

## INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION AT STAKE

**N**EVER, it seems, has human life been held so cheap as today: abortions, euthanasia, elimination of mental defectives, genocide, gas chambers, and the whole concentration-camp world with its massacres, tortures, inquisitions, liquidation of traitors, A-bombs and H-bombs—and so on indefinitely.

A plane will be sent out, it is true, to save a single person who is dangerously ill; but one plane also kills a hundred thousand people in a single second. Modern science can save, but it also kills at a faster and more frantic rate. Swept along helplessly by uncontrolled technical progress, present-day man is often driven to boast of his own abdication before the murderous forces unleashed in our age, and to justify these forces. Almost all current philosophies and political ideologies have a common denominator: they set little store by the existence, either physical or spiritual, of human beings.<sup>1</sup>

The more clear-sighted among our non-Christian contemporaries declare that man is in danger, and they demand 'respect for the human personality.' But although their emphasis on personality is sincere, their philosophy both the sanest and the nearest to Christianity, most of them on a mere decree from their government are resolved (or resigned?) to surrender completely to the inhumanities of military discipline, and will give themselves up body and soul to the blasphemous massacre of God's creatures.

The Decalogue, in its age-old wisdom, has set out what is involved in loving your neighbour or (if you prefer) in respect for human personality. Modern man is mad indeed if he thinks he can build a civilised world while maintaining his light-hearted attitude to the sixth commandment. I believe the future of humanity turns precisely on whether he takes this commandment seriously or not. If there is one question of life or death, it is our attitude to 'Thou shalt not kill.' The planet's fate depends on this; the Church's fate also.

For it is this question above all by which modern man will finally judge the Church and its witness. Where is its vaunted Good News if it takes part in the slaughter and howls with the wolves? What

real significance can Jesus Christ have, if His disciples join in collective hatred and violence so readily, if they too gamble with human life? How can the Church bring a message of hope to men oppressed by their murderous factions, if it seems to sanction these factions and murders with its moral authority? When atheists wax sarcastic against religion, they are basically betraying their contempt for the Christians who preach love and do not practise it. In the past millions of men have left the Church for good because of religious wars and the Inquisition; and today tens of millions are obviously disgusted with Christianity because of the wars which Christians wage. Today more than ever, owing to the horror of modern methods of mass-extirpation, the Church's witness turns on the truly crucial question of the sixth commandment.

But alas, instead of letting the Good News be heard as a clarion call amidst a world ravaged by terrors, despairs, hatreds, and violent convulsions, the Church's preaching has a sad and uncertain sound. Before the agonising challenge of 'Thou shalt not kill,' it seems hesitant and equivocating; it drifts on in impotence and resignation. Little wonder, then, if people turn away from it in disillusionment and despair.

Despite all appearances, the masses are longing for a hope which will bring them release; the Church cannot go on disappointing them any longer. Nor can it let its own children be racked by terrible problems of conscience without speaking to them clearly. More than ever Christians are torn between their obedience as children of God, who have received forgiveness and are called on to forgive others, and their obedience as citizens called on to maintain order and justice in this sinful world. From the darkness of this deep inner conflict, they are confronted by a dilemma which seems insoluble: they must deny Christ by taking part in the general slaughter or else deny Him by evading their military duty. Has the Church really nothing to say to them?

There can surely be few tasks of greater importance and urgency than to study this problem of respect for human life, under the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit, in the fraternal communion of all those who invoke the name of Jesus Christ and are tormented by the tragic dilemma of whether a Christian should take part in war. In other words, if Christ is preached by a Church which submits to military laws, is He still the Christ of the Scriptures? The pages which follow are intended as a modest contribution to the common search for a true faithfulness to God.<sup>2</sup>