

"AMERICA"

November, 1969

Let me share some impressions of the U.S. that are the result of my recent two-week trip to the San Francisco Bay Area. It is very difficult to precisely define or interpret even your own feelings but I will endeavor to express some of the key words that seemed to stand out.

(1) Change. Everything and everyone is changing on the American scene, and the changes are wholesale; nothing stays put! For example: The mood of university students cannot be reliably predicted from semester to semester; people who are closest to students are the most cautious about all predictions concerning the present school year. Today's mood tends to be obsolete next week. Things that appeared permanent and established a few years ago are now wavering; the old traditions and institutions mean less and less to students on the large university campuses. There is a greater feeling of aloneness on the part of students with the breakdown of campus community and school spirit". Fraternities and Sororities which once were a vigorous and dominant part of college life are on the decline at most large schools at least for the present. Change

is symbolically manifested in the styles of clothing, the haircut, the movie. The cinema of 1969 is brutal and erotic, a very dangerous combination to feed on, but nevertheless this is "in" and current, fortunately subject to change at any moment. Change is the key word!

The second word is Dynamism. It is impossible to miss the tremendous forcefulness and intensity present in America today. The speed and movement you feel on the vast freeway approaches to the Bay Bridge; the economic power and energy of the American techmostructure. In Seattle I drove past Boeing field and saw the 747 jet marked along side a 707. The incredible achievement in problem solving that the 747 symbolizes staggers the imagination. But more than these material signs of dynamism one is confronted on many sides by the fact that the culture is gearing itself at a breakneck pace to grapple with the various social problems that characterize the U.S. today. Each evening on TV panels and "specials" were devoted to the almost surgical and completely frank discussion of social issues: urban deterioration, school inadequacy, racial confrontation, poverty, foreign policy. The frankness was agonizing and the criticism total but in it all I was impressed that the problem solving genius of American culture is at work.

The third word appears incongruous in the face of the first two: change and dynamism, and this third word when combined with the first two as I see it portrays the complexity that is America today. The word is fatigue. One University professor told me that he felt that if the descriptive word for the student last October was angry then at least for the first two months of this semester the key word was tired. People are tired of the war in Viet Name, of extremes, of the overkill, of many other things too: tired of the pleasures, material symbols, etc. How do you reconcile the three words, change, dynamism, fatigue? Somehow you must because the fact is that all three have converged in 1969, and perhaps in this convergence there is a basis for genuine hope and resolution. It seems to me that the sense of fatigue has had a humanizing impact, a new sort of inner felt modesty that is in the long run a good thing for the soul. Just a few years ago the University was the grande prima donna of American society; it could do no wrong, had no needs and stood as an ivy covered secular shrine in the temple gardens of the 20th century man. In different ways the same could be said of the industrial monolith with all of its promises of power and prosperity, of science, mass media and many other institutions including the Christian Church; each occupied their place on the temple grounds. Today vast fissures have broken open and each of the institutions of 20th century man are now unavoidably aware of their own frailty and identity crises. Even the anti shrine shrines of protest and escapism are also tottering in 1969. Added together ~~It~~ fell the air is greatly cleared as over against the summer of 1968 and I am grateful for that clearing because it means that we can search out what is authentic and if an institution will find its true heart it can enter a great new age of meaning. What a priceless moment for the Christian Church to rediscover Jesus and the meaning of his reign.