

Munich, March 29, 1962 (Research and Evaluation - Urban) --

The slow transformation of Hungary's Communist hierarchy into a hierarchy (or series) of divergent tastes in thinking has seen an equally remarkable although limited growth in the freedom and interpenetration of the Catholic press and especially El Esmer to engage official sources in cautious polemic. Until about a year ago any general opposition to the tenets of Communism, to say nothing of the public pronouncements of its leaders, would have been unthinkable, and the most this paper and the monthly "Vigilia" could do was to put forward reformist versions of Christian thinking akin in intention to those of Brocas, Berkeffer and Ransel.

Last year the Catholic Church made a real effort to work out a theological formula which would allow it to coexist with the regime without forfeiting essential elements in Catholic teaching. The Church was obviously in no position to follow an existentialist course. What we got, therefore, was a rationalization of practical churchmanship, not always convincing or dignified to behold. Apart from exploiting 1 Timothy (2: 3-4), 1 Peter (2: 13), Romans (13: 1-7), one favorite line of approach was to look for such precedents in Church history as would justify the Church in trimming its sails to regime requirements. It was argued, for instance, that the social ethics of Communism is entirely acceptable to Christians because it has a worthy predecessor in the social philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, or ("El Esmer" 18 April 1961), that cooperation with a "democratic" temporal power and an enlightened attitude to the working class and property were sanctioned by Pope Leo XIII.

Of the various interpretations of humanism, so ran one argument, it is not the Christian and Communist versions which clash, but rather the Christian and the liberal, anthropocentric. The latter conceives of man as a self-contained individual, inaccessible to, and unassailable by, grace. Communist humanism, on the other hand, shares certain characteristics with the teachings of Christ, particularly in its educational program, but also in abolishing racial and social barriers and taking an optimistic view of man's future.

To the question "How can a Christian cooperate in building a world which has become largely un-Christian?", the following answer was offered: Where the man without religion conceives

of the world as a self-contained whole, unrelated to God, the Christian holds that the world is God's creation. It is therefore, not only possible, but incumbent upon the Christian to play his part in shaping the affairs of men. Further, there is reason ground between the Christian and his adversary also in their conception of what constitute worthy ends of human endeavor. When the man without religion argues that material comforts and goods are the proper rewards of man's creative effort, he is still assuming that these are means toward reaching a culturally, morally, and in the end, also spiritually superior type of existence. The Christian, on his part, can engage in meaningful dialogue with his non-religious interlocutor, because he can find in Christian teaching enough material to justify his in socially cooperating with people who do not otherwise share his persuasion ("Vigilia", January 1961).

Another trend, closer to the existentialist view, questions the value of theology in its present sectarian form. Christianity is as topical or outdated as its priests and theologians make it. There is progress in the affairs of men, and if it is God's will that man should satisfy his curiosity and improve his state in ever changing ways, it is surely part of His design that the Christian should bear equally modern witness. The truths of Christianity are capable of application over the whole field of modern life - to intercept the works of men even in those marginal areas where the Church has traditionally shied away from making its voice felt, is the Christian's duty in Eastern Europe. None of us is answerable for things other than our own, but there we must not, for or against, but always within the "Zeitgeist", not away from it. To make this change possible, theology, too, must shift its ground. If the compass of Christian interest is the whole of life, theology must cease to be preoccupied with dogma and theologians cease to be recruited from among the clergy only. Unless he can do this and produce an "existential science" man will get little help from it in his search for God. When the Christian lifts his eyes to the eternal order of things, he will find but two cornerstones to support him in his faith: Revelation and Redemption. But these are absolutes, affecting the whole of mankind in an eschatological sense only; individual salvation is not guaranteed. On this side of eternity the Christian is responsible for his deeds. "The answers are easy, every sinner demands its own solutions. The ways of faith and grace are equally numerous." ("The Tasks of Theology", "Vigilia", January 1961).

Finally, there was a school of thought represented principally by Vid Miselta and a handful of intellectual clergymen. Their cooperation with "Marxist humanists" (Communists are seldom mentioned) is far from only as possible but as distinctly desirable, provided that ideological tolerance is shown by the regime. The Church was, in fact, prepared, on this showing, to do

most of the running. "While Marxists reject the whole of Christian teaching," Michaelis wrote, "We, Catholic thinkers do not globally reject Marxist theory. There are points in dialectical and historical materialism which we can adopt in our thinking."

Recently, however, the Government's decision to step up its campaign against religion and, especially, to refine its methods, has brought forth a less spectacular but quite considerable response. Last year a compromise editions would appear to be less widely sought and a number of articles have not (and have been allowed to put) sentiments unacceptable from a Christian point of view and covertly opposed to the "Communism equals affluence equals happiness" motif of the Soviet leaders. One case in point is an editorial by the eminent young journalist and poet James Filinsky in "Uj Sobar" 25 March 1962.

Writing under the title, "Boderg Asceticism" Filinsky takes up and demolishes one of Khrushchev's spurious remarks on the March Agricultural Plans. The Soviet Pioneer said:

"To preach equality in the spirit of the first Christian communities with their low standard of living and asceticism is alien to scientific Communism. Communism SET NOT BE depicted as a table laid with empty soup-plates and occupied by highly conscious and completely equal people." (5 March 1962.) (My italics)

Although not mentioning Khrushchev by name Filinsky challenges the implications of Khrushchev's words and is quite frank about the dangers which, to his mind, an affluent society, unassisted by the uplift inherent in spiritual teaching, represents to Christians and, indeed, to all men. His message is almost Lawrenceian: "Give them the gear so that we can free ourselves to talk about something else," but this "something else" requires for Filinsky the asceticism and self-denial of men whose sights are set beyond the attainment of material comforts.

"To be creative and to love are impossible without self-denial and sacrifice... To pursue the sciences and arts as full and rounded men makes it absolutely necessary for us to lead the lives of ascetics... Asceticism is not the condition but the consequence of a higher type of living."

Coming closer to Khrushchev's theme Filinsky examines the effect satiety may have on a classless society. He says:

"It will undoubtedly be a blessing of our age if the possessive class "mine-yours-his" will no longer threaten (our integrity), but welfare can also sap the springs of man's creative energies... In the midst of increasing affluence we must have the courage to seek impoverishment in the sign of the splendid poverty of the loving and constructive man."

At this point Filinsky joins issue with Khrushchev's diatribe; far from apologizing for the empty plates, he insists that they were and are necessary. What socialized affluence is trying to do is not to make men more perfect but to make imperfect human beings more comfortable, and this, he implies, should be rejected.

"It is one of the miracles of the Gospels that they preached the virtue of self-denial to men still in a state of poverty... The ambition to attain wealth, the urge to hoard and collect, have a way of turning life into a mere quantitative affair... Through asceticism the poorest can be rich, but without the wealthiest are, in truth, poverty-stricken."

Arguing that poverty is a positive quality Filinsky makes it quite clear that his words are addressed not to Christians on the Eastern side of the curtain (although they too, would profit from them) but to warn against the vision of material abundance which Khrushchev depicted for the Party at the 22nd Congress:

... In an age of technology, welfare and social peace, poverty will play an increasingly important part in shaping the moral and spiritual values of modern man... Social peace will make things drab and grey unless it is permeated with love. The asceticism which the Gospels preach does not mean a pessimistic non-participation... On the contrary.. the demand for self-abnegation removes the obstacles which hamper man's love for his brother."

This is a round-about way of assuring the Soviet Premier but it is clear and courageous and only one in a row of similar manifestations. It may well be that the Church as a whole will use the present loosening-up in Hungary to get its message more effectively than it has in the past. The sharpening of atheistic propaganda will certainly give the Episcopate every reason to do so.