

THE COMMONWEAL

A WEEKLY REVIEW OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, LITERATURE AND THE ARTS

The Church And Mr. Kennedy

THE SUBJECT of the President and Catholicism was, we had assumed, a thoroughly dead one, well-buried by the election results. Now, after reading far too many evaluations of the President's conduct as a Catholic during his first year in office, we can only observe that some people never tire of talking of some things. Nor do they seem able to avoid confusing and confounding the issues while they are at it. The result of the talk this time has been to do the President a grave injustice.

Mr. Kennedy has been treated unjustly by two groups. First, he has been badly served by those who have heaped extravagant praise on him for his stand on federal aid to parochial schools. Not content with simply approving his position, they have made him out to be an epic figure in preserving the First Amendment. In the eyes of the *Christian Century*, "John F. Kennedy has compiled a better record on the issue of separation of church and state than any other President we have had in the past thirty years." The reason for such praise, not surprisingly, is that he "refused to bow to the will of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. . . ."

Secondly, he has been no less badly served by those Catholics who condemned his aid-to-education bill for its exclusion of aid to parochial schools. For that group, the President's bill would have countenanced "a positive act of discrimination" against Catholics. To make matters worse, these critics impute bad motives to the President: as they see it, he took his stand only to ward off non-Catholic attack and opposition.

There is little that needs to be said about the Protestant praise. The President seems to us to have acted in quite an ordinary fashion: he is neither a hero nor a villain in the perennial church-state discussion. Peopled as that historic discussion is with mythical figures and forces, the President seems a minor character. And it is simply nonsense to think

of the President as one courageously defying the will of the hierarchy. The hierarchy, to be sure, took a stand—a rather blunt and tactless one, politically—but they did not attempt to impose their will on the President as a Catholic. Nor did they, as the *Christian Century* implies, require any Catholic "in obedience" to accept their stand. It is misleading to state the matter so, or even to suggest it.

THE CATHOLIC criticism is another question. As we have often said, we believe that the President's reading of the Constitution is a dubiously narrow one. We believe that a good Constitutional case can be made out for certain kinds of aid to private education. We can hardly believe that every type of aid, however limited, would subvert the First Amendment. Still more, the argument that a denial of such aid amounts to an injustice is a plausible and reasonable one. We would agree fully with those who said that the President's Constitutional stand was not a strong or a wise one.

But it is one thing to hold that position and quite another to draw the conclusion that the President's stand is, on the face of it, knowingly and culpably discriminatory. What is forgotten is that Mr. Kennedy's reading of the Constitution is a common and widespread one and has been for decades. It is, for many constitutional lawyers, an unexceptional reading. That many other eminent constitutional lawyers consider the reading narrow, erroneous and unnecessary does not change that fact.

One can, to be sure, criticize the President for choosing the safe, conservative reading when better ones are available. But it is a purely gratuitous insult to all but accuse him of dissimulation and discrimination because of his choice. Given the divided legal opinion on the question, no man can be accused of wilful discrimination solely because he accepts one reading rather than another. To read only the crassest political expediency into his choice is to compound the injustice. We regret that some

Catholics have expressed themselves in that offensive way.

Let us assume, however, for the sake of argument, that the President took public opinion into account before reaching his decision. Is it so obvious that all Catholics disagree with his interpretation of the First Amendment? Is it really the case that all Catholics feel themselves victimized, more sinned against than sinning? Are Catholics unanimous in their opposition to any bill which would not include aid to parochial schools? We think not. On the contrary, Catholics hold many positions on federal aid to education.

Indeed, the most disturbing thing about much Catholic writing on the subject is that it continually talks about "the Catholic position." Despite the aggrieved, often hysterical prose of much of the Catholic press, many Catholics do not have the least sense of being victimized. Many in fact approve of the President's position and hold that the needs of the public schools take precedence over those of parochial schools. Even if, as may be the case, a majority reject the President's stand, there are still a considerable number of Catholics—including some bishops—who are against federal aid for any schools. Once again, we observe ruefully, the expression "the Catholic position" is being misused—a persuasive, question-begging phrase masquerading as a factual one.

What does all this come to? It comes at least to a simple requirement in charity that we cease reading unworthy motives into the President's positions. Criticism, yes; mind-reading and soul-searching, no. Let us by all means continue attempting to persuade Mr. Kennedy and others of the constitutional case for aid to parochial schools. If he is not persuaded, well, he's not and that's all. The President has given neither Protestants nor Catholics grounds for special praise or blame. We commend him for it.

New Guinea's Fate

THE LEGITIMACY of Indonesia's impassioned claim to West New Guinea has long been disputed by the Dutch and questioned by others. Indonesian is spoken only along the coastal areas. The Papuans, who comprise the bulk of the population, are of a different ethnic stock; the great majority live in inaccessible mountains and valleys in the interior, most of them at a Stone Age, headhunting stage of civilization. Few have even heard of Indonesian nationalism, while the more educated in the lowlands, now encouraged by the anti-Indonesian Dutch, are developing a Papuan nationalism of their own.

President Sukarno claims that all the former Dutch East Indies belong to Indonesia by virtue of the November 1949 treaty which ended overt hostilities. If the inhabitants of West New Guinea themselves manifest little desire to be "liberated" by Jakarta, Dr. Sukarno's ardent followers vehemently favor taking over the disputed area. Recent Dutch success in awakening Papuan interest in self-determination is now spurring Indonesia (with Soviet encouragement) to step up the pressure for such a takeover in anti-colonialism's name.

What would be the upshot if the issue were left to outright force? Holland itself is on the other side of the globe. It has only a few ships and planes and several thousand men in West New Guinea. Modest reinforcements are on the way, for Dutch troops in transit are reported to be protesting their civilian dress, which would deprive them of the protection of the Geneva Convention. Despite the eagerness of Indonesians to volunteer for New Guinea service, Jakarta would also find this a most difficult terrain. Its *matériel* is clearly inadequate for mounting an attack two thousand miles from its chief military bases. The sinking of a torpedo boat by Dutch fire, January 15, supplied some sobering evidence of the resistance to be expected.

But it does not look as if it will come to armed combat. In the present anti-colonial atmosphere Indonesia's repeated threats should be enough. The Dutch have little to gain from hanging onto this primitive wilderness; that they will withdraw appears inevitable. Australia, which is seeking gradually to develop and civilize its eastern half of the primitive island, now expects it.

Secretary U Thant has been doing his utmost to bring about Netherlands-Indonesia negotiations. He has at last succeeded. What basis is there for an agreement? It will be nice if a formula can be found which will satisfy Indonesian nationalist fervor and mollify Dutch national pride. That objective will be in the foreground, but it is hardly the primary concern. What of the West New Guineans themselves?

In view of Indonesia's severe internal economic and political difficulties, there is small likelihood of the natives' being greatly benefited by a settlement involving years of Jakarta rule as a preliminary to some future moment of self-determination. Nor under present conditions can the Dutch long remain in the picture. Perhaps the best to be hoped for under the circumstances is some sort of mandate over West New Guinea for Indonesia—a mandate which would hold that Republic strictly and periodically accountable to the United Nations and expressly provide for a U.N.-supervised plebiscite far enough in the future to make it meaningful.