

Where Have Our Certainties Gone?

By Father Cormac Burke

Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1696 (1977)

Fr. Burke, a former Irish lawyer, held teaching positions at Maynooth College, Trinity College, Dublin, and Catholic University of America. At present, youth guidance and retreat work are his full-time activities. The following article is taken from Catholic Position Papers, October 1976, published by the Seido Foundation for the Advancement of Education, 12-6 Funado-Cho, Ashiya-Shi, Japan.

INTRODUCTION

Fifteen years ago, no more, [in 1961] the Catholic Church appeared to many people as a stronghold of firm faith and clear moral principles in the midst of a drifting and disoriented world. One knew what it meant to be a Catholic: in what things a Catholic believed, and what things he rejected.

A Catholic believed in the Blessed Trinity, in the Incarnation, in an infallible Church. He believed in original sin and in the redemption; in the sacraments and the need for prayer. When he went to Mass on Sundays he knew he was attending a sacrifice. He believed in the real presence of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

He knew he could not go to communion if he were in mortal sin, and he had a clear notion of which things were mortal sins, and which were merely venial; he had in short a clear idea of the nature of sin as an offence against God, and of the need to confess one's grave sins. He venerated the Blessed Virgin Mary, and trusted in the intercession of the saints and the angels. He believed that contraception, divorce and abortion were gravely wrong. And he believed ever so many things more.

Where has all the certainty gone?

No one, until recently, ever thought of presenting the way of a follower of Christ as an easy way. Christ certainly did not present it so. But, at least in the Catholic Church, it seemed a clear way. One saw where it went and where it could not go. The steps by which one followed it could at times be difficult steps, but one knew which steps to take. That is how things were, until recently.

Suddenly (so it must seem to many Catholics) everything has changed. This clear way has been plunged into darkness. The clarity and unanimity have disappeared. It is as if one no longer knew - because one is no longer taught - what it means to be a Catholic and what is incompatible with being one.

Or rather, if one were to go by certain publications which claim to represent a "Catholic" viewpoint or certain "religious - instruction" textbooks published for the use of Catholic schools, or certain sermons, one can say that there is indeed a new idea, a sort of new ideal, of what it means "to be a Catholic".

For them, to be a Catholic today means to profess a vague belief in God without any special type of duty towards him, and a general sense of community towards other men. It means to be a follower of a religion whose main demands seem to be formulated on a social level, being directed as often as not towards "structures", and at times taking on a markedly political character.

What do we hear now of those things that were considered fundamental in the formation of a Catholic conscience those fifteen years ago? Practically nothing: practically nothing about the worship we owe to God and to the Blessed Sacrament, nor about the obligation to go to Mass, nor about the need for personal prayer, nor of the nature of sin as an offence against God, nor of the need for repentance and purpose of amendment and sacramental confession.

The disorientation is particularly striking, well-nigh complete, in the field of sexual conduct. It is a well-known fact, for instance, that students in some "Catholic" schools are being taught that masturbation is not a sin. Nor does one have to go far nowadays to find a priest who maintains that contraception is lawful, and that divorce, and even abortion, should be permitted in certain cases.

What is one to make of this new situation? Above all, in the midst of such confusion, is it possible to find any sure guidelines for our conscience and for our conduct?

Come of age

We cannot overlook the fact that some people regard this situation as highly positive. For them, it constitutes a very definite progress, and is proof that we in the Church have at last "come of age" and achieved a real maturity. They applaud this new and fluid situation that they see within the Church as one that favours individual freedom. And their attitude towards questions of faith or moral conduct (which, they say, were formerly subjected to rigid and monolithic rules) is that they should now be left to the free decision of personal conscience.

Now, perhaps the first comment to be made about this attitude is that it is highly ambiguous. In one extreme it may represent nothing new. At the opposite extreme it could be pure heresy. And, in any case, it evidently solves nothing.

If this attitude means no more than what it says - that personal decisions should be freely made by personal conscience - this is indeed to say nothing new. It is simply to say what the Church has always taught. Catholics have always made their decisions personally and freely. If they did not, the decisions would not be theirs, nor could they be considered responsible for them.

If, however, this new attitude means that Catholics have acquired a new maturity in their free moral decisions because they need no longer listen to or follow the teaching of the Church, this is plain heresy. It is the Lutheran heresy of private interpretation applied not only to holy Scripture, but to any and every rule of faith or morality. But it is not just heresy, it is an aberration. Far from representing an advance or a conquest for freedom, it marks a pitiful retrogression.

CONCERNING CONSCIENCE

It would help to explain this if we first say a few words about conscience itself, which is that faculty we possess of judging the morality of our actions: their moral goodness or badness. It is obvious that conscience, in making its judgements, must follow certain principles or norms. And it is equally obvious that, if conscience is governed by mistaken principles, its judgements will be mistaken. If someone, in such a situation, acts according to his conscience, his conduct will be sincere, but it will also be mistaken (or misguided); and it may well do harm to others.

One could give thousands of examples: a teacher who thinks that racial discrimination is a good thing, a politician who believes in class warfare, a businessman who thinks he is justified in sharp practices, a father (such as Bertrand Russell) who believes that free love is a good thing and educates his children accordingly... Can a person who maintains such viewpoints be sincere? Can he be really following his conscience in professing them? It is possible. We cannot know: only God (and perhaps the person himself) knows.

But do we know that such a person is mistaken, and that if he is really following his conscience, his conscience has deceived him.

All of this underlines a self-evident principle (and the fact that some people today deny it, or seem to overlook it, does not make it any less self-evident): that to be sincere is not always the same as to be right; these are two different concepts that do not necessarily coincide.

Conscience is not infallible

This brief parenthesis should make it easier to assess the suggestion we are examining: that conscience has reached a new maturity that frees it from any need to look to the Church's teaching for guidance.

This suggestion could pass if we had any guarantee that our conscience is infallible and cannot deceive us. If this were the case, then we could solve any problem of moral conduct without the slightest obligation or need to look for standards of conduct outside ourselves. Our own infallible conscience would be the all-reliable source of these standards.

Do any of us really believe things are so? Does experience not teach us that far from being infallible, our conscience can go wrong and does in fact frequently and easily go wrong? Given this, then, the attitude of those who maintain that individual conscience should solve all moral questions on its own (that is, without any reference whatsoever to any type of external guidance or advice or authority) can only be classified as a foolish and empty attitude.

It appears as an attitude of either enormous pride - the attitude of those who despite all evidence to the contrary, endow their own conscience with infallibility (precisely the infallibility that they themselves resolutely deny to the Church), or else of enormous childishness: the attitude of those who, when faced with the evidence, prefer not to think.

Such an attitude, in any event, can only appear as a solution to those who prefer not to be burdened with any genuine moral norm, who do not want to be given any true standard of goodness and badness whereby to govern their actions.

Deciding for oneself

It is really only pride, or a reluctance to think, that can complicate a matter which, when all is said and done, a little common sense shows to be very simple. I think we can make this clear if we suggest a parallel in another area. Let us imagine that two people set out on a trip together and come to a crossroad. One says to the other: "And now, which road should we take?" And the other replies: "Let us decide by ourselves. Let us decide the matter on our own account, but, whatever we do, do not let us think of looking at that map in the glove compartment, or of asking that policeman. Let us not admit that we are men of such immature and limited personality that we have to look to other people to help us. Let us not undermine our freedom by consulting others. Let us decide the matter by ourselves, in all freedom, exclusively on our own account."

His companion will probably reply, "Surely, you don't mean what you're saying? Of course it's we who are going to decide. That's not the problem. The problem is to know how to make the right decision. Of course I want to exercise my freedom and I mean to do so. But in doing so, I don't want to make a mistake. Look, here we have several roads before us, and I know that only one can lead us to our destination. Therefore it is easy for us to go wrong here; I would like to be certain that in choosing I am not going wrong. What I therefore need right now is more information; then I will feel free to decide. This does not mean that I am prepared to accept information from any source. But it does mean that I will accept it from anyone or anything that deserves my confidence.

Those road signs over there; I imagine they are reliable. I doubt they have been put there in order to mislead the drivers. Or that map; my feeling is that it must be the result of a lot of study and experience. Or that policeman; he ought to know where the roads lead to; it's his job; and I doubt that he is going to lie to us.

Therefore, I will read the signs, I will look at the map, I will ask the policeman and, according to their directions, I will drive on... Do you really think that I have proved myself to be a man of weaker personality or lesser freedom for doing so?"

Making a moral decision

Similarly, when faced with a moral decision, one is faced with the possibility of making a right decision or a wrong one, of pleasing God or placing obstacles between him and us, of creating a happier human life for ourselves or of ruining that life. In such a situation any thinking person will try to foresee where his choices may take him; he will want information about the consequences of the various possible decisions before him.

To react so, in the face of any problem of personal conduct, is to act both in conscience and intelligently. To act otherwise is the result of pride or stupidity. It is certainly not the result of thinking.

Some people today, in the name of freedom, of the personal right of each one to decide freely by himself, seem bent on tearing down all the road signs, on defacing any type of indication culled from the experience of the past.

I cannot help feeling that it is a poor service to humanity and to the cause of freedom to cry out to those who stand at the cross-roads of moral choice, cross-roads now stripped of all signs: "Now you can do what you like."

Surely what the vast majority of people like to do at the cross-roads is precisely to know where the roads lead to: whether this road, despite its apparent steepness, will lead me to my destination; whether this other road, however attractive it may appear, will not lead me there because it eventually runs out in the sands of the desert.

I know that I can do what I like. But I also know too that there are many things by which I am easily attracted (things that appeal to my ambition or my passions, for instance) but which are incapable of giving me either earthly happiness or that of heaven, and are quite capable of destroying my potential for any type of happiness whatsoever.

Therefore the only sensible thing to do at a moral crossroad, is to find out exactly where the various roads go, and so be able to foresee the consequences of what one is about to do or choose. Whence

or from whom can we get that more accurate information which we need if we are to make the right choices? From various sources.

The rights of conscience

We can get that information, in part, from our conscience itself, always provided we bear in mind that to listen to one's conscience is a much more demanding process than some people may think.

Some of those who appeal to conscience today seem to regard it as a seal of approval that they can at will stamp on any action they feel like doing.

Conscience is not that; it is not a servile appendix of our selfishness or comfort, a ready Yes-man to our passions or prejudices. It is an imperious voice whose message is often expressed in an implacable No.

We hear a lot today about the rights of conscience. Yet, I feel that we hear little about what seems to me the main right among all conscientious rights: the right of conscience to be taken seriously, to be heeded, even when it is saying No to us.

One needs to have a keen ear if one is to catch all that conscience is saying. And one needs to have an upright will if one is to follow it.

External sources of information

At the same time, not all the information that we possess or can acquire, in order to judge the goodness or badness of our actions, comes from our conscience. All of that information ought to be in our conscience, but not all of it comes from our conscience as from its primary source. It comes from outside. Let us try to explain what we mean.

We have a certain innate sense of moral good and evil, but it is rather rudimentary. Some people, in a similar way, possess a peculiar sense of geographical orientation which undoubtedly helps them at the cross-roads, when they have to choose between the several roads before them. If they are sensible, however, they will not rely exclusively on this simple sense of direction (which, in any case, is probably largely based on something exterior; on the position of the sun, for instance).

If they are sensible, they will act as we suggested earlier on; they will look around to see if there are any signs, or they will buy a map, or consult a traffic policeman. And they will pay heed to the indications that they receive in this way, to the extent they feel these external sources of information are indeed reliable.

At the cross-roads of our moral decisions it is only natural that we should act similarly. It is logical that we examine our conscience, to see what it has to tell us. But it is also logical that we should look to see if anyone else besides our conscience, anyone worthy of trust, can advise us about those decisions and their possible consequences. If it turns out in the end that no one has anything to say, then we will have to decide the matter on our own, despite the fact that we know our conscience may be mistaken and may be urging us down the wrong path.

WHEN IT IS GOD WHO SPEAKS

For a Catholic, the situation is clear. We are not alone at the cross-roads. We have not been left on our own before our moral decisions. God is with us. He has something to say to us, more or less clearly, at each crossroad, at each moral decision.

It is in fact God himself who wishes to speak to us, from within, in our conscience. That is why conscience is sometimes described as the voice of God speaking inside us. This is all right as far as it goes. But the very fact that conscience is fallible means that we can misinterpret that voice of God when he tries to speak to us from within.

So conscience is not enough. There must be something else. And this brings us to a point of the greatest importance. The main guide we possess, to help us in our moral decisions, speaks to us not from within, but from without. The voice of God has spoken about so many, so very many, moral questions. And that voice has spoken outside us, and outside (over and beyond) any simply subjective impressions. It has spoken in the most objective and clearest terms. That voice spoke already in the Old Testament (what are the Ten Commandments but divinely given moral standards?) and it has spoken above all in Jesus Christ.

Truth itself

If Jesus is God, he is, as indeed he claimed to be, the very Truth itself, (see John 14:6)) who can neither be mistaken nor lead us astray. When he speaks clearly about some moral question - about divorce, for example: "let man not separate what God has joined together," that absolutely settles the matter for any Christian. It becomes a subject about which there can no longer be the slightest doubt.

If God prohibits divorce as contrary to the essential nature of marriage, then all the opinion polls or referendums or parliamentary votes in the world cannot cancel or affect that divine prohibition. Referendums or laws can make divorce, or abortion or euthanasia, legal in ten countries. But there is nothing that can make them moral.

When we have God's word about the lawfulness or unlawfulness of something, the contrary votes of men are always votes in the minority.

When God seems to have nothing to say

There are, however, matters about which God seems not to have spoken to us in the Scripture. Despite suggestions to the contrary, contraception is not one of them, for God handed down the clearest possible sentence in this matter in the case of Onan. But it is not hard to think of other examples such as drug-taking or the problems posed by population growth. Here certainly are two subjects of which no mention seems to be made in Scripture. Does this mean, we ask, that God has nothing to say to us about these matters?

It is worth noting that this question can be put in two ways, or, rather, in two tones. It can be put as if it were the question of someone who reaches a crossroad, looks around, sees (or thinks he sees) no signs, and says to himself: "Hard luck! God apparently has not yet come this way. He has forgotten this crossing. Here he has said nothing. And that leaves me free to do whatever I feel like."

Or one can put the same question, but in the tone of voice of someone who, on arriving and seeing no visible directions, asks himself: "But is it possible that there are no signs here? Is it possible that at this crossroad, where I have to make an important decision, God has nothing to say to me, that he is not prepared to help me or guide me?"

The right tone

This is the tone in which I feel the question should be put. I imagine that, on some occasion or other, we have all felt that Christ's contemporaries had the enormous advantage of being able to consult God himself about their doubts, and of being able to receive his advice directly. It is only natural to feel a sort of envy towards them.

Anyone who follows the elementary Christian custom of devoting a few minutes each day to reading Christ's life in the gospels, will feel himself drawn by our Lord's voice with its accent of infinite tenderness, love and encouragement; and sooner or later he is bound to ask himself: "Where is that voice today? Is it possible that it has ceased to sound in this world of ours?"

He will not rest content until he discovers it and can follow it. As one thinks of the apostles in their daily conversation with our Lord, it is only natural to reflect, "How lucky they were!" and perhaps even to pose the question: "Is it not a little bit unfair that we cannot enjoy the same advantage? Has it been our bad luck to have arrived too late, or that he should have come too early, for us to be able to hear his voice?"

He speaks today

The answer is that we are not deprived of that privilege. Christ also speaks for us. He also speaks today. He does so through his Church. When the Church speaks to us in the name of Christ, we have the guarantee that it is the voice of Christ that is speaking to us. He gave us that guarantee when he said to his apostles: "Whoever listens to you, listens to me, and whoever rejects you, rejects me."

It makes sense. The truth of Christ does not vary, but it has to be applied to each new situation. Human nature and destiny are always the same, but each epoch can bring new human situations which have to be focused in the light of salvation.

In the world of 2,000 years ago the problem posed by demographic growth did not exist; the pill did not exist, nor did so many modern methods of euthanasia or abortion. But God has not permitted that these problems, or others that may arise in the future, should be problems appearing at cross-roads devoid of any type of divine directions; problems whose complexity makes us look in anguish to God in the hope that he will tell us how we should deal with them, only to see him turn his back on us and utter a disconcerting "No comment."

No. Our Lord who said "I will be with you always even until the end of the world" has not left us in the dark about these problems. He has spoken, and speaks, about them in all clearness. And he has done so, and continues to do so, in and through his Church.

Christ continues to speak

But, someone may well object, how can you assert that Christ in his Church speaks clearly to us about contraception or even about divorce or abortion, in a moment when the Church itself seems to be a babel of contradictory voices about these problems? The objection brings us back to the point at which we began our essay.

It is true that many voices are raised in the Church affirming contradictory things about these subjects. But this should not represent the slightest difficulty for a Catholic with a minimum of basic grounding in his faith. This does not mean that Christ has ceased to speak in his Church, that he has somehow lapsed into silence. It simply means, at the worst, that some Christians have ceased to listen to him. Or perhaps what has happened is that they have forgotten where they should turn their ears in order to hear his voice. It could also mean, insofar as there has been a lapse into

silence, that it has been on the part of some pastors whose mission and responsibility is to be spokesmen for the truth of Christ. But even if this were to occur in some particular case, it should not disconcert a moderately informed Catholic, let alone shake his faith.

It is all a question of knowing where the voice of Christ is to be heard; through which organs he speaks. And this is a simple matter. Christ's voice speaks to us not only in the Gospel, but in the faith of always: in the tradition and teaching that the Church has maintained clearly and constantly throughout the centuries and in those genuine acts of the Magisterium *which, from time to time, give an answer to what is or appears to be a new question.* (FOOTNOTE: The MAGISTERIUM is the body of authentic teachers of the word of Christ, that is the Pope and the bishops united with him.)

CAN THE CHURCH BE MISTAKEN

When the Church as a whole believes some point of faith or morals, it is not possible that the entire Church should be wrong on that point. Such an error would imply that Christ had not been capable of fulfilling his promises: "Whoever listens to you listens to me," and "The gates of hell (which particularly means the powers of error) will not prevail against my Church." And this is, simply, impossible.

For example, it was not possible (and I am referring to the centuries prior to the definitions of the Council of Trent) that the Church should have been in error about the Real Presence. It was not possible that Christ should have allowed his followers, during more than a thousand years, to worship idolatrously what was no more than a bit of bread.

Similarly it was not possible that the Church, even before the dogmatic definition of 1950, should have been wrong in its belief in the assumption of our Lady.

I would emphasize that these points of Catholic belief enjoyed a guarantee of infallibility even before they had been dogmatically defined. This point needs to be insisted upon in order to challenge the idea that the binding aspect (as some would term it) or the guarantee of the truth (as I would prefer to express it) of a point of faith, only arises after a dogmatic- definition has been handed down. This is not so. Dogmatic definitions are surely infallible. But they are only given about points of faith that are already believed in. And the only things that they add to in regard to these points of faith is a greater precision in the way of expressing them (which makes it really difficult to misinterpret their genuine meaning), and the consequence - for anyone who denies them - of committing formal heresy.

The Pope's mission

The popes and the ecumenical councils under the popes have been defining points of belief from the earliest times. Practically twenty centuries of dogmatic definitions have in fact made it extremely difficult to find a single point of Catholic doctrine whose content is not unmistakably clear. Nevertheless, if an apparently new problem were to turn up and there did not seem to be any clear and unanimous teaching about it, any Catholic would know that one person alone is qualified to clarify the question and pass judgement on it in the name of Christ, for this mission has been entrusted by our Lord to one person alone. And that person is the Pope: "You are Peter, and it is on this rock that I will build my Church.... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." "Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep."

The Church has always believed (and more than 100 years ago the first Vatican Council finally defined it as a divinely revealed dogma) that "The Roman Pontiff, when he speaks ex cathedra - that is, when acting as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he, by his supreme apostolic authority, defines a doctrine touching faith or morals which is to be held by the whole Church - enjoys, by the divine assistance promised to him in Blessed Peter, that infallibility by which the divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed when defining a doctrine touching faith or morals. Therefore the definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves and not in virtue of the consent of the Church."

Furthermore, the Church has always believed that the Pope has full power to govern the Church itself, and that the same respect and obedience are due to his authority as are due to the authority of Christ: "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven."

"*Humanae Vitae*"

It would not be surprising if all of this were to make us think of the *Humanae Vitae* controversy. As is well known, some Catholics maintain that since the Pope did not expressly say in the encyclical that he wished to give an infallible definition, its teaching may be fallible and we are therefore free to differ from it. I would make three comments on this viewpoint:

- 1) The encyclical appears as a solemn act of the Pope's Magisterium. It is addressed to all the faithful. And it sets out to give a judgement on a moral question of the greatest importance for everyday life. In the encyclical the Pope, having weighed up the apparent arguments which are generally adduced in favour of contraception, says: "We, by virtue of the mandate entrusted to us by Christ, intend to give Our reply to this series of grave questions."
- 2) In any case, what is at stake here is not a red herring issue of whether an encyclical is infallible or not. After all, *Humanae Vitae* said nothing new. It simply reaffirmed the previous teaching of the Church, i.e., what the Church had been teaching for centuries.

This can easily be checked; it is simply a question of consulting any Catholic textbook of moral theology published before 1960. Not a single one will be found that defends the lawfulness of contraceptives. For hundreds of years, the Church, the whole Church, has been teaching and believing explicitly that contraception is a grave sin. It is simply inconceivable that Christ should have permitted his Church to be in error in this belief, so burdening many people's consciences with a sense of sin where in reality there was no sin. Obviously it is not the value of an encyclical, but the infallibility of the entire Church that is at stake.

What then is to be said about those priests who teach that contraception is licit? What is to be said, and it should be said quite clearly, is that they are teaching contrary to the Church's teaching, and that they are, therefore, in error. The mission and responsibility of the ordinary priest, as of the ordinary layman, is to follow the Magisterium of the Church; and these priests set themselves up against the Magisterium.

Those who do not obey

- 3) I would say, in the last place, that even if someone failed to see how the Church's teaching on contraception is necessarily endowed with infallibility, another motive should alone be sufficient to make him accept this teaching, and that is the motive of discipline. Even if he believed that this is a "reformable" point of Catholic teaching, and was firmly convinced that in time it will be modified,

he sins if he does not observe it now when it has not in fact been modified, when it is still, at least, a disciplinary law of the Church.

The Church's laws concerning Sunday Mass, Lenten fasting, or priestly celibacy, for example, are disciplinary laws. The Church could modify or abolish them. But, as long as it does not do so, they bind in conscience.

If a layman or priest does not observe them on the grounds that he does not see their point, that they do not seem to him suited to our "modern mentality," he sins. The same sin of disobedience is committed by those who failed to observe, or who preach against, the law given by the Church about contraception. However much they may regard it as a "modifiable" law, for so long as it has not been modified, they sin by breaking a law that is still binding.

Some of those priests who preach the lawfulness of contraceptives may not perhaps be prepared to acknowledge that they are in error; but they cannot deny that they are disobeying, in opposition to what God and the Church asks of them, and in opposition also to what they themselves solemnly and freely promised at their ordination. Let them recall the words which the Pope addressed to them towards the end of *Humanae Vitae*: "It is your principal duty (We are speaking especially to you who teach moral theology) to expound the Church's teaching with regard to marriage in its entirety and with complete frankness. In the performance of your ministry you must be the first to give an example of that sincere obedience, inward as well as outward, which is due to the Magisterium of the Church."

It is sad that such cases of disobedience should occur. Nevertheless, the disobedience of a priest, however much a motive of scandal for the faithful, is not a sufficient motive to justify their disobedience.

If a layman has to choose between trusting in the word or opinion of a priest or a theologian (whoever he may be, and however great his reputation) and trusting in the word and the teaching of the Pope, he well knows whom he should trust and whom Christ wants him to obey.

THINGS THAT CHRIST CAN ASK US

Christ, as we have pointed out, continues to speak to us as in the times of the apostles; he continues to speak to us in the voice of his Church. And it is as urgent as ever to want to hear his voice and follow his commandments. It ought to be obvious that the voice of Christ can ask us for loyalty and obedience, not only when an *ex cathedra* point of doctrine is at issue... not only in matters of faith or morals... but also in matters of discipline; for example, the way in which the sacraments are to be administered or Holy Mass celebrated or heard. There, at least in principle, no dogmatic matters may seem to be in question.

Our Lord endowed his Church with power not only to teach but also to govern. And his words "whoever listens to you listens to me; and whoever rejects you rejects me" apply equally to the disciplinary measures or decisions of government taken by the Church. Nevertheless, it seems as if some priests are not longer capable of recognizing Christ's voice in the dispositions of the Holy See. For instance, there is the whole matter of communion in the hand. It is well known that this is licit only when the Holy See has expressly authorized it for a particular country; and yet [in 1976] in certain countries where no such authorization has been granted, priests are to be found regularly distribute communion in the hand. [A comment for 2005: The number of countries where this

authorization has been granted has now significantly increased. But the principle outlined by Father Cormac still remains valid.]

Similarly, one not infrequently comes across cases of priests who openly ignore recent specific indications of the Holy See. There are those who forget that it is obligatory to follow one of the four approved canons or eucharistic prayers without varying them, that it is specially forbidden to change the words of consecration, that the obligation remains of wearing liturgical vestments when saying Mass, etc. [The number of approved eucharistic prayers has now been increased, but it is still obligatory to follow the approved texts without variation and to follow the other liturgical directives - once known as the Rubrics.]

In virtue of what principle or of what spirit is one no longer bound to obey the laws of the Church? Certainly not in virtue of the spirit of Christ; nor in virtue of a supposed conciliar spirit, however much some persons seem to believe (and if they do not believe it, they certainly imply it) that the recent Council gave the green light for any and every type of liturgical innovation. It would be good to remind them that the Council stated, in the most unambiguous terms, that "absolutely no other person, not even a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority."

If priests do not heed their bishops, or bishops do not heed the Holy See, it is only common sense to suppose that the ordinary faithful will have little inclination to heed their priests. Nothing destroys the prestige of authority so quickly as arbitrariness.

When an authority does not obey the authority that lies above it, it acts arbitrarily. The most curious part of it all is the persistent attempts to justify such arbitrary actions in the name of a supposed "community sense," when their blatantly obvious effect is to rupture the ecclesial unity willed by Christ.

An unmentionable word?

Obedience is a word that no popular preacher (or, rather, no preacher whose concern is to be popular) would dream of mentioning nowadays. Nevertheless popular or unpopular, it is and will always be a subject or, more accurately, a virtue which needs to be emphasized, simply because without obedience we are not going to be saved. Salvation does not depend on having humanitarian or pious sentiments, and still less on having squeezed, oneself a place on the latest ecclesiastical bandwagon. Salvation depends on fulfilling the will of God. Our Lord himself has told us so in words that should set us on our guard against possible self-deception: "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven... "

Sunday Mass?

These words of our Lord could hardly be stronger or clearer: and they simply shoot to pieces many of the "arguments" by which some people today feel they can reduce the demands of Christian living; the argument, for example, with which some Christians feel they have demolished the Third Commandment: "But can't one speak with God anywhere? Then I don't see any need for going to Mass on Sundays." Without going deeper into the matter, it should be enough to reply to these people, reminding them of the passage just quoted from St. Matthew: "You are quite right in saying that one can talk to God anywhere. But that is not the point. The point is that if you talk to God elsewhere (do you?), but do not go to Mass on Sundays, you are saying 'Lord, Lord,' but you are not

fulfilling the will of God. And you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." And that is the word of the Lord.

Let us emphasize the point. If one wishes to obey God's will, then it is essential to obey those whom he has constituted in authority with the mission to govern his Church. St. Paul also reminds us of this, and his words can scarcely be said to be lacking in force: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement." In the text, St. Paul is speaking of obedience to legitimate civil authority.

Authority within the Church

His words have evidently much greater force when it is a question of obedience to authority within the Church. He goes on immediately to add a remark that is worth noting: "Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience." Some contemporary Christians, especially those lay people and ecclesiastics who seem to specialize in conscientious objection would do well to meditate on these last words of the Apostle.

He preaches obedience to authority. He insists that it is essential to salvation. But he does not want us to obey out of fear or with a sense of coercion.

He wants us to obey precisely out of motives of conscience, because our conscience has understood that it is reasonable and good and noble to obey, and encourages us to do so; and we have listened to our conscience, and have obeyed personally and freely.

"Love means deeds"

It is an extraordinary fact, but some people nowadays seem to regard obedience as something that necessarily degrades man and destroys his personality and freedom. They do not seem capable of understanding that a man can obey because he chooses to, because he feels that it is worthwhile placing his possibilities, above all, his mind and his will, at the service, of something greater, of someone greater, than his own ego. In a word, they do not understand that a man can obey out of love, because he wants to love another person, and he realizes that the distinctive exercise of love is to want to do the will of the loved one.

The person who does not understand love, as the effective desire to do the will of the loved person, and does not try to exercise it in this way, does not have the slightest idea of what love means. He is an egoist, and will not find happiness either here or hereafter.

"Love means deeds." In the gospel, our Lord time and again asks us for deeds. Let us recall some of his works which tell us that if we want to love him, we must keep his commandments, we must fulfil his will; and that whoever does not fulfil it, whoever does not obey, does not love him. In the first place, he himself sets the example. He tells us that he has not come to do his own will, but the will of his Father. Loving us with deeds, he loved us, in his passion, "to the end," obeying "unto death," and despite the repugnance it caused him, he persevered in that voluntary and total obedience: "Not my will but yours be done." He could truly say: "I have given you an example, so that you also may do as I have done."

But then he insists, and there is no getting away from his insistence: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." He repeats it: "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who

loves me." And still again: "If any one loves me, he will keep my word." And once more: "He who does not love does not keep my words."

Reluctance to love God?

In certain sectors of the Church today there are individuals, or groups of individuals, whose attitude is one of constant protest against authority. Has it ever occurred to them that, whatever may at times be said in favour of their protest, one thing can certainly be said against it: that it shows a clear disinclination to love God?

If we are really interested in achieving that principal aim of our Christian existence, which is to love God above all things, what are we protesting against? That the Commandments prevent us from loving him? That the Magisterium prevents us from loving him? Far from making it difficult for us to love God, these are the channels through which he himself wants us to prove our love for him. Nothing can stop us loving God, if we want to obey him. Therefore, if we want to love him, let us obey.

And if we do not obey, then the fact is that we do not want to love him; we do not want to love God above all other things, but rather want to put our love for other things such as our opinions, our sensuality, or our pride, above our love for God.

No one should be surprised if he finds it hard to fulfil a commandment. After all, if it were something simple that we were being asked to fulfil, there would be no need to raise it to the rank of commandment. Given the weakness of our human nature, it may also be logical that we find it hard to obey authority. But it is Jesus Christ himself who points out that it is precisely there - in the fulfilment of the commandments, in obedience or disobedience towards his Church - that the difference lies between loving him or not loving him.

I think that, in all reverence, we can say that our Lord was never one to beat about the bush. Fence-sitting or non-alignment postures just don't go down, where he is concerned. "Whoever is not with me, is against me," may be unpalatable words to some ears, but they are certainly quite clear. After reflecting on them it is easier to grasp the deep truth expressed by that phrase in *The Way*: "Jesus, wherever you have passed, no heart remains indifferent. You are either loved or hated."

To be... Christ's... or not to be

One of the descriptions which Jesus applies to himself is that of the Good Shepherd. If we are to judge from St. John's Gospel, it was a description our Lord was particularly fond of. It is not surprising then that the early Christians specially cherished this image of Christ the Good Shepherd. It is also obvious that, as they followed out the gospel parable, they must have had no objection to considering themselves "sheep" of Christ's flock.

It is possible that some Christians nowadays may not be over-enthusiastic at the idea of considering themselves sheep. Nevertheless, since it is a figure that our Lord used on more than one occasion, it looks as if it has to be taken in earnest. This conclusion becomes well-nigh inescapable when we recall that when Jesus describes those who are saved in the Last Judgement, he once again used the term "sheep," and the only alternative classification, in that tremendous moment, is that of a "goat," separated for ever from the vision of God.

Our Lord is not being trite in using the metaphor of the Good Shepherd and the sheep. He is not just being merely poetic either. He wishes to teach us a deep lesson. He wants to reveal consoling truths

to us, and ask us for a mature response and a readiness to face up to difficult demands. In narrating the parable, our Lord already anticipates the fact of his death: "the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep"; he indicates the infinite reward which he gives to those who follow him: "my sheep hear my voice... and I give them eternal life"; but he asks us to recognize his voice and to follow him: "the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice... my sheep hear my voice, and follow me."

There may be other sheep-like characteristics which our Lord wants us to imitate, but I doubt it.

Docility

What one cannot doubt, because it is the very essence of the parable, is that he wants us to imitate the sheep's typical docility. To recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow it readily: that is what he asks of us. At times, that can be hard, because human pride is reluctant to be docile. Nevertheless, there will be one further occasion still when our Lord returns to the subject, and maintains the same image in doing so.

After the resurrection he confirms Peter, despite his evident defects, in his position as visible head of his Church. He confirms him as head and shepherd: he tells him three times: "Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep... Feed my sheep...."

Could our Lord give us clearer teachings or guarantees or criteria? "I know mine and mine know me." And he wants the sheep to be able to know that they are his: because, recognizing the voice of the Good Shepherd, they follow it docilely.

Each one of us should ask himself: "And how about me? Have I the right to count myself among those who are his? Do I know, do I recognize, his voice? Do I follow it? Am I able to distinguish where that voice sounds? Do I know who has the mission to echo it here on earth?... .

To be his... To be Christ's, which means to be God's... How terrible it would be to earn that devastating reproach which our Lord addressed to the Pharisees: "He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."

To doubt the Church is to doubt God

A Christian is expected to have the elementary capacity to see and hear Christ in the Church, above all in the Pope and in the dispositions of the Holy See. That capacity endows us with a God-given standard of right and wrong, of truth and error; and so we can face the most changing circumstances with certainty, confidence and peace. All of this, of course, depends on our faith. But we ought to have this faith; and man's shortcoming should not take it from us. Speaking of those human defects which necessarily appear in the Church, the author of *Christ is Passing By* says that they do not entitle anyone "to judge the Church in a human fashion, without theological faith, simply letting oneself be impressed by the qualities or the defects of certain clerics or certain lay people." That would be an over-superficial judgement. It is not the response of men, but the action of God, that matters in the Church; and this is what we should try to see. "For that is the Church: Christ present among us... we can end up by mistrusting men, and each of us is personally obliged to mistrust himself and to add a *mea culpa*, a sincere act of contrition, to the balance sheet of his day. But we have no right to doubt God.

And to doubt the Church, to doubt its divine origin or the saving effectiveness of its preaching and its sacraments, is to doubt God himself; it amounts to a refusal to believe fully in the fact of the coming of the Holy Spirit."

Conscience and authority

The Church is Christ present among us... It is what we said earlier: Christ has not abandoned us, He is present. He continues speaking to us. He continues being our guide. That is why we also said that the guide's voice, in which we can and should place absolute trust, does not speak to us from within, but from without: Christ speaking to us in the teaching of his Church. This brings us to an important point which needs to be clearly grasped.

It is commonplace to draw a vivid contrast between conscience and authority, to present them as so irreconcilably opposed that if conscience cannot avoid the clutches of authority, if it cannot "liberate" itself, then there is no course open to it but to submit, with all that this implies in terms of humiliation, depersonalization, degradation.... Now, if this is applied to the authority of the Church understood as the authority of Christ, as the voice of the Good Shepherd, it is false.... The teachings of the Church are not imposed on us from outside. We accept them freely. And in accepting them, we make them ours. Just as the driver, who reads and follows the road signs, does not feel that he is having anything imposed on him. Just the contrary: he was looking for guidance, for information. And now he has found it. He takes possession of that information. It is now his. Now he knows which is the right road. And he freely chooses it. It is the same with us and our conscience.

The indications given by the Church, i.e., indications guaranteed by Christ, exist outside us. They are objective. But when we listen to them, because we trust them, we make them ours. We incorporate them into our conscience. They become part of the elements of judgement which go to make up our conscience.

It is false, therefore, in the case of a Catholic, to oppose personal conscience and Church authority. The authority of the Church, the trust that he has in the authority of the Church, is a part of his personal conscience....

When we apply all of this to the question of freedom, we see that what happens to a person who incorporates Christ's teaching into his conscience, is paradoxically just the opposite of what so many people seem to imagine. He feels freer (and not less free) in his very conscience; he feels more secure in his actions. He feels liberated from insecurity and error.

Divine competence

We could sum this up by saying that it resolves itself into matters of trust and of competence. We tend to trust competent people. We put our trust in persons whom we believe know what they are speaking about and what they practise. We trust a competent doctor when he advises us about our health or a Nobel Prize winner in physics when he speaks about his speciality.

Likewise, we trust the Pope and the Magisterium, when they speak to us about God and the way of salvation, because we believe that they are competent precisely in these fields. They have a competence which comes to them from God. Their competence is divine. And our trust in them should therefore know no limits.

Believing joyfully

To doubt the Church would mean to doubt God. Similarly, to believe in the Church is to believe in God. And how does a Christian believe in God? Freely; and joyfully. Joyfully, because he knows that God loves us, and that when he speaks and guides us, we can be sure, absolutely sure, that he is leading us forward towards happiness. So it is then, with that same joy and for these same reasons, that we should believe in the Church and follow her teachings.

It is worth repeating what we said at the beginning: the Christian way is not always easy, but it is a clear way: and we know that it leads to heaven.

If one meets disgruntled Christians today who seem ready to protest about everything, could this not be because they are thinking too much about the demands or the difficulties of Christian living, and not enough about the clearness and sureness of the way and, above all, about where it is going?
