

No More Strangers

Introduction by Thomas Merton

On January 17, 1965, Merton recorded in his journal: 'Last week I wrote a preface for Phil Berrigan's book [No More Strangers#] in which there are many fine ideas and some bad writing.' According to the dust jacket, the book focuses 'on the scandalous gap between professed Christian principles and the failure of Christians to address themselves to today's inequities.' The introduction by Merton is published here for the first time since 1965 by kind permission of the Trustees of the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust

What is the real meaning of “renewal” and *aggiornamento* in the Church? The terms are familiar enough in these days of the Second Vatican Council. So too are other familiar phrases about “the emerging layman”, “lay theology”, “the Church and the modern world”. What are they all about?

Sometimes it appears that these expressions are used with only the most perfunctory attempt to convey a meaning. They tend to be hopeful incantations. They have become favorite catch phrases indicating a general climate of optimism, an awareness or a pious hope that the Church is not altogether out of date in the space age. Yet this notion of updating tends to be equivocal, through contagion with the ambiguities of a fast-moving technology extrapolated in the processes of a marketing society. In what sense is the Church getting up to date? In the same sense as this year's Ford or Chevrolet?

Obviously Pope John did not mean anything of this sort when he called the Vatican Council. It is true that we do occasionally hear of accommodations that will amount to a considerable shift of scenery; but the updating we look for must surely be something a little more fundamental than a new uniform for the Swiss guards at the Vatican — or even a new habit for sisters at the parochial school.

A great deal of the loud optimism about renewal and *aggiornamento*

appears to come from people who are working hard to allay deep anxieties about themselves, the Church and even the Catholic faith. These are the ones (and they form a majority) who are not yet used to associating anguish with the life of faith. For these it is axiomatic, and always has been, that the life of faith brings total security and an absolute lack of questioning or of uncertainty in any point whatever. Yet even they are bound to take account of the fact that unbelievers set very little store by their security and seem determined to get along without it. It has until recently been customary to dismiss this evident hardness of heart as a sign of reprobation. But now it becomes necessary, or so it would seem, for the Christian to break through to these hard hearts and establish some basis of communication. The Church now has to be heard speaking their language and sharing some of their concerns. Not only that, she must convince them that she is just as modern as they are, just as concerned with efficiency and up-to-date methods, just as alert, just as smart, just as impatient of antique formality. For these Christians there seems to be a great need of recognition, of an assurance, on the part of the modern world, that their existence is still relevant. They desire not only to pray silently and defiantly for the world; they also want the world to admit that it *needs* them. And this is a tall order.

The Vatican Council has indeed been getting an extraordinarily good press in the secular media, and the efforts made by the Council to update the Church are regarded as news even for non-Christians. Yet experience shows that readers of the press and viewers of TV tend to accept without protest the judgment of the press and TV as to what constitutes news. Does this docile acceptance imply real interest? Those who take too superficial a view of *aggiornamento* may tend to draw encouraging conclusions merely from the fact that the old Church can still get such good coverage. This implies acceptance of the delusion that one's real importance can be gauged by the Gallup polls. But this is not renewal of the Church; it is only the renewal of her image, or should we say her myth?

The message of the present book can be summed up as a fervent protest against the idea that all the Church needs is a new "posture", a refurbished image, or an American accent. Father Berrigan is not impressed by the Madison Avenue style in religion. His book is a plea for a much deeper consideration of *aggiornamento* and of the layman's role in the Church's life. It is a forthright denial that Catholics can remain satisfied with a new jargon, a new ideology, a new mystique that will successfully engage the attention of the modern technologist, the man of

science, the cold-war politician and — who knows? — even the Marxist. The Church is not going to make her way in the modern world merely by ecclesiastical newspeak and theology in timestyle*.

Father Berrigan belongs to the *avant-garde* in liturgy as in other things, but he is not one who will accept the idea of a new ritual and a new liturgical language unless the Christians who participate in the new liturgy recognize the full social implications of their doing so. What is the good of "full active participation" in the Eucharistic Sacrifice if one remains indifferent to the struggle of the Negroes for civil rights, or if one is benign toward Negroes in theory but hostile to them in concrete fact? What is the good of hearing the gospel of peace proclaimed in one's mother tongue if one remains committed to policies based on hatred, fear, suspicion and full readiness to cooperate in genocide? That is why this book contains one of the best Catholic analyses of the race question in the U.S. and another on the arms race in which the author makes the incisive remark that all the great social problems of our time have to be seen as signs of "the unfinished Redemption" and consequently as challenges to Christian faith and Christian concern.

Pope Paul has made some significant, not to say radical, gestures — for instance his symbolic renunciation of the tiara, his pilgrimage to Bombay, there to plead with the world to renounce the suicidal arms race and devote the money instead to helping the desperately poor, who form the majority of the earth's population. But it will be of scant significance to set aside the tiara, the symbol of papal temporal power, and yet still retain the obsolete apparatus of a clerical bureaucracy that frustrates or delays every attempt to liberate the apostolate and the Christian witness from futile institutional routines. The great battle of the Second Vatican Council has been between the forces that seek a real and fundamental renewal that will reshape the whole human organization of the Church and those who, dreading a real change of structures, seek to maintain the forms and routines established to meet the needs of the sixteenth century, while merely giving the Church a twentieth-century façade.

Clearly, then, *aggiornamento* means something more than supplying the old clerical apparatus with humming IBM machines through the courtesy of business and industry (in return for a formal ecclesiastical blessing upon intercontinental ballistic missiles).

To put it very plainly, the thing that is not yet getting through unambiguously either to the clergy or to the laity is that the old institutional clericalism of the Church faces the need for radical change, from the Roman curia on down, via the diocesan curia, right into the

parish where Father dictates (or withholds) the final answer on everything from liturgy and marriage problems to questions of social justice and social action which are strictly the business of the laity. Such a reform, of course, implies a much more radical approach to such questions as the priesthood, the religious life, seminaries and the lay apostolate than has as yet been suggested in the Council schemata on these points, though a minority of Bishops and *periti* [expert advisers to the Council] have already raised the great questions in all their stark urgency. The job of *aggiornamento* in the Church requires not merely that the Council should set in motion new policies to be implemented by the clergy and religious, using zealous lay Catholics as docile instruments. It requires the formation of a new clergy and a new laity, a clergy that will not only have a real empathy and understanding of the problems of the layman and of his world but will even be willing to recognize that the Church belongs to the layman, is *for* the layman and *of* the layman, and is indeed a lay Church. For it is the laity who are the "Chosen People of God" even though the clergy are, it is true, especially chosen and set apart by vocation to give themselves to God and to service of the Church. But the very fact that the clergy are called to *serve* the laity highlights the importance of the laity in the Church.

Renewal of the Church depends on the difficult and sacrificial task of changing a clerical Church back into a lay Church — sacrificial especially for the clergy and religious who will have to participate in their own downgrading, who will need to understand that *they alone do not constitute the Church*, that their holiness is not the beginning and the end of all the Church's strivings, that the worship *they* offer to God is not the main reason for the Church's existence.

Father Berrigan is here following the paths opened up by Congar and Karl Rahner, not to mention Emmanuel Mounier and Teilhard de Chardin. He directs a clear-sighted and perhaps in some ways ruthless attack on the myth of a purely clerical Church — a Church in which Christian holiness is priestly and conventual holiness, in which the clergy and the religious keep everything going by their dedicated lives. In such a Church the layman is at best an outsider who makes a desperate effort to live as a religious in the world while serving as an instrument in clerically directed projects. At worst the layman is a mere passenger who hangs onto the Church and manages, by following clerical admonitions, to keep himself from falling off into the abyss of communism and unbelief.

Of course one must face the fact that there are cogent pragmatic reasons why the Church has become so completely clericalized. A trained

and disciplined corps of ecclesiastics makes it possible for the institution to be well organized and efficiently run. It is a real power for unity, and there is no question of getting along without such trained and dedicated Christians. There is no doubt that the task of creating a fervent and profoundly enlightened Christian laity demands the indispensable efforts of the clergy themselves. But the clergy must take a totally new attitude toward lay action and lay holiness. They must see that it is not merely a second-rate version of clerical action and clerical holiness. And this new attitude toward the layman and his world is going to prove decisive in the spiritual renewal of the clergy themselves.

To regard the Church as primarily clerical and conventual has dangerous consequences because it produces a radical split between two completely separate realms of "spirituality" and "secularity". The "spiritual" or sacred realm is confined to the convent or the sanctuary, or to the half hour of Mass and Communion and to other moments of duty and devotion in which the layman seeks for the time being to behave like a minor seminarian. The "secular" takes in everything else. Naturally this same split affects the priest and the religious even more deeply than the layman, since the priest and religious are trained to give special regard to certain exercises of piety which presumably save their active work from becoming a debacle but which tend to become more and more perfunctory as active (and secular) concerns absorb more and more of the day, infecting it with a sense of guilt.

The term "lay monasticism" is used disparagingly by Father Berrigan in this connection to indicate an unrealistic spirituality, in which the layman seeks the sacred and godly by turning away from the concrete realities of his own everyday life. Actually, I might mention that in monastic circles the term has quite different connotations and suggests something of the best present tendencies in monastic reform. "Lay monasticism" is a form of monastic life in which the monks ordinarily do not become clerics or priests and in which consequently they have a simpler and less regimented life, a vernacular office, are not subject to the rather arid formalities of seminary education and can therefore be formed more properly and more freely as monks. This represents a return to the original simplicity and spontaneity of the monastic idea in which the monk was in fact a *layman* living apart in poverty, by the work of his hands, either alone or in a likeminded community.

Father Berrigan's book is not concerned with monks, but the point is worth mentioning here because it shows how, at both extremes, there is this same tendency to draw inward toward the center. The layman now

begins to realize that he is required only to be himself and not to justify his existence in the Church by pretending at odd moments that he is a monk at heart. But the monk, too, tends to realize that he is not an ethereal, unworldly being, nor yet a kind of glorified canon appointed to chant the office and teach school; that he too can discover the real meaning of his vocation by drawing closer to the simplicity and labor of the layman, which is his own traditional lot.

The Little Brothers of Jesus, founded by Charles de Foucauld, whose lives are much like those of the worker priests of the Mission de France, have in them definite elements of this "lay monasticism" in its good sense, and by their influence they are causing a rethinking of traditional monasticism in the ancient Orders. In any case there is a renewed emphasis on the fact that ordinary life with its work, its insecurity and its inevitable sacrifices is for the Christian just as much part of the "sacred" realm as anything else, because, like everything else, it has been consecrated to God by the Incarnation, the Death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The real problem of a "clerical" Church is that it not only claims to mediate the light and holiness of God to the world, but it also implicitly sets itself squarely in between the Christian and the world, and we are seldom clear whether she is there as a defense, a barrier, or a mediator. In any case, the result is that the Christian is maintained, to some extent, in an attitude of passivity and tutelage. In order to "be a Christian" he has to let himself be protected against the world and kept "out of the world" by his Church. His daily plunges into the world are of course inevitable and they are tolerated, on condition that they are not what he "really means". What he "really means" is to save his soul by keeping himself, in his interior intention, aloof from the world in which, unfortunately, he has to give a great deal of time and attention to making a living.

This is a falsification and distortion of the true Gospel perspective about "the world", and it results in deplorable ambiguities. For one thing, this attitude ends by practically short-circuiting the real energy that the Christian (priest or layman) could conceivably put into his witness and his service in the world. The Christian, like Christ, is sent into the world to bear witness to the love of the Father for the world and for man, and to help man be redeemed by Christ. To say that man is redeemed "from the world" by Christ is to say that he is redeemed from the sinful use of created things and from the great complex of illusions and obsessions which organize human activity in the service of power, greed, lust, cruelty, hatred, egoism, and inhumanity. This is "the world" in the worst

sense of the word (see 1 John 2:15). But to assume that all human and temporal existence, all work, all social life, all sexual and procreative love, all technology, all forms of human knowledge, recreation, art, and trade are by their very nature damnable and "worldly" is to remove them from the power and influence of Christ and His Church.

Marx was not far wrong when he diagnosed a certain decadent religiosity as a means of keeping man alienated from himself and from the world in which he lived and worked. Such alienation from reality was very effective in making man a serviceable instrument of others who used him for their own ends. And, we might add, these were strictly worldly ends. Hence to cut man off from the reality of his own life, his own work, and himself, by suggesting that these realities are all in some way vile is in fact not to redeem and rescue him but simply to enslave him more thoroughly to the forces that use his world, and him in it, for immoral and selfish ends. The most cogent argument against a spurious unworldliness is that it is in actual fact very effective in serving 'the world' in the worst sense. The Christian who is unworldly only in this particular sense becomes an innocent cooperator in the work of degrading the world and submitting it still further to the forces of evil and of greed.

Worse than that, he may be in hypocritical connivance with "worldliness" in its most deplorable sense. History shows plenty of examples of Christians who have, with the "right intention", wrought great wrong, and experience shows that once one has theoretically admitted the primacy of the spiritual over the "worldly" and tacitly added the admission that one is not yet capable of the spiritual so he might as well make the best of the worldly, the result has been a much more radical and godless secularization of the secular. Those today who call for the recognition of the "sacred" possibilities within the "secular" realm itself are in fact summoning the Christian layman to a much more heroic and radical commitment than would be demanded of him by a life of unprincipled "secularity" during the week redeemed by a half hour of distracted sacredness on Sunday, ringed with regret that one was not cut out to be a Carmelite or a Trappist.

Another and more cogent example of the effects of a spirituality that divorces the "spiritual life" from everyday social reality: Father Berrigan remembers occasions when racial justice as preached to Southern congregations, including the instance when part of the congregation got up and walked out, not without insults (one devout soul left with the shout: "If I miss Mass this Sunday, it is *your* fault"). There seems to be a rather general belief in the South that the whole race question has

nothing whatever to do with religion or with Christianity. The business of the pastor or of the preacher is to talk about Jesus, "so why are they shouting about civil rights and getting everybody upset?" There is sincere indignation about this irruption of base and worldly distractions into the tranquility of the sacred — a tranquility guaranteed by the fact that in the sacred realm of interiority things are more what you like them to be, whereas in the world of brutal and secular fact they have a tendency to resist manipulation and to require more distracting forms of attention.

There is a "fruitful ambiguity" in the book's title, *No More Strangers*. The reader will recall the Pauline context. It comes in the liturgy for the Feasts of the Apostles. "You are no more strangers and sojourners but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19). In the Pauline text the "stranger" is he who is estranged from Christ and from the people of God. But in this book there are also allusions to the problem that the Christian has become alienated and estranged from the contemporary world. This alienation, this estrangement is due, we have seen, precisely to a superficial and distorted understanding of the "unworldliness" to which we are summoned by the Gospel. The New Testament certainly demands that the Christian be converted from "the world" to "Christ and His Church", since his vocation is to follow Christ "out of this world to the Father", together with the new Israel, the Chosen People. But "the world" in this context means the whole realm of greed, power, lust, selfishness, hatred, and inhumanity. It certainly does not mean the world of everyday reality, of common duty, of work, of play, of sorrow and joy, the world in which man is called to work out his destiny as a son of God.

Hence it is important to spell out the contradiction that is implied in a false spirituality which, in making a man a stranger to the everyday realities of life willed for mankind by God, actually estranges him from Christ. That is why modern apostles insist on the need for Christians to love the world. Love for the world in this sense does not mean love for power, for selfish greed and lust, but love for the common lot and task of man. Indeed it means above all love for man himself, and thereby love for Christ. Today we can see the urgency of restoring this true perspective, of casting aside the outworn formulas of a false unworldliness that has no other result than to divide man within himself and deliver him over all the more completely to the greeds and hatred of "the world". True Christian unworldliness is not a rejection of man or of God's creation; it is a firm and ardent faith which is strong enough to find Christ in man and in man's world. It can see a sacred meaning and a divine message in the

secular needs and struggles of twentieth-century man. It can see Christ suffering in the peoples who starve, who seek their just rights, their freedom, their chance to develop and build themselves a new civilization. *This awareness of Christ in the world today is the basic intuition upon which the work of renewal and aggiornamento must be built.* To be a stranger to the needs of our fellow man and to the hopes and perils of this moment of history is to be a stranger to Christ Himself, and no amount of interiority can supply for this lack of Christian insight.

Such is the message which this book utters with impassioned conviction. It will teach us that our mission as Catholics in the world today is not a mission merely to consolidate our own position and establish our own prestige, to protect our institutions amid the insecurities of a world in full revolution. It is a mission to witness to Christ in this changing world, to see Him in modern man, so that we recognize that our duty is more to our fellow man, whether he be a Christian or not, than to our own advantage and prestige. We do not know what the future may bring, but we know that our job is to face it with courage and hope and share our hope with our fellow man. We have more to do than sing hymns while the ship goes down.

January 1965

Thomas Merton

- # Philip Berrigan, *No More Strangers*, introduction by Thomas Merton (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1965).
- * Time magazine pioneered a style of writing called timestyle, which was brash, curt, punchy, athletic, and had a great sense of humour; it transformed the news into a form of entertainment.

'Introduction' by Thomas Merton, Copyright 1965 by the Abbey of Gethsemani; used by permission of the Trustees of the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust.