

Editorial

CIVIL disobedience, as crystallized in the apostolic declarations "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4 : 20) and "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5 : 29), is as old as the Church itself—though it should not pass unnoticed that it was, to begin with, and repeatedly has been subsequently, ecclesiastical disobedience. But the principle is constant, whatever the constitution of the threatening power. When, however, we consider that for the Apostles the great imperative laid upon them was the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, for which they suffered persecution and death, it is disturbing to observe the manner in which in our day civil disobedience has been largely divorced from the evangelical context and is followed by many as a way of life or even as a substitute gospel. If the apostolic Gospel, which is the word of peace through the blood of Christ's Cross, is left behind, it must be expected that disobedience will manifest itself, as it has been doing increasingly of late, in the guise of violence and terror and anarchy. Social justice and the improvement of society are of course proper concerns of the Christian and the Church. History, indeed, bears ample testimony to the decisive role that Christian conscience has played on the stage of social reform. But the advances which have been made have not been achieved by means of violence or sedition.

Today, however, there are voices which are inviting the Church to engage in violence and sedition. Is the Christian Church at liberty to accept this invitation? In view of the answer to this question proposed by the Theological Group of the "Christian Peace Conference" of Czechoslovakia, published in a recent Information Bulletin, one might be excused for feeling that there is a certain ineptness about the title of this body. A report emanating from this Theological Group addresses itself to the inquiry whether Christians "are permitted, indeed, whether they are even positively commanded, to take part in violent attempts to overthrow the government", and observes that in Budapest in 1965 the Advisory Committee of the Christian Peace Conference answered this question in the affirmative. In the quest for a theological understanding of revolution it is at least admitted that "a literal understanding of the New Testament gives us little to go on". The explanation is offered that the New Testament Church was relatively unconcerned about the prevailing forms of government because of its expectation of the speedy return of Christ. But the tendentiousness of this argument is exposed both by the fact that even in what are judged to be the earlier writings the New Testament displays a characteristically paradoxical but at the same time creative tension between imminence and delay in connection with the Parousia, and also by the fact that a well defined doctrine of the state may without difficulty be constructed from the teaching of the New Testament. While it is true that we must not render to Caesar the things that are God's, yet we are enjoined by Christ Himself to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's

(Mt. 22 : 21). This principle is spelled out more fully in the New Testament epistles. Civil government is a ministry ordained by God ; anti-government resistance is therefore resistance against the ordinance of God (Rom. 13 : 1ff.) ; Christians should be submissive to the civil authorities and, indeed, an example to all of law-abiding citizenship ; a man who suffers as a law-breaker has no commendation, but to suffer as a Christian, that is, for the sake of the Gospel and for rendering to God the things that are God's, is nothing to be ashamed of (1 Pet. 2 : 13ff., 4 : 14ff.).

The concept of civil disobedience now current in some circles of the Church, however, has departed from the apostolic concept in that it is associated with deliberate and repeated acts of law-breaking, arrest for which is praised as a notable mark of sanctity. The expression "civil disobedience" is now in fact loaded with a connotation very different from anything that we find taught in the New Testament. We are even invited to believe that Jesus Christ led the way as an inciter to lawlessness and insurrection. It is true that He was frequently in a position to set Himself up as a popular demagogue and revolutionary leader ; but it is equally true that He always turned His back on all such opportunities. His final word on violence was spoken to the Apostle Peter who in a display of desperate zeal had opposed the armed mob that came out to seize Jesus by striking off the ear of one who was a servant of the high priest. This action, heroic and well-meaning though it undoubtedly was, called forth the admonition from Christ : "Put your sword back into its place ; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt. 26 : 52). Guided by this principle, and mindful of their Master's counsel : "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt. 5 : 44), martyrs and reformers of old have eschewed fierceness and violence. Thus Bishop Jewel offered the following rejoinder to Harding's calumny that the Reformers were accustomed to teach the people to rebel against lawful authority : "Here is another great untruth among the rest. For M. Harding right well knoweth that we never armed the people, nor taught them to rebel for religion against the prince. If anything have at any time happened otherwise, it was either some wilful rage or some fatal fury : it was not our counsel ; it was not our doctrine. We teach the people, as St. Paul doth, to be subject to the higher powers, not only for fear, but also for conscience. We teach them that whoso striketh with the sword by private authority shall perish with the sword. If the prince happen to be wicked or cruel or burdensome, we teach them to say with St. Ambrose : *Arma nostra sunt preces et lacrymae* : 'Tears and prayers be our weapons'" (*Works*, Vol. III, p. 170).

The description, then, contained in the Czechoslovakian Report to which we have already referred, of the "doctrine of the right and obligation to resist" as a "traditional Christian doctrine" is nothing short of astonishing, especially as it is further explained that "this doctrine calls on Christians actively to resist a government which misuses its authority". "Whoever resists," it adds, "is at the same time bound to work out a programme for taking over power. The aim must be to set up a new and better order. At this point, resistance passes over into revolution." So far from being traditionally Christian,

this has the ring of traditional revolutionary Communism. Rejection of this revolutionary tenet is attributed to the equation of the *status quo* with the will of God and to a static understanding of the role of man in creation. "Revolution," we are further instructed, "necessarily involves the use of force", including even armed force, with the qualification, however, that "the use of armed force in a revolution can only be *ultima ratio*". The application of less forceful measures is expounded in the following terms: "All means of lawful criticism and lawful action must first be courageously and persistently explored. If this does not achieve the objective, every responsible man has a right and duty to resist in every possible way. This includes the proved methods of resistance by the workers; working to rule, and strikes. It also includes the proved methods of non-violence as practised by Gandhi and M. L. King. Such methods under certain circumstances can bring about a gradual revolution without bloodshed."

In the light of this doctrine of revolution, we would ask our brethren in Czechoslovakia two questions: (1) are they not in danger of substituting the sovereignty of man for the sovereignty of God? and (2) does the appearance of this Report portend an uprising against the unjust tyranny under which they are living? To be frank, the tenor of the Report betrays no suggestion of dissatisfaction with the existing régime; on the contrary, they give the impression of being one of its mouthpieces. We, for our part, while we certainly have no cause for complacency or self-congratulation, would fraternally admonish them to take heed lest they be brainwashed with the ideology of Communism, which is an ideology of antichristianity, at the same time assuring them of our prayerful and sympathetic concern for them in the perplexing dilemmas and tensions which must daily press upon them. If from our present privileged position there is anything we can do to strengthen their hands and to minister to their needs, we are anxious to do it.

One of the most interesting of the documents that emanated from the Second Vatican Council, the *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, must be understood as in large measure a plea, implicit rather than overt, to the governments of the Communist world for the granting of toleration and liberty of expression to the Christian Church. This plea is based on the claim that the human person has an inherent right "to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups or of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs", nor is anyone "to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others"—with, however, the addition of the proviso that "the just requirements of public order are to be observed". With still greater particularity this Declaration states that "religious bodies also have the right not to be hindered, either by legal measures or by administrative action on the part of government, in the selection, training, appointment, and transferral of their own ministers, in communicating with religious authorities and communities abroad, in erecting buildings for religious purposes, and in the acquisition and use of suitable funds or properties", and also "in their public teaching and witness to their faith, whether by the spoken or by the written word".

This plain affirmation of human rights will be welcome to all who value the sanctity of the individual, and doubly so as it comes from a religious body whose own record has been deplorably stained with intolerance and persecution of others, as this document significantly though somewhat casually recognizes by acknowledging that "there have at times appeared ways of acting which were less in accord with the spirit of the gospel and even opposed to it".

It may be a vain hope that the powers of atheistic Communism which dominate so much of our world will honour this great principle of religious freedom, but we are confident that our brethren of the Czechoslovakian church will be willing to weigh carefully the counsel of this Vatican II document relating to the question of the use of violence for the purpose of promoting the kingdom of God. The Declaration reminds us that Christ "refused to be a political Messiah, ruling by force", and that He "acknowledged the power of government and its rights, when he commanded that tribute be given to Caesar".

Not by force of blows does His rule assert its claims. Rather, it is established by witnessing to the truth and by hearing the truth, and it extends its dominion by the love whereby Christ, lifted up on the cross, draws all men to Himself.

Taught by the word and example of Christ, the apostles followed the same way. From the very origins of the Church the disciples of Christ strove to convert men to faith in Christ as the Lord—not, however, by the use of coercion or by devices unworthy of the gospel, but by the power, above all, of the Word of God. . . . And they preached the Word of God in full confidence that there was resident in this Word itself a divine power able to destroy all the forces arrayed against God.

The history of the Gospel constantly demonstrates the effect of this divine power resident in the Word in the transformation and re-creation of individuals and communities; and the Gospel is still, and will ever continue to be, the power of God unto salvation in this distraught world of ours. Moreover, this dynamic Word is by its very nature a word of judgment against evil and injustice. It must be carried and uttered, in all its saving and judging power, by reborn lives into the whole world of human action and experience once again today—into politics, into business, into industry, into the professions, into schools and universities, yes, and not least, into our churches and chapels. The results are certain, because it is *God's* Word. P.E.H.
