Conscience and Authority - The Christchurch Lecture

By John Kennedy
Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1545 (1969)

One of the challenges in everyday life evident among and between young and old is the harmony, or lack of it, between Conscience and Authority. This article is based on an address given at a seminar at the Christchurch University in late 1968..

Mr. John Kennedy is editor of the N.Z. Tablet. He is a journalist of wide experience and has written here on a subject of importance in this day and age.

Conscience

In his latest book, "Is It The Same Church?" the distinguished lay theologian, Frank Sheed, talks of what he calls the myth of the pre-conciliar Church. This is that the Second Vatican Council altered everything and that the sooner we realize it the better.

Sheed agrees that there have been changes, but he wonders whether they are as far-reaching, or as deep-seated, as many people imagine.

We could start by quoting one of the instances he gives to support his contention that it is the same Church. The instance I speak of concerns the first part of my subject, Conscience. I quote:

People talk as if the Second Vatican Council had introduced a revolutionary innovation called conscience. But, in fact, the Council did not go an inch beyond what I - taught by the Church - had been teaching for forty years [that's forty years prior to the Council].

I remember vividly a lunch-hour meeting in the twenties on Tower Hill, a few yards from the spot where Thomas More was beheaded, I explained to a questioner that if I came to believe that Christ was no more than a man of deep spiritual genius, I should be bound in conscience to leave the Church, and might still find eternal salvation - indeed, that my soul might be in more danger inside the Church than out. The questioner said I was lying; the crowd agreed with him. I got it from St. Thomas Aquinas.

It's not new

Conscience, or man's knowledge of it, is not something new.

But first let's define it. We can say simply that it is the faculty by which a person is convinced that some actions are right and ought to be done, some are wrong and ought not to be done, and others are indifferent in their morality and may be done or not. It is present in every person and it is the final subjective arbiter of his choice of good and evil.

It is not something that began with Christianity. Nor is it something the Church drummed up to make us toe the line. It stems from a primal feeling in man that he is somehow responsible,

accountable, for his actions. No culture has yet been found in which it was not recognized, though sometimes under different names.

The ancient Egyptians, for instance, referred to it as "the heart," as in such texts: "The heart is an excellent witness; he must not depart from its guidance." The Hindus see it as "the invisible God who dwells within us," while Socrates, who died because he heeded its call, spoke of it as "a divine monitor." Seneca, the Roman, had a neat term for it - "a holy spirit dwelling in man, an observer, a watcher of good and evil in us."

Freedom of conscience

We live in an age when freedom of conscience has become respectable, though some of its manifestations, as we shall see presently, are not always so. Even in ancient Greece there were limits on it in that citizens were bound to worship civic deities even though they might not agree with them.

Our Lord brought with him a keener appreciation. He rejected unduly literal obedience to the law and insisted rather on a peaceful and intelligent love of God and men. The first Christians, it is clear, commonly held that by natural law all are free to follow their consciences and that punishment for religious offences should be left to God.

There was a shift on this later, when the Church gained its legal freedom, and became, so to speak, part of the establishment. It came to regard heresy and schism as social evils that should be punished by the State. This is the view you find in such great doctors of the Church as Augustine, Chrysostom, Jerome and Aquinas.

Conscience, the guide

St. Thomas did conclude that a man should always follow his conscience and that an act resulting from an invincibly erroneous conscience was free from guilt. But he believed that invincible error could arise only in the most unusual cases. He excepted pagans and Jews, but he regarded heretics and schismatics sourly. And we all know where this type of thinking led - to the Inquisition and a lot of things we would sooner forget.

Possibility of error

When the Reformation came, spawning a proliferation of creeds, it naturally provoked considerable thought on this matter of conscience, and many Catholics came to see that the possibilities of error in good faith were much wider than they had thought previously. They accepted the legitimacy of tolerance, but they were suspicious of it, if only because the Protestants made so much of it.

Yet even in those days Catholics who knew their faith had no doubt of the primacy that a man must accord his conscience before all authority. Take that magnificent layman, Sir Thomas More. At his trial he spoke thus of conscience:

You all must understand that in things touching conscience every true and good subject is more bound to have respect to his said conscience and his soul than to anything else in all the world.

Thomas More, as a matter of fact, did recognize certain limitations on the rights of conscience in regard to civil authority. In his "Utopia" he wrote that if a man had opinions which went against the very foundations of the State he should keep silent about them in public, though he might discuss them in private with the learned. I'll wager there are a good many prelates, policemen and

politicians around the world who wish that more people and priests these days would take a hint from "Utopia."

The Popes speak out

In the past 100 years or so the Popes have repeatedly referred to liberty of conscience, stimulated, it is fair to say, in no small degree by the fact that great portions of the world have come under the sway of totalitarian, godless governments which exalt the State at the expense of the individual. [Even in 2004 godless totalitarianisms or other totalitarianisms still attempt to control the lives of millions of the world's peoples.]

But they did speak. Pius XI, for example, talking on the Fascists, condemned what he called "outrages against the wholesome and precious freedom of conscience." And in 1931, in a letter to the Archbishop of Milan, he set out a principle which is still very relevant.

Catholic societies, be said, did not engage in politics as such, but they claimed the right to instruct men's consciences about them. That still has an application because there is an obligation in conscience on Catholics to help form correct social and political values, even though it may not always please civil authorities.

Pius XII and John spoke strongly for it, too. And then along came the Second Vatican Council to deal with it in two documents - that on "The Church in the Modern World" and that on "Religious Freedom".

In correlating the Church's thinking on this issue in these two documents, the Church was simply spelling out something that was already clearly laid down in Canon Law, Article 1351: "Nobody may be forced to embrace the Catholic Faith against his will."

If you leave a man free in conscience to decide his religion, you reaffirm in no uncertain manner the primacy of conscience.

Basis of formation

But the matter does not end there. Implicit in all the Church's teaching on conscience is the view that it is not merely enough to know that you have a conscience; it must also be formed. How, then, is this to be done? The answer to this is important because it touches on the whole matter of the relationship of conscience towards authority, whether civil or ecclesiastical.

There are certain basic points.

PRONE TO ERROR

First, the human person, being limited, and exposed to the consequences of original sin, is prone to ignorance and error. A realization of this is imperative if he is to form his conscience properly.

It means that it is possible to err in making a judgement of conscience, even when we make it in good faith. Hence the need to take every possible step to ensure that the basis for the judgements we make is as sound and as wholesome as possible.

MUST BE FORMED

The second basic point is that if a man is to be faithful to his inherent dignity, then this matter of forming his conscience is an obligation. And, once it is formed, it must be followed faithfully, since observing it is the only condition on which man can achieve his ultimate destiny.

A SOCIAL BEING

The third point is that we must never forget that man is a social being and that this must be taken into account not only in the formation of his conscience but also in the relationship between that conscience and authority. We live in a society which includes other people. They, too, have rights, and these must be respected. We can't exalt our own conscience by trampling on those of others.

For the Christian, of course, Our Lord spelled out the only possible basis for this social aspect - love of our fellow men. We have to co-exist with our fellows, and Our Lord made it perfectly clear that there is but one basis for that co-existence - love of God and love of one's fellows. If these are present in our conscience, then our conscience becomes the only guarantee and protection of a man in his social relations.

If love of God and love of man are present, then another love follows, as day follows night. This is love of moral good, the desire to follow the divine law.

Seen in this way a properly formed conscience is a positive thing which can establish a working relationship with authority and which, in so doing, contributes not only to the moral well-being of its subject, but also to that of the society around him.

Freedom of conscience, seen in this light, can never be, as some people seem to make it today - a cloak for moral indifference or selfish individualism. What we have to do is to achieve as much freedom as possible, bearing in mind the common good, our duties as Christians, as members of Christ.

Authority of conscience

Now this leads inevitably to the question: How much authority has conscience itself? It has never been better brought out than by Cardinal Newman when he wrote in a letter to the Duke of Norfolk:

Conscience is the aboriginal vicar of Christ, a prophet in its information, a monarch in its peremptories, a priest in its blessings and anathemas. And even though the eternal priesthood throughout the Church should cease to be, in it the sacerdotal principle would remain and would have sway.

It is, in short, the supreme authority for a man. Vatican II saw it as his most secret core and sanctuary, a place where he is alone with God, whose voice, says the Council, echoes in his depths. John Henry Newman put it somewhat more bluntly when he said that he would willingly drink to the Pope, but first to conscience and then the Pope.

That does not mean that it is infallible. Like every other judgement we make, it can be mistaken. There are many things done in the world by people, whose consciences are not at all troubled, that are an affront to God and man.

That this should be so does not mean that we tear down conscience; it means, rather, that we build it and form it so that these situations do not arise. And this is where the Church has a very special role.

There is but one final yardstick on this matter of the authority of conscience, and that is the moral law that has been built into each of us by our Maker. Frank Sheed puts it this way:

God did not make us and then impose laws. He made us according to law. If we misuse an engine it begins to creak, grind, make knocking noises. A disturbed conscience is the equivalent of this when what we misuse is our own self.

How to know it

Cardinal Newman illustrates this problem of conscience coming to know the divine law and its authority by using the analogy of the moon reflected in a lake. When the lake is still we get a near perfect circle of golden light. When a wind ruffles the surface the moon is still reflected, but only in sparkles and flashes with blackness between.

If we want to know what the moon is really like we must look at the moon itself because we should get a very odd idea of it if we saw it only in a lake. If we want to know the moral law in all its clarity and certainty, he goes on, to look at our own nature is not sufficient either; we must look at the law in itself as God has taught it.

The authority of conscience comes from its role as the voice within us telling us to follow the moral law. If we are to do that we must know that law. And, since that law is divine, binding, in knowing it we bind ourselves to follow the judgements our conscience makes on the basis of its knowledge of that law.

No easy matter

It is not easy in this modern age to develop this sense of authority in our conscience. We are exposed to pressures that our fathers never knew. We live in a society where a large part of the mass media actively propagates sentiments that are permissive, shallow; self-righteous, indifferent and selfish.

We live in an age where more and more people seem to think that the norm is that what is right for me is good and that what is not in my self-interest is wrong. We live, moreover, in an age when these are translated into powerful social and community pressures, an age in which it takes great courage to stand against these pressures. That is all the more so because they can be presented in such reasonable colours, can be made to sound so plausible, so seemingly sensible.

Like a computer

How we resist these pressures depends upon ourselves. Sometimes I am tempted to see conscience as a kind of great computer. It's not a bad analogy. A data processor feeds into his MMH IBM computer a mass of information. The computer sorts it, analyses it, and comes up with the answer in a fraction of a second. And that answer must be right - provided the machine has been properly programmed and provided all its circuits are working correctly.

Now if we view conscience as a mental computer we can say that at any given moment programmed into it are the spontaneous reactions of our nature (which may not always be wholly sound), the moral standards accepted by the society in which we live (and they can be a mixture of good and bad), and whatever moral teaching we have acquired.

That's our data processing, and depending on how well it has been done, we come up with an answer. If we are not programmed right, we don't get the right answer. But in the circumstances it is the only answer we can expect.

And since it is the answer of conscience we have to follow it.

Conscience and Ecclesiastical Authority

In the matter of conscience and ecclesiastical authority, the first point to be made is to ask why Christ instituted the Church and why He gave it its mandate.

The answer to that is simple enough - it was to teach the way He had laid down, to teach it in His name and with His authority. And those who heard it heard Him.

It is fair comment to say that any person who is a Catholic, that is to say, any person who has made a judgement in conscience that this is the true Faith, must also, in conscience, hearken unto what that teaching authority that Christ established says.

If he finds himself in a situation where he disputes the doctrines it lays down, then he opts out, of his own free will. There may be a clash between authority and conscience here, but there is certainly no infringement of conscience.

As Frank Sheed said, if he sincerely believed he was right and the Church wrong, then he would be bound to follow his conscience. And he could be in danger if he didn't.

Under the law

The next point to be made on this matter of ecclesiastical authority is that we will find ourselves in a very barren situation if we just place ourselves under a law that tells us what is commanded and what is forbidden and leaves it at that.

And yet, to some extent, this was a position that applied to many Catholics until recently. The Church had spoken; that was that. If you asked them the why or the wherefore, they didn't know.

They failed to realize that a knowledge that a law is there is not enough, that we must grasp it in its entirety, that we should know instinctively that what it demands is in itself good or that the one who commands is good, and therefore his commands are more likely than not to be good, too.

Otherwise it would be rather like giving a man who didn't know left from right a fast car and expecting him to give way to the right at the first intersection be came to.

Many of you are probably parents. In this issue of conscience and ecclesiastical authority the point will come across more plainly if I say that it is my experience with children - and I have six of them - that when they are very young they do what you tell them even though they cannot always comprehend the reason why.

Trust is vital

Whether they do this depends in large measure on whether there is trust, the feeling on the part of the child that his parents are good and that what they want for him or from him will be good. And as they grow they come to know why you want these things and they come to see that they are right and reasonable.

Something the same applies in our relationship to the Church.

There must be trust, there must be the feeling that this thing that is asked of us is good; in other words, like children, we must constantly grow in knowledge and trust.

It is against this background, that we can see that part of the trouble about conscience versus authority in the Church today stems from the fact that many Catholics followed the letter of the law without understanding its spirit. It was an attitude that you might find exemplified in some of the old examination of conscience sections of some prayer-books.

Now, however, the Catholic finds that the Church expects him to stand fairly and squarely on his own feet. It is treating him like an adult; his problem is to learn how to behave like one. To some extent in the past, we turned in on ourselves; we can no longer.

There is no problem about the Church having authority. The injunctions Our Lord gave Peter, the Apostles and those who came after them were simple, clear and incapable of being misunderstood. "Go and teach all nations" and "Behold I am with you all days," and so on. There is no room for hair-splitting there.

The Magisterium

That's why we admit the existence of the magisterium, the teaching authority; that's why we accept the jurisdiction of the Pope and the College of Bishops; that's why in our own dioceses we look for guidance in faith and morals to our bishop, for he is Christ and the Church in that diocese.

But while we give all this to the Church and to the Pope and the Bishops, we also demand certain things in return. We expect that the authority of the Church will create the necessary framework for order, if the standards it insists on are to be observed. We expect that it itself will observe that framework.

We demand that it shall be clear in its teaching, that it may erect a bulwark of clear law so that we may be preserved from a blind, unthinking obedience to it, an obedience that might disintegrate under pressure because of ignorance or misunderstanding.

Church must listen

We have the right to expect that authority in the Church will listen to us. This, of course, is set out specifically in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which says:

The laity have the right, as do all Christians, to receive in abundance from their sacred pastors the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the assistance of the word of God and the sacraments. Every layman should openly reveal to them his needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which befits a son of God and a brother in Christ. An individual layman, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which he may enjoy, is permitted, and sometimes even obliged to express his opinion on things which concern the good of the Church.

It was necessary that the Council Fathers did say this because ecclesiastical authority is sometimes exercised in an arbitrary high-handed way. And it does not always take kindly to being questioned. Certainly if one is going to stand up to someone in the Church, then one needs to know that not only has one the right, but also the obligation if one feels sufficiently earnest in conscience.

Equally, that statement in the Constitution on the Church also places an obligation on the Church, or the officer of it concerned, to listen - and to listen properly and in charity.

Confusion

To some extent authority is an unfashionable word today, even in the Church. Part of this stems from a confusion in the average Catholic's mind as to where this ecclesiastical authority begins and ends.

He knows that he must, if be is to remain a Catholic, obey his bishop in matters of faith and morals. But what about administrative decisions? What about an argument over the design or cost of a

church, or whether a new hospital should be built or more done for the poor or the Negroes (one of the burning issues in the American Church in 1967 and today)?

What about a situation such as that in San Francisco where Archbishop McGucken is pushing ahead with a $7,000,000 cathedral, even though sections of his priests and people have protested that this is a scandal when the city is full of stinking ghettos? Were the seminarians, priests and laity who earlier this year [1968] picketed the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington in protest against the spending over the coming years of some $30,000,000 on it, acting in scandalous disobedience, or were they right in so far as they followed their own consciences? [Were they also being iconoclastic? What SHOULD be our attitude to building edifices to the glory of God? Are our attitudes consistent with the faith that built the 13th century marvels to the grandeur of God?] Can we respect authority if we see it abused? And, if it is abused in one instance, does not this lessen respect for it in others by creating doubts?

Need for discussion

Leaving faith and morals aside, for these are the undoubted prerogative of the magisterium, there has got to be discussion in these other matters. The phrase, "Oh, you'd better not say that or raise this, the bishop wouldn't like it," is still too often heard. It is a dangerous one.

It not only reduces the people of God to a flock of mindless sheep; it also deprives their shepherds of the very advice Vatican II was so concerned that they should get.

Indeed, there should be nothing worse than being a bishop surrounded by a crowd of yes-men, priests and laity alike, who do their darnedest to prevent him hearing anything that might run counter to what they think he thinks.

This sort of situation can and does exist in the Church, just as it does in the world at large. If we honestly believe that there is something that we must put to an ecclesiastical superior, then we are obliged to put it. Vatican II is quite emphatic. It is a matter of conscience. And it is certainly showing no disrespect for authority.

We lessen ourselves

And if we don't, if we get cold feet and take the easy way out, then we lessen ourselves because we chip away some of the inherent dignity that is in every man. Remember this - if there is one thing the Catholic Church stands for, almost alone in this mixed-up world, it is this - the tremendous dignity of each man, every man.

There will always be criticism in the Church. It would be an unhealthy state of affairs if there were not. Father Haring, in "The Liberty of the Children of God" warns against a superficial service of the law, both Church and civil, and says:

To remain bogged down in a simple knowledge of the law carries with it the danger of a dull lack of criticism, or of a criticism proffered without love; both manifest a lack of moral insight and of genuine moral effort. Lack of criticism (he goes on) is indeed an indication of subordination, but it could never be considered a true and dignified kind of Christian obedience. One who never criticizes, whether he realizes it or not, is actually guilty of foolishness and lust for power. He is a stone with which dictators build their streets. If he is fortunate he will get a good superior, but he will never be able to enter fully into the real moral and religious aims of that superior. Who knows, whether or not the one who is afraid to criticize, who today follows the ruler without any problem,

may perhaps tomorrow, thoughtlessly and without misgiving, obey the unenlightened words of the spirit of the world?

Father Haring here has surely put his finger on the great danger that faces us. It is simply that unless we form and know our consciences and exercise them honestly, unless we know what authority is, then our sense of the moral law will wilt to the point where we will find it suits us best to go with the mob.

Let us but add one thing on this matter of criticism of authority. It must be responsible. It must be rooted in the gospel law of freedom, love, truthfulness and humility because these are the things the Church is pledged to live by. And these are the things by which she should act in meeting criticism.

Conscience and Civil Authority

When we come to the field of conscience and civil authority we must remember that it is the mission of Government to promote the common good, to establish a framework in which man may live and develop in accord with his human dignity.

Catholics generally hold that civil authority is of God, not by any specifically divine intervention, but by the fact that God is the author of nature, and nature demands authority.

History shows us very clearly that few human societies or institutions can survive for any length of time unless there is a firm and stable principle at work. It is, except in the dreams of the anarchist, indispensable for the common welfare of any society. The alternative is chaos.

In the achievement of this men accept certain restrictions or laws that may even involve restraints even on freedom of conscience. One couldn't have a situation, for example, where we went around beating up Protestants simply because they disputed the Real Presence. And similarly, we can't exact vengeance in kind from one who harms us. The State attends to it.

These things are straightforward enough. In our modern society the challenges to the Christian conscience are greater than they have ever been.

Consider the issues we face - abortion, euthanasia, family planning, poverty, world hunger, the development of weapons whose use would amount to collective suicide, the development of a mass media that smothers morality, opinions and values.

Abortion

Take abortion, for instance. How do we react here if the Government proposes a law that goes against our conscience? Have we the right to insist that our belief in conscience shall prevail when others in the community, including some good Christians, approve it?

Our duty in conscience is clear - that we have to bring out Catholic teaching, that we have to point to the consequences such legislation may produce, that we must convince the legislators that what we say is not something born of a blind religious prejudice but rather of a true concern for the whole community.

We would do well, for example, to bring home to them the wisdom in the teaching of St. Thomas who, in the name of morality, rejected laws which, under the pretext of idealism, brought about greater evils than they prevented.

But supposing the Government legislated. What then? Should we denounce it as un-Christian, say it had forfeited our allegiance and reach for our pea-rifles? The answer, of course, is that whatever the civil law may or may not permit, we would be bound by the law of the Church and in conscience to refrain from it.

What others did would be none of our business. That's their affair. It's hard enough to look after one's own conscience without indulging in self-righteousness about others.

This situation now applies in Britain, and there the Hierarchy has reminded Catholics of the Catholic teaching and has set out guidelines for Catholic doctors and nurses. What could be simpler? [In such a short address Mr Kennedy had no time to draw out the implications of the Law of Charity to our Neighbour when that neighbour is mistreated, as happened when Slavery was legal, and similarly when my pre-born neighbour has his life brutally ended under 'legalized' abortion.]

Other issues

But let's get away from these matters, which are pretty straightforward, and get on to such issues as civil disobedience, protest marches, demonstrations in defiance of the law on political and social issues, such as Vietnam? Where do we stand here? What, in conscience, do we owe authority?

Things that are Caesar's

Our Lord Himself strengthened the authority of the State when He said that man should render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's and unto God the things that were God's. The early Christians knew this meant they were to be good citizens. And they were. But they drew a sharp line, and died for it, when the State tried to move into God's field.

Those lines became somewhat blurred when the Church emerged from the persecutions and when she became so much a part of the fabric of human society that to break away from or challenge her teaching was seen as a threat to the State, too. All that changed with the Reformation, but there is still a very basic respect in Catholic teaching for the authority of the State.

We see this most noticeably when a war breaks out. Catholics in each country involved, usually with the full blessing of the hierarchies, rally round the flag.

The most recent and most awkward of these was the Second World War. For, whatever disputes the German Hierarchy may have had with aspects of the Nazi programme, there is no question but that they exhorted their people to fight loyally for the fatherland when Hitler launched his aggressions.

Some exceptions

Most of them did. But a handful of priests and laity didn't - and they were killed. Men like the Pallottine priest, Father Franz Reinisch, who was executed because his conscience forbade him to take an oath of allegiance to a regime which he regarded as Godless. And men, like Franz Jaggerstatter, an Austrian peasant, happily married, father of three, who died rather than go against his conscience.

In his case he told his bishop that his conscience forbade him to take military service. His bishop, Dr. Fliessen, of Linz, told him that he was not responsible for the temporal authorities or their actions, that, on the contrary, he had an obligation to obey them, that in any event his primary responsibility was to his family.

Jaggerstatter was not convinced; he stood his ground and was beheaded in circumstances surprisingly similar to those in which Thomas More died.

He died because he believed he must follow what his conscience told him even though the civil authority said otherwise, and even though his family suffered. In his homeland today some revere him as a martyr; more say he was a deserter and traitor and that the men who deserve to be honoured are the men who answered Hitler's call, even though it was to an aggressive war.

Martyr or deserter?

What do you think he was? Martyr or deserter? Right or wrong? Or is his true position perhaps best summed up by Dr. Gordon Zahn in his book, War, Conscience and Dissent? I quote:

It is part of the mysterious dynamic of the Church that she brings forth saints suited to the needs of every age. Given, for instance, a social order corrupted by sexual licence or the pursuit of material wealth, there will suddenly emerge a holy man or woman whose life is dedicated to Christian chastity or voluntary poverty.

In this day of the conformist, the other-directed man, we need saints who will assert the right and duty of the individual Christian to judge the demands of Leviathan.

We need saints who, when the occasion arises, will refuse to render unto Caesar that which is not Caesar's, even though such a refusal carry with it martyrdom.

Franz Jaggerstatter dared to pass such a judgement. He made such a refusal and paid that price. We may not canonize him. But we can tell his story and point to the lesson it teaches.

Reassess priorities

The lesson is simply this - that each of us in these troubled times must reassess our own conscience's order of priorities to see how they stand.

This, indeed, is more important than making any good resolution to match his total commitment; for once that proper order of priorities is there, the commitment will follow.

All of us are subject to pressures or obligations that we use as pretexts for cutting moral corners. The commitment Jaggerstatter called for was nothing short of spiritual perfection. And he saw this as a goal, not for an exalted few, but one to which every Christian was bound to strive.

In a world where uniformity, linked to unquestioning obedience to orders of the secular ruler, has become ever more prevalent, it is good to be reminded of the occasional need for opposition, and, in particular, opposition inspired and maintained by religious commitment. There can be greater dangers in giving an unquestioning first priority to the will of a government.

You may say that I have drawn a long bow in mentioning Jaggerstatter. Not so. There are Jaggerstatters active in the world today. I would refer you to men like [1968] Father Groppi in Milwaukee, who has been fined and gaoled for fighting for justice for the Negro; to those whose conscience has refused to permit them to go along with un-Christian policies in countries such as Rhodesia, South Africa; to men like Father Philip Berrigan, recently gaoled for six years for a Vietnam war protest. [1968]

We Catholics must examine our consciences in these matters. It is not so long since a band of Catholics spat on Father Groppi; bishops have been picketed in America because they spoke up for the Negro. And they weren't Protestant pickets.

Never popular

There can arise social orders that are too evil for Christian support and that there are situations in which prophetic disruption is to be preferred to stable complacency. I don't expect you to accept that unreservedly because prophets and martyrs have never been popular people. They have a habit of focussing conscience on things it would sooner ignore.

If we do get such a regime, the fault in the end lies with the people. Because its very existence implies a corruption that could not help but produce something evil.

Danger of compromise

We live in an age when the tendency is to seek compromise, that we tend to judge courses of action not by their inherent right, but by whether they are practical and likely to achieve their effect, that we suspect that those who stand firm, especially on moral issues, are fanatics.

We look for excuses for accepting society's standards as the norm of conscience because we know that if we can find a modus vivendi, life will be so much more comfortable. There is tremendous danger here, a danger that is all the greater because it is insidious and because people make it sound reasonable. But that doesn't make it right.

Clearer answers

The Church must provide clearer answers on some of these things than it has done in the past. In Pope John's Pacem in Terris, a statement foreshadows this, and crystallizes what I have been saying:

If civil authorities legislate for or allow anything contrary to that order and therefore contrary to the will of God, neither the laws made nor the authorizations granted can be binding on the consciences of the citizens, since God has more right to be obeyed than man.
