

LOST OPPORTUNITIES

The Church and the Second Empire

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IN a previous article,¹ I pointed out that Frederic Ozanam, the great and saintly founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, had in the course of his lectures on Commercial Law at the University of Lyons in 1839 outlined a remarkable system of Christian social reforms. He had denounced the exploitation of the working classes, which he described as slavery, he called for a just wage, profit-sharing and even pensions—over fifty years before Leo XIII published the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. And Ozanam was not the only French Catholic to be moved by the spectacle of working-class misery which grew in intensity with the development of the Industrial Revolution. Conservatives like Villeneuve-Bargemont and Charles de Coux had denounced the evil effects of industrialism, and Royalists claimed that the plight of the workers was due to the Revolution which had made their exploitation possible by destroying the Guilds of the *ancien régime*. Other Catholics were influenced by the doctrines of the early Socialist thinkers, such as Saint-Simon and Fourier. The most notable of these were the group of working men who, under the leadership of Buchez, founded a paper called *l'Atelier*, some of the pages of which make stimulating and startling reading even today. The vigorous and progressive spirit of this élite of French Catholic social thinkers is best rendered by the Abbé (afterwards Mgr) Maret, the friend and collaborator of Ozanam and Lacordaire, who (before Marx and Proudhon had given to the word 'socialism' its materialistic and atheistic connotation) wrote: 'It is no use refuting the pseudo-socialists, let us become socialists ourselves'.

M. J.-B. Duroselle, in his great and immensely erudite work *Les Débuts du Catholicisme Social en France*, gives us a detailed picture of the intense activity amongst French Catholic thinkers during the last years of the monarchy of Louis-Philippe. This activity was, of course, limited to an élite, it did not affect the hierarchy and only influenced a minority of the clergy, but it was

¹ cf. BLACKFRIARS, November 1953.

a promising beginning, and it is reasonable to assume that a realization of the need for social reforms would have spread gradually amongst Catholics. How is it possible, therefore, that during the whole of the Second Empire, at a time when Socialism was strengthening its grip on the workers, French Catholics contributed practically nothing to Catholic social teaching, and that Albert de Mun could write bitterly in 1871 that they had done practically nothing for the working classes?

One of the main reasons, no doubt, is that Catholics failed completely to understand the meaning of the insurrection of the Paris working classes in May and June 1848, a rising brought about by appalling conditions of misery and unemployment, and which the provisional Government of the Second Republic was totally unwilling to remedy. The spark which set alight this fearful explosion of working-class anger was the closing, at the suggestion of the Catholic leader Falloux, of the 'Ateliers Nationaux', Government sponsored workshops for the relief of unemployment which had been set up under socialist pressure, and which had utterly failed in their purpose. The extent to which Catholics misunderstood this outburst of misery and despair is best measured by the comments of the leading Catholic review, *Le Correspondant*, which described the riots as the 'raising of the banner of idleness', congratulated the Generals on the use of artillery to quell it and asked that no mercy should be shown to the ringleaders. No mercy was, in fact, shown, and when the Socialist Pierre Lerroux appealed in the name of Christian Charity to the fifteen priests in the National Assembly to join him in asking for clemency, he was met with a stony silence. This bitterly reactionary attitude was, of course, dictated by fear, but it would be unfair to attribute it solely to the fear that Catholics felt for the safety of their property. It must not be forgotten that barely sixty years before, the Church had been practically wiped out in France by a revolution of unparalleled ferocity, and many saw in this new outburst of mob violence signs of a repetition of the fearful revolutionary disease. Catholics remembered that the Revolution of 1789 had been prepared by the writings and the pernicious doctrines of Rousseau and the Encyclopaedists, who had undermined the basis of authority. Readers of Dr Menczer's recent *Catholic Political Thought 1789-1848* will remember the preoccupation of practically all the leading Catholic political

thinkers of the time with the problem of restoring authority at the expense of liberty, and it is only natural therefore that Catholics should see in the spread of democratic and socialist ideas a further threat to authority and therefore to Society itself. The evidence provided by the revolutionary riots of May-June 1848 turned the hierarchy, the clergy and the vast lethargic mass of Catholics into bitter enemies of socialism and democracy, because although they had very little understanding of these new ideas, they feared that they would inevitably lead to revolution and consequently to a renewed persecution of the Church. The violence of this reaction destroyed completely the Catholic Socialist movement of Buchez and his followers, and ever after the word 'socialism' was monopolized on the Continent by the followers of Proudhon and Marx. It also dealt a mortal blow to the early Christian-Democratic movement, so brilliantly led by Ozanam, Maret and Lacordaire, a movement which was not reconstituted until sixty years later, when Marc Sangnier founded *Le Sillon*, the forebear of the present M.R.P.

After the shock of 1848, it was not surprising that Catholics should feel little enthusiasm for republican institutions, and although they preferred a monarchy, they were prepared to welcome any strong authoritarian régime which was prepared to defend the Church. The President of the Republic, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, was by no means a model Catholic, but he had given a striking proof of his sympathy for the Church by assisting Pius IX to regain possession of Rome, and when he seized power in December 1852 it was with the full support and approval of his French Catholic subjects. 'God', said the Papal Nuncio, 'has paid to France the debt of the Church.'

The Imperial dictatorship restored order in France, and Catholics heaved a sigh of relief, but they understood perfectly that dictatorship was a palliative, not a remedy, and other measures must be taken to cure the French working classes from the revolutionary disease with which they were afflicted.

Catholics, however, failed completely to diagnose correctly the cause of the unrest, and there is little doubt that this was due to the fact that there was not a single Catholic amongst the leading economists of the day, although the science of political economy was in full development at that time. The Industrial Revolution had led to the concentration of a large industrial proletariat in the

towns, and its wages and standards of living had declined steadily between 1820 and 1850. This proletariat was forbidden to form unions and was therefore totally unable to bargain with the employers, who were forced through fierce competition to reduce costs wherever they could. The abundance of labour, and its inability to bargain, made it easy to exploit, and the conditions of the French industrial working classes towards 1848, which are accurately described in the famous report of Villermé, were pitiable indeed. Yet the immense majority of French Catholics were convinced that the misery of the working classes was merely that poverty which our Lord has stated will always be with us, that it could not be cured, and that it should merely be alleviated by charity. The urgent problem of the day was to teach the workers to bear their lot with Christian resignation. 'It is in the mind of man', wrote Mgr Régnier, Bishop of Angoulême, in 1849, 'it is in his faith and in his conscience that the cause and guarantee of order are to be found. Ideas and doctrines lead and dominate the moral world and provoke or appease revolutions.' In other words, social peace cannot be achieved by social reforms; in fact, these are useless, as they merely pamper to the desire of the masses for material goods and enjoyment. True social peace can only be achieved by giving to the masses a Christian education.

This idea was put over with great skill and eloquence by great orators like Montalembert. They pointed out to the terrified Voltairean middle classes that the cause of unrest amongst the workers, the spirit of revolution which was threatening the very basis of civilized society, was caused not by misery but by the dechristianization of the masses. They claimed that Christianity alone could give to the workers that spirit which would enable them to bear with resignation the misery and sufferings of this earthly life, and they therefore appealed to the authorities in the name of reason and common sense to entrust the education of the young to the Church. This appeal did not fall on deaf ears. It was more successful than Catholics had dared to hope. The 'Loi Falloux' negotiated between Mgr Dupanloup and Thiers, and passed in 1850, granted to the Church a generous share in secondary and University education and gave her a control over the whole of elementary education. This law did not, however, have the results that were expected of it. Whilst it enabled the Church to exercise a far greater influence over the middle classes, it did

not help her to reconquer the masses. On the contrary, the arguments used by Catholics served only to increase the conviction of the masses that the Church was indifferent to their sufferings, that she was allied to the propertied classes and to political reaction and that the purpose of religion was to serve as opium for the people.

As a result of the disappearance of the Catholic Socialist and Christian-Democratic movements, the small élite of Catholics who retained an interest in the working classes were convinced Royalists, the most notable of whom were Armand de Melun, Frédéric Le Play and Charles Perrin. Armand de Melun in particular stands out as the great Catholic champion of the working classes, and he constantly worked to introduce legislation to improve the condition of the workers. This group, however, utterly failed to influence the working-class movement itself because its paternalistic methods discouraged the formation of leadership, and the élite of the working classes came more and more under Socialist influence.

Consequently, the gulf that divided the Church from the masses grew wider and wider during the Second Empire. It is illustrated in a terrible and dramatic fashion by the violent deaths of the two Archbishops of Paris, Mgr Affre and Mgr Darboy. During the riots of 1848, Mgr Affre, at the suggestion of Ozanam, attempted to pacify the mob by making a personal intervention at the barricades. He was received by the rioters with every mark of respect and deference, and he was killed by a stray bullet. His death caused consternation amongst the workers, who loved him as a friend of the poor, and although the origin of the shot will probably remain a mystery, several reputable historians believe that it was fired by the government troops. Twenty-three years later, on the 24th May, 1871, during the Commune, Mgr Darboy, wearing the same pectoral cross that Mgr Affre had worn, was also shot, but this time by a firing squad of workers with hatred in their hearts, who saw in him an enemy of the poor. 'The great scandal of the nineteenth century', the loss of the working classes to the Church, had by then, in France at least, been consummated.