

COMPLIMENTS  
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*The Church*  
and  
*Public Opinion*



*By*

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*The following letter dated July 13, 1966 was written by Amleto Cardinal Cicognani, Papal Secretary of State. It was addressed to M. Alain Barrere, president of the French Social Week at Nice, France. The subject discussed by the participants of the meeting was the Catholic Church and Public Opinion.*

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# *The Church and Public Opinion*

Ever since their origin, the Social Weeks of France have always tried to give answers to the problems of our times which are both inspired by the teaching of the Church and scientifically detailed. Having dealt in turn during their sessions at Nancy (1955) with the techniques of modern communications media, at Grenoble (1960) with socialization, at Caen (1963) with the democratic society, they are now attacking in its entirety the vast and grave problem of "public opinion." The Holy Father, to whom you have explained your project, is vitally interested in it and is pleased to congratulate the Social Weeks for having resolved to devote their coming sessions at Nice to a phenomenon of such considerable importance to the Church in the modern world.

Public opinion is inherent in the social nature of man. In his address to the Fourth World Congress of the Catholic Press in Rome in 1950, Pope Pius XII regarded this an incontestable fact, resembling "a natural echo, a common resonance, more or less spontaneous, of facts and circumstances in the spirit and judgments of persons who feel responsible for and closely linked to the destiny of their community."<sup>1</sup>

Thus the phenomenon is not new. Nevertheless it has acquired, as a result of modern technology, a heretofore unsuspected dimension and influence. The social communications media, whose importance has

been stressed by the ecumenical council,<sup>2</sup> transmit in effect the same news at the same moment to a public at times as vast as the whole world.

Thus news naturally creates public opinion which will be even more far-reaching than the news itself would have been, even if it had been universally transmitted. This is certainly good, but it also involves a risk since the selection and presentation of news always involve a conception of man and his destiny with which the public and society become slowly but inexorably imbued.

Actually, in every community side by side with laws and institutions, a more or less spontaneous way of life emerges which is expressed by judgments, attitudes, and behavior-patterns, practiced or adopted by a more or less large portion of a group in the face of current events. Choices, which could have been divergent, assume the same orientation, and thus agreement is achieved in everyday life. Thus, we see that public opinion is born out of a desire and need of man to meet his fellow, to understand him and to communicate with him in active participation in the life of the community, where it manifests itself as a symbol and factor of social cohesion.

A sort of philosophy of life is thus worked out across the agreements and dissents, the approvals and disapprovals of public opinion. Sometimes its expression tends to stiffen or to become exclusive, hemming into the pillory of obsolete conformity a social life which it leads outside of contemporary progress. If, on the other hand, it remains spontaneous and diversified by free confrontation, this continuous welcoming of complementary truths and values can be a source of balance and enrichment.

## *Climate of Liberty*

This is to say that public opinion, in order to establish itself sanely, needs a true climate of liberty, outside the pressure of myths and all constraint which would strive to impose a uniformity whose appearance is the humiliating signal of dangerous regression. Thus it was possible to galvanize an entire nation into committing actions which stirred up the disapproval of the universal conscience and which finally led to a catastrophe whose horror is still lingering in everybody's memory.

If man quite naturally seeks ways and means to share his ideas, he may be tempted to employ in this connection methods which affect his personal dignity and his freedom of judgment. Advertising can go so far as to transform the consumer into a conditioned automation. But it is in the political field where the gravest offenses are committed, and the very terms used in this connection — e.g., mass rape, brainwashing — in themselves condemn these degrading methods. Pius XII stigmatized “the violence of those who cunningly put into motion all the resources of modern technology, all the subtle arts of persuasion in order to strip (the citizenry) of its freedom of thought and to turn them into frail ‘reeds shaken by the wind’ [Matt. 11:7].”<sup>3</sup>

Also, one of the strongest vindications and most notable conquests of modern man has been the realization — alas still merely verbal in certain countries — of the human right to free expression, by a group as well as by an individual, of freely formed opinions. This right, rooted in the human person, constitutes one of his essential prerogatives. Pope John XXIII, whose memory

has remained so vivid in peoples' spirits and hearts, gave this doctrine exceptional fame in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. It ranks, in fact, among the "universal, inviolate and inalienable" rights of the human person, "the right to freedom in the search of truth, in the expression and dissemination of thought."<sup>4</sup> The ecumenical council, finally, by its Declaration on Religious Liberty, has solemnly expressed the view of the Church on this point.

But in the world of today public opinion is profoundly marked by increasing socialization, based on acquaintances, judgments and behavior patterns. In the diverse groups, which are becoming increasingly more numerous and complex, and which make up the various societies, each person encounters a mode of speech, of thinking and of acting which tends to integrate him psychologically into the particular group, influences him, and profoundly determines his behavior.

It is therefore important that in this tight system, where common opinions commonly held weigh more heavily, man should be able to preserve his freedom of thought and decision. One of the most serious problems confronting modern man is no doubt the individual's fate in an inevitable process of socialization. An education begun at a very early age will provide the type of spiritual and character formation which will make it possible for the person concerned to overcome the dangers propelled by mass public opinion: the abuse of slogans, standardization of ideas, and group-coercion. Tomorrow's civilization, so powerfully modeled by public opinion, is thus in the hands of citizens.

In fact, in the democratic process of government, so readily adopted by people

of today, it is the community as such which is responsible for its destiny and which itself sets the goals to be achieved and the means by which to achieve them. If, in this political structure, the citizens delegate their powers, they by no means renounce thereby the exercise of their individual responsibilities. This, in turn, presupposes a perpetual interest of the greatest possible number of people for community affairs, and it can be seen from the fact how determining the weight of public opinion is in the process of public affairs.

### ***The Fourth Power***

Public opinion has begun to be referred to as the fourth power, next to the legislative, executive, and judiciary powers. However exact this metaphor may be, it emphasizes quite well the reality of this diffuse power. It manifests itself marginally in relation to institutions, on a level of moral pressure, without expressing itself by judicial decisions, as a sort of spontaneous burst, instigated in the community by the events of its changing and manifold life.

To the sociologist who inquires into the influence of public opinion, the latter frequently seems to be polyvalent and ambiguous, capable, as Aesop's language, of the best and the worst, susceptible to passion, excesses, ingratitude, even brutality. At the same time it is capable of manifesting itself as a conscience, a judge, an advocate, an appeal for the best of causes. The great values which, at decisive times, put it into motion are generally justice, honor, solidarity, peace, and liberty: the "sign of our times" which Pope John XXIII had welcomed optimistically. Because, whenever public opinion strays in its passionate thrusts or its ideological suggestions,

its motivations usually remain noble; it must be given credit for delineating the checks on abuses of power, for forming the popular conscience acquired by citizens in judging the common good, and of feeling obligated to participate actively in civic affairs.

This underlines the tragic image previously emphasized by Pope Pius XII of a society lacking a genuine public opinion, not as a result of external constraint, but by default on the part of people living in a community. The search for easy pleasures, the sinking into comfort, the refusal of obligation, the absence of ideals, the lack of character, the neglect of an objective moral rule, and the common good are at the same time the immediate causes, the disturbing symptoms, and the results of this situation whose contagion may rapidly corrupt the entire social structure.

The simple recollection of this grave danger is in itself a pressing invitation to see public opinion as something quite different from a definitely secured right or as a permanent menace, but rather as a real blessing entirely left to the active exercise of responsibility by the citizenry. Who does not, as a result, see what is the duty of Catholics, conscious of the obligations of their faith in the midst of a pluralistic and usually tolerant society, but which is nevertheless subject to criticism and sometimes affected by extreme changes?

### ***The Christian's Duty***

All too frequently indifferent with regard to the values of faith, public opinion forms an idea of the Church drawn from the images presented by the press, literature, radio, movies, television and songs which are both the expression and catalysts of dominant mentalities. This shows that it



is up to Christians to work intelligently in these very important public opinion molding activities in order to present the true image of the Church there. It is also their duty to resist disparaging pressures and to promote respect for human and spiritual values without which a civilization degrades itself unknowingly. Moreover, it is their duty through a dynamic projection of their convictions, to command the respect of public opinion for the imperatives of their faith, the ethical concepts which it entails, and the moral obligations which it imposes. In a word, it is necessary for them to respond to the appeal which His Holiness Paul VI launched from the rostrum of the United Nations: "We must become accustomed to contemplate man in a new fashion; also, the life of men living together, and, finally, the ways of history and the destiny of the world, according to the words of St. Paul: 'Put on the new man, which has been created according to God in justice and holiness of truth' [Eph. 4:23]."<sup>5</sup>

This demonstrates what problems a reflection on the essence of public opinion presents to the conscience of Christians called on to live in a world more and more alien to the faith and sometimes even allergic to any spiritual perspective. If public opinion can be defined as the effectiveness of ideas in the active thinking of a group at a given moment of its history, who does not perceive the urgency facing the contemporary Christian to act upon the dominant public opinion of his environment, of his profession, of his city; to infuse into the pragmatic philosophy of life which this public opinion disseminates the exalting dynamism of spiritual values drawn from the pure and permanent sources of the message of the Gospel?

The duty of the Christian, already so exacting in this area, is nonetheless not exhausted by this convincing testimonial of the Church which he carries into the midst of the world. Because, if public opinion, according to the formula so frequently quoted from Pius XII, is "the prerogative of every normal society composed of men,"<sup>6</sup> it is quite evident that there exists also — naturally in matters left to free discussion — a public opinion in the Church. The same pontiff gave on this subject this decisive opinion: "This can surprise only those who do not know the Church or those who know it badly. Because, after all, she is a living body and something would be missing in her life if public opinion were lacking, a deficiency for which blame would fall on the pastors and the faithful."<sup>7</sup>

By examining the doctrine of the Church the recent ecumenical council shed particular light on the place and role of the people of God, a people who are faithful, free, and responsible, and who are called on to participate in the edification of the Church. Far from being a subject on which one expects neither suggestions nor initiatives, it is up to the people of God to play an active role in the search for the means by which the Church strives to present the message of the Gospel to contemporary people. The council, moreover, has invited laymen, conscious of their vocation and their obligations, to "make known to their pastors their needs and their desires with the freedom and confidence which is the right of the sons of God and the brothers in Christ."<sup>8</sup>

It is hence normal and healthy that a public opinion is formed among the faithful and that it expresses itself freely, for the Church lives and develops in history.

Her participation in the destiny of the world imposes upon her a double dialectic of acceptance and refusal, of fidelity and adaptation, in her own life, her government, her instruction, and her liturgy, as well as in the animation which she exercises in the midst of the temporal order. Who cannot see from this how the expression of the ideas of those who are instructed, governed, and sanctified by the hierarchy, and also tied to it by confident obedience, will be beneficial to it in its dialogue with men of these times?

### *A Resounding Echo*

Public opinion in the Church thus appears as an exchange of thoughts of which the responsible persons of the community are the principal promoters. It is from the teaching of the hierarchy that it receives its first nourishment and it is to the hierarchy that it gives voice to the circumstances, worries, difficulties, hopes and desires of the people of God in such a manner that the pastors, thus enlightened, "can act better and more wisely in spiritual as well as temporal matters."<sup>9</sup>

As a living echo of the teaching and directives given to the faithful in return, it stirs up in them an invigorating consent. Who does not grasp the importance of such a public opinion in assuring a resounding echo to the positions taken by the teaching authority of the Church, without which they all too often remain just dead letters? It is still well remembered by all what sympathetic interest public opinion attached to the great events which marked the pontificate of John XXIII, the meeting of the ecumenical council, and the trips of His Holiness Paul VI. But Catholics can usefully ask themselves, to what extent they concur with

the untiring effort of the Church and the Holy See for international peace and social justice, problems in whose understanding public opinion plays such an important role. Therefore, the council calls attention to "the urgency and extreme necessity for a new spring in the development of mentalities and a change of tone in public opinion."<sup>10</sup>

Public opinion within the Church is a manifestation of the holy freedom of the sons of God and it represents the dialogue of a family in mutual trust, the reciprocal charity and supernatural obedience called for in the encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*. Far from being uncontrolled criticism or a bitter dispute of the Church, it appears as a gesture of love for it. Because, if the spouse of Christ is in need of an "aggiornamento," she is nevertheless still our mother Holy Church, according to the teaching of the council itself. Also, everyone, in proportion to the influence which he exerts and the audience which he commands, should take care in manifesting his opinions to weigh his interventions carefully, to be sure that they are well founded, and to estimate their foreseeable impact and anticipated consequences in terms of the welfare of souls, so that thoughts too human by their very nature do not appear to corrupt what has been sought by fidelity to Christ and solicitude for His reign. At this price, public opinion will play within the Church its beneficent role as an instrument of privileged dialogue, while, at the same time, rendering powerful assistance to the Church in her effort of conducting an unceasing dialogue with the contemporary world.

Within the framework of the perspectives opened up by the ecumenical council of a Church solicitous of spreading the mes-

sage of the Gospel in a pluralistic world, marked by the democratic form of government and utterly transformed by a growing process of socialization, the contemporary Christian sees exceptionally wide-ranging possibilities opening up before him. In a Church which is undergoing renewal in the midst of a world in full transformation, he must translate the requirements of his faith into evangelical behavior stimulated by authentic charity. He will be intent on exercising his actions in all social circles, in the family, school, profession, and during leisure periods, where common positions and group judgments are worked out, and where public opinion is born; on promoting values for community growth and on affirming courageously the primacy of the spirit. Eager to bring the world into a greater harmony with the ideal of love and peace brought by Christ, he will be equally preoccupied in assisting the Church to project to contemporary mankind an image of herself which is increasingly more devoted to the design of love revealed in the Gospel. "Who do men say that I am?" Jesus asked His Apostles (Mark 8:27). The same question still resounds today across the centuries. It is directed to all the disciples of Christ, because the world in most instances meets and judges the Church through the community of the faithful and is led to Christ by it. . . .

There is no doubt that the authoritative lectures of the coming Social Week, under the benevolent patronage of Bishop Jean Mouisset of Nice, will help all Catholics to be more conscious of their high and exacting mission with regard to public opinion and of the best means to achieve it. With this wish in mind the Holy Father sends you, Mr. President, with the pledge

of abundant divine graces for yourself, the members of the permanent commission, the professors, and all those attending the Social Week, a special apostolic blessing.

Happy to transmit to you this precious encouragement, I extend to you, Mr. President, with my best wishes for the fruitfulness of your labors, my assurances of respectful devotion in Our Lord.

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#### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, XLII (1950), p. 252.
- <sup>2</sup> *A.A.S.*, LVI (1964), p. 147 ff.
- <sup>3</sup> *A.A.S.*, XLII (1950), p. 253.
- <sup>4</sup> *A.A.S.*, LV (1963), p. 259-260.
- <sup>5</sup> *A.A.S.*, LVII (1965), p. 884.
- <sup>6</sup> *A.A.S.*, XLII (1950), p. 251.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- <sup>8</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, No. 37.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 82, par. 3.



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