1968 a Momentous Year---And It's Far from Over

By Religious News Service

Whatever may happen in the rest of 1968—and indications are that the remaining months will be increasingly eventful—the year has already become momentous in both religious and secular life, for the United States and for the entire world.

Sometimes, a religious event, such as the funeral of Martin Luther King, with its wide implications, dominates the news. More often, the major events have strong religious overtones. Such events include:

—A new hope for negotiations to end the Vietnam War, given special meaning by President Lyndon B. Johnson's announcement that he will not accept re-election.

—A continuing racial crisis in the U.S., diagnosed in the booklength report of a special presidential commission, climaxed by the murder of America's most widely-admired civil rights leader and by the subsequent passage of a civil rights bill.

—A financial challenge that saw the pound devalued and the gold basis of the dollar shaken.

—Upheavals in several Communist nations of Eastern Europe. Specifically religious news has included:

—An acceleration of the timetable for unification of the 10 Protestant Churches in the Consultation on Church Union.

—A drastic reorganization of the Roman Curia and the Papal Household.

—A three-way dispute involving the governments of Greece and Sweden, the World Council of Churches and the Orthodox Church in Greece.

—Wide response to a dispute between the Archbishop of Los Angeles and a religious order.

—Increased hierarchical attention to unofficial Catholic groups.

Within a few months, 1968 has seen more startling developments than some whole years of the recent past. With Vietnam peace negotiations on the horizon, with a presidential election(a general assembly of the World Council and an international Eucharistic Congress among the scheduled events of the future, and with predictions of a racially tense summer, the rest of the year should also be eventful.

LBJ Acts Welcomed

Religious reactions to President Johnson's announcement on Vietnam and his non-candidacy were overwhelmingly favorable, though some peace groups were cautious or even negative.

Pope Paul VI referred to the development several times, usually in indirect terms, as grounds for new hope. The general secretary of the WCC, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, called it a "move in the right direction."

But the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Protestant chaplain at Yale University, said that he was "a little skeptical" and the Rev. Richard Neuhaus, a Brooklyn Lutheran pastor, was "profoundly disturbed" by the intensified bombing in the areas Johnson had not declared off limits. Father Daniel Berrigan, S.J., said that the President's statement was "the same as if Hitler after Dachau issued a statement that he was ready to bargain with the Jews."

All three clergymen have been active in the peace movement and Mr. Coffin and Father Berrigan have been arrested for activities opposed to the Vietnam war.

There was some skepticism among religious leaders on another unexpected development, the sudden liberalization of policies in Communist Czechoslovakia, but the reaction there has been overwhelmingly hopeful. The government has begun rehabilitation proceedings for clergymen and others who were imprisoned by the former regime and has taken steps toward wide-ranging reforms in church-state relations. According to persistent reports, negotiations are underway with the Vatican which may lead to the return of exiled Joseph Cardinal Beran, Archbishop of Prague, and the appointment of many new bishops.

Concern over Greece

Church leaders, meanwhile, have become concerned over ecumenical implications of church-state relations in Greece. The military government there has encouraged reforms in the Orthodox Church, but many of its other actions have been criticized or questioned outside of Greece. As a result of criticism by the Swedish premier and a proposed "appraisal" of the new Greek Constitution by the WCC, the Greek Church has withdrawn its delegation from the forthcoming WCC General Assembly at Uppsala.

The religious response to racism has received a special impetus from the report of the President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.

While they await new government-sponsored programs, many Churches are augmenting their financial and human commitments, some with the application of a fixed portion of available funds, for aid to Negroes or to the predominantly Negro poverty areas.

Aid for Ghettos

In January, before the report on civil disorders, the Methodist Board of Missions launched a program alloting $3 million for low-interest loans to home-owners or small businesses in the ghettos. Since the report, Bishop John J. Wright of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh has announced that he will give 10 per cent of the funds which he is "free to administer as a bishop" to agencies combating the problems of race and poverty. United Church of Christ congregations have been asked by their national Executive Council to contribute up to 5 per cent of their local expenditures for action in the urban crisis.

Programs pre-dating the report often seem designed to meet many of its findings. One such program was launched in late February by the General Board of the National Council of Churches.

The Board called on the Council and all member Churches to coordinate their resources in a special action program.

In a related action, the NCC General Board advocated a guaranteed annual income, "available as a matter of right" and adequate to "maintain health and decency."

The Gold Crises

Another 1968 crisis affecting the Churches erupted in European gold markets. It threatened to undermine the fixed relationship between the dollar and gold which is the present basis of the dollar's status among foreign countries. The crisis was averted, at least for the present, by an agreement among all the major Western powers except France, which will accept the present fixed gold value of the dollar despite open market fluctuations.

A devaluation of the dollar in foreign exchange would have seriously reduced the effect of overseas efforts of the Churches in missions, relief activities and contributions to foreign affiliates — effects which British Churches have already noted since the devaluation of the pound sterling.

A major religious development which surprised some observers was the acceleration of the Consultation on Church Union timetable at its seventh annual meeting in March. The meeting called for formulation of a specific plan for union by 1969 or, at the latest, 1970. Full agreement on union may follow within 10 years according to informed opinion expressed at the meeting.

Not unanticipated, but still sudden and radical, was Pope Paul's overnight elimination of many hereditary and honorary positions at the Papal Court. These have been held for centuries by members of the Roman nobility.

Curia Shakeup

Equally drastic was the reorganization of the Roman Curia, which went into effect on March 1. Several of the Sacred Congregations in the Curia were abolished or incorporated into other agencies. Experimental and post-conciliar bodies such as the Secretariat for Christian Unity, the Consilium on the Laity and the Pontifical Study Commission on Justice and Peace became part of the Curia.

Most of the heads of Curia congregations resigned, and their replacements (appointed for 5-year terms, not for life as before) gave the new Curia leadership a younger and more international look.

The Pope also appointed a 27-man board of laymen, including six non-Italians with "honorary" appointments, to advise him on the secular governing of Vatican City.

Church renewal is not running with equal smoothness everywhere however. In Los Angeles, a disagreement between Francis Cardinal McIntyre and the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary escalated and spread beyond the diocesan boundaries.

Centering on the norms for renewal in the Sisters' fields of work, forms of community life and prayer and style of dress, the dispute became the subject of statements and resolutions by Catholic organizations and individuals.

In Victoria, B.C., Bishop Remy de Roo told the IHM Sisters of his diocese to continue their experimental reforms with his complete support and approval. But bishops and nuns were not the only ones who became involved. Unofficial Catholic organizations responded, as they did also to the report on civil disorders and to other current topics of interest and controversy.

Many of these groups, organized for the most part within the past year or two, are beginning to develop nationwide structures which are reflected by the word "national" in their titles: National Association of Laymen, National Association for Pastoral Renewal and National Federation of Priests' Councils.

Despite this independence (or perhaps because of it), these organizations seem to be winning some favorable attention from the hierarchy.

One of the newest diocesan heads in the U.S., Archbishop Terence Cooke of New York, may have struck a keynote for the hierarchy when he said that he plans 'to be a very good listener."

By his own admission, Archbishop Cooke's appointment came as a "shock and tremendous surprise" to him as it did to many others.

Shock and surprise of more profound nature culminating in the assassination of Dr. King, came frequently in the first quarter of 1968. Surely the murder of the non-violent proponent of civil rights had more shock than any year should contain.

GUITARS IN ROME

Milan (RNS) — The use of modern idioms in Church music is growing in Italy. One church in Rome has used electric guitars and hymns in modern style even during Lent. Church officials have looked upon this experiment with great caution, but the Masses have been attracting young people in unprecedented numbers.

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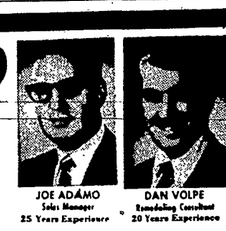
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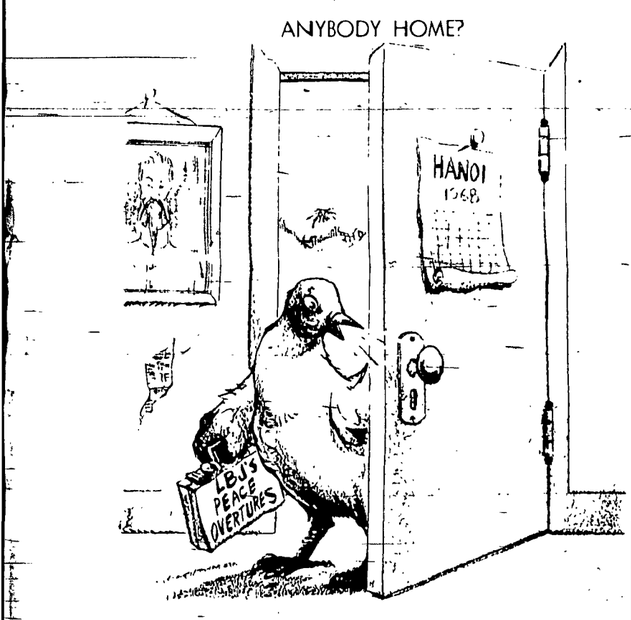

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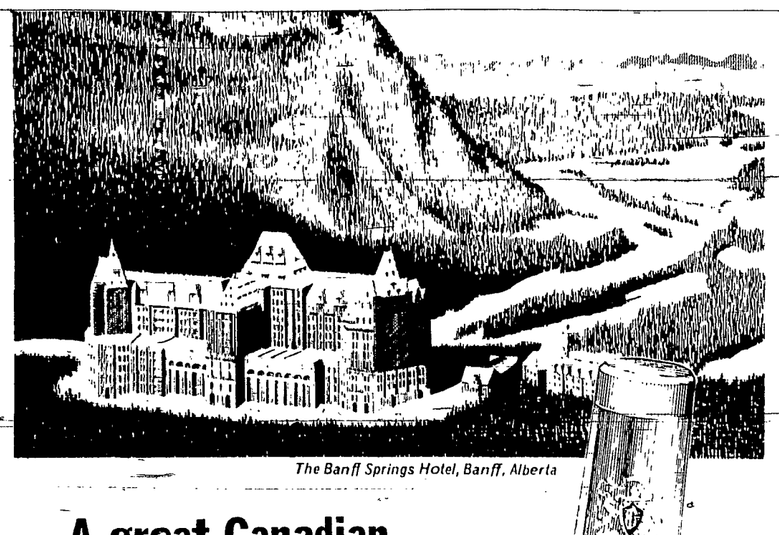
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"It is a fiction to
provisions as one for "
if it were not, free
property to churches
tional as gifts of the
larly, it is equally a fi
terize the children r
schools as the benef
statutory program."

The New York S
Loan Act, which was
was declared unconsti
New York Supreme
August 1966. Four m
Appellate Division re
er court's ruling, conte
of the local school b
brought the suit aga
Board of Education d
right to do so.

The Court of Appe
highest tribunal, in a
in May 1967, ruled th
constitutional. This de
appealed to the Supr

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