

ON PUTTING YOUR BODY IN LINE

FRONTIER, on 17.1.67

(Paul Verghese)

Perhaps the most frivolous and most controversial event in the Church and Society World Conference in Geneva was the "March". It was organized by the youth delegates and young stewards, though more than half of the Conference took part in it.

They marched from the Ecumenical Centre, the venue of the Conference, to the Place des Nations, in front of the European office of the U.N. They carried placards saying, for example, "World in Peace or World in pieces", "The Church must be where the action is", "Justice not charity for the poor", "the arms race has no winner", "Apartheid against God", "New Structures for a New World".

At the place des Nations, they read a statement, which said in French, Indonesian, German, Spanish, English and Japanese:

"We believe that: Since Hiroshima the possibility of war has become the potentiality of global suicide and the destruction of all life. We therefore commit ourselves to working towards a future without war.

"We believe that: The present conflict in Vietnam is a contemporary tragedy of hideous proportions. We plead for the immediate cessation of the fighting.

"We believe that: Human and physical suffering from ignorance, poverty and disease can be eliminated by man's present resources and knowledge. Economic, political, and social justice are a universal responsibility and

can only be achieved through international cooperation. We call for a more equitable sharing of wealth and the application of human knowledge and resources both within all nations and from the richer nations to the poorer ones.

"We believe that: Racial, ethnic and cultural oppression and discrimination threaten the struggle for universal human values. We call for an end to all forms of such oppression and discrimination, not only in more blatant forms such as apartheid, but also in more subtle manifestations such as paternalism.

WE STAND HERE AND COMMIT OURSELVES, OUR SOULS,
AND OUR BODIES."

What were these young people trying to do? The international press, in so far as it gave the march any coverage at all, was somewhat derisive. So were many of the senior delegates and some of the younger ones.

The controversy was not about the content of the placards or the statement; but about the technique itself. And the concern of this article is not even about the technique, but about what lies behind the effort of the young people.

The Conference was one of the best with regard to professional competence on the issue, world representativeness, and lay participation. It has produced what may turn out to be some of the best pieces of "consensus thinking" by Christians on world issues.

Yet, the young people were frustrated. They felt, on the one hand, somewhat left out, along with many senior people, by the forbiddingly technical nature of some of the discussions. They also felt that the issues were being tackled in much too academic a manner and not as live human issues.

But the main reason for their frustration was that there was no "action" and too much speaking. They felt the need, as one put it, "to put their bodies in line", to express their commitment in some non-cerebral, tangible, physical way. "Meeting of minds" seems to leave young people unsatisfied. They believe that words can never carry a sufficient sense of urgency and can often be a substitute rather than a preparation for action. They wanted to say it by doing rather than by talking. Commitment, they said, has to be expressed bodily, by an act, rather ^{than} simply mentally, by words.

Now here is a fundamental problem to which more attention needs to be given. It is not just young people who are surfeited with words. People are losing confidence in conferences and speeches, perhaps because there are so many of them and they don't always seem to result in change.

The ecumenical movement as well as the churches in general, are in a crisis of communication. Christianity, especially its active Western wing, has a tremendous volume of words to its credit. But a good 90% of its output in the last 400 years since the innovation of printing was largely irrelevant by the time it came out. We have already talked too much in order to continue to be heard with respect. To many the Church still seems to pose as the treasure house of all

wisdom, the "teacher of the world". That charm has been more than once proved false. We need to learn to speak with more modesty, and prove the authenticity of our words by matching action. We need to put our "Word" theology in its proper context of the liturgy, which is an act and not just a form of words. The Eucharistic principle of participating in Christ's action by our bodily action needs to be reinstated in our ecumenical procedures.

Faith itself has to be expressed in bodily acts, like Baptism and the Eucharist. Perhaps one reason behind the growth of unbelief in our time may be the increasing pace of alienation by the over-spiritualization and over-verbalization of faith, worship and social concern.

The conference-committee-consultation technique needs to be reviewed in the light of this fundamental theological point. Pioneering action by the Church speaks more authentically than avant-garde statements.

People were brought together at Geneva, to an amazing degree representative of the world Church (non-Catholic). Their minds met and clashed; theoretical agreements and disagreements were brought to light; many new insights and much fresh information became available to the participants. The conference was indeed a significant experience for all.

Yet, one question that kept coming up again and again was the relation of all that we were saying to the Christian faith itself. Here again perhaps people were asking for an intellectual connection between politics and economics on the one side and the Gospel on the other.

The theology by which revolution, technology, urbanization, secularization and everything else under the sun could be made to follow easily from the Gospel does not always carry conviction.

The Christian element in the conference could have found better expression in its life of worship, if only the churches were not so divided. Again the Eucharist rather than any intellectual theology has to be the bridge between the Christian character of such a conference and its concerns about the life of man. The Eucharist is a way of "putting our bodies in line" that we need to make more creative use of, in ecumenical conferences despite our unhappy divisions.

In a sense, it can be said that a Eucharistic milieu and a eucharistic theology alone can give a proper spiritual orientation for our social concerns. Otherwise, the thin line now dividing a shallow humanism and a proper Christian social concern seems likely to become more faint.

But this requires much more sustained creative thinking, and a change of perspective in current theological developments. This brief essay can only draw attention to the need, but not seek to supply it.