

Priesthood and Revolution

Where Christianity and Marxism Part Ways

By Fr. Herbert McCabe, O.P.



(Ade de Bethune)

We find among Catholics two opposing attitudes to the priesthood. There is the conservative view, which sees the Church as a kind of feudal society, in which each man has his proper status with corresponding “duties of his state.” On the other hand, there is the progressive view, which models the Church on the democratic society, in which citizens are not differentiated by their status but by their functions. I think that both these views are mistaken, because both place the Christian ministry essentially within the Church; both hark back to the idea that the basic job of the priest is to celebrate Mass and otherwise minister to the faithful. In the decree on the priesthood of Vatican II, however, the position is quite otherwise: “Priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have as their primary duty the proclamation of the gospel of God to all men.” It has to be admitted that the same document later on asserts that “Priests fulfill their chief duty in the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice,” but that occurs in a section that seems plainly to have been inserted to satisfy those who wanted to safeguard the practice of daily Mass. The emphasis of the Vatican decree on the priesthood, like the one on bishops, is on the proclamation of the gospel to all, whether Christians or not.

As I see it, the basic error is to see the Church primarily as a community. The Church is not first of all a community; it is first of all a movement within the community of mankind. We ought not to have simply a functional view of the clergy within the Church; we ought to press our functionalism much further; we ought to have a functional view of the Church within mankind. It is only within communities that people have functions. You could not have the function of being a teacher or a plumber except within a society which demands and makes sense of teaching or plumbing. The progressive sees the Church as a community and the priests as functional within it. I, on the other hand, want to see the only community as that of mankind, and to see the Church as functional within it. It will follow from this that the important distinctions in the Church— those we call sacramental, the distinctions established by baptism/confirmation, ordination/consecration, and marriage

baptism/confirmation, ordination/consecration, and marriage—are not functional in relation to a community called the Church.

Fundamentally they are functional in relation to the community of man. The bishop or priest is not a man with a special job to do in the Church; he is a man with a special job to do in the world. Any differentiation within the Church is a mere consequence of this.

Being a bishop is a function not in a Church but in society, just as being a plumber is a function not in a Church but in society, with this essential difference; the plumber's job is immanent in the society; it is part of the fabric of the society, whereas the bishop's job is essentially revolutionary or subversive of the society. (I am using the word revolutionary to do the work that in the past was done by the word transcendental, because the latter word has lost its Christian significance; in fact, it has lost both its paradoxical and its historical character.)

If we are to understand the Christian ministry, it is as well to take our start from the New Testament. It seems to me that the most illuminating text is the passage in John 17 when Christ, in the course of his prayer before his arrest, commissions his apostles. Speaking to his Father he says: "I passed your word on to them, and the world hated them because they belong to the world no more than I belong to the world." I think it is extremely significant that the first thing said about them qua apostles, as bearers of the word, is the world will hate them.

They are to be set apart from the world, not in the sense of avoiding it or "being removed from it," but in the sense of being sacrificial victims, the consecrated ones of the world. They are to stand askew to the world in some way. And this consecration, Christ explains, is simply their commission to the truth, to the word that he has passed on. Jesus says that their consecration will be like his, hinting that just as the world cannot tolerate his "standing apart," his independence of its structure, and so hates him and finally kills him, so they, too,

what it is like to be a teacher or a father. Hence, the bafflement of young people looking at the priesthood.

I have said relatively little about the way the Church measures up or fails to measure up to its mission. Yet, it seems to me, it is here that the “credibility” of the Church is to be judged, not according to whether it is a community in which we can begin to satisfy our personal need for human warmth and kindness and decent personal relations, but according to whether it is an effective force in the revolutionizing of the world. Someone might complain, “But this is to set the Church too hard a test. Looking at its history you could hardly claim that it has ever been in the forefront of the revolution. Isn't it enough for it not to impede the revolution too much and meanwhile to carry on its private task of exploring religious questions and propagating kindness?” No it is not enough. Such a Church would not be worth belonging to. The Church stands or falls by its revolutionary character; and despite all that may be said against it, despite the constant betrayal of its mission by its leaders, despite the competing claims of other movements which may look revolutionary for the moment but which will inevitably become conservative in the next generation, my personal view is that there is nowhere else to go.

The first sign of real recovery of Christianity will be the hostility of the world. “I passed your word on to them and the world hated them.” If the world, the powers of the establishment, does not hate the Church, her ministers and her people, it is because we have successfully concealed from the world the character of the word that has been passed on to us.



(Ade de Bethune)

are ultimately to be consecrated by violent death.

Jesus then speaks of those others “who through their [the apostles’] word will believe in me.” He clearly envisages a distinction between his missionaries and those who come to believe through their teaching. The belief in question is the belief that Jesus is “from God,” that his opposition to the world, or rather his transcendence of it which provokes the hostility of the world, is divine and not satanic. Jesus is manifestly dangerous to the world; belief in him consists in seeing that his destructive power is not evil but mysteriously good, that if the world will let itself be destroyed, it will find not merely death but a new life. The whole purpose of all this, Jesus goes on to say, is that “they may be one.” The believers are themselves to be one in a new way and in this way they are to bring about unity in the world.

The “world” here in St. John, it seems evident enough, is a political concept. It is a form of relationship among men, a style of society typified for St. John by the Roman colonial empire—a kind of human organization and unity based on the domination of man by man. Jesus sees his task and that of his followers as the subversion of this kind of society so that it may be replaced by a society with a new kind of unity. “Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you.” His object is a society sustained as society by love, the presence of the divine Spirit in man.

The attitude of St. John to “the world” is ambivalent. Michael Davitt, the nineteenth-century Irish revolutionary, was of the opinion that Ireland was a horrible country; he was also deeply in love with Ireland. These are not incompatible views. In the first case he meant by Ireland certain structures of political power, in particular the institutions of land ownership; in the second case he meant by Ireland the structures of communication among men which constitute the Irish people as Irish—their traditions, religion, language, environment and all the rest. He felt that the people

constituted by the second structures were victims of the first structures. Out of this dual viewpoint came a revolutionary movement called the Land League. (This movement was denounced by the Irish hierarchy. One Archbishop McCabe, the story is, described the women members as “immodest and wicked” and was promptly made a cardinal.)

The movement known as Christianity arose from a similar ambiguity of attitude toward the world, an attitude attributed to God. It is indeed the attribution of this attitude to God, the acknowledgment that Jesus is “sent from God” that lies at the root of faith for St. John.

Christianity is a movement of change within the world, a movement which seeks to transform the institutional relations between men in order the better to express the relationships which constitute them as human; this movement is to be hated by the world, is to come in conflict with the power structure of the world, but is eventually to “overcome the world.” “This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.” It therefore seems not unreasonable to describe the Church as a revolutionary movement within the world. The preaching of the gospel is a danger to the values of the world and to the economic and political structures which embody these values.

If I may borrow some words from Cardinal Suhard:

We have to aim at structural reform. A structure corresponds to an aim. Now we have to change the aim; instead of aiming first at producing, we must aim first at giving all men a truly human life. In place of capitalism, a mere technique of production in which, in the absence of a higher rule, production puts man at its service, we must put an economy which will be at the service of men, and not just of some men but of all men...something is needed quite different from a more or less extensive modification of our

namely the clergy. This, in summary, is what I am saying. The Christian minister is dedicated (set apart) for the task of penetrating the world. The fact that the Church's task is, in a sense, a political task, should not make us see it as essentially a job for the laity, with the clergy acting as back-room boys or as the army supply corps. We should, rather, see it as a task for the Church as such, in its structures. If the bishop is a leader in the Church, it is only because he has been given the task of being a leader in the revolutionary struggle against the values and political forms of the world. Insofar as he neglects this primary task it becomes increasingly difficult to take him seriously as a merely ecclesiastical leader. This is, after all, our experience, is it not?

According to what I have called the “progressive” view, the priest is distinguished from the rest of the laity simply by having a specific sacramental task in the Church. This seems inadequate to me. The ministerial priesthood is not defined by a single set of tasks but by a relationship to the priesthood of all Christians. The business of the priest is to be one jump ahead of the Christian life of his age; it is his job to be constantly representing to the Christian people and to the world, the evangelical, revolutionary significance of their Christian, secular lives. It is every Christian's task to be critical and interpretative of his world; it is the ministerial task to be interpretative of the Christian life, to see through it to the gospel that it more or less adequately embodies. It is to seek out and represent to men the Christianness of their Christianity, the evangelical character of their lives. This is what promulgation of the gospel means.

If this is so, then there is from age to age no constant activity that belongs to the priest as such. We may use some general purpose phrase like “promulgating the gospel” but what this means in terms of revealing the gospel as present, and destructively present, in this or that age, must necessarily change through history. When history seems to be moving exceptionally fast, then what it is like to be a priest will change very rapidly, much more rapidly for example, than

revolution remains at a more superficial level. There is bound to be conflict as well as cooperation between those whose ultimate aim is the humanizing of man and those who regard this end as illusory except in terms of divinizing man.

But if we say that the task to which the priest is dedicated is the proclamation of the gospel, how can we say that the priesthood of the Christian minister differs from that of any baptized Christian—and differs, according to *Lumen Gentium*, not merely in degree but in quality? Is it not every Christian's task to proclaim the gospel? The only answer, it seems to me, is in terms of dedication. A priest is dedicated to this task in both senses of the term—in the personal sense of being a dedicated man and in the institutional sense of having been dedicated to it by the community. You cannot lead a revolutionary movement as either a job or a hobby; you can only lead it if you are recognized as dedicated to and embodying the spirit of the revolution. It seems to me similarly appropriate that people should expect their ministers to embody the spirit of the gospel in their whole lives and not merely in the sacramental job they do. A revolutionary leader, however, is not simply a charismatic figure. He cannot rely simply on the enthusiasm he inspires as an individual. Precisely because he embodies the revolutionary spirit of the people, he speaks for them as a movement and hence exercises direction and authority in the movement. His authority resides in the spirit of the movement itself, but the criterion of his authority is his recognition by the movement as a whole.

It is in this way that we distinguish the central path of the movement from by-ways which may lead nowhere. As I see it, ordination is the recognition by the whole community of the dedication of an individual. Such recognition is a creative act of realization; that is, it is both a realization in the sense of a discovery and in the sense of an act of making real. Ordination is like baptism, or for that matter any other sacrament, in that it is a creative interpretation of a situation. All Christians are lay people but some are more lay than others,

of our institutions. More is needed even than a revolution, for 'revolution' means turning round, and a situation which is turned around is not necessarily improved or even changed. There must be a total renewal.

Without quibbling about words like revolution and renewal, that seems a fair account of what Christianity is concerned with.



(Ade de Bethune)

If then we are to see the Church as essentially a revolutionary movement within the world, how are we to assess its relationship to other, more overtly revolutionary movements? In particular, what are we to make of the consistent opposition that the Church has in fact shown to such movements?

Throughout the prophetic books of the Old Testament, especially in the psalms, runs the theme that the dominative society, which is maintained in stability by domination and fear, is linked to the rejection of Yahweh. It is linked with the worship of idols, of gods, and the inability to believe in Yahweh, the “non-God,” the one whose demands are not essentially in terms of this or that religious practice, but of righteousness and justice between men. Together with this goes firstly the idea that this is not due simply to the individual bad choices of men, but that all men are somehow the victims of this setup, that we are constituted as men in a system of

relationships that inevitably compromises us, and secondly the idea that release from this situation is to come somehow through the anawim, the dispossessed, the outcasts of society.

In a well-known passage, Karl Marx speaks of

a class in civil society which is not a class of civil war, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal...which claims no traditional status but only human status...a sphere finally which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all the other spheres of society, without therefore emancipating all these other spheres.

Marx saw quite clearly that the freedom of the oppressor is as illusory as the freedom of the oppressed. For him there can only be true freedom when the relationship of domination which alienates man is destroyed, and he thought that the one force in society which could do this was that of the poor, the dispossessed.

Jesus, you might say, carries this idea a good deal further. He says it is the poor who will possess the kingdom of heaven; that is to say, it is through the poor, the anawim, that the kingship of God is to replace the kingship of man over man. And Jesus' notions of poverty and of alienation also go further. For him, the liberating class consists of those who have sunk below even the poverty of the proletariat, who have gone beyond a poverty inflicted from outside to an even deeper poverty of spirit, those who have reached a total dispossession even of themselves. This is what Jesus means by faith. A willingness to accept destruction, a willingness ultimately to accept death. That is why he links faith with crucifixion. He refers to his crucifixion as his "baptism" and as his "consecration" and he demands the same of his disciples. This acceptance of death is, for

comes to think of the Church as a community that is part of the established political order. Then what threatens the established order will seem to him a threat to the existence of the Church. This has been the typical attitude of at least the higher clergy for centuries. Similarly, the dishonest hostility of the Marxist for the Christian arises out of the fossilization of Socialist society into an authoritarian form and fear of the Christian Church as a possible form of organized opposition to the government and its domination. The actual world scene is governed far more by the interplay of these two dishonest hostilities and the natural reactions to them than by the conflict of the two honest differences I mentioned above.



(Ade de Bethune)

To return now to the question of the Christian ministry: As I see it, the Christian priest is not to be understood on the model of the political leader in either a feudal or a democratic society because the Church is not a society. It is a movement of transformation, a revolutionary movement within the society of the world. The likeliest model for the Christian minister, therefore, is the revolutionary leader; indeed, the priest should be a revolutionary leader, but one who goes in and through what in today's terms is called a political revolution to a depth which today we call metaphysical or spiritual. This interpretation of the revolution in its ultimate depths is the proclamation of the gospel; it is the call to faith as the radical overcoming of the world. Such a mission will inevitably lead to conflict not only with "the world" but also with those whose

Irish rebel who was, I believe, the first Roman Catholic Marxist, pointed out: “One great source of the strength of the ruling class has ever been their willingness to kill in defense of their power and privileges...the readiness of the ruling class to order killing, the small value the ruling class has ever set upon human life, is in marked contrast to the reluctance of all revolutionists to shed blood.”

The first thing, then, that I want to say about the revolutionary mission of the Church is that it cuts deeper than what would ordinarily be called the political revolution. The Christian is entitled to feel that the political revolution, precisely because it does not reach to the heart of the matter, to the ultimate alienation of sin, is liable to betray the revolution itself. The achievements of the political revolution, insofar as they are thought of as ultimate aims and not as pointers toward an absolute future, may themselves become forms of the dominative society. The mission of the Church is to be—in a slightly different sense from Régis Debray—the revolution in the revolution. To proclaim the gospel is to interpret the revolution in revolutionary terms, not to see it as merely the substitution of one imaginable social order for another.

The honest hostility of the Christian to the Marxist is based on the Marxist's apparent denial of the absolute future, the Marxist's belief that man can ultimately arrive at being man, with no further transcendence beyond him, in other words the Marxists' atheism. The honest hostility of the Marxist to the Christian is based on the belief that concern with an ultimate alienation, with sin and with death, is a technique for avoiding the demands of the historical present. The Marxist-Christian dialogue, it seems to me, starts from these two honest hostilities.

But vastly more important in practice is the dishonest hostility of both sides. The dishonest hostility of Christian for Marxist arises out of the Christian's betrayal of his own revolutionary purpose. It arises when he forgets that he is involved in a revolutionary movement and

Jesus, the beginning of life. It is the emancipation not just of the poor that finally brings about the kingdom (or non-kingdom) but the emancipation of the dead. The final revolution is the resurrection of the body.

It is characteristic of revolutionary change, as distinct from simple reforms, that its ultimate aim is not describable in the available language. The concepts and descriptive language at our disposal in any age are determined by the whole complex of institutions that go to make up that age. It follows that a proposal for the complete transformation of the structures of a community cannot be expressed descriptively, except very approximately, in the language of that community. Fortunately, the range of expression of our language goes beyond its descriptive use. We are able through symbolism to point toward what we cannot yet express descriptively. Thus, whereas a revolutionary can state precisely a number of things he wants to get rid of (and he may to this extent be confused with a reformer who wishes to remove abuses while retaining the present basic structure of community), when it comes to trying to say what his new world would be like he has to leave the language of sociological prose and employ imagery.

He has to hope that his listener will understand the direction in which he is pointing. An important consequence of this is that it is nearly always possible to betray the revolutionary by taking him literally; to fulfill all that he seems literally to be demanding and yet to move no nearer the revolutionary goal. This indeed is exactly what we see happening in neo-capitalism. It is possible to give away all I have and deliver my body to be burned and yet have not charity.

The sacraments of the Church are precisely the imagery in which she speaks of the world of the future, the coming kingdom of God. What sort of relationship is there to be among men? The kind that is hinted at, symbolized in the Eucharist; it is to be a political reality

but not one that can be described in today's political terms. A revolutionary is not merely one who tries to make political changes; he is out to change the meaning of the word politics. When the kingdom can be described in political terms, in its own political terms, the Eucharist will be no longer necessary. But until then we point toward it in symbolic terms. And, of course, there exists an equivalent of neo-capitalism to emasculate the revolutionary character of the Church. This takes the sacraments not as symbols of the future, but as literal realities. We may see the liturgical movement, the whole concentration on the parish community, the people of God gathered around the altar and so on, as in some danger of embodying this "neo-capitalist" mistake. The sacramental life has been valued literally for its own sake—as somebody might value the nationalization of steel for its own sake—instead of seeing it as an image of the world at which we are trying to arrive.

It is in this sense that the revolutionary is concerned with the transcendent, with what cannot be accommodated within the categories of our time, of our world. He points toward an unimaginable future. He is there to tell us that the future is unimaginable. It is in this sense that we speak of God as the absolute future—not as the relative future which will in turn become present and domesticated, but as what eternally summons man to self-transcendence, to living into the future.

If what I have been saying is approximately right, then we may say that Christianity is Marxism carried a great deal further. Christian and Marxist both recognize the need for struggle against specific anti-human forces, and both see human history as the story of this struggle. Both seek to end the dominative society, and both see this coming about through a redemptive movement that has no stake in that society, a redemptive community of the poor. Both, moreover, in their different ways—pre-destination for one and the materialist theory of history for the other—claim that they are not merely proposing an ideal, a possibility that we may happen to choose, but

that they are recounting facts, revealing the plan upon which human history is based, whether we like it or not. Marx, however, only claims to be dealing with the alienation brought about by conditions of life, ultimately by conditions of labor; Jesus claims to deal even with the alienation involved in death.

Corresponding to this is the difference in their notions of the redemptive community. For Marx, it is those dispossessed of themselves through the conditions of their work; for Jesus, it is those who have faith, those who are totally stripped of themselves, those who are crucified. For Marx, the proletariat claims no traditional status, only human status. His redemptive community is left with its human powers, above all its numbers. It is by these human powers—the power to handle a gun—that the armed violence of the bourgeois state is to be overcome. For Jesus, the redemptive community has dispossessed itself even of its human status, and its revolutionary force comes from the depth within man which is beyond man, from the power of grace. Involved in faith is the confidence that by dying to ourselves, by giving up all forms of self-assertion, we will receive again our humanity, we will rise again from the death of faith. We will "come forth from the baptismal font" transformed by the divine life, so that we become an explosive force in the world, a force which will, as St. Paul puts it, "Do away with every sovereignty, authority and power" and finally even with the domination of death itself.

It seems to me that the operation of this restored, divinized humanity does not necessarily preclude the use of guns or any other human power. I think there are times when the constant violence of the class-structured society reaches such an intensity that it can only be contained by revolutionary violence. There is this difference, however: for the revolutionary, precisely because of his vision of the non-dominative community, violence is an exceptional and regrettable measure; for the dominative society, institutionalized violence is the very condition of its existence. As James Connolly, the