

- 1 We are at the end of an epoch which has lasted almost 1700 years: the epoch of ethnic, family, and cultural Catholicism, the period of the «born Catholic.»
  - 1.1 There has probably been no period in the history of the church (with two possible exceptions) when there has been as great a need to take stock of who we are, where we are, what the challenges, dangers, and opportunities are.
  - 1.2 We are moving into a period which is particularly critical for the American church, because of its great energy and vitality. (There is danger in the fact that Rome does not seem to value, or even recognize, this vitality.)
    - 1.2.1 It would be tragic if we were to experience the alienation of the intellectual elite here, as has been the case in the Latin countries.
  - 1.3 The symptoms of this end of an era are all around us, but they tend to be interpreted in a naive and superficial way.
    - 1.3.1 The fact that many young and middle-aged Catholics are drifting away from Catholic practice.
    - 1.3.2 The fact that the divorce rate for Catholics is approaching that of the general population.
    - 1.3.3 The breakdown of the mystique of the priesthood and the accompanying decline in the number of priests.
      - 1.3.3.1 Not necessarily a decline in vocations.
    - 1.3.4 Widespread refusal, on the part of American Catholics, to accept positions which Rome insists on.
- 2 In such a time, the advice and approach of Deuteronomy could guide us: «Turn to the times of old.» Examine our roots, where we come from.
  - 2.1 Church history is the record of our response (and of our failure to respond) to the call of Jesus, from the earliest days to the present.
  - 2.2 Concern for the past is not simply a hobby for nostalgia buffs. But neither is it simply a matter of drawing inspiration from the past or of learning from it; it is a question of identity.
  - 2.3 For us, the church at the beginning is normative in a special way.

- 2.3.1 We don't need to motivate reflection on history simply by reciting the (quite true) dictum that «those who do not understand the past are condemned to repeat its mistakes.»
- 2.3.2 But rather to find out who we really are, what it means to be church.
- 2.3.3 This implies that reflection on the earliest days will be the most important of all, and will have the most to teach us about how to meet the challenges of the next thirty years.
- 2.3.4 Often Catholic historians wrote the history of the first century with apologetic or defensive motives: apostolic succession, papacy, episcopacy, sacraments; so some conclusions here may appear surprising and even shocking.
- 2.4 Reflection on church history can lead us to a realistic love of the church.
- 2.5 In what follows I will merely be giving hints.
- 3 What are the problems and challenges which face us at the end of an epoch? (Not necessarily in order.)
  - 3.1 First: the need to rediscover our *identity*. We are uncertain about what it means to belong to church, to *be* church.
  - 3.2 Second: the development of an intelligent and biblically based theology of marriage and, more generally, of sexuality.
    - 3.2.1 This is an area in which real alienation between Rome and the American church is possible - as the birth control fiasco makes clear.
  - 3.3 Third: the need to understand the relationship between social, political, and economic justice (and the peace which is conditioned on these three) - and the Christian message.
  - 3.4 Fourth: the need to recognize the maturity and the responsibility of many of the Catholic laity.
    - 3.4.1 This is sometimes experienced in an interesting way: as the need to develop a spirituality which has strong biblical roots, is in continuity with what is valid in our

- tradition, and is adapted to wo/men who live their lives in the closing years of the twentieth century.
- 3.5 Fifth: the need to understand the role of women in the church, and to reject the patronizing pseudo-rationale which has been used to exclude women from full participation in church life. This implies an understanding and acknowledgment of . .
    - 3.5.1 the equality of men and women,
    - 3.5.2 and the uniqueness of the contribution which men and women are called to make. Such a discussion cannot exclude the possibility of sacramental ministry for women.
  - 3.6 Sixth: the need to work out an understanding of freedom in the church; a resolution of the real or apparent conflict between the teaching of churchmen and the right and duty of the individual Catholic in forming his/her conscience.
- 4 First: church history and our identity: What is church? What does it mean to belong to the church?
- 4.1 First of all, three prenotes:
    - 4.1.1 The traditional (pre-Vatican II) image of the church, which strongly emphasized the institutional and hierarchical elements in the church is not only not working very well today; although it has some NT foundation, it cannot be traced to Jesus or to the earliest gentile communities. (Jesus' words were «community-forming.»)
    - 4.1.2 Vatican II offered the insight that *we are the church*, but Catholics have been slow to grasp its implications. Catholics still tend to identify the hierarchy with the church and to speak of both hierarchy and church as «them.» «They» have laws and dogmas in order to assert their control over the organization and its members.
    - 4.1.3 Vatican II gave us another image - people of God, but we *are* not quite at ease with it. It seems to have a touch of arrogance, and we don't feel comfortable

describing ourselves this way to others.

- 4.2 Reflection on the church of the first century brings us back to the time of small, highly committed communities
  - 4.2.1 which were very aware of being directed by the Spirit.
  - 4.2.2 and which were cohesive (and at times pugnacious), while always realizing that they were the embodiment of the *one church* in a given town or city.
- 4.3 What we find there is not the «perfect society» of Bellarmine's definition; rather we find a community of *disciples* - that is, of those who want to follow Jesus. This is not a rejection of the image of «people of God,» but a new way of seeing this image (and one which has a better NT backing).
  - 4.3.1 In the church of the first century, there is strong emphasis on the *personal* element: to each of us, Jesus says «Follow me.»
  - 4.3.2 Jesus' own followers have been *called* and *chosen*. They have not chosen Jesus; he has chosen them, and they are called to *respond* to his action and to *follow* him. In the NT, the church is called *ekklesia*, and this Greek word is related to the word for «call» - *kalein*.
- 4.4 Historical-critical study shows how strong the NT roots of this position are.
  - 4.4.1 In *Acts*, the church is often spoken of as «the disciples.»
  - 4.4.2 According to John, all of Jesus' words and actions are rooted in his relationship with the Father; he does the Father's will and he has been sent by the Father, and *as he has been sent by the Father, he sends his disciples*.
  - 4.4.3 In *Phil* 2:5-11, «He was obedient up to the point of death, death on the cross, and therefore God gave him the name which is above every other name ...» The meaning is that God empowered him to do all things - specifically to offer the Father's unconditional love in the Father's own name, and to empower his

followers, his disciples, to do the same.

- 4.5 In the first century, the local church (the local Christian community) is not a branch office of an international organization. It is rather the *one* church (and, in a certain sense, the *whole* church) which is present here, in this community of disciples.
- 4.6 As in many other areas, this NT image of the church is one which corresponds to our experience today; we can identify with it.
  - 4.6.1 Our loyalty is not to an institution or an organization, but to Jesus, who called us to belong to a community of those who follow him. In this sense, we are «his people.»
  - 4.6.2 Our act of following demands personal decision, not just once, but continually. We will not confuse the community of disciples with all of the baptized (even baptized Catholics); we will not be surprised that we are a minority and we will be able to live without the triumphalism of earlier days.
- 4.7 This «community of disciples» understanding of the church is not anti-institutional, but it does put the institutional elements in perspective.
  - 4.7.1 A community of disciples cannot exist without structure and without social organization. Because we are a community, *his* community, there will be organizational features about our life together. We need community for mutual support, because without it, we would have no scripture, no sacraments, no liturgy, no preaching of the word of God.
  - 4.7.2 We find these institutional elements (sometimes called «church order» in the NT and we find this church order developing in the course of the NT itself).
  - 4.7.3 Paul insisted on the need for authoritative teaching on questions of faith and moral life, and he based his position on the need for *unity* and *love* in these early

communities.

- 4.8 This understanding of church will help us deal with dissent and conflict in the church today, because it will help us balance the overstressed institutional element with the always necessary charismatic element.
- 4.9 It will also awaken interest in the strangely dormant theme of *evangelization*, and may prevent this from being the great missed opportunity of the next generation.
- 5 Second: the need for a good theology of marriage and sexuality. What does church history have to teach us here?
  - 5.1 It shows that the negative view of sexuality which has disfigured much of the Christian and Catholic tradition is not rooted in the NT, but rather in the Platonism of the Greek fathers, and of Augustine.
    - 5.1.1 Church history forces us to take note of the fact that the attitude of, for example, Jewish tradition, toward sexuality has been more relaxed and positive, with less fear, suspicion, and anxiety.
  - 5.2 It shows that this negative view cannot be blamed on Paul. «Flesh,» in the sense of «sins of the flesh» is not a good translation of an important word used by Paul.
  - 5.3 Church history encourages us to center our attention on the scriptural sources, and to regard much in the so-called Christian tradition as a reflection of alien elements.
  - 5.4 None of this, incidentally, suggests that facile optimism in regard to our sexuality is called for; but it does suggest that the virtual obsession with sex as an area in which sins can be committed does not have a good NT pedigree.
  - 5.5 In this matter, church history has a liberating effect. It liberates us from unchristian elements in our tradition and encourages us to turn back to the authentic sources.
    - 5.5.1 Here, in passing (because this is not really our topic), I would suggest Genesis 1:27, and the material in Hosea and the Song of Songs which indicate that the sexual marital relationship is the symbol of God's love for his people, and is therefore the revelation of

God in our midst.

- 6 Third: the quest for social, political, and economic justice, and peace.
  - 6.1 History show us that we are emerging from a long period in which Christian and Catholic life was defined largely in terms of religious practice - a «me and God» or «me and Jesus» piety.
    - 6.1.1 The sins which counted were the readily identifiable violations of the laws of fasting and abstinence, and of sexual norms. Rejection of the Lord's call to love one another did not surface often in the confessional.
  - 6.2 Up until the 1950's, the virtually obsessive anti-communism of Pius XII set the tone, and (despite some interesting exceptions in the US), we could speak of a general alliance of churchmen with the political right. (For example, Spellman and his view of the Vietnam war as an anti-communist crusade; the support for Coughlin in the late thirties and McCarthy in the early fifties.)
    - 6.2.1 However, on some fronts today, a few Catholics wonder if may be facing something just as ridiculous: the alliance of churchmen with the political left.
  - 6.3 The problem we face is determining the precise relationship between, on the one hand, Jesus' words and actions, and, on the other, our task as Christians to be in the world and not of it, but at the same time, called to transform it.
    - 6.3.1 An historical-critical reading of the Gospels shows that we must avoid the temptation of confusing Jesus' message with whatever political causes, and social and economic proposals are dear to us and to those with whom we associate.
    - 6.3.2 I think this is a major problem for the proponents of liberation theology; and I would suggest that, on the American scene, it is not prima facie evident that Brian Hehir's positions are more Christian or Catholic than Michael Novak's.
    - 6.3.3 In the name of the Christian message, we can have

Catholics of the right and left «excommunicating» each other because they differ on judgments which, although they have moral overtones, are essentially political.

- 6.3.4 Church history tells us that whenever churchmen have entered an alliance with the political order, the results have been disastrous.
  - 6.3.5 The Constantinian turning point as the first evidence of that.
  - 6.3.6 So was the breakdown of the medieval world, which prepared for the alienation of the cultural elite in modern times. (The church's alliance with the feudal order lasted at least until the French Revolution.)
  - 6.3.7 The loss of the working classes in Latin Europe is another.
- 7 Fourth: the emancipation of the laity (or the de-clericalizing of the church), and the quest for a viable spirituality (a way of experiencing the power of God in our lives).
- 7.1 The problem itself was largely created by the Gregorian Reform of 1076.
    - 7.1.1 The monasticizing of the church: the ideal members of the clergy are monks; monks are the full members of the church; laypeople are Christian in a secondary and derived sense.
  - 7.2 Clericalism in this form was to dominate the church for almost 900 years; there are strong traces of it in the call of Pius XI in 1923 for «Catholic Action» - defined as «the cooperation of the laity in the work of the clergy.»
    - 7.2.1 As though the great Christian tasks of teaching and of sanctifying are essentially the work of those in holy orders, but, under rigid control, the laity may be allowed a share in these tasks.
  - 7.3 But church history shows that in the earliest days of the church, particularly in the gentile communities, there was no essential distinction between the clergy and laity.
    - 7.3.1 In the Pauline communities, this distinction cannot be

documented.

7.3.2 The Greek word which meant almost exactly what «priest» means today was not used by Paul to refer to those who had some important role to play in his communities. He used *episcopos*.

7.4 This implies the need to go back to our original sources (scripture) to understand the problematic relation of clergy and laity.

7.5 The same is true of the need for a genuinely contemporary spirituality.

7.5.1 Many today feel the need to experience the transcendence of God at the very moment they are engaged in wordly work and pursuits.

8 Fifth: the role of women in the church. An examination of our history shows us some interesting facts:

8.1 By the time the Christian era began, the position of women had been declining for about 1000 years, both in the gentile mediterranean world, and in the Israelite-Jewish world.

8.2 It is this fact which makes a number of statements and actions attributed to Jesus almost polemic in their thrust - for example, Jesus' speaking to the Samaritan woman.

8.3 The same is true for Paul:

8.3.1 His obvious reliance on women in his apostolic activity. Broad agreement among exegetes today that the prescription on women keeping silent in church was an addition toward the end of the first century. 1 Cor 14:34 (*sigatosan* and *hypotassesthosan*) contradicts 1 Cor 11:5 (*propheteuosa*).

8.3.2 His use of *diakonos* for Phoebe.

8.3.3 His use of the word «apostle» in speaking of women; reference to Apollos and Prisca.

8.4 What church history shows us above all here is that the rather subservient role which has been allotted to women, and the systematic exclusion of women from sacramental ministry, which many in the hierarchy want to trace back to Jesus himself, is a reflection of social attitudes of the first century

(a period which culminated the slide in the position of women from patriarchal times down to the beginning of the Christian era).

8.5 When we examine the role of women in the church (and we cannot exclude sacramental ministry from the discussion), we ought to sharply distinguish the theological question (that is, is there any solid reason for excluding women from sacramental ministry?) from the practical question (should women be ordained in the near future?).

8.5.1 Mention the problem of the «Twelve Apostles.»

8.5.2 If we had only the traditions of the Jewish-Christian church, then the tradition of male dominance would be the only one known (even though it did not go back to Jesus).

8.6 This implies that, in terms of what we know of the earliest history of the church, the question of the ordination of women could and should be openly discussed in the church. It is not an issue which can be settled by Roman fiat (and it will be good when Rome comes to realize that in the modern world issues cannot be settled in that way).

9 Sixth: church teaching and the conscience of the individual.

9.1 Church history shows us that it is above all in recent centuries that Rome has taken a more authoritarian posture, particularly on moral questions.

9.1.1 The birth control fiasco is both a symbol and an outstanding example of this.

9.1.2 It is particularly in this century that churchmen have insisted that they are not simply providing useful, even indispensable information for the formation of conscience, but that they intend to preempt the conscience judgment of the Catholic, and say, effectively, «You must decide as follows.»

9.2 Church history shows us that this concept of jurisdiction and this approach to teaching cannot be documented at the beginning. It is connected with a series of strange developments in which the church, starting about the sixth century,

successively narrowed its base. These developments have had far-reaching effects and have impeded the *catholicity* of the church.

- 9.2.1 It became western and not eastern, with the resulting separation between Rome and the East. (This was a major factor in the growth of juridicism.)
- 9.2.2 In the sixth and seventh centuries, it forced the language of Rome on the converted Germanic tribesmen.
- 9.2.3 In the Reformation it became southern European as against northern European, and it left the church with a slightly alien aura in the non-Latin lands of Europe. The church emerged from the post-Reformation polemic, saddled with Bellarmine's definition (perfect society).
- 9.2.4 In a series of sad episodes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (1645 - 1742), it affirmed this cultural bias against the ancient civilizations of the east (India and China).
- 9.2.5 In the nineteenth century, the church became not merely southern European, but Roman, and Romanità became the fifth mark of the church, (particularly under Pius IX) and this epoch lasted until Vatican II. This «Romanness» is probably as important as any factor in creating the tensions between the church in the US and the papacy.
- 9.2.6 And at the same time (and in the early twentieth century) the church turned its back on the modern world and on modern methods of understanding scripture (Pius X and the anti-modernist witch hunt).
- 9.2.7 This attitude surfaced again, briefly, at the end of the life of Pius XII: *Humani Generis*.
- 9.3 This problem of the conflict between church teaching and individual conscience often surfaces today in terms of the question of what is really essential to Christian faith and what is peripheral.

- 9.3.1 Traditionally, Catholics have pointed to seven sacraments, three grades of ministry, enhanced, at Vatican I, by papal primacy and infallibility. It was argued that these elements were there at the beginning, although the *awareness* that they belonged to the church was something which emerged in time.
- 9.3.2 But are all these elements of divine origin in the sense that they were there at the beginning?
- 9.3.3 Or is it possible that they unfolded in the history of the church - that is, that they were *added* (with what justification does not concern us here). Contemporary historical scholarship could be summed up this way:
- 9.3.4 Jesus himself did not specifically institute all seven sacraments, nor did he found the threefold ministry, with its distinction of bishop, priest, and deacon, all of them distinct from laity.
- 9.3.5 Some of the sacraments, as well as the clergy / laity distinction, go back to free decisions of the church in apostolic times. (Perhaps because they were indispensable ways of preserving what Jesus intended.)
- 9.3.6 A historical view suggests that we could think of elements of church life as though they were located in concentric rings at varying distances from Jesus himself
- 9.3.7 The innermost circle, grouped nearest to the center, includes those elements which go back to Jesus.
- 9.3.8 A community which would continue his ministry of preaching and teaching.
- 9.3.9 The existence of a visible sign which seals entrance into the community. Baptism may have become this sign after Jesus' time.
- 9.3.10 The existence of a meal at the center of the act of worship.
- 9.3.11 A community which receives and extends God's forgiveness.

- 9.3.12 The second circle would contain elements which came into being in NT times, but cannot be traced to Jesus.
  - 9.3.13 Some of the earliest credal statements.
  - 9.3.14 The scriptural canon.
  - 9.3.15 Some would add the sacramentality of confirmation, marriage, and anointing, as well as a ministerial priesthood, distinct from the priesthood of all the faithful.
  - 9.3.16 And some would include here papal primacy and jurisdictional power.
  - 9.3.17 The third circle, still farther from the center, would include elements which have been around for a long time, but which do not have a really solid NT pedigree.
  - 9.3.18 The restriction of ordination to males.
  - 9.3.19 The restriction (with some minor exceptions) of decision-making at church Councils to bishops.
  - 9.3.20 The fourth circle would include elements which are basically disciplinary in character: regulations on fasting and abstinence, priestly celibacy, requirements for the form of marriage, and many others.
- 10 Where do we turn today for inspiration and light, as we strive to be the community of disciples? Here church history has an interesting lesson:
- 10.1 Every great revival and renewal of church life has come about as the result of a return to the *word of God* and as the result of allowing the NT to play a normative role in the life of the church and of the individual Christian. (Note carefully that this has nothing whatsoever to do with fundamentalism. Fundamentalism *precludes* any understanding of scripture.)
    - 10.1.1 The church discovered and expressed its identity in writing the NT.
    - 10.1.2 Ignatian spirituality and the founding of the Jesuit order.

- 10.1.3 Calls for the reform of the church in head and members which were voiced from late medieval times to the eve of the Reformation.
- 10.1.4 The genuine spirituality of the Lutheran Reformation.
- 10.2 Can this revival and renewal happen again today? Only if the biblical renewal which gained momentum in Catholic life about thirty years ago and then weakened in the wave of activism which followed Vatican II can be put on course again. Why did it lose momentum?
  - 10.2.1 A combination of gushy excitement about the changes decreed at Vatican II, *and* the activism which is part of the American character.
  - 10.2.2 Fundamentalism (which made some inroads among Catholics during this period) also played a role in discrediting interest in scripture.
- 10.3 We will have to stop automatically referring to all developments of which we approve as «the work of the Spirit» or as «prophetic witness.»
  - 10.3.1 We need a *criterion*, a measuring stick, which can judge and criticize what clergy or laity want and like at any particular point in history.
- 10.4 The real Spirit is always the Spirit of Christ; and the Christ was the one who defined himself in the word and work, the life and death of Jesus - the one to whom we have privileged access through scripture, if we read it, not in a naive or fundamentalistic way, but critically and historically. We will have to renew our confidence in the power of the word of God to liberate the individual believer, and then work through him/her to change the world.
- 10.5 This return to the sources would have a powerful effect on each of the six problem areas mentioned earlier:
  - 10.5.1 It would put institutional and charismatic elements of the church in right relationship. It would make it possible for us to live without *uniformity* in church life, but with a deep concern for *unity*.

This would have important repercussions on the ecumenical movement, and it would lead to a more Christian, NT notion of the role of the Bishop of Rome.

- 10.5.2 It would enable us to deal with marriage in a way which was at once idealistic and realistic, because it would make it possible to distinguish Jesus' intentions from those of the Canon Law tradition. It would give us the basis for a new approach to sexuality and other moral questions, which would be based neither on Roman recalcitrance nor on pop-psychology-permissiveness.
- 10.5.3 It could give us an understanding of the relationship of the NT to the political, social, and economic problems of the day, which would go beyond the amateur economics (and equally amateurish marxism!) of liberation theology.
- 10.5.4 It would ground a genuine emancipation of the laity and a declericalization of the church.
- 10.5.5 This would be the only long-term solution to the priest shortage.
- 10.5.6 It would take the debate over the role of women in the church out of the hands of the two polarized groups which have been conducting it: the more radical feminists, on the one hand, and arch-conservative churchmen, on the other, and it would put discussion on a sound basis (e.g. the obvious ministerial role of some women in the Pauline churches).
- 10.5.7 It would suggest a way of understanding freedom and dissent by showing that some things have an excellent NT pedigree, while others have little or none. It would force us to ask a very good question: «Can we demand of ourselves or of others, as a condition of being Catholic, what Jesus of Nazareth did not demand?»