

TO DAVID RAMAGE

From Ivan Illich

November 14, 1989

Dear Dave,

In 1987, I eagerly accepted your invitation to teach for three years at McCormick Seminary, as long as the Cardinal of Chicago did not object. Your invitation was the occasion to report on the theological implications of three decades of research. This inquiry focuses on the origins of some fundamental assumptions, which -- having gone unexamined -- constitute the framework of late 20th century anguishing apriories.

Your generosity was especially welcome because it reached me at a moment when I began, with renewed vigor, to foster encounters among several dozen associates from all over the world with whom separately I had for many years pursued precisely this theme.

Our research into the history of western trivial certainties had led me, and a very few other intellectuals who like me are theologically inclined to be consistently impressed by a pattern which goes beyond what Weber or Girard, Tawney or Luis Dumont had made us suspect. The entire set of those axiomatic assumptions that generate the mental space within which today's social concepts emerge is derived from the millennial attempt by the western church to give institutional permanence to Christian vocation.

This seemingly inexorable inversion, by which grace turns into the motor of an amoral world-system, merits critical reflection for at least two reasons:

1. A new kind of discernment of spirits is needed today to recognize the insidious perversion that is operating within notions like "education", "life", "health", "needs", "development", "participation", "equality", "sexuality", "communication" etc. If this perversion is attributed to the weakness of the persons who justify their actions in term of these notions, the historically and theologically significant function of these ordinary concepts within the contemporary world view cannot but be obscured.
2. More importantly, the eyes of faith must be opened to an eschatological dimension of today's everyday reality, namely the unprecedented mysterious dimension of sinfulness in Western culture that results from its historical association with the Church. Misunderstood, this insight becomes a scandal rather than an epoch-specific invitation to enter into the darkness of faith.

During three Novembers as your guest in 1987, -88 and -89, I selected my themes so as to give several concrete examples of perverted certainties that grew out of sacred attempts to give social permanence to evangelical vocation. As I told you last night at the dinner to which you also invited Bob Worley and Lee Hoinacki, I am now preparing these lectures for publication as a book. However, before I do so I want to forestall a misunderstanding: the impression that I indict the Church -- which and certainly a couple of respected divines gathered from my work.

Nothing could be further from my intent - whether "Church" is understood in the humble Presbyterian way or with Roman certainty about the Real Presence. My purpose is emphatically not indictment but rather recognition -- recognition of the fullness of the mystery that we both call "Church": the God-given condition for ever renewed gratuitous gifts that transcend human understanding -- and also, equally unfailingly, the origin of unprecedented social forms that, within history reveal depths of sin that no mind can fathom. By those faced with a world in which greenhouse effect and ozone hole, reproductive alternatives, genetic depletion, automation, global system management, are constantly nagging notions, a theology which re-clarifies the spirit of "felix culpa" seems a safeguard rather than a threat to faith.

It was and it is my intention to pursue these reflections in collaboration with Lee Hoinacki openly but discreetly as a major endeavor during the coming years. We will associate a dozen persons on this and other continents to our enterprise, and you are certainly one of them. My stays at McCormick Seminary and especially my conversations with you and Bob Worley have deepened my long-standing conviction that this inquiry, pursued in a spirit of fidelity to the Church cannot fit the "curriculum" of any institution of pastoral formation that is defined by planning, policy, and concerned with relevance. The fact that Mc Cormick could not gather the audience that you expected is therefore, in my mind, a consequence of the nature of an undertaking on which you and I consciously embarked, and not a sign that anything went wrong.

What I and my friends examine are not good intention but the inevitable implication of the modern Church in this world when its "kingdom" is not represented by crowned heads, lawbooks and banks but by the seduction to view reality in terms of system communication and management.

At your request, after dinner, I sat down to write this note; now that it is finished I suspect that I have made a first step towards the introduction to the McCormick lectures (or sermons?) I will publish.

With fraternal affection