

Remembrance of Things Past¹

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When I went on 23 September to a meeting of the Peace and Justice Commission called to discuss plans for next Peace Sunday, I had no idea that I was going to be presented with a Bene merenti medal. Bishop Mahon, who was presiding over the meeting, suddenly started talking about people who spend thier lives in obscurity beavering away for a cause, and I thought he was going to tell us about some little-known *curé* in Lyons or Marseilles, when suddenly I heard my own name mentioned as someone who had been beavering away for peace ever since 1936 when PAX was founded. I was too astonished and abashed to make a speech at the time, so I am going to make it now, among my friends at Spode, where it will be several times longer.

I would like to begin by saying that I feel I was given the medal under false pretences, because for years I didn't beaver away for peace at all and had nothing to do with PAX. I was in it at the beginning in 1936 and vividly remember Eric Gill arriving in his smock and biretta-type headgear at one of the early meetings in London; there was much discussion as to whether PAX should try to stop the impending war or try to help those who wanted conscientiously to object to fighting in it – the latter alternative was the one chosen by the more realistically minded. But then, owing to living abroad and the subsequent dispersions of the war, I lost touch with PAX. It wasn't until the fifties – at the time when an improvement on the atom bomb was discovered by the scientists, namely the hydrogen bomb – that I wrote a letter to *The Catholic Herald* asking what on earth had become of that Catholic Peace Society of the thirties called PAX ... whereupon I was inundated with literature from Charles Thompson and John O'Connor, the organisation's then *Bulletin* editor and secretary. So I immediately rejoined PAX, met those two gallant men, and not long after was asked to be a speaker at a PAX conference here at Spode – that would have been in 1959.

Those were pre-Simon days² – days when large benign Father Henry St John was our conference chairman, always wearing his habit, of course in those days, and there was a general feeling of lots of peaceful white habits floating around – a different image from the one presented now. An exception even then was Father

Conrad who always welcomed us in the chilly hall smoking a pipe and wearing a thick high-necked sweater. And inserted among the peaceful white presences of thirteen years ago were people like Dom Bede Griffiths, the Benedictine monk who now lives in India, Hugh Brock, the then editor of *Peace News*, and Archbishop Roberts who was delated to Rome for addressing a PAX conference here. Archbishop O'Hara, Apostolic Delegate to England at the time, wrote to him as follows:

"... Certain activities during Your Grace's recent stay in this country unhappily left me no other alternative but to refer them to the Holy See. Archbishops and bishops here were genuinely embarrassed, complained to me, as was their right, and requested me to make their feelings known to the proper authorities. I refer to your association with the PAX organisation. In 1955, after this society published an attack on the work of the Catholic Truth Society, Cardinal Griffin wrote to the Secretary saying that under no circumstances was he prepared to give permission for priests to serve on the council of PAX nor would he allow any priest to associate himself actively with the work of PAX. His successor, His Eminence Cardinal Godfrey, has not seen fit to change this policy. Yet *The Catholic Herald* of 6 November reports Your Grace's presence at a meeting of PAX and your address to them. More distressing still was the front page story in the same paper (*Catholic Herald*, 23 Oct 1959) of a conference at Spode House when Your Grace was a principal speaker ..."

The so-called attack on the Catholic Truth Society consisted of an article in *PAX Bulletin* criticising an inadequate (from our point of view) CTS pamphlet on the rights of conscientious objection. Archbishop Roberts extricated himself from his awkward position by going to Rome and having a long talk with Pope John, after which the whole matter just got buried, though Archbishop Roberts would have liked reparation to be made and to be seen to be made, on the grounds that he had no idea that a rule against priests belonging to or addressing PAX existed (not, perhaps, that he would have paid any attention to it if he had). We owed an inestimable amount to Archbishop Roberts in those days. I don't deny that latterly he has become somewhat confused in his pet causes. You can ask him to address a meeting on the bomb and find him discoursing on the pill.

But to revert to those years in the late fifties and early sixties here at Spode. Besides the white presences, which sometimes included our dear Father Iltyd Evans, and besides the illustrious people mentioned above and many others including Dorothy Day from time to time, there used to be a strong youthful contingent,

for those were the days of the Catholic CND, the heyday of boys like Adrian Cunningham, Kevin McGrath, Eddie Linden, Phil Philpot, Peter Lumsden and many others. Those were the days when there was all that theological hair-splitting about targets at sea (it was *The Catholic Times*, long since defunct, that seemed particularly anxious to prove that nuclear weapons needn't be indiscriminate). Those were the days when the novelist Pamela Frankau, a Jewish convert to Catholicism, with her wit, her first-class mind and her man's voice, was an integral part of the PAX scene in London. She was an outstandingly able public speaker, holding the Albert Hall in thrall, and was especially good at demolishing the targets-at-sea argument. The Catholic CND boys and girls all automatically joined PAX and brought the movement new life, but then they seeped away into marriage and its commitments, or universities and their commitments or, occasionally, monasteries or friaries and their commitments, so that by the mid-sixties, PAX was again being mainly supported by its older members, which was why the merger with the more youthful PAX CHRISTI earlier this year was so providential.

Mainly, I said, but not entirely. It was at one of our Spode conferences in the late fifties that two dynamic-looking blond young men, one very tall, one shorter with a great bush of hair, walked briskly across the great entrance hall as if they really meant business: Stan Windass and Brian Wicker. And of course there was the uniquely eloquent Walter Stein, but he was short and dark. These men were already husbands and fathers and teachers at one university or other and their lives were sufficiently stable for them to be able to allocate time to their cause. Brian Wicker, now chairman of PAX CHRISTI, makes the perfect bridge between the two movements, and welds them into a single new entity.

Another Catholic thing, among many others, that started in England in the thirties and with whose beginnings I was intimately associated, and to which Bishop Mahon made reference in sketching out my meagre *curriculum vitae*, was the monthly paper, *The Catholic Worker*. This first saw life in 1935, a year before PAX. I met up with two men who had both come across and been deeply impressed by the American *Catholic Worker* which had started the year before in 1934, and they were exploring the possibilities of starting a similar paper in England. I was full of enthusiasm. I was in any case, deeply interested in the *Jeunesse Ouvriere Chretienne*, the JOC, a movement that had fairly recently been started in Belgium by Canon Cardijn (though this posh title betrays his working-class origins without which he would never have started the movement), and I was trying to think up ways of introducing it into England. Eventually it became the Young Catholic Workers or YCW.

How can I evoke the atmosphere of that time for all those of you who are too young to have experienced it? To begin with it was a period of great poverty and depression for the working classes. In 1932, there were the hunger marches, organised by the NUWM (National Unemployed Workers' Movement), and many middle-class intellectuals became Communists. The hunger marchers had only to make a halt in Oxford or Cambridge in their long trek down from the North to Hyde Park, and have their bleeding feet washed and bandaged by sympathetic undergraduates, for the latter to join the Communist Party on the spot. I felt the Catholic/Communist tension very keenly. A Communist friend of mine maintained that Christians couldn't really care about the fate of the poor in this world because of their belief in heaven where all wrongs are redressed – pie in the sky when you die. I replied that the whole condition of getting to heaven at all was doing the will of God here on earth, which was to love our neighbour as ourselves, to identify with Lazarus, to repudiate Dives. I said that it was part of a Christian's brief to hunger and thirst after justice, and that two of the sins that “cry to heaven for vengeance” (in the words of the Penny Catechism) were oppression of the poor and defrauding labourers of their wages. This spirit of working for social justice was all the rage in the Church at that time – had not Pius XI recently produced his social encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, updating Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*? And had he not called the JOC “an ideal form of Catholic action”? – which did not, however, prevent the then Bishop of Clifton from banning the nascent movement in his diocese.

So it was not surprising that those two ardent young men, recently down from Oxford, who had been bowled over by Dorothy Day's *Catholic Worker*, wanted to start a similar paper here. Their names Bernard Wall and Edmund Howard. I became the Garibaldi of the triumvirate, the strong arm who did the practical work; Bernard was the ideas man (Mazzini), and Edmund was the angel who was going to put up the money until the paper stood on its own feet. The snag was that we were all middle-class and of course there had to be a working-class man to edit the paper. So we sought advice from that admirable Jesuit, Father Leo O'Hea, principal of the Catholic Workers' College at Oxford and chairman of the Catholic Social Guild, both typical products of the *zeitgeist* (the first still goes on, the second has come to an end), and he recommended Jack Ford, a Manchester docker and ex-Workers' College man, to be the paper's editor. Jack's northern assistants were Eileen, his girl, and Charlie, a CSG man from Leeds. There followed the excitement of getting the first issue out (in June, 1935), and then the next and the next, and of selling it at street corners and out-

side churches – though one of our helpers, a Downside boy, was chased along the street by a parish priest for selling such a paper outside his church – and then there came a blow: Jack Ford announced to the London team that he was coming down on the night excursion train for urgent deliberations. Eileen and Charlie were coming too. They arrived at eight in the morning at the flat over a fruitshop in Covent Garden where the *Catholic Worker* had its office and where Bernard and Edmund and I awaited them. It was a painful and very long day (the excursion train wasn't returning north till eleven at night) during which Jack made many scurrilous accusations against Eileen and said he couldn't work with her any more. So we had to choose between Jack and Eileen who hotly repudiated Jack's imputations. Now Eileen was a very efficient and intelligent girl, and Jack appeared as unreasonable and unbalanced, so we opted for Eileen and organised a caretaker editorship pending Father O'Hea coming up with another man.

But at this point we met Bob Walsh who at that time was working as van-driver and delivery-man and general dogsbody for *The Catholic Herald*; he had enrolled himself in the miscellaneous group that assembled at the *Worker* office every month to address wrappers and dispatch the paper to people who received it by post. His outstanding abilities – mental, moral, organisational – were immediately apparent, and we wanted *him* to be editor, though the fact that he hadn't attended the Catholic Workers' College told against him as by now this establishment looked on the editorship as the natural preserve of its own *alumni*. I drove to Oxford with Bob in a *Catholic Herald* van and another of those lengthy sessions took place (Jo Kirwan was of the party, a mere student then), but Bob and I won the day and he became editor. He later moved up to Wigan with his wife and children and started a house of hospitality, on the Dorothy Day pattern, from which the paper was produced. Though the paper survived until well after the war, it eventually came to an end, unlike its American prototype which will soon be 50 years old. When I met Dorothy Day at Session Four of the Council, to which she had gone because the pastoral constitution on The Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) was under debate, and she had a special interest in the section dealing with "the fostering of peace" (indeed she and 19 other women fasted for 10 days for a conciliar condemnation of nuclear weapons and a recognition of the right to conscientious objection; the fast was successful) – when I met her there in Rome, she suggested that the English *Catholic Worker* had come to an end because it was too political and insufficiently visionary (prophetic, I suppose we would say now). However this may be, the paper fulfilled a vital function while it lasted. And anyway, it

was part of the *zeitgeist*.

There is much to be said about the Catholic Church in England in the thirties. I have glanced only at PAX and *The Catholic Worker* because it was these that Bishop Mahon referred to. But I would like to select one more thing to say, and that is how wonderful and inspiring to us in the thirties was the inauguration of the Feast of Christ the King. In fact, it was instituted in the twenties because the Mexican priest Father Pro, who I think provided the initial inspiration for Grahame Greene's priest in *The Power and the Glory*, faced the firing-squad shouting "Viva Cristo Rey", and the persecution of the Church in Mexico was in the twenties. However this may be, it was in the thirties that the feast-day came into its own here in England. Why did the concept of Christ the King mean so much to us? Why, when I went to a JOC congress in Paris in 1936 with one or two potential English Jocists, did Bob and other friends who had just missed seeing us off at Victoria have a telegram waiting for us at Newhaven saying "Live Christ the King"? I think it was something to do with Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin *in practice* kinging it over the world, and our deep desire to show where *our* allegiance lay, what kingdom *we* longed for everyone to belong to. I cannot think that any other title attached to Our Lord, whether Christ the Worker, or Christ the Drop-Out or even Christ the Freedom Fighter, could mean to anyone now what the title of Christ the King meant to us then. Perhaps every decade has its own Christ. I feel it's somehow typical of the current passion for liturgical change that the feast of Christ the King has been shifted from the last Sunday of October where we always used to know it was. However, having it on the last Sunday of November, or any way the last Sunday before the beginning of Advent, has a kind of beauty and logic: the feast before the fast, the glory before everything humbly starts again.

- 1 A talk given at PAX/PAX CHRISTI Conference at Spode House.
- 2 Simon Blake O.P. who was chairing the current conference.