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CHRISTIAN ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR

I read once a remark – I believe it had been made by Bishop Fulton Sheen – that in our times we are witnessing the end of Christendom and the renaissance of Christianity. If by Christendom we mean the sum-total of institutions, laws, customs and civil practices inspired by the message of the Gospel and therefore serving as protection and help to christian living, then it is not hard to see how this is truly happening in our day and age. There was a time in certain countries, and for that we do not need to go very far back, when it was anathema to speak of separation of Church and State. It was taken for granted in the so-called Catholic nations that the civil constitution should recognise the Roman Catholic religion as the State religion, and that therefore the latter should enjoy a privileged position *vis à vis* the State, whose duty it was to protect and defend the Church in every possible way.

It is very doubtful, as we know, whether such a state of affairs really helped the Catholic religion after all. One thing we know: today Christianity does not need such a State protection, in fact it can do better without it. This has been clearly recognised officially by the Catholic Church today, as we read in the *Declaration on Religious Liberty* issued by the Second Vatican Council.¹ The same point is made even more eloquently by the present Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in his first encyclical called 'Redemptor Hominis', addressed to all men and women of good will. In the third part of this important document the Holy Father writes: 'I appeal in the name of all believers throughout the world, to those on whom the organization of social and public life in some way depends, earnestly requesting them to respect the rights of religion and of the Church's activity. No privilege is asked for, but only

¹Vatican II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, n. 2.

respect for an elementary right. Actuation of this right is one of the fundamental tests of man's authentic progress in any regime, in any society, system or milieu'.²

Whether or not we are prepared to accept it as a fact that to the crumbling of Christendom there corresponds in our age a renaissance of Christianity, there can be no doubt that our world of today is different from that of our fathers and grandfathers. At times we do have a feeling, if I am not mistaken, that we have been brought up and prepared for a world which no longer exists. We are somehow feeling as misfits, lacking at times the ability to adapt ourselves to the needs of the times, and that is precisely because we are unable to detect the signs of the times.³

In dealing with the whole subject of christian ethical behaviour, which when all is said and done is the ultimate goal of the christian education we are expected to impart to the young students entrusted to our care in our schools and universities, we cannot prescind from the signs of the times. True, there are ethical principles which must form the basis of any ethical behaviour, especially if this behaviour is going to be truly christian; these principles, in their turn, are in themselves unchangeable, being logically derived from the very nature of man as redeemed by Christ. But the ethical behaviour of an individual human person will be also determined by his particular situation and by the special circumstances of time and place, as well as by the needs and rights of other people who live with him and around him. Christ has redeemed all men. But Christ has also redeemed the world in which man lives and which has been entrusted from the beginning by the Creator to man, that he might dominate it, 'work' it and thereby continue God's plan of creation. In the light of all this we can understand what christian ethical behaviour means in the concrete, in this world of ours, today.

What first of all characterizes this modern world of ours is change. We are living in a rapidly changing world. Nothing seems to be stable any more. Before us lies the whole spectacle of a world of men and things, pulsating with life, thought, activity and achievement perhaps more than ever before. As *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, of Vatican II, puts it, today 'profound and rapid changes are spread-

² *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 17.

³ See *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 4.

ing by degrees around the whole world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man, these changes recoil upon him, upon his decisions and desires, both individual and collective, and upon his manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and to people. Hence we can already speak of a true social and cultural transformation, one which has repercussions on man's religious life as well'.⁴

History itself speeds along on so rapid a course, than an individual person can scarcely keep abreast of it. Thus the human race has passed from a rather static concept of reality, to a more dynamic, evolutionary one. In consequence there has arisen a new series of problems, a series as important as can be, calling for new efforts of analysis and synthesis.

As a result of the above, deep changes in the social order have also taken place in recent times. The traditional local communities, for example, such as father-centred families, tribes, villages, various groups and associations stemming from social contacts, are resenting more and more from such rapid changes. It is also noteworthy how many men and women are being induced by circumstances and need to migrate, to settle down in a far-off country and thereby to change altogether their manner of life. This phenomenon, as we know, is taking place in central Europe on a scale hitherto unknown, creating new and untold problems to hosts and guests alike and bringing about the formation of what is today called the 'Fourth World'.

Every change implies a crisis, although not every crisis necessarily leads to disaster. For change implies life, and life is the negation of death. Therefore change is in itself a good thing, provided it is not made for its own sake, but for the sake of something better. Unfortunately this is not always the case with the changes we are witnessing in our times. As we know, the change of attitudes and in social structures has frequently led to calling accepted values into question. This has been and still is especially true of young people, who often become impatient of their seniors and of what they stand for and thus render still wider the generation gap. As a result, parents and educators frequently experience great difficulties in discharging their task.

Such changing conditions are bound to exert a strong influence on religious convictions and moral behaviour. On the one hand, a

⁴*Gaudium et Spes, ibid.*

more critical ability to distinguish religion from a magical view of the world and from the superstitions which still circulate, purifies religion, makes it more personal and leads to a more vivid and committed sense of God. On the other hand, growing numbers of people are abandoning religion in practice, limiting themselves, if at all, to practices in which the service of others is involved, but shunning any so called 'church activities and practices' out of mistrust for the institutional Church. Within the individual person, too, there often develops an imbalance between a concern for practicality and efficiency and the demands of moral conscience based on fixed moral norms.

Another characteristic of the world today, influencing the ethical behaviour of the Christian, is technology. We are living in a technical age. We know well enough what a technical age is, what are its characteristics, its benefits, its dangers, its illusions. We have heard much about the technical progress which has been registered in our age, even in our lifetime. The man of today is absorbed in scientific research, in new technical ventures and interests, in machines and gadgets, and his mind has become coldly calculating, wrapped in his work and technical achievement, absorbed by the thought of his past successes and by fresh hopes of never-ending progress in his control of inert matter. The immediate reality enthalls him. His hopes often have no inspiration beyond the present life.

For a Christian, this extraordinary technical advancement is a good thing, for he sees in it man's response to his Creator's command to dominate the earth and continue God's creation. But the Christian is also aware that such a technical progress was not meant by the Creator to be an end in itself, nor was it intended to render man himself less of a master and more of a slave.

On this subject, again, the present Holy Father makes some pointed remarks in his already mentioned encyclical letter 'Redemptor Hominis'. 'The essential meaning of this kingship and dominion of man over the visible world, which the creator himself gave man for his task, consists in the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and in the superiority of spirit over matter'.⁵ Indeed there is already a perceptible danger that, while man's dominion over the powers of nature is making enormous advances, man himself should gradually and in

⁵ *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 16.

various ways let his humanity be subjected to the world and become himself subject to manipulation by the production system, by his environment, by the impact of publicity and by the means of social communication.

The man of today, therefore, seems to be threatened by the very things he produces. This is the drama, which can easily develop into a tragedy, of present-day human existence. Man therefore lives increasingly in fear. He is afraid of not being able to control altogether the tremendous forces of nature which he is beginning to discover within matter itself; he is afraid that it can become the instrument of a self-destruction, compared with which all the cataclysms and catastrophes of history known to us seems to fade away. And we know very well that such fear is not unfounded: we can only think of the destructive power of the atomic and hydrogen bombs, or of the atomic plant in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, which only recently almost spelled disaster to many thousands of human things over a wide area.

Such a situation, created by the technical age, gives rise to a fundamental question. In the Pope's own words, the question is: 'Does this progress, which has man for its author and promoter, make human life on earth more human in every aspect of that life? ... Do all the conquests attained until now and those projected for the future for technology accord with man's moral and spiritual progress? ... In men and among men is there a growth of social love, of respect for the rights of others, for every man, nation and people, or on the contrary is there an increase of various degrees of selfishness, exaggerated nationalism instead of authentic love of country?'⁶ These and similar questions we must ask ourselves today, with absolute honesty, objectivity and a sense of moral responsibility, before we can decide what our behaviour should be as human persons and as committed Christians in face of the present situation.

A third characteristic of our time is that we are living in a secularist society. It is not simply a matter of decline in religious practices and moral standards, but rather a radical change of attitude in regard to matters religious as such and the whole institutional status of religion in society.

As we have pointed out above, separation between Church and State has come to stay in almost every country of the world.

⁶*Ibid.*, n. 15.

Christianity has lost the protected position it enjoyed in many countries of Europe. But also on the level of the individual, the same trend is apparent. The Christian code of conduct is no longer regarded as the unquestioned norm which, though often transgressed, is still valid. Very many people, perhaps, the majority even in the so-called Christian countries, no longer believe in an objective moral code. A person's behaviour is his own affair.

Inevitably this rejection of the institutional Church is interpreted by many as a rejection of religion. This is however not necessarily the case. Many things around us, in fact, show that mankind is in many ways becoming more humane, more concerned about values, and man is becoming more concerned about his fellow-men. Perhaps we can even say that the man of today is becoming more and more religious, in that he is responding more generously to the insights of his own nature, fashioned in the image of God. And if he is becoming more religious, we should perhaps also say that he is becoming more Christian, even if anonymously so, to use here the concept of 'anonymous christianity' developed by the theologian Karl Rahner and others after him.⁷

The crisis facing Christianity today is, therefore, very different from previous crises which revolved around individual points of disputed doctrine. The new challenge poses more fundamental questions. What is the function of religion? What is the Church's role in society? How should ecclesial institutions change to serve man's changing insights and needs? This was indeed the problematic facing the Second Vatican Council, concerning itself as it did with the erosion of the whole religious foundation of society, with the growing divorce of the Church and the world.

The secularist movement, which is still growing in strength, panicked at first the Christian Churches. In an attempt to keep up with the secularising trend, some sought an uneasy compromise at all levels, from an overemphasis on the primacy of conscience to going dangerously close to taking God out of religion. Others have retreated into their ecclesiastical fortresses, dismissing the new thinking as entirely bad and without trying to sort out the wheat from the chaff. What is needed is a new understanding of the relationship between religion and society, between the Church and the world.

In the foregoing first part of my paper I have tried to give a pic-

⁷ Anita Röper, *The Anonymous Christian* (Sheed & Ward, New York, 1966).

ture of the kind of world that we see emerging today and of the kind of society that is being conditioned by it. In the rapidly changing world of ours, fertilized so to say by the seed of a technical age, we are witnessing the birth of a secularist society. What sort of a creature this new society will be as it grows, develops and reaches adult age, it is for the future to tell. One thing is certain: man is the protagonist of this evolving drama. But the question is: will he be the hero thereof? or the victim? When all is said and done, the answer to such a question will depend on man himself, to the extent that he will play his role responsibly and maturely as befits a creature endowed with intellect and free will and crowned with a God-given human dignity. As for the Christian, his divine call is to be not only the protagonist of history, but its maker. His vocation is to be the architect of the new world of tomorrow and to shape its destiny through his own christian ethical behaviour.

What does Christian Ethical Behaviour spell in this world of ours such as we know it to be today? The broad lines of the answer to this question already emerge, I think from the first part. In a more systematic way, however, the answer can be drawn up as follows: christian ethical behaviour today means living a life of faith, hope and charity in the context of, and according to the demands of today's world. These are, as we know, the three theological virtues which, in the traditional teaching of the Church, sum up man's commitment to God as a Christian, implying that christian moral behaviour consists primarily in positive action, and not in the avoidance of evil.

The Christian of today must be first of all a man of faith. The world of today is torn, as it were, between the two polarising forces of liberty and slavery. Never was man so eager for his own freedom, so thirsty for self-assertion and so adamant on fighting for his own rights as today. As a result of this we can also say that man was never so free as he is today, both as individual, and as the member of a nation. Colonialism is a thing of the past and few are the countries, even in the Third World, which have not attained at least a measure of political independence. The past generation has seen all kinds of unions and associations taking shape for the purpose of safeguarding the rights of workers. Women have gained their full civic emancipation in most countries, and their social emancipation, if not yet perfect in every respect, has no doubt made great strides in our own generation.

But can we say that the man of today is altogether free as a person? In many ways he is still enslaved by such dominating forces as pressure groups, political manouwerings, ideologies which present alluring pictures of a paradise on earth that will never be attained, the mass-media with the impact of its distorted information and the alienating force of its propaganda.

The Christian must be a man of faith: he must have more faith in himself and in his fellow human beings, and he must give witness to such a faith by his very behaviour, always uncompromising and motivated by a singleness of purpose which should be so typical of the Christian, believing as he does in God's overruling presence in the world and in the heart of man. He must have faith in the moral values which are proper to him as man and as Christian and which alone are of lasting significance. It is in these values that he sees the foundation of true human liberation, because it is above all these values that satisfy the needs of the spirit. For such values the Christian is always ready to struggle, for them he is always ready to pay a price: he owes it to himself, to his children, to his country. Compromising on this level could mean immediate freedom from annoyances and repercussions, but would invariably lead to further subjection and lasting tyranny.

The Christian, properly enlightened by the tenets of his faith, knows very well where true freedom lies. For him freedom is not the right to do what one wills, but the will to do what is right. True freedom, hence, is not curtailed by the acknowledgement of a moral code, but on the contrary it is enhanced by it; for the moral order, rendered easier if not always more attractive by the light of the Gospel, is based on what is good for man himself and according to his nature.

The man of faith is also the lover of truth. Without truth there can be no real freedom. 'You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free', we read in the Bible.⁸ On these words Pope John Paul II comments as follows in his encyclical: 'These words contain both a fundamental requirement and a warning: the requirement of an honest relationship with regard to truth as a condition for authentic freedom, and the warning to avoid every kind of illusory freedom, every superficial unilateral freedom, every freedom that fails to enter into the whole truth about man and the world. . . . What a stupendous confirmation of this has been given

⁸ John 8, 32.

and is still being given by those who, thanks to Christ and in Christ, have reached true freedom and have manifested it even in situations of external constraint!⁹

Hence freedom is a condition of the spirit rather than of the body or of its environment. And the man of faith, by his uncompromising behaviour, gives witness to this: his body may be enslaved, but his spirit is free. He is free to follow the dictates of his conscience, properly informed and gradually formed by honest behaviour in all circumstances and persevering loyalty to the Spirit of Christ living within him.

Men of such faith, especially among the laity, are needed more than ever today; it is their proper task as lay people to sanctify the world from within and to make the Church present in the world: in the family, at work, in the marketplace, in social and cultural life. 'The layman', as Vatican II says in *Lumen Gentium*, 'is closely involved in temporal affairs of every sort. It is therefore his special task to illumine and organize these affairs in such a way, that they may always start out, develop and persist according to Christ's mind to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer'.¹⁰

The Christian of today must be a man of hope, of great hope. Hope breeds optimism and joy. He must be a living witness of all three qualities, which are so needed in a world that is so short of them. Our technical age has excelled in the production of material wealth and in the creation of things meant to add to man's pleasures and to make his life ever more easy and comfortable.

If we are not cautious, however, this wealth will increasingly become concentrated in the hands of a few, leaving the majority of human beings in the world without sufficient means of subsistence. If there has never been so much material wealth in the world, there has never been either so much poverty and hunger, leaving many millions, especially children, an easy prey to disease and immature death.

In such a situation of great tension between wealth and poverty, between extreme comfort and untold suffering, the Christian's ethical behaviour should have a cathalizing effect, helping to narrow the widening gap and to bring closer together the two extremes. He should resist today's attitude among many of his contemporaries, of regarding work as an absolute value. The increasing pressure on the part of governments, to work more in order to

⁹ *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 12.

¹⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 32.

produce more and so to help improving the nation's economy has created an 'idolatry of work' mentality. Because of work, man has no time left to enjoy the fruit of his own work, to take adequate rest and to cater for the needs of the spirit.

Because of such an attitude, man's main concern today is not his own person, but the things he uses, or rather the ever new demands he creates; his main efforts are not directed towards 'being more', but towards 'having more'. The Christian's detachment from earthly goods for their own sake, his following of Christ the poor in the spirit of the beatitudes taught us by Jesus Christ, 'blessed are the poor in spirit',¹¹ his readiness to share what is superfluous with those who have less than he has and what is necessary with those who have nothing, all this will make him a living witness of his interior conviction that spiritual goods are superior to the material ones, that man does not live by bread alone, that the values really worthy of attainment are the lasting ones and not the ones that perish.

The Christian places his hope on an eschatological kingdom, a kingdom which for him is already here in anticipation, and not altogether in the future. Hence there is always joy in his attitude rather than sadness and despair, his efforts are imbued by a spirit of optimism rather than by a sense of frustration and anguish. By his very presence among his fellow men, irradiating joy around him as a spontaneous outburst of his inner fulfillment and deep satisfaction, he tells everyone that honesty is always the best policy and that behaving at all times according to the dictates of one's christian conscience is always a reward in itself. Here again, as when dealing with faith, we cannot forget that a high price must often be paid, that sacrifice and even suffering are often inseparable from christian behaviour. But the Christian also knows that Someone, upon whom all christian hopes rest, has walked the same way and has made it worthwhile.

In this regard it must be emphatically stated that much of the despair and unhappiness of today's world has resulted in a widespread disregard for human life in all its manifestations. Violence, terrorism and destruction of human life are today a matter of every day occurrence. Innocent people are often the victim of greed and exploitation, and their lives are sacrificed for the sake of contentions between groups or factions. And what about the millions of

¹¹Matthew 5, 3.

innocent human beings who are killed every year, nay every month, even in the so-called civilized countries, before they are even given the chance of being born into this world of men? This 'abominable' crime of abortion, as *Gaudium et Spes* calls it,¹² is the best proof, if such were needed, that modern society has reached the point of utter moral bankruptcy and spiritual dejection.

The ethical behaviour of the Christian must be one of clear and uncompromising opposition to all such hypocrisy. Human life is sacred, for it is God's gift. The unborn has an absolute right to life, and this right is fundamental and independent on any situation or circumstance, whether or not this proceeds from man's free choice. Every Christian worthy of the name must stand for life. He is pro-life person, and this conviction he is ready to manifest without fear and at all times, whether that be in his immediate surroundings, in his political decisions or in his own profession. As a man of hope he believes in life and in all its manifestations, and as such he is against any attempt to destroy or endanger life, whether such an attempt be called abortion, euthanasia, genetic manipulation or test-tube babies, or even for that matter capital punishment.

The Christian finally is a man who inspires love. His whole behaviour must be impregnated with love and motivated by an ardent desire to bring his fellow men closer together. This is what Christ has done, and this is his fundamental precept to his followers: 'Love one another as I have loved you'.¹³ He has saved us by an act of supreme love, and He wants his followers to continue by loving his saving mission in the world.

What would the world be without Christianity and the 'love' element that it has injected into it? There has never been an end to this process of growing in love and unity since the coming of Jesus Christ. Both the social trends of today and the extraordinary means of communication, such as the mass-media and the means of travel in our jet age, have made the human race more concretely one than ever before. All barriers of time and space have now been almost entirely eliminated. And yet we know that man's egoism and the resulting injustices are still causing racial, political and social blocks opposed to one another. Hence wars, great or small, are not yet a matter of the past.

¹² *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 51.

¹³ John 15, 12.

The ethical behaviour of the Christian makes him an instrument of peace, bridging the gap between whoever and whatever is divided by hatred, suspicion and egoism. The Christian is a peacemaker, here again in the spirit of Him who said: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God'.¹⁴ He is happy to be an instrument of God's love in a troubled and divided world, in a divided Christianity, in a divided nation, in a divided family. He is happy when called upon to act as intermediary where there is dispute and to help starting a dialogue where there is suspicion and mistrust. By means of a loving and sympathizing attitude the Christian overcomes every barrier and undergoes every sacrifice for the sake of others. When one loves, one tends to give what one has, and if necessary even what one is.

It is love more than anything else that makes the Christian authentically sensitive to the demands of justice. He knows that, so long as there is rampant injustice causing social disorder of every kind, there can be no possibility of peace and harmony between opposing sides. While he therefore strives with all his might to restore justice where this is violated, he is always the first one to stand for justice and to practice it wherever he is concerned, and this he does with a sense of utter devotion to duty and self dedication, knowing well enough that, while many indeed are aware of their own rights and are not prepared to give them up, very few are those who give a thought to their own duties viz a vis their neighbours.

Justice, honesty and fair play are the characteristics of the ethical behaviour of the authentic Christian, in a world in which such values are very loudly spoken of but very little practiced. And the Christian may very well feel isolated at times in his struggle for justice; the indifference of most people where the rights of others are concerned does not deter him, for he knows too well that what most people do and what is right are two different things.

In another context, the ethical behaviour of the Christian is not less illuminating where his personal relationship to another human being is concerned. It has been remarked that in the world of today there is a veritable inflation of the word 'love'. This most beautiful and most divine of all words was never used so much and has never meant so little. We know very well how frequently today

¹⁴Matthew 5, 9.

is the misuse of sex in the name of love, to what extent has gone the exploitation of sex for self-gratification, how widespread has become the commercialization of sex in all its manifestation, what low levels has reached the debasement of the human person, and especially of the female body, in this regard.

The authentic Christian cannot remain a silent spectator before such a degree of permissiveness and promiscuity in an area which in itself, and in God's plan, is so sacred. Here too his ethical behaviour must be in accord with the teaching of the Gospel as proposed by the Church, considering all sexual activity only in function of marriage, understanding by this an exclusive and permanent relationship based on mutual dedication in love and giving rise to the family.

Faith, hope and charity: the three characteristic marks of a Christian. They stand for all together. No human behaviour can be truly ethical and truly christian without them. It has always been so, it is so today, and will ever remain so, especially during this generation of ours when the christian era is fast approaching the close of its second millenium. The challenge facing the Christian is enormous, just as enormous is the opportunity which he and his fellow Christians have in common of becoming the architects of a new world, of a world that will be more inhabitable and more worthy of man to the extent that its inhabitants will be more ethical in their behaviour and more christian in their ideals. Man alone, however, will not do it, God can do it and will do it through man, or rather with man.

G.K. Chesterton, the great English essayist of a generation ago, was a convinced Catholic if there ever was one. He would be a great European if he lived today. He once wrote: 'We must begin to live as we think, lest we begin to think as we live'. The man whose ethical behaviour is truly christian has too well understood this saying: for he both thinks and lives as a Christian.

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