

Triumph

April 1973

Vol. VIII No. 4

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TRIUMPH is published ten times a year (monthly except for August and September) by the Society for the Christian Commonwealth, at 278 Broadview, Warrenton, Va. 22186, under the patronage of St. Athanasius. Tel: (703) 347-4700. Second class postage paid at Warrenton, Va. and at additional mailing offices.

Microfilm copies of current as well as back issues of TRIUMPH may be purchased from Xerox University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.

SUBSCRIPTION PRICE: \$10.00 a year; two years, \$18.00, three years, \$27.00; single copy \$1.00. Add 50c a year for Canadian, \$1.50 for all other foreign postage. Change of address notices, undeliverable copies, orders for subscriptions and all other correspondence should be sent to TRIUMPH, 278 Broadview, Warrenton, Va. 22186. Please allow one month's notice for change of address; mailing label from magazine should be sent with notice of change, but always send both old and new address, including ZIP code.

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Ecumenism in Crisis:

Some Catholic-Political Considerations

W. H. MARSHNER

The question whether the Catholic Church in this country should join the National Council of Churches is now in the final stages of study. At the same time, all ecumenical undertakings have been given a new cast by the January 22 Supreme Court decision on abortion. These two circumstances define the present moment as uniquely propitious for a careful rethinking of the entire ecumenical engagement.

Signs are everywhere that the abortion decision has shocked Catholics out of a deep complacency which settled on them after John Kennedy's election. But the abortion decision does not stand in isolation. It has to be seen against a two-fold background. On the one hand, the "social issue" of the late '60s went far toward destroying Catholic contentment with the libertarian strand in American politics, especially on the Right. On the other hand, the triumph of McGovernism within the established liberal institutions gave Catholic Democrats a new sense of homelessness. The Party's liberalism was no longer their liberalism, and Michael Novak was surely not alone in thinking that the hour had struck to rediscover some distinctively Catholic ideals for the politics of the '70s.

This emerging consciousness of a new Catholic task in the social order, a consciousness which cuts across Left and Right and reaches special intensity in the life issue, forms the angle of vision for "Catholic politics." It is from this angle of vision that I propose to re-evaluate ecumenism.

Broadly defined, ecumenism is the contact and cooperation of Christians across denominational lines. More narrowly, it is the same sort of thing when done by official church bodies, hierarchical or bureaucratic, with the ultimate hope of some day bringing the several denominations into unity.

Within the scope of these two definitions, I distinguish four largely independent zones of ecumenical activity in contemporary Catholic experience. These zones are the radical, the charismatic, the official and the (for want of a better term) "anti-modern."

Radical ecumenism is the "underground" variety practiced by dissident Catholics in the company (almost invariably) of liberal Protestants. Intercommunion is routine and is rationalized by a shared contempt for "institutionalism." The example of the National Association of Laity indicates that abortion will not create a crisis in

these circles, since the "Catholics" involved have simply repudiated their Church's position. As an elitist phenomenon, then, radically out of touch and consciously out of sympathy with traditional and popular Catholic sensibilities, this sort of ecumenism may be written off for our purposes as simply irrelevant.

The second zone I call charismatic ecumenism; it is expressed through prayer meetings which increasingly attract Protestant Pentecostals even when held under Catholic auspices. I prescind here from any discussion of the theological merits of this movement, but it is worth noting that its elements are heterogeneous. At one margin, charismatic ecumenism shades into the radical variety, heedless of institutions and formal dogmas. But in other sectors, Pentecostalism seems to bring together theologically conservative people, highly conscious of historical differences and hostile to intercommunion. At this margin, charismatic ecumenism fades into what I call the "anti-modern" zone. This polarization, I believe, will prove to be more enduring than any superficial unity based on prayer techniques or alleged gifts. For Catholic political purposes, at least, charismatic ecumenism will split its ranks between the radical and anti-modern zones, in either of which it may yet turn out to have great impact.

The official zone of ecumenism, of course, is that carried on by the Catholic hierarchy itself, especially the NCCB Committee on Ecumenical Affairs (now chaired by Archbishop William Baum of Washington, D.C.), the diocesan ecumenical commissions, and the officially sponsored groups and panels on all levels. Because of numbers and publicity, this zone is what Catholics ordinarily think of when they hear the word "ecumenism," and it is this sort which, as our title suggests, is in crisis.

Crisis is judgment. It is the moment at which two ways beckon imperiously and one must be chosen. In the United States, where the Orthodox are a tiny minority, ecumenism commonly means relations with Protestants, and official ecumenism has meant relations with a definite genus of Protestants. It is hardly necessary to define this genus beyond signaling two properties: these are the Protestants who belong to the National Council of Churches (NCC) and who sanction or indeed aggressively advocate the crime of abortion.

Every major Protestant denomination connected with the NCC has taken a formal stand of some sort in favor of at least "therapeutic" abortion. Threat to the mother's health, rape, incest and fetal deformity have been cited by all these bodies as cases justifying abortion

and its legalization. Some denominations have gone further, advocating the abolition of all abortion laws, so as to allow child murder to be entirely a medical question.

Nor has the NCC apparatus itself been silent. Some months ago the Council established a study committee, dominated by women, to prepare a new policy statement specifically on abortion. The result was an outrageous document which identified the "sanctity" of human life with its "quality." The "central goal" of a correct abortion policy was said to be "enabling women to live with dignity and equality," a goal which, it was claimed, makes abortion "often" a "necessary" solution under present social circumstances. Whenever a conflict of interest occurs between "unborn life in the womb" and "fully existing life" (i.e., adults), the statement went on, it is the woman who must decide—not the father, the courts or the Church. The issue of the humanity of the fetus was never raised.

Now, it is true that on March 1 the General Board of the NCC voted to reject the new policy statement; but it would be inaccurate to conclude that this vote represented a substantial ideological repudiation. Rather, the thing was put aside because some Eastern Orthodox bodies openly threatened to walk out if such a statement were adopted. It is the presence of the Orthodox, of course, which lends credibility to the NCC's claim of being a genuinely ecumenical undertaking, as opposed to a Protestant club; and so, given a choice between the abortion draft and a serious loss of members and prestige, the politics of the situation dictated a prudent retreat.

But a retreat to where? To having *no* position on abortion? Not at all. For the NCC is still committed to its statement on "Responsible Parenthood," adopted on February 23, 1961. This reads in part: "Protestant Christians are agreed in condemning abortions or any method [of birth control] which destroys human life *except when the health or life of the mother is at stake*. The destruction of life already begun cannot be condoned as a method of family limitation" (emphasis added). No doubt the italicized clause did not look too sinister back in 1961, but everyone is aware by now that maternal "health" is a code word for abortion on demand. In other words, the old statement as it stands would have been adequate to express full endorsement of the '70 New York law or even of the Supreme Court decision. What is significant about recent developments, therefore, is the sheer fact that NCC thinking had become so radical as to desire any further statement at all. And proof that this thinking is still dominant, despite the March 1 vote, may be garnered from the fact that the new statement was not killed but sent to all member denominations as a document for further study.

Far from evoking a storm of protest from official Roman Catholic spokesmen, these Protestant statements and almost-statements have been passed over in silence, as though they were something routine like reaffirmations of *sola scriptura*. But in fact abortion and feminism are not traditional Protestant stands. Luther, Calvin and

Wesley would have been horrified at such ideas. Moreover, since ecumenism itself, according to Vatican II, is based on the supposition that important elements of the Catholic heritage have been preserved in the separated bodies, nothing could have been more natural than sharp Catholic rejoinders to statements that fly in the face of all Christian tradition and thereby undermine the very premises of ecumenical cooperation. How, then, explain this Catholic silence?

The question becomes all the more urgent when the ecumenical situation is contrasted with the civil. Here Catholic spokesmen have not been silent. In fact, the American bishops in the statement released by their Administrative Committee on February 13 have attacked the Supreme Court decision as not only morally repulsive but as actually incompatible with civil peace. Not only is the Court decision itself branded as immoral, but so are all laws in conformity with it. Whereupon, the bishops point out that immoral laws are not to be obeyed and that Christians must obey God rather than men. Now: if the Catholic bishops can say such things to the armed and dangerous U.S. government, why have they not talked back to the Protestant denominational leaders? Is the mass of Protestant churchgoers any less bound to obey God rather than men?

Put it another way. Catholic spokesmen seem to have no difficulty in speaking boldly, clearly and prophetically to Protestants provided the latter are addressed as "citizens." (Citizens are just people considered in abstraction from their religion.) But when Protestants are addressed as Protestants (through "official" ecumenism, that is), the rules of the game appear to change. Suddenly the prophetic truth is bracketed as merely "our tradition." Proclamation is denatured into dialogue. But is this inevitable? Is ecumenism by nature a dialogue situation? Or can it also, and more authentically, be a situation of joint proclamation?

Most Christians, I think, would opt for the latter understanding, at least if ecumenism is to have a future. Why, then—the question returns—why here and now are Catholic ecumenists not proclaiming their faith boldly on the crucial issue of abortion? An answer, I fear, will emerge from a brief look at what these ecumenists are doing instead. Certainly they are not ignoring the abortion issue. On the contrary, they seem to be desperately eager to get this "hot potato" into an appropriate insulation. I cite three cases.

Case 1. *Grass Roots Level*. There is an ecumenical group in Spokane, Washington, entitled N.O.W. (Neighbors Offering Witness). Several Catholics, including at least two Jesuits and a religious sister, are members. Two years ago, when Catholics in Washington were engaged in an all-out struggle against demand abortion, N.O.W. published a small "position" paper, in which the signatories confessed that they could reach no position whatsoever on abortion save that it was immensely valuable to agree to disagree:

A potentially explosive issue is upon us. But it can be defused. The purpose of this paper is to assist the thinking of persons both for and against the proposed abortion re-

ferendum this fall. It is important that each person know why he upholds his convictions.

But it is even more important to understand and appreciate the views of those who do not feel the way you do—and to know how they feel and why they feel this way. . . . Hopefully this will save the community from being hurt by the differences of opinions and convictions regarding an issue which has a high emotion content. . . .

At this point, the position paper divides into two columns, and for several pages one column sings the advantages of child murder, while the other argues that unborn babies are human beings who merit the protection of the law. At the end of this curious exercise, the joint statement resumes:

Although we disagree on the abortion issue, we are unanimous and unequivocal in our support of the quality of life for all persons after birth. We stand together in supporting those domestic programs which aim at the improvement of life. . . . Quality of life is that necessary ingredient that raises a neighborhood into a brotherhood. This means . . . appreciating differences. By its very nature "community" means a true spirit of mutual respect.

I resist, with difficulty, the opportunities for riposte which this insufferable text affords. I merely point out that it posits a clear hierarchy of values and that this hierarchy flatly contradicts the one posited by the bishops' statement of February 13. According to N.O.W., civil peace (*alias* "community") is a supreme value which disagreement over abortion *ought not* to disturb. According to the bishops, innocent human life is a supreme value whose defense *ought to break* the civil peace if necessary. Between these two positions lies all the difference between "good Germans" and Christian martyrs.

It is quite possible that five months ago the bishops did not perceive this dichotomy as clearly as they do today. Fr. David Bowman, S.J., who is employed by the NCC as Special Assistant for Ecumenical Services, was lobbying ubiquitously at the bishops' national meeting last November for a peace-and-dialogue-at-any-price position, and no one seemed to be treating him as a pariah. The passion of his life, it seems, is to have the Catholic Church in America join the National Council of Churches formally. He collaborated in the production of a 47-page report advocating that very step. But along with this lengthy report, Bowman was handing out copies of N.O.W.'s little position paper *as a model of how the abortion question would fruitfully be handled by the whole Catholic Church once inside the NCC framework*. Incredible.

Case 2. *State Level*. Texas is one of eleven states in which the diocese or the regional Catholic conference is formally affiliated to the state council of churches. But two circumstances make Texas unique. First, Texas contains ten Roman Catholic dioceses which, along with numerous Protestant and Orthodox bodies, make the Texas Conference of Churches (TCC) the largest inter-faith organization in the world in which Roman Catholics participate as full members. Secondly, Texas

had a genuinely "strict" abortion law until *Roe v. Wade* struck it down; whereupon, the state attorney general denounced the Supreme Court and filed a petition calling for reconsideration of its decision and recognition of fetal personhood. While this legal drama was unfolding, what did the TCC have to say? I quote from an *NC News* release of February 23:

The Texas Conference of Churches called for ecumenical cooperation in studying the problems brought about by the U.S. Supreme Court decision on abortion.

In action taken at the closing session of the conference's fourth annual assembly, the delegates voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution acknowledging "the distress which now strains us," and giving "support to legislative efforts in our state that initiate or increase maternity services, child-care and assistance to pregnant women, undergirding their choice to give birth."

A resolution screening committee had removed a clause from the original resolution that would have commended the Texas attorney general for chastising the high court for having acted "in a legislative manner. . . ."

In other words, the TCC was in the same impasse as N.O.W. It could talk about maternity services but not about the subject at hand, abortion. It could only answer the questions which nobody had bothered to ask. Its simulacrum of Christian cooperation could not even agree to commend the eminently Christian initiative of the state attorney general. Frighteningly, an ecumenical politics had so hamstrung Catholic politics that a secular state government could act more decisively for human life than the local Roman Catholic Church!

Case 3. *National Level*. A number of figures of national stature in the ecumenical movement gathered on January 31 in New York at the famous cathedral of St. John the Divine. They were participants at a panel discussion on "What Will the Abortion Issue Do to Ecumenical Efforts?" I cite the report in *Religious News Service*, February 1:

Debate over abortion could be "catastrophic" for the ecumenical movement "if we let it be," Dr. Cynthia Wedel, immediate past-president of the National Council of Churches, warned here. But if the Churches learn how to work together across the lines of disagreement, she said, they could discover things important not only for the Churches but for everyone living in a pluralistic society. . . . Catholics should be wary of trying to enforce by law a position meeting with such deep opposition of thoughtful and conscientious people of other faiths, said Father Herbert W. Rogers, S.J., an assistant professor of theology at Fordham University.

He also suggested that it might be possible for Catholic theology to develop a somewhat different position on abortion. . . .

In reference to the ecumenical problems posed by the abortion issue, he said that calling abortionists "murderers" is imposing on them the standards of a religious faith they do not share. . . .

"It may be that God called the modern ecumenical movement into being in order that the Churches might learn the skills everyone would need in a pluralistic society," [Dr. Wedel] said.

Again, a dozen points deserve attack, but I pass over all but one. With special clarity, from this incident, emerges the fact that the abortion crisis has forced those committed to ecumenism-as-usual to articulate a new rationale for their activities. Nobody can now believe that Christian reunion is at hand. Common witness is impossible. Cooperation in service is unthinkable (for "service" includes the Clergy Abortion Referral Service). Therefore: official ecumenism is now discovered to be "providential" because it will help to develop "skills" in pluralistic living.

First, a political comment. "Pluralism" in contemporary America means exactly one thing: the exclusion of Catholic values from public policy and (reflexively) the acquiescence of Catholics in that exclusion. Thus the rationale for continued ecumenism (RC-loves-NCC variety) is the rationale for a Catholic acceptance of political defeat. Defeat? Not even that! It is the rationale for never fighting in the first place. Hence it is the most "conservative" rationale possible: the one course of action which promises to leave the present post-Protestant and secularist elite absolutely in control of the destinies of America's Catholic millions.

Secondly, a theological comment. Ecumenism is *not* an exercise in pluralistic manners. It is a serious attempt to restore Christian unity. According to the mind of Vatican II, successful ecumenism is precisely an ever growing unity in credal proclamation; in the absence of such unity, "ecumenical" efforts can never be anything but superficial irenicism or purely humanitarian social service. The inevitable question, therefore, is whether "ecumenical" relations with Protestant bodies that support abortion can really deserve the name. They have shown themselves unprepared to maintain any element of the Christian moral heritage which seriously conflicts with prevalent secular thinking. In an analogy which is not at all far-fetched, these churches can be called a *Volkschristliche* movement. Therefore the question that must be faced, no matter how painful it may be, is whether ecumenical relations with the NCC must not be terminated or at least radically de-emphasized precisely in the name of authentic ecumenism itself.

Whereupon, a second political comment. "Actions speak louder than words," runs a bit of conventional wisdom which is also confirmed in pastoral theory. The American hierarchy can say that it is serious about opposing abortion in the public sphere and simultaneously serious about increasing ties with Protestants who support abortion in the "ecumenical" sphere. But the spoken paradox must break into sheer contradiction in the order of action. A highly visible ecumenical step, such as joining the NCC, can only have the effect of casting grave doubt on the hierarchy's abortion stand in the popular mind. The press will see to that!

Where, then, can ecumenism turn? Is there, or can there be, a strategy for American Catholics that is both authentically ecumenical and supportive of an active, pro-life politics? I think that there can be.

The anti-modern zone of ecumenical activity never used to amount to much. It was the sphere in which

people who really had no interest in ecumenism at all might occasionally toss bouquets at each other for severally struggling against "modernism" in their own denominations. It was the sphere in which Carl McIntyre might now and then call upon "all you traditional Roman Catholics out there" to do something about creeping Communism in the Vatican, or some such. But two developments have deeply altered this situation.

Not the "Jesus Freak" movement itself so much as its shock waves have produced a significant Protestant force that is unlike Carl McIntyre in being doctrinally conservative without being bigotedly anti-Catholic or rigidly right-wing in politics. Publications such as *Christianity Today* and *The Cambridge Fish* address a fervently Christian readership in terms that are genuinely open to Catholic collaboration. In fact, a recent issue of the *Fish* included Catholic voices in a repudiation of abortion. A similar spirit of openness gave rise to the much-publicized "Key '73" effort, in which many Catholic dioceses have taken part. In short, there is now a broad-based movement in Protestantism which interestingly mirrors the Vatican II stance of the Catholic Church: total doctrinal firmness and free ecumenical dynamism.

Meanwhile and secondly, the Supreme Court's abortion decision has touched off a reaction of horror in "conservative" Protestant circles that echoes the response of the Catholic hierarchy and laity. The editor of *Christianity Today* hastened to the press conference at which (Catholic) Rep. Lawrence Hogan announced his Right to Life Amendment. A fundamentalist radio preacher in Baltimore has been eagerly hawking subscriptions to the notoriously orthodox Catholic weekly, *The Wanderer*, because of its militant stand against abortion. Hundreds of examples like these could be adduced.

Trivia? Or straws in what may become an ever stronger wind? A study recently published by the NCC itself concludes that the "conservative" Protestant bodies are the only ones that are growing absolutely and retaining their young people. The NCC, then, may look like something solid today, while the institutions of anti-modern Protestantism look ephemeral and disreputable. But in 20 years?

The conclusion is both obvious and risky. No one knows what would happen if Bishop Baum's Ecumenical Affairs Committee determined radically to redirect the official ecumenical apparatus. No one knows whether a substantial ecumenical movement, worthy of the name, could be built on a new coalition of forces embracing "conservative" Protestants, charismatics, and the Orthodox. But three things can be said with certainty: (1) a constituency of some size for a new ecumenism is "out there"; (2) many Catholic lay people are already enthusiastic for such a venture, especially those who have never been friendly to ecumenism before; and (3) the political needs of the hour and the Catholic politics now struggling to be born cry out with utmost urgency for such an experiment to be made.

And another thing may be added with equal certainty: (4) neither an authentic ecumenical policy on the part of the Catholic Church, nor the movement to defend the sanctity of unborn life, could be anything but severely damaged by a Catholic decision to join the National Council of Churches. ■