience, but is that sufficient justification? If any of his parishioners belonged to the Conservative party, would they not have a real grievance? Or if any of them were reservists likely to be called up, or workers in a military-aircraft factory, would they not be disturbed in conscience? In fact, was not that the very purpose of his statement from the altar? But would it actually have done any good? Such questions and many others would occur at once to the pastoral-minded clergy.

However, the point in the story which can be underlined for our present purpose is this: although the parish priest told his people that in his judgment the Suez operation was morally unlawful, and

that they would be justified in turning conscientious objectors to it, he (apparently) did not tell them they were *bound* to do so, still less did he say he would refuse absolution and communion to any of them who failed to do so. Theoretically, from the customary pastoral viewpoint, you may say that he should have backed up his teaching by sanctions. Of course this would have been useless in any case, because no other priest in the district would have taken the same line. But it does seem likely that given all the circumstances he would not even wish to enforce his application of the Church's teaching to the particular case of Suez, but only wanted to give them his own judgement and to leave it to their consciences to decide what to do.

Their consciences? Their private individual consciences? What ultra-protestant moral anarchy is here, ultra-pastoral-minded readers may ask. And it is true that the individual conscience, even of Catholics, is often highly fallible, and that the vigilance and guidance of Mother Church will always be needed. But wise parents, as their children grow up, know how to keep rules and compulsion to a minimum, and more and more to guide through influence and advice. Perhaps something like that is happening in the Church, and perhaps the aforesaid parish priest, in his perplexities over Suez, was feeling rather blindly maybe towards a new style in pastoral responsibility, less authoritarian to be sure but in the long run more influential.

If so, it seems that theologians will need to have a new look at the theology of Conscience, which at present is almost non-existent, or only just visible, like the first green crocus-leaf showing. At present the word conscience, in Catholic technical usage, has an unduly restricted sense and in practice means little more than following the teaching of the theological experts. This might be well enough if the experts made use of *their* consciences (in the larger English-language sense of that word) but in practice they too have become content to reckon up the verdicts of other experts, and since bishops too (the real teachers) are expected to take their cue from the experts, the whole thing becomes rather a vicious circle.

Can we hope, then, that the Church, through agonizing re-appraisals about nuclear war and other ethical problems, may be in process of discovering or re-discovering a larger kind of Conscience altogether? Not just the ready-made computer-like decisions imposed by a world-wide bureaucracy, and certainly not the eccentric vagaries of individual emotion or caprice; but something larger and more permanent altogether, which we might call the higher collective conscience, the truly catholic conscience, the human conscience at its best. Its verdicts would take time to be formulated and recognised and to be registered by the Church's magisterium, but once arrived at they would have a full authority intrinsic as well as extrinsic, in somewhat similar fashion as the final judgment of the best minds in

matters of art and literature. Painting like Picasso's, novels like the later Joyce, music like you know who's – are they truly beautiful, or are they just cleverness run crazy? The judgment of so-called experts may be divided on such things for a time, but in the end we know that standards will be reaffirmed, the sincere will be sorted out from the spoof; the wheat will remain, the chaff will be forgotten; there will be discrimination. Similarly the human mind, not this or that human mind, but the human mind at its best (with the Church permanently in the world to keep a light shining in the darkness, and with God's grace always helping men of goodwill) is capable of perceiving more and more about even the remoter conclusions of the natural law of right and wrong.

This being so, and always supposing that the human race including the Church militant are going to survive at all, we may argue that the natural law is an eternal and recognisable fact, and that the human-conscience-at-its-best is a growing historical reality. It would take us too long to trace the connections of this concept with the encyclicals of Pope John and the teaching of Second Vatican, but the connections are there and visible enough.

If Schema 13 gets through the Council with a large majority (this article is written in mid-November) it will evidently only be achieved through pasting paper over a lot of big cracks, and the paper will not last long. Does it seem too unrealistic then to suppose that the faithful of the future will be expected to use their own moral judgment much more than in the past? And that all our schools above primary level will have to undertake serious training in Christian freedom and the meaning and education of the personal conscience? Our bishops and clergy, instead of laying down the law in every circumstance of life, will often say something like: 'On this matter there is no agreement yet in the Church; the best book giving both sides of the question is so and so, you can read both sides, or if you don't read you can ask the advice of somebody whose judgment you respect: and then make up your own mind in the sight of God.' To the more authoritarian type of cleric this may seem at first like the end of the world. But to the eye of humble faith it may look like what Pope John and Pope Paul have predicted for the Church: a second Pentecost, heralding a fresh renewal of the face of the earth.