

I. HISTORICITY AND THE IMAGE OF THE CHURCH

1. ESSENCE AND HISTORICAL FORMS

The Church is rapidly approaching its third millennium. For the world in which the Church lives, the future has already begun. Science has begun to investigate both microcosm and macrocosm, both the atom and the universe; there are increasingly rapid and more efficient means of communication and transport; there is a wealth of new instruments, synthetic materials; methods of production are being rationalized; the expectation of human life has been increased by a decade or more; tremendous achievements have been made in physics, chemistry, biology, medicine, psychology, sociology, economics, historical research. All in all, despite those worldwide catastrophes and perils which have been the particular fate of our century, the story has been one of breathtaking progress. The highly industrialized nations of Europe and America have spread their knowledge throughout the world, the peoples of Asia and Africa have come to life; the world is becoming one and a single economic unit, a single civilization, perhaps even a single culture is emerging.

And what of the Church? Has the future begun for it too? In some respect perhaps, but in many others it has not. At all events we have surely come to realize that the Church cannot, even if it wants to, stand aside from this world-wide reorientation which heralds a new era; for the Church lives in this, not in another world. Our age, like all times of transition, is one of unrest. For all the triumphs of science and technology, there is a feeling of disquiet which finds expression in art, in films and in the theatre, in literature and in philosophy: it is an experience of individuals and nations alike. The Church too, behind its façade of seemingly timeless self-confidence, is affected by this unrest, since it affects the people who make up the Church. It is a healthy, even salutary, unrest and it should give us cause for hope, not anxiety. What looks like a serious crisis may mark the moment of new life; what looks like a sinister threat may in reality be a great opportunity.

Enormous tasks, both familiar and unfamiliar, confront a Church which sees itself as a part of this changed and changing world and claims to exist for the world. It must renew, reassemble and revitalize