



The Pilgrim

“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

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And Yet... And Yet...

November, 1970

My running dialogue with the *Hic et Nunc* generation may encounter real difficulty this month... We have agreed to discuss the topic “What Good is the Church?”... I must say immediately that the wording is not my choice... There is an implied contempt, even despair, in it to which I might have objected... But I felt that the younger generation should be given the privilege of wording its questions in its own halting way... So here goes...

“What Good is the Church?”... I turned my chair to face the window toward the North... At my left was a campus clustered around a towering chapel... The Church built that chapel — a poor woman in Iowa, a business man from Fort Wayne, a struggling preacher in Canada... They — the Church, the people of God — built that chapel as a sign in stone and glass that neither hell nor high water would finally prevail against its message and life... Have you a substitute for this?...

I hear your reply: “Our generation has never denied that the Church now and then builds saints and cathedrals... What we are questioning is the failure of the Church to influence society, to stand for mercy and justice and peace in our world... Too often the Church is on the side of power and privilege and oppression”... To all of which — sorrowing and ashamed — I must agree... And yet...

You see, that is why I headed this column “And Yet”... I knew that I would be compelled to admit many things, to say “*pater peccavimus*” over and over again, and to acknowledge that history is often on your side... After all, your generation is negatively very consistent with history... You have the same questions, but the answers are not always with you... This I admit under the imperative of the past... So it is, God have pity on us...

Many times, over the years, I have been in a crowded, towering, fashionable church and have joined suburbanities and two-car owners in singing mightily:

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“Though with a scornful wonder
Men see Her sore oppressed
By schisms rent asunder
By heresies distressed...”

I felt nothing of the “scornful wonder” of my world... I was not “sore oppressed,” and “schisms” and “heresies” were only for the hidden cadences of theological journals... The pipe organ was expensive (the music had only very faint overtones of the catacombs and the fiery stake), and my host had promised me a good dinner and a game of golf for the remainder of the Lord’s Day...

The darker words of the hymn were clearly not for me or about me... And here, my *Hic et Nunc* son, lies our greatest shame and our deepest disaster... It is not where you so often see it — in our failure to be relevant to society and its problems — but in our damnable smugness and in our attempt to float into heaven on flowery beds of ease... This is the trouble of the Church — not distress and oppression,” but prideful comfort — and the ultimate heresy of our life and not of our words... This is my problem with your problem... I cannot understand why you ask us to *do* some thing on earth when we are not even *being* something which can stand up in the harsh and kindly light of heaven...

I fear that I am not saying all this very well... The solution of the problem of the Church lies not in becoming more *this-worldly* but by the alchemy of heaven in becoming more *other-worldly*... After all, the Church is the organism thrust into time and history paradoxically by the helpless hands of a child and the helpless hands of a crucified criminal... No human laws, no idea of progress, no histories of civilization really and finally apply to the Church... The Church of Christ has no liberty to become the slave even of its own history... History is great, but Christ is greater... He is a present Lord with a present will, and the Church becomes truly contemporary only by doing His will on earth as it is done in heaven...

Well — I left you hanging in the air... “What Good is the Church?”... All I have said is that it can be, will be again, very good... But you will have to change your tune — and so must I... Will you understand if, for the time being, I quote from the end of Dostoyevsky’s “The Grand Inquisitor” in my own conclusion... His Christ figure, who has listened to all the Inquisitor’s

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accusations without saying a word, at the end “suddenly approached the old man in silence and kissed him softly on his bloodless, aged lips”... That kiss was the eternal answer to the question “What Good is the Church?”... It is to follow its Lord in kissing the now ‘bloody but still cold lips of your world – and mine... God love you!

