

BLACKFRIARS

Vol. XX

MAY 1939

No. 280

WAR AND THE CATHOLIC

THE VIEWS OF A LAYMAN

WAR is on every horizon to-day—a black cloud that, coming nearer, resolves itself into a swarm of enemy aircraft bringing death from the skies.

Fear of that black swarm is hypnotising half the civilised world, and there is no decent man or woman but detests the new horror it has brought into warfare, the Massacre of the Innocents. A dead or dying soldier on the battlefield is an ugly sickening fact, but it is possible to cover it with the decent cloak of duty or even to dress it with glory. The woman or the young child dying in torment amidst the ruins of a home is plain, unvarnished, abominable evil, beyond palliation, beyond glorification. Yet it is an inescapable part of war to-day. Spain has seen it; China has seen it; and where will modern war be waged without it?

The Catholic feels the utmost aversion from taking part in warfare that involves such horrors. If it be a necessity, it is a most evil one. But is it a necessity? There are Catholics who say it is no longer so, that modern warfare can never be justified. 'War has become impossible,' says Eric Gill, Catholic artist, writer and craftsman; 'a just modern war is unthinkable,' writes Father Gerald Vann, O.P.; and Father F. Stratmann, O.P., in a book, *The Church and War* considers that 'modern warfare with the all-round ruin it brings must be immoral.' The Catholic hating the barbaric methods of war to-day reads these and similar denunciations with sympathy but in growing perplexity of mind.

It is urgently necessary to resolve this perplexity. To

do so adequately means finding the answers to two questions:

1. What is the teaching of Christ and His Church on the subject of war?
and in the light of this teaching,
2. What should a Catholic do if his country goes to war?

The urgency is real, for no one in any civilised country of the world to-day can feel secure. Evil will not leave man alone to the sweet pursuit of the Hound of Heaven; the dogs of war hunt him as well. To-day the hunting is easier than ever, for the world has shrunk into a very small area and the Human Family, for the first time since Noah, lives together. Its messengers span the world in days; its messages girdle the earth in less than Puck's forty minutes.

We are a Brotherhood at last—a Brotherhood of Peril. A century of conquests over material nature has brought the peoples of the world close together, but all they feel yet is the greater danger of fire. So that women and children may starve with Plenty at their door; herrings may be thrown back into the North Sea and coffee burnt in Brazil; prosperity has no currency but danger spreads like a contagion and a remote frontier quarrel in Central Europe can imperil every man, woman and child in the civilised world.

Every country, however remote it may be from occasion of conflict, is preparing for war. More and more is the citizen in peace asked to share in these preparations. Circumstances are, therefore, making it impossible for an honest Catholic to shirk the issue of personal conduct, and this as an urgent matter of conscience.

What, then, have Christ and His Church taught on this subject? What did Our Lord say about War and Peace and fighting? For three years the Divine Voice filled the air of Palestine with supernatural wisdom. It was imprinted directly on the minds and hearts of His followers, and it has become their teaching on His behalf, 'Go ye and

teach all nations.' Some part only of His teaching was written down, and His Church, under His guidance, published a part of what had been written.

The Church as the original repository of this teaching and its *authorised* disseminator is our final guide.

It is important to remember this when we look at the many startling phrases in the New Testament.

'I say to you not to resist evil; but if one strike thee on thy right cheek, turn to him also the other.'

'Love your enemies; do good to them that hate you.'

'They that take the sword shall perish by the sword.'

'I come not to bring peace but a sword.'

'Get thee behind me, Satan.'

Unaided we cannot solve the inner meaning of these words nor reconcile their outward contradiction. They are flashes of supernatural light that dazzle our fallen understanding. Their real context is in Heaven.

Our wisest writer, G. K. Chesterton, in *The Everlasting Man* says of these words of Christ, 'a man simply taking the words of the story as they stand would form . . . an impression full of mystery, possibly of inconsistency . . . He would not find a word of all that obvious rhetoric against war which has filled countless books and odes and orations; not a word about the wickedness of war, the appalling scale of the slaughter in war and all the rest of the familiar frenzy, indeed not a word about war at all. There is nothing that throws any light on Christ's attitude to organised warfare except that He seems to have been rather fond of Roman soldiers.'

The official teaching of the Catholic Church on the subject of war is the work mainly of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas. It may be summarised as follows:

Man is social by nature and by the circumstances of his earthly existence. He, therefore, lives in societies. These have taken different forms in the course of human history; at present they are National States. The State has the duty of securing the welfare of its citizens; not a duty to a higher

earthly authority, because there is none, but a duty in natural law. Having the duty it must necessarily have two rights or powers with which to carry it out, Authority and Coercion. The power of Coercion is the power to use force and the use of force against authorities outside the State is War.

The right of the State to wage war is limited by many conditions. Gross injustice must have been committed by the other party. It must be serious injustice, *i.e.* it must vitally affect the country declaring war, and it must be plain. Every other available means of righting the injustice must have been tried. The State's intention must be right-minded; it must not have an evil aim; and it must have reasonable prospects of righting the wrong with the power at its command. Once war is declared it must be carried out without unnecessary violence and cruelty that serves no military end. Finally, if the State has voluntarily bound itself to submit its disputes to arbitration it must follow this course before resorting to war, even in a just cause.

As regards the individual, the Church has never forbidden military service; and in the ranks of its saints is Joan the fighting saviour of France. The Church has, in fact, always preached the duty of proper subjection to all duly constituted authority. There is no *obligation* to enquire into the morality of the orders of this authority before obeying them.

But naturally this duty of obedience is no longer binding when the Catholic citizen is called upon to perform an act that violates his conscience. He can and must become a conscientious objector.

So in regard to war, it is clear that he must refuse to take part in a war that is manifestly unjust, which means, for a Catholic, a war that obviously violates the conditions that the Church has laid down for a just war.

The difficulty of a Catholic to-day is this, that he will rarely be able to decide whether his country's cause is really

just or not. He will like to think it is, but if he is honest he will know that he has no real certainty.

Only posterity can judge the justice or otherwise of a country's action. At the time there is deliberate suppression of the truth, sometimes legitimate, but more often part of a smoke screen of propaganda put up to mislead friend and foe alike.

A Catholic can of course only judge on the facts available at the time, but even if these seem clear enough he will have good reason to be doubtful. Only the favoured few have a Government inspired by Catholic ideals. Other Governments must necessarily be suspect. They may be, and often are, the puppets of international forces working for immoral ends, whether they be armament rings, international financiers or freemasons. Even if free of these influences they may be seeking purely material ends of their own under the cloak of seeking justice.

The Catholic may perhaps consider that they have just and adequate reasons for going to war, yet he hesitates to give his support because he feels that the character of modern war destroys that initial justice. He wonders whether air bombing, poison gas, blockade, hate propaganda and the deliberate attacks on civilians can ever in any circumstances secure justice.

He will therefore have no comforting certainty about his country's action, but only varying degrees of doubt.

Now the Catholic pacifist would give him this certainty. The Catholic pacifist looks at the pagan world of to-day, and overcome by the evidence of evil and the horrors of modern war decides that *all* war to-day is unjustified, and that consequently a Catholic must *always* refuse to take part in it.

Mr. E. I. Watkin, Catholic writer, considers 'that national wars similar to the Great War are unjustified because they must produce more evil, physical, intellectual, aesthetic, moral and religious, than any good they can effect.'

Father Gerald Vann, O.P., has written: 'War has long since ceased to be a possible means of establishing justice.' And against unjust aggression he advises 'organised non-violent resistance.'

In England and America a Catholic Society called *Pax* has been formed on the following basic ideas:

1. The use of force for the vindication of an undoubted right is in some cases and under certain conditions allowable to men both individually and collectively.
2. But under present conditions warfare involves moral and physical evils so great as to exceed any possible legitimate gain to either side: therefore such warfare is morally unjustifiable.
3. Those who are convinced of the truth of this have the right and duty to abstain from participation in any warlike activity.

If this view is accepted, of course the Catholic's problem is solved and his way clear. But is it reasonable or justifiable to accept it?

The Catholic pacifist asserts the *impossibility* of a just war under modern conditions. His views therefore carry with them the implication that it is better to-day to submit to injustice rather than resort to modern warfare to set it right. Put another way, this can only mean that in modern circumstances the evils resulting from submission are less than the evils resulting from war. This is in fact frankly admitted by Mr. E. I. Watkin, who has written: 'Even if defencelessness did involve annexation, loss of national sovereignty, this would be a lesser evil than war.'

There will always be injustice in this imperfect world: there will therefore always be just causes. This is not denied. What is denied is the use of modern warfare as a means of prosecuting a just cause.

But what else remains to a country, as to an individual, *in the last resort* but the use of force to rectify injustice? The use of force in the international sphere is war. In its long history in this world, war has assumed many dif-

ferent forms, some viler than others, all equally regrettable in the hands of the creatures of God. To-day its forms and methods are execrable, but it still remains the only remedy left open, when all others fail, for the prosecution of justice. The same kind of force has to be used in the most justified self-defence as in the most blatant aggression. The alternative to employing it is submission.

The pacifists preclude modern war as a weapon of justice even in a good cause on the ground that it inevitably produces more evil than already exists. No doubt it does, but surely that is beside the point. The real test is different. Will modern war always produce more evil than would have been the case if the war had not been fought? That is surely the real criterion. And on that test obviously modern warfare, bad as it is, cannot be condemned without exception. A country threatened with wanton aggression by an enemy whose claims it cannot satisfy by any peaceful means will know that a successful war of resistance will leave a wake of evil in its train, but it will consider such evils to be less than the evils of submission, and it will therefore be justified in taking up arms, provided its resistance has a reasonable chance of success.

It is a bad mistake to imagine that war to be justifiable must improve matters. G. K. Chesterton has much wisdom on that subject in his *Autobiography*. He writes: 'The only defensible war is a war of defence. And a war of defence by its very definition and nature is one from which a man comes back battered and bleeding and only boasting that he is not dead.'

Basically this extreme Catholic pacifism aims at solving the problem of war by the growth of individual conscientious objection. It does credit to the hearts of its promoters, but not to their heads. Its danger is that it may reach Catholics through their hearts, through their fear and hatred of modern war, and impose on them a duty in conscience where none exists or need exist. It is too facile a solution. War is one of the chief manifestations of the

problem of evil, and the hope that it will be eliminated by universal conscientious objection is not only a dream but a dangerous illusion.

We must all seek peace, but peace is the 'tranquillity of order,' and order is diminished not increased by the inability of a State to count upon the support of its citizens in the event of a just war. That way lies chaos. Peace can only be sought in the elimination of the causes of war, a long arduous and, to some extent, personal task, the ways and means of which cannot be examined here.

In the meantime the Catholic's duty to his country stands and as he cannot secure certainty in the Catholic pacifist's way he remains in a state of doubt as likely as not.

It is sometimes said by a less extreme form of pacifist that if in doubt he should do nothing. But surely his clear duty to support his country cannot be limited to those occasions on which he is certain it is acting rightly. This duty presses and cannot wait. It is not right to sit on the fence.

Incalculable harm can be done by individuals who withhold support in the beginning but give it in extremis. The initial neutrality of these people may be a factor in the subsequent collapse. Similarly a man is not justified in withholding support as a volunteer that he would give as a conscript.

The benefit of a Catholic's doubt should be given to his country and fellow citizens. His uncertainty means that his country *may* be right and therefore in refusing to fight he assumes the responsibility of weakening a possible just cause and of creating more injustice instead of less by his abstention.

Refusal to fight involves complete readiness to submit. Surely then it is a defensible course only when one is morally certain that injustice is being done.

It has already been stated that there is no compulsion from the Church in the matter. In a case of doubtful justice the Church does not say you *must* be a conscientious

objector or that you *must* carry out your duty and fight. The Church always has children on both sides of a quarrel, each side convinced of the justice of its cause. The Church has never sufficient information to adjudicate on the merits of a quarrel, according right to one side and adjudging all Catholics on the other as murderers; nor in her wisdom does she show any signs of adjudging Catholics on *both* sides as murderers by adopting the position that *all* modern war is unjustified.

The Church allows the individual to act according to his conscience, and it seems clear that he should not withhold his support from his country unless he is morally certain that injustice is being done, and unless he is prepared to carry his refusal to the point of complete submission. Clearly also he should never cease to strive in every way at his command for the elimination or limitation of war.

FRANCIS McDERMOTT.