



RELIGIOUS BULLETIN

VOL. XLIV, NO. 8
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1964

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SIDE-STEPPING THE "EITHER-OR"

In last Sunday's gospel Jesus eluded the trap set for him by the Pharisees -- watchdogs of the status-quo -- by rejecting an either-or. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; to God what is God's," is not an invitation to divide our lives into compartments, but a recognition that life is the sort of thing that demands pursuit on many levels. Indeed, if life means anything, it captures this aptitude to organize disparate concerns into one. What cannot adapt must be programmed; what can adapt signals it is alive; what can decide and discriminate announces its humanity.

Yet we are continually hiding behind either-or's as though we were neither alive nor human. One excuses himself from leadership because he has to study, another from time for prayer because his job is to work. And most insidiously of all, we still hear echoes of a faded and discredited either-or of a century ago: the individual or the state. Every concession the individual makes to society, we are told, endangers his autonomy, threatens to swallow him up in "the state". We know today, of course, that these are exaggerated polarities, that political and social life is more subtle, more intertwined than this. Every one of us is at once an individual and caught up in a web of social relations. These are simply the facts of the case. Our task is to find successful formulae for pulling both facets together.

The most enlightening way of looking at the Council is as a struggle to give both facets of man their due. The poles here are law and conscience. Life demands both spontaneity and boundaries; without law it turns malignant, without its characteristic elan, it is indistinguishable from death. The Council Fathers are espousing the truth that change is normalcy, avowing that we must experiment to find the patterns respecting at once law and conscience, protecting the full range of man's freedom.

In worship the poles are public and private; and the task of our day is to rediscover the public face of prayer. But try as we might, this strikes us as a contradiction. And it is not simply that we have always been used to praying in silence, but also that we cannot help associate the public with the superficial. Politics strikes us as somehow dirty; no one considers it as an occupation! We are content to think of a job and a family. Anything more is somehow superfluous.

But look around at the impasse this kind of thinking has brought
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