

CRISIS AND COMMITMENT  
IN THE  
EDUCATION OF A CATHOLIC

by  
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I should like to begin this afternoon by quoting a very terrifying statement made in a national magazine article a year ago.

"It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being must divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes and hypocrisies of the Christian Church. If the concept has any validity or use it can only be to make us larger, freer and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time to get rid of him."

The article, a little later, picks up another thread and it says:

"Neither civilized reason or Christian love would cause any of these people to treat you as they presumably wanted to be treated. Only the fear of your power of retaliation would cause them to do that or to seem to do it."

The quotations came from the November 17th issue of the New Yorker of last year, in what was, for me, one of the most terrifying reading experiences I have had in my life. It was an article called "In a Region of My Mind," the article that really thrust James Baldwin into the American literary milieu. If you do not recognize Baldwin, you had better recognize him because he is one of the most terrifying young writers of our time; and he is speaking for the Negro population.

With that in the background, remember that he said "If the concept has any validity or any use it can only make us larger, freer and more loving," and he says, "If God cannot do this then it is time that we got rid of him."

Now, what I would like to suggest to you and to me this afternoon is that it is Baldwin in the Negro race, Baldwin in the atheistic world, Baldwin in the southern stereotype, Baldwin in the suburbs of St. Louis, it is all of these strange people with ideas that terrify us, either because of their radical position or because of their conservative position; it is these people that we must somehow come to approach in a larger, freer, more loving way. I would suggest that we do not do this by learning a lot of principles; that we do not do this by staying in our own ghettos, by breathing the same air, by telling each other how great it is to be a Christian; but that we find out how great it is to be a Christian by finding out how terrible it is to be a human being. Terrible, in a wonderful sense of terrifying, in the realization that there is nobody who grows without going through growing pains, and the growing pains are never over.

And so I have said to many leading Catholic educators that I really wonder what would happen if the United States government said to us tomorrow: "Yes, we will give you the money to run your schools on every level - on the elementary school level, on the undergraduate level, on the secondary school level, on the graduate school level. You can have the money through the parents, you can have

it directly through institutions, but as soon as we give it to you, remember that we want you to have equal but separate rights."

It seems to me that if they did this, if they said to us "Yes, you can have equal but separate rights," we would scream to high heaven and we would remember that that is what we did to the American Negro and we are trying to get away from it today because we are smart enough to realize that you don't have an influence on your society unless you are part of the main stream of that society.

Rather than talking specifically today on what happens to you as an individual, I would like to talk to you about what I think you as an individual are meant to contribute to the apostolate of the seventies, eighties and nineties and the two-thousands. Out there is the world waiting for all of us to communicate with it and somehow or other we have to be able to begin to understand that world, not to debate with it, not to apologize for our own position by defending it in the old philosophical sense, but we have to be able to go into that world and to find out what that world is all about.

I want to quote to you again from probably my favorite Christian writer of this time, Daniel Berrigan. Berrigan says:

"When ideas remain too long unexercised, a man who begins as an intellectual, his mind in good trim, ends shapeless of mind, useless of mind.

"In the long run a Christian may know a great deal, and understand a great deal. But one fault spoils everything. And the fault is simply that a man would deny any claim on him from his own times. The fault is that he would glory in the history of man or the history of the Church as great ideas; but of his own times would know nothing. The fault is that a man would not think his own times worth the price of knowing.

"And let us not be deceived; the price of the knowledge is a heavy one. The price of knowing one's own times is always, to a Christian, the price of acting on behalf of one's own times. Whereas the knowledge of the past has no price attached to it; it is like the knowledge of the dead; it demands no living risks; neither the risk of misunderstanding nor of estrangement nor of practical mistake.

"But to know the living is always a risky process. It implies the risks of knowledge that must itself be living, since it centers on the living; that must be open, since the object of knowledge is an 'other,' and therefore changing, growing, evading."

And then

And then he talks about what he calls "the tribal and family optimism which is the death warrant of reality."

"Among Christians of our day," he says, "it persists in parochial minds who measure all things by the traditional plumb line - the line which joins a

rectory to a school to a series of comfortable interlocked streets. This is the nursery world of the unawakened. Beyond is a terrifying unknown.

"And if we come to what we might call the geometry of mystery, the line which joins sacramental experience to human life, we would note a strange parallel to the geography of today's parish.

"The invisible line here would run from baptistry to pulpit to altar, and on to school and home. In many Christian lives, it would be a line drawn in early childhood, and hewn to through adulthood - a line which has deepened into a rut. In another sense, it is a line which has become a party line; it joins man to man, the ethical, the cheerful, the interiorly pure, the good suburbanites. As clearly and jealously as a property line, upon which Christian taxes have been paid, and which therefore by the logic of the suburbs must be kept free from squatter man, this line traces for fathers and their children, the limits beyond which the Christian vocation will not go, the limits it has set to its free action. One can be baptized, shrive, take the Eucharist, live and die - and never touch the real world; lead a sectarian, safe, pragmatic life, and call it a religious life; never be troubled about the judgment of God on such a life; never experience anguish over 'the world, the way it goes'; never experience the jealousy of God or the silence of God; never waver before the alternatives which mankind holds out - to choose; to renege; to refuse."

Small groups of you with whom I have talked this year know that I am presently possessed by the wonder and mystery of freedom. Possessed as I have never been before by the wonder and mystery of freedom, meditating all the time about the foolishness of God, who knew what it meant to make me free. Who knew that in making me free, He would let me choose. Who knew that in making me free He could let me succeed or fail. Who was fool enough to let me make a choice even about salvation or damnation. And so it seems to me, if He put such a terrible price on vitality, if He really made such a terrible investment in the grace which He gave to me, then indeed, grace must be the most important thing of the Christian life - sharing in the divine life of Christ which we call grace. Another kind of preoccupation with the Christian life which rather sees it as a series of rules and regulations and a series of prescriptions and proscriptions is a deadening kind of stricture rather than a structuring kind of force of the grace-life in vitality and action.

In this framework I believe that we have to reevaluate our whole position about the future role of education and the Christian world. We have indeed become at least late adolescent Catholics, ready and perhaps compelled to go out and get involved in the tremendous interdynamics of our contemporary world. This great aching atheistic and agnostic world is essentially contemplative and is waiting somehow for the vitality that comes out of people who are unafraid to be afraid, who have what I have been calling the security to be insecure, who so believe in

their faith that they aren't afraid to look at all of the terrifying aberrations that we see around us. At Brandeis University I said that the image that so many people have of Roman Catholic nuns disturbs me deeply. They think of us as some kind of a protected young naive group, sheltered from the cold winds of reality. Too often even our students somehow get misled with this kind of notion. In many a high school the advent of a nun into a conversation in process would cause a young student group to change the subject with a kind of embarrassed attitude of "sister is too young to know."

And yet when we think about it, we are the shock troops of the Church. If we are the guerrilla fighters, who somehow or other decided that it was worth it to put no barriers on our contribution, then it seems to me that we ought to be the most mature people in the world, that we ought to have the best chance of anybody in the whole world of being as comfortable as Christ with the woman at the well, with the woman taken in adultery, and Mary Magdalen; that perhaps the prostitute ought to come into our arms faster than she comes into anybody else's because she trusts us to have gambled for tremendous involvement in the grace life, the divine life which is the Christ life. And it seems to me that if our education is going anywhere that we have to create in you who are our first-line troops this same kind of compassion, this same kind of open heart and open mind in terrifying wonder at God's world so that you will not be those suburbanites that Berrigan talks about, who are secure and who have traced their lines around the Christian property on which Christian taxes have been paid. Rather you will be the people who learn in the experimental process to meet the world and to be undone by it by getting to know people with varying kinds of viewpoints.

My mother and dad told me not long ago about a protestant couple whose young son came home to our little town with a Master's Degree in psychology. He came home to his wonderful provincial atmosphere, sat down at the table, and his mother said to him: "It is your turn to give the grace." And he, who was 22 said: "I don't do that any more." His father and mother were undone, and they came to talk to my father and mother and asked what they should do. When my mother asked me what to tell them, I said: "Mother, please tell them to be patient with him. Please tell them to love him. Please tell them not to preach to him. Please, somehow or other, ask his parents to give him the great security of whatever is their basic involvement in Christianity so that he can live it out for a while without a terrible guilt complex."

Then I began to talk to my mother about some of my atheistic friends. For the first time in my life I saw my mother afraid. She said to me in great simplicity, "Don't gamble too much." My mother has never known an athiest. .not really known one, not really loved one. She never had a chance to say "Who are You?", and I'm sure, because I have the greatest respect for her, that if she ever gets to know one, she is going to be a lot better than I am at saying "Who are you?". I trust her that much. But I will say to you who are not yet twenty-one that you can't afford to let happen to you what happened to my mother because you have to live

in a world of terrible insecurity and even try to get inside. You have to contribute to it, and so you have to have the powerful courage to say to these people "Who are you?". You have to say it to people of every kind and so I beg you not to defend your faith. I beg you not to engage in arguments with the next fellow who dates you. But I do beg you to live your faith not by getting yourself all inside a nice little network as to what's right and what's wrong, but by developing such an attitude and such a vigor in the grace life through the sacramental system that you can live in terrible insecurity and even try to get inside.

A year and a half ago I had the privilege of attending a two and half week conference at M.I.T. Endicott House. I was the only Sister and one of five women with a group of about fifty men. I am sure that 50 per cent of the people at that conference were atheistic or agnostic. At the end of the conference one brilliant historian said to me, "Sister, there has been a lot of talk about existence theorems here - but the one existence theorem no one counted on confronting was you. For four days many of us tried to convince ourselves that your freedom of inquiry was phoney and for the next four days that your commitment was phoney. At the end of the first week nobody could convince himself that either was phoney. And all we've got to say is you are damned hard on us."

But I, too, have very few crutches left that I once had. There was a time when I was your age and could say blithely "those stupid idiots who can say that they believe in the brotherhood of man and not in the fatherhood of God" and I could dismiss them very quickly. I can't do that any more because I know legions of them who do not think they believe in the fatherhood of God and who are living the concept of the brotherhood of man in a way I wish I could. And so I have to rethink this whole process again. I have to keep asking myself every day and every hour, "What does the fatherhood of God mean?" and the answers are not cheap and the quest is rather terrifying. I get asked all the time if I will stand behind the statement that was quoted in Time magazine. Priests write me letters and ask me whether they are liars or fools because they never questioned the existence of God. But I will say to you, you people who are not yet twenty-one, that unless you question the existence of God - question, not doubt it - you are a liar or a fool, a fool at least in the apostolic sense, because you have to communicate with a world that is questioning His existence.

Every morning when I get up I have to ask the question because I have invested everything that I am and have on that one fact; and if I am wrong, I want to know it. And so if my faith is anything, then my faith is that which can make me more and more mature. And if that faith can communicate with anything or anyone else, then it has to be seen by those people as a living force.

Really mature people are very complex. Really mature people have not learned any simple answers. They are not asking for some kind of safe and secure way in which somebody will always tell them whether they are safe or sorry, whether they are right or wrong. Life is a terribly lonely type of process.

It is lonely and wonderful and terrifying to find out who you are. You will find this out, not in any kind of hermitage or isolation, but you will find it out in confrontation. You will find it out by confronting people of every imaginable kind. And so we are saying that we are ready to try at least one other form of Christian education here. Not everyone agrees, but there are a growing number of us who are committed to establishing as much dynamics on this campus as we can possibly establish. We have begun to say in print that about 50 per cent of our faculty are lay people (and it may get higher), that about 50 per cent of those people are not of our faith, and that some of them are men and women of integrity with no formal, organized religion. In such a community, the reverberation that I as a faculty member and you as a student have on our whole wonderful, at least potentially interlocked, world are incredible.

A year and a half ago I sat at dinner at Cambridge with Dr. Bruner and Mr. Walton and a few others. Dr. Bruner, the Harvard psychologist, had heard a good deal about a Webster sophomore. A number of people had said that she was a very exciting student. Bruner got very excited about her and said, "I know what we'll do, Sister J. Let's talk to Polly Bunting at Radcliffe about a junior year at Radcliffe for this kind of student from Webster College. My God, think what she would do to Radcliffe." Now this is very important - not what Radcliffe would do to her but what she would do to Radcliffe. And at this point Mr. Walton from our faculty said: "Jerry, we forgot to tell you one very important thing. She is joining the Sisters of Loretto this fall." With this, Dr. Bruner stopped a minute and said, "I don't think I can fight with that. At this moment I can think of nothing more important than being sure we have that kind of Sister of Loretto in the next generation." Now Jerry Bruner hadn't really known a sister a few years ago. He had known about them, as I knew about atheists and agnostics.

This summer a number of our girls played roles in various kinds of places-- some of them were up at M.I.T., one was at the University of Minnesota, a couple of them were in a Kosher Jewish camp. These people and all the rest of you, perhaps, who had experiences that I don't know about have a tremendous reverberative effect. And I am sure that you came back not as you were before.

A great modern Catholic scripture scholar has said to some of us that it is his personal conviction that an atheist of integrity is in the state of grace. When he said this, I almost jumped up and down, almost climbed the mountains and waved. I remember when I was a little girl on the farm at home and used to lie out in the backyard and look at all those stars and think, "They tell me that I'm going to contemplate God for ever and ever and ever and ever and ever. How terribly boring." I really did. And then you get possessed with the knowledge that He really is infinite and you really are never going to exhaust Him. You've got a finite mind and everybody else that has gone along the way had a finite mind, even Thomas Aquinas. I know I'm becoming obnoxious at this point by saying to my philosopher friends, "If God who is omniscient and omnipotent could create a Thomas why couldn't he create a greater Thomas in the twentieth century and the twenty-first? And if Thomas had as great a mind as he had, wouldn't he ask new questions in the twentieth century with seven centuries of new data?"

I am awfully interested in finding a way to make students philosophize as well as to know about philosophy. It is this kind of questioning mind that will allow you to communicate with the world and allow them (the world) to communicate with you. If they know you haven't got the world by the tail, if they know that you find the world terrifying but beautiful and interesting and full of wonder, then they will begin to communicate with you. Then I think you will be driven back to the chapel, the Communion table, into the silence of your own heart with completely new kinds of contemplation, with completely new kinds of involvement. The principal question remains: How much do we want to be involved; and are we willing to pay the price?

Newspapers quote me cryptically as having said I no longer would join a Catholic learned society. I say this because I think it is so important that I, as a Catholic, as one of the many Christians, one of the many people possessed of the grace life, be involved in the great main stream of intellectual movements. If there is an American Psychological Association, I can see no reason in the world for establishing a Catholic Psychological Association, but I can see every reason in the world for having Catholics deeply involved in the American Psychological Association.

I want our Catholic students to become involved in professional theatre but I don't want them to get involved in some kind of Catholic theatre because I don't think such a thing exists. There is a magnificent place for someone possessed of the grace life in the theatre, in journalism, in mathematics, in physics, in poetry.

And so at the same time I say that I would like to throw out Catholic textbooks. I maintain that I want great textbooks written by Catholics. I want those textbooks to be so good that they could be used at Harvard and Princeton as well as Webster College. We must have persons with the vitality of the grace life who can see history with such insight that their works are chosen to be used in the great educational centers of this country, but not Catholics who write Catholic textbooks with a Catholic point of view for Catholic schools.

I want you to have a real point of view and perhaps your real point of view will come from conflicting points of view. Specifically at the time when you are exposed to the greatest vitality we can give you, the vitality of our own kind of theology department, I do not want you to waste that time by keeping you sheltered from conflict and diverging viewpoints. I want to use that time to get many conflicting and divergent viewpoints into you and confronting you so that you can really vitally go back to our own vital theology department and use it in a new way.

And so we like to think that in a few years at least 25 per cent of the people sitting in this kind of assembly will be non-Catholic, because then we would begin to have a greater and greater kind of involvement and interdynamics going on. I no longer think it is important for every Catholic student to be in a Catholic school but I think it is terribly important to have some awfully good

Catholic schools, not veneered, not safe, but dynamic kinds of schools which include the Catholic contribution.

Perhaps we can build this kind of institution here. Perhaps it will be one of the revolutionary stages that will make ready for the great parousia of the intellectual life when one day, please God, in your life time if not in mine, we will see Princeton and Harvard and Illinois and Michigan and Berkeley running for the great Christian intellectuals because they will see them as such intellectually dynamic people, careful but not cautious.

In introducing me Sister Mary Francis talked about one lovely coincidence—the fact that today, November 4, 1963, is the fifth anniversary of the coronation of Pope John. There is another coincidence. This morning's gospel for the feast of St. Charles Borromeo told the story of the talents. It is that awful gospel that stops before it really gets to the point. It talks about the man who had ten talents, and the man who had five, and then it tells about the man who had one and went and buried it. It never tells you what happened to the man who buried his talent, so I went and got a Bible and would like to finish the story for you:

"But he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Master, I know that thou art a stern man; thou reapest where thou hast not sowed and gatherest where thou has not winnowed; and as I was afraid, I went away and hid thy talent in the earth; behold, thou hast what is thine.' But his master answered and said to him, 'Wicked and slothful servant!'"

Now if you go and follow that gospel narrative into the next chapters you will find the narrative about the separation of the sheep and goats. And this account is a springboard into another one which I never discovered until this afternoon. (I am delighted that I gave this speech because it made me discover the third link of this) It is that lovely passage in the gospel that says: "I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was thirsty, I was naked. I was sick. I was in prison and you came to me."

Those who came to the sick and hungry and those in prison were the sheep. The others who were afraid of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and avoided those in prison were the goats.

And you remember He said to them: "As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me." And you know how it ends. It says: "Enter into the joy of everlasting life."

The everlasting life which is beginning at this minute. We are already in eternity. Eternity is just a continuance which jumps us from the divine life which is the only life we can live in heaven. And how did He say you are going to have it? You are going to have it if you go to the hungry and thirsty and the naked and the sick, and those in prison. And this means all the people who don't understand you until you understand them.

We who are the apostles, we who are the shock troops of the Church, we who are the guerilla fighters of the grace life, must plunge into that other world and find out what makes that world go, so that we can vitalize it and be vitalized by it.

This is the cry I would like to give students and people all over the world because I think we can't wait for it much longer. I would like to give it first or share it first or confront first with it our own students who belong to our own colleges at this moment in time. We cannot afford to be slothful. We cannot afford to be safe. But we must afford to be involved in the magnificent dynamic of faith that is secure enough to be insecure, in the real kind of detachment, humility and dependence that says:

"I live with His life; and I run with it."