

William F. Buckley, Jr.

Religion and transcripts

IS THERE NO LIMIT to the weapons Richard Nixon is prepared to use to defend himself? He began by telling us that the tapes would speak for themselves, and would fully exonerate him.

A week later he has propped up a Jesuit theologian to pronounce the tapes as fine examples of Christian morality, and to describe their principal author as the embodiment of Christian virtue and high statesmanship.

Here is what I would like someone please to explain to me. Why is Mr. Nixon's judgment so awry these days? I write within minutes of reading the remarks of the Reverend John McLaughlin, Jesuit priest and presidential aide, and I — who ran for public office only once, and achieved 13 per cent of the vote — know as certainly as that the sun will rise tomorrow that this venture will bring yet further discredit to President Nixon — and discredit to Father McLaughlin.

Mr. Nixon will succeed in arousing the anger of many who care deeply that we should not trifle with men of God, and who will recall that Mr. Nixon has at least a passive weakness for that kind of thing. For many years, Billy Graham was always there to suggest however faintly that God is a middle-class Republican.

And when Mr. Nixon went to a church service in Key Biscayne to give thanks for the cease-fire in South Vietnam, he suffered himself to be described by the local pastor in terms that would have embarrassed St. John of the Cross.

Father McLaughlin is not a country preacher. To become a Jesuit requires 13 years of hard study in the seminary. (Father McLaughlin should have taken the 14th year.) And after that, he served as an editor of the Jesuit weekly *America*, which for a while was given to loosing thunderbolts at

any Catholic who expressed any reservation over any papal inflection given in the least encyclical.

During the 60's Father McLaughlin then ran for senator from Rhode Island against John Pastore, which suggests his inclination to lost causes.

Father McLaughlin appealed to the virtue of charity. But charity does not require the Congress of the United States and the American people to maintain Richard Nixon as President of the United States.

Charity has nothing to do with keeping us from giving to the transcripts the kind of attention that Mr. Nixon asked us to give to them — from dwelling on the contradictions, and remarking the selfishness of their concern. The only thing that charity absolutely requires is that no further analysis be made of the remarks of Father McLaughlin.

What is Mr. Nixon, the shrewd political analyst, saying to himself, as he drops bomb, after bomb, after bomb? Did he believe that a paid consultant wearing a Roman collar could transubstantiate the tapes from barracks-room discussions about how to lay the Statue of Liberty, into sacrosanct deliberations of a man identified by Father McLaughlin as "the greatest moral leader of the last third of this century"?

What is finally surprising about it is that Nixon isn't really that bad. The *transcripts* are not really that bad. What is bad is that the transcripts should have been released at all, and what is bad is that Mr. Nixon actually believed they would lighten his burden. And, now, that Mr. Nixon either believes what Father McLaughlin says, in which case he has completely lost touch with reality; or else he doesn't believe it, but he thinks it will work, in which case he has — completely lost touch with reality.