

The Empty Chair

SHORTLY before Thanksgiving, the Presiding Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States had a private conference with Pope John XXIII. For the first time in history, the Roman Pontiff and the head of the American branch of the Anglican Communion met face-to-face. The subject discussed was "the unity of all Christian people," and the exchanges were described as "most cordial."

This visit therefore followed the pattern set some months ago when the Archbishop of Canterbury paid a visit to the Pope. That too was an historic occasion, the first such meeting since the days of Martin Luther. And it too took place in an atmosphere of Christian cordiality.

At this writing, the proceedings of the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches are finishing up in India. There too precedent was set, for the meetings were attended by five Catholic theologians acting as official observers for the Vatican—including the American Father Edward Duff, S.J., of the Institute of Social Order in St. Louis.

All these events, of course, owe their inspiration to the Ecumenical Council called by Pope John XXIII, the first sessions of which are slated to begin late next year. To those meetings, in turn, official Protestant observers will be invited, and at this point their attendance looks almost certain.

These are heartening signs. If the road toward Christian unity is a long one, at least the first tentative steps are being taken. But it seems to me the time has come for something more.

A few weeks ago I spoke at a conference sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews on the role of religion in American society. Speaking with me were a distinguished Protestant and a well-known Rabbi; like me, both had come some distance to participate. Our talks were followed by extensive discussion periods, with much give-and-take between the participants themselves and the audience—all part of a continuing program, dedicated to an exploration of our religious roots and a serious effort to see how religion could have more impact on our society.

I thought of this meeting when I read the recent statement of the American Bishops on the decline of morality in American life. Offhand, it would seem that a program like the one I participated in would be exactly the kind of thing to receive a hearty welcome from those concerned about the impact of religion on public affairs. Yet as far as I was concerned, one of the most striking things about the affair was the minimal amount of Catholic support.

True, there were some well informed Catholic laymen present, a few of whom had had a hand in planning the program. But they amounted to only a handful, and the participants did not include one priest, brother or sister from the diocese in which the meeting was held. In fact, the only priest on the scene turned out to be a subscriber to *The Commonweal* who had driven over from his own diocese to see what I looked like in the flesh.

This is not, I am afraid, an untypical situation. We Catholics are forever talking about the need for morality in public life. In fact, though, everyone who is involved in such matters knows that it is extremely difficult to get our participation in projects not specifically labeled "Catholic." And when it comes to participation by priests, anyone who has ever tried knows that in many areas it is almost impossible to find one who can or will join in such efforts.

I know that the fault in these matters is not all on the Catholic side. We have old wounds which are hardly healed, and there are still places where Catholics are not made to feel welcome. But these instances are more and more the exception. If Catholics remain a minority in this country, we are hardly a beleaguered minority any longer. It seems to me, then, that it is time for us to take a hard look at our attitude in these matters and at the changed historical situation we confront.

Here we might profitably consider some recent words of Augustin Cardinal Bea, president of the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. The coming Ecumenical Council should not be viewed as a "Council of Union," Cardinal Bea said, but as one "preparing the way" for Christian unity at some time in the future. Meantime, he stressed, the doctrinal differences separating Catholics and the Protestant and Eastern Orthodox bodies in no way preclude their collaboration in facing common social problems or in working together for world peace. And this, it seems to me, is exactly where American Catholics fall down.

In general, why don't Catholics participate more? Why should the John Birch Society be the only non-religious organization I know of that can boast of a membership fifty per cent Catholic? And in particular, if Pope John can meet with the Archbishop of Canterbury and if he can extend a cordial welcome to visiting American Jews, why is it often so hard to get an American priest on the same platform with a minister and a rabbi?

I have no idea what the American Bishops would reply to such questions. I can only say that I do not find them easy to answer.

JAMES O'GARA

been given duties which would use their technical skills. In many cases these men have been given nothing at all to do while in others they are assigned duties which have no bearing on their skills. While this kind of bungling is an old tradition in the Army, there seems little reason to excuse it today.

The most curious and disturbing criticism, however, has been that many of the reservists have no idea what they are doing back in the service. At least two explanations are possible for this criticism. Either a great many Americans, including reservists, are just ignorant or the Administration has failed to get across its reasons for the recall.

What undoubtedly complicates the situation is that the Berlin threat has subsided somewhat. It is not surprising, given this change since last summer, that many wonder if there was ever a genuine crisis in the first place. The irony, of course, is that the recall may itself have contributed to the easing of tensions by forcing the Soviets to back down in their Berlin demands.

Nevertheless, there are far deeper reasons for much of the ignorance and dissatisfaction. For many years now this country has suffered from the baneful effects of the Dulles' "massive retaliation" doctrine. We have for so long relied upon nuclear weapons as our main line of defense, so long boasted of our ability to destroy the Soviet Union, so long neglected conventional means of warfare, that it is hardly surprising that many Americans fail to grasp the Administration's military policy.

That policy, while often put in a vague fashion, was summarized adequately by President Kennedy in his most recent press conference. "While we rely," he said, "on our nuclear weapons, we also . . . have a choice between humiliation and a holocaust." What gives us this choice, he implied, is the maintenance of the means to fight a conventional war if at all possible; to have some means to fulfill our commitments without an exclusive reliance upon massive nuclear destruction.

This is hardly a subtle or very complicated position. But after years of hearing that we would have no choice but to use nuclear weapons, many are simply not going to grasp the rationality of this approach. While it is good to see that what was a minority opinion during the Eisenhower Administration—the conceivability of limited warfare—has now been recognized, the Administration clearly has a major educational task on its hands.

Not only must it root out the last vestiges of "massive retaliation," it must also show that preparation to wage conventional warfare does provide at least one way out of the nuclear dilemma. America does have the choice the President suggested. But it has to see it if it is to be a meaningful one.

Lobby For Peace

DR. LEO SZILARD was one of the pioneers in developing the system of nuclear reaction which enabled this country to produce the atomic bomb. Now, pioneering in another direction, Dr. Szilard is calling for a nationwide Council for Abolishing War, an organization that could spend twenty-five million dollars a year lobbying in the cause of peace.

In a recent address at the University of Chicago, the eminent biophysicist declared that without drastic political changes, the world is "headed toward an all-out war." One of the ways to avoid this disaster, he said, would be to create the organization he described.

Most importantly, the "movement to abolish war" would ask all those who joined it to contribute two per cent of their total income. Starting with a base of 50,000 students, Dr. Szilard estimated that the movement could reach 500,000 members in a year, which would raise a fund of fifty million dollars. The Council would use every form of personal and group lobbying to influence politicians, editors, columnists, television commentators and all those who influence public opinion. It would also contribute directly to political campaigns and "deliver the votes" of its members, who would promise to vote solely on the issue of "war and peace." It would be, said Dr. Szilard, "the most powerful lobby that ever hit Washington."

Dr. Szilard's idea is exciting and impressive. What is perhaps most notable about it is its rare combination of idealism and hard practicality, which is of course the essential combination. On the one hand, the plan envisaged by Dr. Szilard is single-minded and uncompromising in its idealistic objective of peace; on the other, it calls for hard, politically sophisticated action in the achievement of that objective.

On this score we think that Dr. Szilard is entirely right. The cause of peace is certainly of desperate importance today, and yet it has nothing like the immense pressure apparatus maintained at our government centers by dozens of special-interest groups. If peace has this vital importance, why should its cause not be supported as diligently and as effectively as the cause of the medical associations, or war veterans, or trucking interests?

We hope that Dr. Szilard is right in believing that his movement will attract millions of Americans, especially young people. Certainly it is a movement which offers youth today a need, a cause and a program. For the sake of all mankind, may it be a success, and may Dr. Szilard's greatest claim to fame—he has many—be that he fathered this inspiring plan to advance the cause of peace.