Commentary

APPEAL FOR AMNESTY, 1961. One advantage of the technical perfection of present-day communications is the speed with which public opinion can be roused and focussed; pressure can be generated rapidly, not merely among people of the same tongue, but internationally. How powerful this can be in the interests of justice and compassion was shown in the response to World Refugee Year; now a group of lawyers, writers and publishers in London have initiated a similar campaign for those whose future is even more terrible and uncertain, the 'prisoners of conscience'. The Appeal is based on the eighteenth and nineteenth articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, approved by the founder members of the United Nations. What response might be expected from the countries of the Soviet bloc is hard to say, but if a magazine as frank as *Tygodnik Powszechny*, a review of whose contents is included in this issue of BLACKFRIARS, can flourish in Poland, it is not impossible that a really international campaign can be organized. There are those even in the West who are forcibly restrained either by imprisonment or threats from expressing the convictions of their conscience, or who are suffering violence for trying to expose injustice and to defend elementary human rights. The originators of the Appeal themselves cast a very cold eye on certain areas of the Commonwealth; it would be interesting to invite information and criticism of the West from Poland and Jugoslavia. Once we have shown ourselves ready to treat our own citizens, whether Christian or Marxist, Freedom Rider or Aldermaston Marcher, with justice and respect, we can protest with far greater force against the violations of justice outside the West.

The principles regarding man's conscience, whether it is regarded as true or in error, have been worked out with particular clarity in the context of religious tension. But this is one sphere in which a relaxation of tension is being felt. The spirit of the ecumenical movement is a spirit of amnesty, of forgetting the bitterness of the past, even if the divisions are still there. In this issue an article by Father Henry St John deals with the inviolability of conscience and the respect due to those who in the Catholic view are sincere but in error. Instances are now rare in which the Church authority actually seeks the aid of the secular power to coerce men's consciences, though there are countries where

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the Church, supporting a regime which allows her liberty in her own field, appears to condone the political injustices by which the regime survives. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that we as Catholics are committed to defending justice universally, even for those whom we may think not only wrong but obstinately wrong. The recognition of the principle that no public authority has the right to force men to act against their conscience, or to prevent them from acting according to their conscience, unless their actions violate the rights of others, is surely one of the highest achievements of the human spirit; like all the achievements of the spirit it appears to be delicate, it can sometimes be defended only by martyrdom. The 'prisoners of conscience', in whatever bloc they are to be found, include those who are suffering explicitly for their religious faith, but with them are many who without being explicitly Christian are suffering for their loyalty to what is in fact a Christian principle, and one without which humanity would return to slavery and barbarism. It is to be hoped that Catholics in this country, where we are still perhaps too narrowly engaged in seeking justice for ourselves, will support Appeal for Amnesty, 1961. Even if Reg Butler's design has never been carried out, the actual political prisoners, known and unknown, must not be forgotten.

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