The Roman Catholic Church is a very large institution with over 700 million members in five continents, but the majority now are in the Third World. It is a very diverse institution, including liberation theologians in South America and feminist nuns in the United States, as well as those who are completely committed to reactionary and repressive regimes. What do you think is the role of the Papacy in all this?

There is a difference between what it is and what it ought to be. I think the essential function of the Papacy is as a centre of unity, whereas what it has become is a centre of authority. The Church has become very highly centralised, as though it were just one single church, whereas traditionally it has been a number of churches which related to each other, and found some sort of centre of unity in the bishop of Rome. The Pope has become bishop of the world when in fact what he ought to be is bishop of Rome.

So unity should be achieved by the various churches relating to Rome rather than being controlled by Rome?

Yes.

At the moment we have the very first Polish Pope and the first non-Italian for some centuries. Does this give John Paul II, as an individual, a different relationship with the Church and the Papacy from that of previous Popes?

I'm not sure. I hoped it would mean that when he was elected, but I don't think it has. I think he's carrying on the whole centralising tradition, whereas an Italian Pope, John XXIII, was beginning — in practice, whatever his intentions were — to decentralise the Church. In many ways John Paul II reminds me of Pius XI, a very tough Pope who had to deal with Mussolini and Hitler — very tough and very authoritarian.

He appears very conservative with regard to personal and sexual morality and also with regard to inner-church discipline issues, but he seems perhaps more radical on certain social issues than previous Popes; he has condemned capitalism, urged the setting up of co-operatives and supported the rights of trade unionists, while criticising aspects of socialist societies.

I'm not sure that he is more radical on social questions than his predecessor Paul VI. But he has definitely seen that the Church has to live in a socialist world in the future. He is more concerned, for example, with the Church's relationship with the East, and less interested in the Church adjusting to Western society, which is one reason he appears reactionary to Western liberals: he doesn't woo them much because he is much more interested in what goes on in Eastern Europe, and the Church there doesn't have the liberal approach to personal morality that you get in, say, America.

And the Third World?

I don't know quite where he stands on the Third World. He went to Latin America and made two quite different speeches; one was all about how priests shouldn't take part in politics, and one was a strong attack on the capitalist set-up in the Third World. I don't think you can identify one of these as the line he takes. But he does hold a fairly old-fashioned view of what the clergy are about, which is why he doesn't want them too much involved in politics, and why his remarks were seen as critical of the Nicaraguan government which contains several priests. Rome, at any rate — I don't know if it's John Paul's personal view — is very much against priests being engaged in the political field. His view is probably that priests ought
to be concerned with people's personal rather than political lives.

Do you think this has anything to do with the experience in Poland, where there seems to have been an agreement until recently between the Communist Party and the Polish hierarchy: they're mutually interested in preserving powerful and disciplined organisations, in keeping their members in line and under the control of the leadership. John Paul II seems to insist on vertical structures, dependency, and so on.

Yes. I think left wing Catholics in Poland have been worried for a long time about the Roman structure coalescing with the Communist Party structure. There's a Polish joke about it: God forbid that the Communist Party and the Catholic Church should get together because then everything would be forbidden!

As you said, John Paul has asked that priests and religious should not get involved in politics, which is odd considering that he constantly takes a very political line about all kinds of things. Do you think this means he wants the Church, as such, to intervene in politics and not individual Christians?

I think he sees that the Church can't avoid being involved in politics. Nothing as big as the Church can ever be non-political. But he wants the involvement to be under his control. He doesn't want the Church to be identified with a political movement, because this would be being false to the Gospels; and I strongly sympathise with this view. Because, while evidently everything the Church does has political implications, its perspectives are wider than any political movement's ought to be. If a political party were to try to do what the Church is doing, that would be as bad as the Church trying to do what a political party is doing.

So you would agree with John Paul that there ought not to be a confusion of roles?

I would. But of course it doesn't follow from that that priests should not be engaged in politics . . .

Yes. Take the South American situation. Some of the liberation theologians would argue that it is essential for them to be involved in movements of a political character, if they are to do anything about witnessing to the Gospel.

I agree with them too. I'm just trying to explain why the Pope would oppose it. Another reason for this may be that he thinks that to get overtly involved in politics is to play into the hands of the military regimes, who continually say that these priests are in fact communists and political agitators, not proper priests. And if they say, yes, that's what we are, it makes it much easier for the regimes to deal with them.

Are you yourself saying that they ought not to take up certain political positions?

I think this has to be decided in the concrete circumstances. I would certainly not rule out priests being involved wholeheartedly in political movements, but there could be situations in which it should be ruled out. The Church certainly has an advantage in Latin America in that it is the church of masses of people, and I think it should be careful to maintain its particular role because that gives it political clout. If it simply goes in for politics, it loses that.

So you are saying that — ironically — in order to have maximum political input, the Church should not be too closely identified with political movements?

Yes. But it is easy to overestimate the extent to which the Latin American priests are political. It depends, of course, on what you understand by 'political'; but in a very great number of cases they are simply fighting for the poor in their area. This, of course, makes them political in the eyes of 'the other side', and means they are involved in political acts such as demonstrations.

It means they are involved in political struggle, because they risk themselves.

Well, you can't avoid being involved in political struggle if you take life seriously at all. Everyone's political in that sense.

If we look at the same problem in Western Europe, it seems to me that this plea that the Church and its members should not be involved in politics has quite serious implications for the Italian or the West German Church, where members of the clergy regularly urge people at elections to vote for Christian Democrat parties. The Right will suffer rather than the Left, as a result.

I agree. I think the notion of a 'Christian Democrat' party is itself dubious, and certainly the Church's involvement in politics in most Western European countries has been on the right rather than the left.

John Paul II in his latest encyclical seems to have condemned capitalism, and also distanced himself from socialism, as he understands it practised in Eastern Europe; and he argues for cooperatives and what is termed the 'third way'. It seems to me that the logic in this — whether he would agree with this or not — is that he is really arguing for democratic socialism, because it is only within a socialist economy that you could have cooperative movements which would be autonomous and not determined by the multinationals, and only in democratic socialism that these cooperatives would be allowed to function in ways proper to themselves.

I couldn't agree more. And I think that what you have in Eastern Europe is a non-capitalist society which has failed to become socialist. You couldn't describe it as capitalist, but neither could you describe it as socialist, precisely because socialism is about people having control over their own work and their own lives. But I would like to see the Pope spelling that out, rather than just talking incessantly about 'the third way'. It sounds just a little like the rhetoric of the SDP — you know, 'let's not have anything nasty, let's have something nice'. I think the crucial question is: do you think the class struggle is fundamental, and are you on the right side of it? And the Popes have never got round to saying that the class struggle is the fundamental thing. They used to spend a lot of time saying, 'we must have a just society but of course we'll have nothing to do with the class struggle because that means people hating and fighting each other'. I think they have said that rather less in the last twenty years, but still they have not come out and said that the way to defeat sin, in some of its major manifestations in society, is through class struggle.

In the class struggle one expresses love for the oppressed by solidarity and love for the oppressor by opposition. I think the best image of the kingdom of God is a free, socialist society. But it isn't God, it's only our best image of Him, and it would be a mistake to think that that is what the kingdom of God is. That is why I think the Church should not identify itself with a political movement, because a political movement's concern is with particular, concrete ways of
changing the world.

And after the achievement of a democratic socialist society?

That’s a question for the people who will be there: we don’t know what their problems will be. History answers its own questions. As a Christian, I know that the establishment of a free society won’t solve all our problems — it won’t be God; but I don’t know what the problems will be.

What do you feel about Marxism?

I think a Christian can take from Marxism its account of capitalism, its account of how society operates; this is fairly common ground for a great number of theologians. I think the Marxist critique of Christian institutions doesn’t differ very much from the Christian critique, which has been going on since Christianity evolved. Marxism will be very good for Christianity when it has got round to taking account of it, because Marxism is about getting an accurate analysis of what is going on.

Pope John XXIII initiated a profound transformation in the Church when he called the Second Vatican Council in the mid 60s’ and persuaded them to discuss such things as the achievement of greater participation by the laity, how the Church relates to non-believers, what its attitude should be to questions of social justice. I was not a practising Catholic for fifteen years, and I came back to faith and practice in 1980. I discovered to my astonishment that the Church had transformed itself in many ways. It was much more open, there was much more participation by the laity, women at last were gradually being given some sort of voice; and this seemed to me very encouraging. How do you estimate it?

You’ve got a big advantage there, because having been away for fifteen years you really see the difference. We who have been in it all the time tend to forget just how terrible it used to be. Yes, there have been dramatic changes, but most of them have been part of adjusting to bourgeois society. In a sense it’s just been a catching up on the Reformation. I see the Reformation as the process by which the Protestant churches adjusted to the capitalist revolution, while the Catholic churches clung on to medieval values which were not recognised under capitalism. Vatican II represents the Church finally adapting to bourgeois society, just at the time when bourgeois society is about to collapse! It is a liberal programme in the sense of a programme for liberals — which is good, of course, but we want more than that.

Yes we need to go a lot further than that.

Somebody like John Paul II can see that. He is a mixture: partly he doesn’t like liberals because he is old-fashioned, and partly he doesn’t like liberals because he sees the future doesn’t lie with them.

Could that be because he realises, as Paul VI did, that the majority of the membership of the Church is now in the Third World, where people live in profound poverty, and that alters the whole focus of the Church?

Yes, and the Church in the Third World is itself a mixture of these two kinds of opposition to liberalism. It is in some ways an old-fashioned, primitive church, which also has a forward-looking, progressive stance, so you get a curious mixture which doesn’t fit in to any European or North American categories.

In 1980, for the first time ever, the laity were actively involved in a national consultative conference of the Catholic Church at Liverpool. The conference asked the bishops to forward to Rome their disquiet about official church teaching on divorce, contraception and married clergy. A substantial number were also concerned about achieving full participation by women. How do you assess the Liverpool Conference?

I thought it was excellent — much more open than I thought it would be. I thought it would be a very clericalised proceeding, but it wasn’t. The sad thing is that it doesn’t seem to have come to much.

According to a recent survey, over 60% of lay Catholics do not agree with the official pronouncements about sex and morality — on contraception, abortion, etc. I think it would be a much higher proportion of young Catholics, and in Britain, at any rate, the laity seems to have gone its own way and takes little notice of what the authorities say on these questions. What implications do you think this kind of division of attitudes and belief has for the Church?

I think the Church has always been like that, and sometimes it’s a good thing and sometimes a bad thing. A parallel case is that of nuclear weapons: there is no doubt what the Church’s teaching is about nuclear weapons, yet Catholics quietly carry on having jobs in factories where they are made, and paying no attention.

But there hasn’t been the same pressure put on Catholics vis-a-vis the peace issue as there has been with these other issues.

Yes it’s easier to pressurise people about sex, because you are talking to individual people who are worried, because every one is worried about sex. So you play on people’s anxieties. It’s much less easy to pressurise industry or parliament. But it has always been the case that Catholics don’t pay the kind of attention to central authority that people imagine they do. I think the Church should change its line on divorce. It has now put itself into a corner where the grounds for an annulment are absolutely absurd: they say, ‘we can’t give you a divorce, but we can find reasons why you were never married in the first place’, and it is really a dishonest quest for these. The Church
has to look again at its theology of marriage. I think what makes a marriage is not just a contract people have made, but some son of relationship between them such that you can say it is unviable if the relationship has totally broken down.

I feel very strongly about the position of women in the Church. The attitudes and behaviour of the Church towards women seem to me to be in blatant contradiction to its statements on human rights, and flagrantly in defiance of the spirit of the Gospels. What do you think we ought to be doing about this?

I think the most we can do at the moment is talk — get people to see the truth of what you have just said and to understand that the position of women in the Church is in contradiction to the Gospel. At the moment I can’t see the possibility of any other course of action other than propaganda. I don’t see it as an issue distinct from the position of women in society as a whole. I suspect that you won’t solve this problem short of getting rid of capitalism and establishing socialism.

You're not saying it ought to be shelved until we get to that stage?

I'm not saying it should be shelved, but I think it would be a theoretical mistake to suppose that this is the key issue either in society as a whole or in the Church.

From the encyclical Peace on Earth onwards, the Papacy has been making some very strong statements on disarmament, linking this with the issue of world poverty and hunger. This is obviously an attitude we can all support; but the point is to what extent is this translated into specific judgements about issues like multilateralism and/or unilateralism?

As far as the moral statement that is being made is concerned, it seems clear that the Catholic has to be a unilateralist. He can't just say, 'I'll give up nuclear weapons if somebody else does.' It's quite clear that the Catholic teaching is that the use of nuclear weapons is absolutely out. So a Catholic has to be a unilateralist; and as Bruce Kent remarked, a unilateralist is just a multilateralist who means it.

Why is it that when the issue was put to the last Bishops Conference it was so resoundingly defeated?

Yes — at the English and Welsh Conference. But the Scottish bishops have produced a clear statement against the use of nuclear weapons . . .

. . . and so have the priests at the national Priests Conference.

So I really think that you must ask the bishops why they are not preaching the Catholic teaching!

How do you see the historical development of the Church?

I think that the Catholic Church was a major element in the subversion and destruction of the medieval world, which was essentially a world built on families. The system was a set of interlocking mafias, and the Catholic Church had a great deal to do with its destruction. The emphasis on the celibacy of the clergy, for example, was really to do with having an institution that wasn't a family institution. When the capitalist revolution began, the Church split, and the Protestants more or less accepted wholeheartedly the bourgeois ideology of individualism, while the Catholics maintained a hankering for the past and preserved the collective values of the community and its anti-individualism. What is happening in the Church at the moment — to put it at its most optimistic — is a tidying up of the mistakes of the past. It is coming to accept the best aspects of individualism, while retaining — I hope — notions of collectivity and community, thereby becoming potentially a springboard to the future.

Are you saying that the Catholic Church may adapt more easily to socialism than Protestantism?

Yes, exactly.

But don't you think there have to be major transformations?

Of course. But they always look more major before they happen. I can remember as a child people saying, 'no question of not using Latin' and 'married priests — good heavens, no!' The Catholic Church is perfectly capable of making changes that look terribly major to people outside but in fact don't really bother the people inside that much. And it actually does have a notion of man as essentially the sum total of his total relations — as Marx said.

Don't you think the structures of the Church — the relationship between bishops and priests and the laity — are rather vertical and feudal? Do you think that will gradually change?

Yes. It has already changed in a lot of places; but I think you have to look at the actual concrete historical causes in individual places. If you look at the Irish immigration in nineteenth century England and the dreadful conditions in which the Irish lived, their only leadership, almost the only literate person amongst them, was their priest. The only person they could identify with, who could be any kind of leader — often in struggle against the bosses — was the priest. We inherited that in England; it's breaking down now, in fact it began to break down in the 40s, but it is still there. Often things that people see as peculiar to Catholicism are only our way of coping with a particular historical situation.