

Freedom and Pluralism in the People of God

Interview with Pedro Rodriguez (*Palabra*)

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We would like to begin this interview with a subject on which opinions are highly divided: the question of aggiornamento. In your opinion, what is the real meaning of this word in the life of the Church?

Faithfulness. Aggiornamento, as I see it, means above all 1
faithfulness. A husband, a soldier, an administrator, who faithfully fulfills at each moment, in each new circumstance of his life, the duties of love and justice which he once took on, will always be just that much better a husband, soldier, or administrator. It is difficult to keep this keen sense of loyalty constantly active, as it is always difficult to apply a principle to the changing realities of the contingent world. But it is the best defense against ageing of the spirit, hardening of the heart, and stiffening of the mind.

The same applies to the lives of institutions and, in a very special way, to the life of the Church, which does not follow a precarious human plan but a God-given design. The world's redemption and salvation are the fruit of Jesus Christ's loving filial faithfulness to the will of the heavenly Father who sent him, and of our faithfulness to him. Therefore, *aggiornamento* in the Church, today as in any other period, is fundamentally a joyful reaffirmation of the People of God's faithfulness to the mission received, to the gospel.

This faithfulness should be alive and active in every circumstance of men's lives. It therefore requires opportune

doctrinal developments in the exposition of the riches of the *depositum fidei*, as can clearly be seen in the two thousand years of the Church's history and recently in the Second Vatican Council. It may also require suitable changes and reforms to improve, in their human and perfectible element, the organizational structures and the missionary and apostolic methods of the Church. But it would be, to say the least, superficial to think that *aggiornamento* consists primarily in change, or that all change produces *aggiornamento*. One need only consider that there are people who seek changes which go outside and against the Council's doctrine and would put the progressive movement of the People of God back several centuries in history, back at least to feudal times.

The Second Vatican Council has often used the expression "People of God" to designate the Church. It has thus clearly shown the common responsibility of all Christians in the single mission of this People of God. What, in your opinion, should be the characteristics of the "necessary public opinion in the Church," of which Pius XII already spoke, in order to reflect effectively this common responsibility? How is the phenomenon of "public opinion in the Church" affected by the particular relationships of authority and obedience which exist in the heart of the Christian community?

- 2 I do not think there can be such a thing as truly Christian obedience unless that obedience is voluntary and responsible. The children of God are not stones. Nor are they corpses. They are intelligent and free beings. And all of them have been raised to the same supernatural order as those who hold authority. But no one can use his intelligence and freedom properly, whether it be to obey or to give an opinion, unless he has acquired an adequate Christian education.

The problem of “necessary public opinion in the Church” is fundamentally the same as the problem of the doctrinal training of the faithful. Certainly the Holy Spirit distributes his abundant gifts among the members of the People of God, all of whom are responsible for the mission of the Church. But far from exempting anyone from the obligation of acquiring adequate doctrinal training his action makes it more pressing.

By doctrine I mean the knowledge which each person should have of the mission of the Church as a whole and of his particular role, his specific responsibilities, in that mission. This, as the Holy Father has frequently reminded us, is the colossal task of education which the Church must undertake in the postconciliar period. The solution to the problem which you mention, as well as to other yearnings which are felt today in the heart of the Church, depends directly, I feel, on how well this task is done. Certainly, more or less *prophetic* intuitions of some uninstructed *charismatics* cannot guarantee the necessary public opinion among the People of God.

Regarding the forms of expression of this public opinion, I don't think it is a question of organs and institutions. A diocesan pastoral council, the columns of a newspaper, even though it isn't officially Catholic, or even a personal letter from one of the faithful to his bishop can all be equally effective. There are many legitimate ways in which the faithful can express their opinion. They neither can nor should be *straitjacketed* by creating a new body or institution. And much less if it meant having an institution which ran the risk of being monopolized or made use of, as could so easily happen, by a group or clique of official Catholics, regardless of their tendencies or orientation. That would endanger the prestige of the hierarchy itself, and it would seem a mockery to the other members of the People of God.

*The concept of “People of God,” to which we referred before, expresses the historical character of the Church as a reality of divine origin which also includes some changing and transitory elements. Bearing this in mind, how should the priestly character be expressed in the lives of priests today? What aspects of the priest’s life, as described in the Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis*, would you underline for the present times?*

- 3 I would underline a characteristic of priestly existence which is not part of these changing and transitory elements. I refer to the perfect union which should exist, as the Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis* reminds us on several occasions, between a priest’s consecration and his mission. Or, in other words, between his personal life of piety and the exercise of his priestly ministry; between his filial relationship with God, and his pastoral and brotherly relations with men. I do not believe a priest can carry out an effective ministry unless he is a man of prayer.

*Some sectors of the clergy are concerned about the presence of the priest in society. Taking their cue from the Council (Constitution *Lumen gentium*, no. 31; Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis*, no. 8), they propose that priests undertake a professional or manual activity in civil life: “priests in the factory,” for example. We would like to know your opinion on this.*

- 4 Let me first say that even though I consider it mistaken for many reasons, I respect the opinion contrary to my own, and recognize the apostolic zeal of its proponents, who can count on my prayers and affection.

A priest’s ministry may be encumbered by timidity and complexes, which usually indicate human immaturity, or by

clerical tendencies, which denote supernatural immaturity. But when the priesthood is properly exercised, without those obstacles, I think it is sufficient in itself to ensure a legitimate, simple, and authentic presence of the priest-man among the other members of the human community to whom he addresses himself. Usually nothing more will be needed in order to be in living communion with the world of work, to understand its problems and to share its fortunes. Recourse to the ingenuous "passport" of "amateur lay" activities can offend for all sorts of reasons the average layman's good sense and will rarely be effective, because its very lack of authenticity condemns it to failure from the outset.

The priestly ministry, especially in these times of great scarcity of clergy, is a terribly absorbing task which leaves no time for "double-jobbing." Men need us so much (though many do not realize it) that there will never be a surplus of priests. We need more helping hands, more time, more energy. This is why I often say to my sons who are priests that the day one of them noticed that he had time on his hands, he could be quite sure he had not lived his priesthood well that day.

And bear in mind that in the case of these priests of Opus Dei, we are dealing with men who before receiving Holy Orders usually have worked for years in some intellectual or manual activity in civil life. They are priest-engineers, priest-doctors, priest-workers, and so on. Nevertheless, as far as I know, none of them has thought it necessary to approach men with a slide-rule, a stethoscope, or a pneumatic drill in order to make himself heard or to win the esteem of civil society and his former colleagues and companions. It is true that at times they exercise their professions or trades, in a way compatible with the obligations of the clerical state. But they never feel impelled to do so in order to be "present in civil life." Their motives are different: social charity, for example, or

absolute financial need, in order to initiate some apostolic undertaking. Saint Paul too had occasion to return to his trade as a tent-maker. But not because Ananias told him in Damascus that he should learn to make tents in order to be able to preach Christ's gospel to the Gentiles in a fitting manner.

To sum up—and may I make it clear that with this I am not prejudging the legitimacy or the rectitude of intention of any apostolic activity—I see the professional man or the worker who becomes a priest as more authentic and more in accordance with the doctrine of Vatican II than the figure of the worker-priest. Except in the field of specialized pastoral work, which will always be necessary, the “classical” figure of the worker-priest already belongs to the past: a past in which the marvelous potential of the lay apostolate was hidden to many eyes.

At times we hear complaints about priests who adopt definite positions on temporal problems and particularly on political questions. Today, unlike other times, many of these positions are taken up to favor greater freedom, social justice, and so on. Undoubtedly, active intervention in these matters is not proper to the ministerial priesthood, apart from exceptional cases; but do you not think that a priest should denounce injustice, the absence of freedom, and so on, as un-Christian? How can these opposing demands be reconciled?

- 5 A priest, by virtue of his teaching mission, should preach all the Christian virtues and their practical demands and manifestations in the concrete circumstances of the lives of the men to whom he ministers. He should, also, teach men to respect and esteem the dignity and freedom with which God has endowed the human person, and the special supernatural dignity which a Christian receives at Baptism.