

CHAPTER III

RELATION BETWEEN THE CHURCH
AND CULTURE

When we study the relation of the Church to a human group, we have to understand clearly the level on which we are moving.

I. THE LEVEL OF CIVILIZATION

The Church or Christianity cannot be related as one instrument to another, because the Church does not possess the instruments of civilization, neither is it a civilization as such. Only when two civilizations meet can there be a clash of the instruments between them. The continual temptation of Israel with its temporal messianism, of the Christian Empire of Constantine, of the Hispanic world, and of contemporary Catholic integralism is precisely at the point of confusing Judeo-Christianity with a particular culture, race, people, or nation. Christianity can become slave to the *instruments* of a philosophy, a group, a party, a Christian institution, or to Western culture; but Christian institutions are by nature supplementary and transitory. In many cases, of course, they are beneficial, but we fall into serious error when we attempt to eternalize them. All of this relates to the problem of the creation, growth, and death of Christian institutions. A case in point would be the Pontifical States in the mid-nineteenth century, or the Spanish *Patronato* beginning in the seventeenth century. Each of these is an example of an institution that could have been beneficial at one time but that became injurious to the cause of Christianity when it was no longer needed for the transcendental ends of the gospel.

It is clear that there are other extreme positions, such as that of angelism, fideism, or Monophysitism, which claim that the Kingdom of God is unrelated to any institution and does not need a single instrument of civilization nor the support of any culture. The Manichaeans depreciated the *corporal*, and at times Protestantism has tended to deny the value of the *natural*. The millenarian sects, Jansenism, and certain forms of progressivism are equally deficient at this point.

Between the extreme of identifying Christianity with a human institution and that of denying any relationship between the Kingdom of God and all institutions is the affirmation or the doctrine of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ who was both God and man. Knowing that no concrete instrument of civilization is necessary for the Church — because it transcends them — we know that the Church must always employ the instruments of civilization. Being aware that “corporality” is not the only feature that constitutes the human condition, we can be sure that everything related to the human being is of necessity “carnal” in the biblical sense of “human totality” or “sacramentality.” *Ecclesiastical institutions* divinely established are not the instruments of civilization, and civilization should clearly distinguish them from the innumerable “Christian” institutions not divinely established. The latter are transitory and depend upon a given

culture. Even in divine institutions we should distinguish the accidental, dependent elements such as language from the essential elements. It is understood that the supreme element of a divine institution is the Trinity, which assumes in the person of Jesus Christ historical humanity by means of sacramentality—essentially in the Eucharistic mystery—of the living Church, that is, the Kingdom of God. In this sense Christianity can “exist” in different cultures and can utilize any instrument without necessarily becoming a slave to it.

II. THE LEVEL ON WHICH "RELATIONS" ARE ESTABLISHED

The Church and Christianity can have a twofold relationship with groups and cultures: on the level of understanding and on the level of “ethos.” We shall examine these two aspects separately.

1. The "Ethico-mythical Nucleus" of a Culture and Christian Understanding

If we could grasp, for example, the significance of the work of the apologists in the primitive Church, we would immediately see that they concentrated on criticizing the basis of the total Greco-Roman culture. In light of their Christian understanding of the dogmas of the faith and revealed truth, the apologists utilized the intentional instruments of the Greco-Roman culture, namely, the sciences and philosophies of the era, to critique the “ethico-mythical nucleus” of the culture, such as man as a soul, the body as evil, the universe as eternal, the gods as intraworldly, and history as an eternal cycle of events. Slowly but surely the Judeo-Christian world view filled the vacuum in the ancient culture and began to transform it completely. Evangelization involved not only personal or individual conversion, but also social and community transformation. As a result a new “ethico-mythical nucleus” was created with a clear Christian orientation. It would be incorrect to refer to the new culture as a “Christian Civilization” because no such civilization has ever existed. Neither can we assume that a single civilization resulted. Civilizations with a Christian orientation have been multiple, and furthermore, paganism in one form or another has always existed. A primitive or syncretic civilization is monist, that is, it allows for only one “ethico-mythical nucleus,” while a superior civilization such as contemporary Europe, North America, or Russia is pluralistic, or at least it can be. There can exist in a civilization—a system of instruments—different movements, intentional groups, and centers of interpretation. Thus from medieval civilization with its Christian orientation there resulted the neopagan movements of which Marxism and secularism are the logical consequences. These are distinct world views within the same limits of the prevailing universal civilization.

2. Christian Charity and the Pagan Ethos

The fundamental Greco-Roman attitude in regard to the various instruments of civilization was primarily, on the one hand, obedience to the system established by law, both political and cosmic, because the citizen belonged to the *polis* or the Empire. On the other hand, perfection was achieved by a certain sufficiency of instruments and by the leisure and solitude which the wise man achieved through contemplation apart from his duty to the city. This was classical culture.

Meanwhile, the primary attitude of the Christian in regard to the instruments of civilization was expressed in love for one's neighbor motivated by the love for God. Herein did one participate in the same interpersonal love of God. Charity was not regarded as mere philanthropy; rather it was seen as interpersonal divine love. This

was the foundation of the *Christian ethos*. Obviously such love was and is impossible without faith, without the fundamental experience, without understanding. This love for a person as a person, this respect for another's present and future in God, this created and redeemed understanding, produced innumerable effects in the field of civilization and of the *ethos*—for example, the improvement of the situation for women, the recognition of the equality of people of all races, and the abolition of the institution of slavery. All these things were not achieved in a day, but rather in centuries—results of the fundamental Christian attitude and understanding that faith produces in the conscience, and the awareness of another's inalienable dignity. The people of Israel, and later the Church, entered into dialogue with different peoples, nations, and civilizations, and from this interchange Judeo-Christianity emerged enriched and aware of its universality.

In order to understand the development of culture in Latin America and its mutual relation with the Church, one should distinguish between the pre-Hispanic American civilization and *ethos* and the Hispanic civilization and culture, which clashed with each other. Furthermore, the dialogue that Christianity began with the pre-Hispanic communities was complicated by its apparent identity with the Hispanic culture. Also, the clash between the two civilizations as well as the dialogue between Christianity and American paganism is totally *sui generis*. A description of the actual differences in these two peoples will constitute the objective of the remaining chapters.

Prior to the birth of Christ, Judaism dialogued with the Canaanites, Egyptians, Babylonians, and Greeks. The Primitive Church dialogued with the Roman Empire. In all these cases the Hebrew or Christian community was situated within the interior of a superior culture which in one sense had been permeated by the Semitic spirit in the course of three millennia. The individual conversion of a minority and the subsequent conversion of the masses came by the transformation of the “ethico-mythical nucleus” of the Greco-Roman culture and resulted in the development of Constantinian Christendom. The Germanic tribes—representing external inferior civilizations—invaded the Christian empire, but in the last analysis the invaders were assimilated into the civilization and religion of the invaded, namely, into Latin Christendom. Islam, on the other hand—representing an external superior culture historically—coexisted with Christianity without Europe's ever discovering a means by which to transform the Muslim “ethico-mythical nucleus.”

Finally, as a result of the naval expeditions of Portugal beginning in the fourteenth century and of Spain in the following century, Europe entered for the first time into a program of expansion. Also for the first time Europeans were confronted by superior and inferior cultures which were absolutely external. Like the Germans who invaded the Christian empire, Christians invaded the territory of these external civilizations and cultures. The Scandinavian peoples, for example, resided in a territory outside that of Constantinian Christendom but were, nonetheless, adjacent to the Empire. Their conversion was achieved within the scope of normal terrestrial continental expansion, and the inroads achieved politically and economically influenced the Scandinavians to adopt what they perceived in the medieval civilization as a superior culture. Theirs was a marginal area within the Christian orbit. Conversely, in Africa and on the Atlantic coast of America, Portugal and Spain encountered inferior cultures in an environment totally pagan. In Asia and on the Pacific side of Latin America superior cultures did exist. The great civilizations of India and China, for example, were comparable and even superior to that of the pagan Roman Empire. It is now apparent that Christianity should have entered into dialogue with the Indian and Chinese cultures—and could

have done so, as the experience of Matteo Ricci clearly demonstrates —had they followed the example of Francisco Xavier.

We can also say that without doubt the Hispanic civilization virtually annihilated the Amerindian civilizations in America. The indigenous political and military organizations were obliterated, and the Amerindian elites and their institutions of education and culture were destroyed. What was left of the Indian community after being decimated in part by epidemics, wars, and inhumane treatment was totally unhinged from the ancient context which the norms and the organization of the Amerindian cultures provided. Christianity, therefore, encountered an enormous difficulty in attempting to begin a dialogue on the level of existential understanding, in that the Christian faith did not encounter an adequate interlocutor, and the defenders of the Indians would not have served. Moreover, encountering a pagan environment, half of which the Spanish invaders were inclined to accept and the other half to change, certain ancestral practices continued from the time of the conquest. Consider, for example, the important influence on the Latin American *ethos* of the cohabitation between Spanish and Indians that took place during the first years of the sixteenth century, together with the wholesale lack of respect for the laws pouring forth from the Spanish court. All of this produced an *ethos* of habitual antilegalism. It is certain that the Hispanic culture contributed to or provided a Latin Americanized Christendom, and in the Indian communities a catechetical process was begun that has not yet been completed.