

THE PRIEST OF THE PEOPLE

By THE EDITOR

EVERY HIGH PRIEST TAKEN FROM AMONG MEN IS ORDAINED FOR MEN IN THE THINGS THAT APPERTAIN TO GOD, THAT HE MAY OFFER UP GIFTS AND SACRIFICES FOR SINS.—*Hebrews*, 5, 1.

ST PAUL'S celebrated definition of the priest provides the best introduction to the present number of *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*. For St Paul keeps the balance between the choice which separates the priest from the people, and the purpose of the choice which brings the priest into the midst of the people as their minister and representative. At the ordination, the bishop begins by insisting that the people should have a say in the election of their clergy; and Pope Pius XI followed that inspiration when he addressed an Encyclical letter to the whole Church on the subject of the Catholic priesthood (*Ad Catholici sacerdotii*, December 1935). More recently, the courageous Cardinal Suhard of Paris addressed himself to his own archdiocese in his already famous pastoral—*Le Prêtre dans la Cité*—which was intended to stir up among priests and people a devotion and appreciation of this aspect of the Church.

And now the present Holy Father, Pius XII, has sent a long exhortation to all the clergy throughout the world on 'promoting the holiness of priestly life'—*Menti Nostrae* (September 1950). This latest apostolic exhortation is particularly concerned with the modern training of the future priesthood, and that particular aspect of the Christian priesthood, no less than any other, is of importance to the people of the Church as well as to their ministers. For not only is the priest responsible for the means of spirituality which flow into the whole Church, but also every member of the Church is in some way responsible for the holiness of the priests who thus minister to them. The Holy Father begins by quoting St Peter: 'Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking care of it not by constraint but willingly according to God... being made a pattern of the flock from the heart' (1 Peter 5). The pastors are thus to be among their flock and the pattern or 'form' of those whom they feed.

The enemies of the Church often launch their most violent attacks on the priesthood. The present times reveal this with increasing cruelty, as Cardinals and bishops are tortured, and clergy of all ranks, both secular and regular, are done to death for being ministers to the strength of the Church. It is mainly for this reason that the Popes have insisted so much on the need for worthy priests, desiring them to be well trained for their gigantic tasks, trained indeed for martyrdom.

But a wrong attitude towards the priesthood from within the Church is of course more serious, and it is against this that the recent encyclicals and pastorals have set the true doctrine of the holiness of the priesthood. The attack, moreover, comes not only from the ranks of the faithful who are labelled 'anti-clerical'. A more insidious, because unconscious, undermining of the true position of the priest comes from those of the laity who set the priest on such an enormously high pedestal that inevitably he topples over when there is the slightest tremor in the earth beneath him. 'Clericalism' is responsible for as great a separation between priest and people as 'anti-clericalism', since it tends to make the priest more untouchable and unknowable. And the priest himself often forgets under pressure of adulation and remoteness that his position lies among the flock of whom he must be the pattern.

A writer commenting on Pius XII's exhortation has shown that the special contribution of '*Menti Nostrae*' lies in the means suggested by His Holiness for overcoming the danger of the seclusion of the clergy from the people.¹ The future priests during their training must be taught to think for themselves in order to meet the ideas that live in the minds of the men of the day around them. They must be prepared to meet men of every condition of life, and to acquire an adequate knowledge of world affairs. For they are to be men from among men, helping men to reach God. The methods for achieving this communion with 'the flock' are quite revolutionary and reflect the same spirit that lay behind the Pope's encyclical on the Bible. The priest is fearlessly to learn what is being taught to the men and women of his day.

We are not directly concerned here with the new means recommended for the apostolate, though it is important to recognise the development in this sphere. But the Pope does insist

¹ *Menti Nostrae*: Some Observations by Canon J. Cartmell. (*Clergy Review*: February 1951. pp. 88sq.)

that, wherever anyone is suffering difficulties, there must the priest be found, succouring and helping the distressed and disturbed. He is to be found among the poor and the oppressed as well as among those who, though better off materially, may be in greater need through evil ideas and doctrines.

The priest, then, must be in one sense identified with the people, and the people must find in him their most cherished hopes, the spokesman of their own ideas. The priest who offers his Sunday Mass throughout the year *Pro populo* stands as their representative, which should not mean a mechanical relationship such as might exist between a foreman in a factory and the working men. The one who represents the rest must be linked to them with bonds of mind by knowing their ideas, and with bonds of will in sympathy and love. This cannot be if the people do not co-operate with their priest, leaving him to perform his duties with no idea of his problems or his responsibilities. There must be an increasingly mutual action between the two, so that the Church may be drawn into close unity and so grow in her apostolic strength in the conversion of those who remain as yet debarred from contact with the priest of God.

The present issue of LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, therefore, is addressed as much to the laity as to the clergy. It is hoped that it may contribute, however slightly, towards drawing priest and people even more closely together so that the Church may continue to increase in that unity of all her members in the one life. Indeed, the fundamental spirituality for priest and people alike is always the same, the identification with the living Christ Jesus. The training in the way of living this life will evidently differ considerably for the clergy and laity, but the ideal of contemplation, of obedience, of union with our Lord in the Eucharist, all these aspects of the one life, must be viewed from the same basic principles.

It would be impossible to cover all the ground cultivated in the Pope's exhortation in this respect, but this special number may be regarded as issued in honour of *Menti Nostrae*, designed to show its relevance to priest and people alike. Thus the Holy Father speaks of the contemplation of the priest whose daily recitation of the Office leads him to pray always, both as the 'voice of Christ' and as the 'voice of the Church'. He speaks necessarily of the priest's daily meditation as a preparation for celebrating the

Eucharist sacrifice, 'which he not only celebrates, but which he must also in an intimate way live, for thus he can absorb the heavenly power by which it comes about that he is transformed, and shares in the precious life of the divine Redeemer himself'. This indeed is the goal of all the people for whom the priest ministers. Obedience of the true sort that leads to freedom in Christ is, of course, the basis of the training of the future priests who are taught, in the words of St Ignatius of Antioch, to obey the bishops as Jesus obeyed his Father. Indeed, this principle, more than any other once it is grasped also by the laity, should help to avoid the double danger of 'clericalism' and 'anti-clericalism', both of which tend to a dangerous divorce between priest and people.

The Holy Father's peroration, commending to his priests devotion to the blessed Mother of God, reminds the whole Church of her special protection, in her powerful maternal chastity, of the flock for whom the hundreds of thousands of priests throughout the world now labour.² 'And as for Ourselves, We desire fervently to commend all the priests throughout the entire world to the blessed Mother of God, that by her intercession God may abundantly pour forth his Spirit, who carries his sacred ministers towards holiness and restores the human race with a new moral life.'

² Compare: *La Très Sainte Vierge et le Sacerdoce*. By Paul Philippe, o.p. (Cerf.; and Blackfriars Publications.)