

CATHOLICS INTO POLITICS

THE discussion between Father Aelred Graham and Mr Douglas Woodruff—with Father John Fitzsimons intervening—seems to me to be typical of the sort of controversy that arises in almost any Catholic gathering of today when the subject of politics is introduced, though to be sure it is on a much higher dialectical plane than most. There is a great temptation to join in and develop the many fascinating but well-worn themes that have been raised in ever-widening circles round the original splash; but it would be unprofitable, if only because it has been done so often and much better before. What I am going to attempt is something much more presumptuous, that is to break out of the circle, which however wide is still a constriction of both Catholic thought and action.

First, may I offer a definition of politics? It is, I suggest, the art of the organisation of society for the common good. And the problem that does, or should, face the politician is how to preserve the liberty of the individual while securing the common good of all.

It is surely clear that the successful organisation of society for the common good must depend on the members of this or that society having a fairly unanimous idea of what is the common good for which they strive, and on their living and carrying out this organisation within a common structure or framework as to the essentials of which they are all more or less agreed. As Christopher Hollis has said, quoting and supporting Cecil Chesterton¹, 'party government is only tolerable when the two parties agree in their political opinions'². Furthermore, as Fr Graham rightly enjoins, they must 'see things steadily and see them whole'³.

The crux of the matter, of course, is to decide what really does constitute the common good. This is where Catholics come in, and this is, I submit, where all discussions about politics must start. From the point of view of obtaining a right balance between individual liberty and the common good there is no special sacredness attaching to any one political system; the important thing is that the agreement about the aim should be as broadly based and widely understood as possible. I suppose that the nearest we have approached to these conditions was in the best period of the Middle Ages. In the heyday of Party Government (I am speaking of England throughout) in the nineteenth and early part of the present centuries this condition was partially fulfilled. Both the great parties were in general agreement about the structure of society and the

¹ *History of the United States*, pp. 227, 228.

² *The Two Nations*, p. 113.

³ *Blackfriars*, March, 1949, p. 108.

aims to be achieved. For example, I quote Christopher Hollis again, 'this condition of substantial agreement between the parties was admirably fulfilled in the England of the 1830's and 1840's . . . all were most obedient servants of the laws of political economy, and it was a matter of indifference to the masters of those laws which of them might chance to be in political power.'⁴

Unfortunately there was at that time not one nation but two, as Disraeli said⁵, and there was a profound disagreement between the two. History, in the opinion of Douglas Jerrold, 'is the record not of what has happened but of what has mattered'⁶, and what has mattered to us, and still matters, is this disagreement. Its consequence is before us today when there is no kind of basic political agreement between the two main parties on the stage of Westminster—Conservative and Socialist. Their aims, the sort of structure of society they wish to achieve, are fundamentally different. Catholics belong to, and are active in, both these parties. What are they to do?

Without doubt they must, with Fr Graham, 'insist on the primacy of truth and the way of good will'⁷, and, with Mr Woodruff, 'become more alive to the primary importance of preserving their personal liberty in matters so intimate to themselves and their families in education, health, employment, savings'⁸, and, with Fr Fitzsimons, 'work for security, justice and the conservation of all that is good'⁹. They must also, as I heard declaimed on a public platform recently, contribute a spirit of service to the political and social life of the country. We have heard this before so often. Is that all?

All these admirable recommendations are on a natural plane, but surely the Catholic lives simultaneously on two planes, the supernatural and the natural. Must not therefore his contribution to politics—remembering our definition of it—be supernatural as well as natural? In Fr Graham's own words, that 'is our opportunity, the Church has the task . . . of *sanctifying* the lawful aspirations of modern man'¹⁰. And the 'Church' is the community of the faithful on earth under the guidance of the common head, the Pope¹¹.

⁴ *The Two Nations*, p. 113.

⁵ *Sybil*, Book ii, Ch. 5.

⁶ *An Introduction to the History of England*, p. 11.

⁷ *Blackfriars*, March, 1949, p. 108.

⁸ *Ibid.*, May, 1949, p. 210.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, March, 1949, p. 109.

¹¹ Pius XII. Allocution of February 20th, 1946. 'The Vital Principle of Human Society'—*Tablet*, March 2nd, 1946, p. 108.

Perhaps that aspect of our activities is to be taken for granted. 'The world', we say with the Paycock, 'is in a state of chassis', but thank God for the Faith.' On the other hand, can we look with satisfaction on the results of this attitude? 'That the forces of paganism, and not those of Christianity, have gained control of the world compels us to admit that there is a lack of inner force in those (Catholic) agencies that have for their purpose the promotion of Christ's principles and His way of life.'¹² So wrote an American priest during the war, and what is true of the U.S.A. is true also of this country.

Returning to the conditions for the successful organisation of society for the common good, which is politics, we can see that our aim must not only include the supernatural as well as the natural good, but must give absolute priority to it. 'The greatest error', wrote Cardinal Suhard in his great pastoral, *Growth or Decline*, quoted also by Fr Fitzsimons¹³, 'of the Christians of the twentieth century, and one its children would not forgive them, would be to let the world take shape and unite without them, without God—or against him', and 'the greatest service that can be rendered the Church and her children is to make the "Christian summa" of the world in formation.'¹⁴ And he underlines this and brings it to the personal point a little later: 'The action of the Christian must first of all be supernatural'¹⁵. About the same time Pius XII made an even more precise and definite call to the laity: 'Nor would even the stimulus of a Christian life lived according to conventional standards be efficacious. Today there is need of the greatness of a Christian life lived in its fulness with persevering constancy. There is need of valiant and bold shock troops of these men and women who, living in the midst of the world, are ready at any minute to battle for their Faith, for the law of God, for Christ.'¹⁶

It is not for me to labour this point, but I am sure it had to be made. Catholics must go into politics, but they must go in as *Catholics*, not only with a supernatural end in view but fortified and galvanised by supernatural means first and foremost. 'It is not', said Pius XII very relevantly, 'that we disdain human resources, nor that we blame the use made of them in putting them at the service of the apostolate . . . but the error lies rather in relying primarily on these activities . . . and to resort to the supernatural

¹² Father John J. Hugo. *In the Vineyard* (U.S.A., 1942). p. 2.

¹³ *Blackfriars*, May, 1949, p. 217.

¹⁴ *Growth or Decline* (Fides Publishers, Montreal, 1949), p. 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁶ *Rinascita Christiana*, January 22nd, 1947.

forces of grace by prayer and penance only as a subsidiary help.¹⁷ It is, or should be, common knowledge that it is this spirit that is behind the revival that is taking place in such movements as the Sword of the Spirit, L.O.C.K., and the American Christophers, and is the source of all the good that has flowed from the J.O.C. and Y.C.W. movements; it was the inspiration of the Pilgrimage of the Cross.

But, while we put ourselves actively at one with the supernatural ends of the Church, which, we know, coincide at every point with the common good, we remember that the Church operates in time as well as for eternity. 'The Church cannot cut herself off . . . and desert her divinely providential mission of forming the complete man, and, therefore, collaborating without rest in the construction of the solid foundations of society.'¹⁸ Catholics must surely, therefore, go into politics with some general agreement as to the natural aims for the common good, and the basic structure of society.

At present there is no such agreement; there is hardly any attempt at it. Mr Woodruff puts his finger on the trouble when he wishes 'there were more Catholic thinking and speaking and less party loyalty in the Catholics who vote Labour'¹⁹. Unfortunately he appears to fall into the same trap when he says earlier on in the same article that 'it is reasonable to have more hopes of the Conservative than of the Labour Party coming to understand and accept the Catholic social philosophy'²⁰. A phrase in a speech made three years ago and a few vague remarks in various Charters are flimsy foundations for such a hope. Had they been the issues on which the many by-elections have been fought one might be able to be more optimistic. In fact I can vouch from my own experience that it is easier to find acceptance of these ideas in the rank and file of the Labour Party than among the Conservatives. Similarly, it is, I think, a mistake to try and see a whole Catholic philosophy in the Liberal co-ownership proposals and recommend it as the only party for Catholics to join on that account, as some people tend to do.

The truth is that all Catholics tend to think, speak and vote on party lines, except when some immediate sectional interest is involved. In Parliament, when a Communist or crypto-Communist speaks his 'faith' pours out of him; I defy any stranger to read or hear speeches by other members in Parliament on any general subject and identify the Catholics. We are indeed creatures of our

¹⁷ Discourse at the Grand Retour, 1946. Quoted by Cardinal Suhard in op. cit. p. 64.

¹⁸ Pius XII. Allocution of February 20th, 1946.

¹⁹ *Blackfriars*, May, 1949, p. 210.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

environment, we remain loyal to the parties we were so to speak born in, we try and see what is good or Christian in those parties and then attempt to fit our Catholicism to their policies; not even conversion as a rule makes us change our party. We identify the common good with a party programme or a party philosophy. This may be seeing things steadily, but it is not seeing them whole.

This is not to say that we should not be members of one party or another. But our prime, our only object within them should be to work for the formation of a common Christian structure of society, within which the parties can continue to work. It is idle to delude ourselves that this or that party is more Christian than another; there are Christians in all parties and good men of natural virtue, but this country was declared in 1917, with the consent of all parties, to be no longer legally Christian²¹. Our task is nothing less than to make it so again. In the natural plane, which we are discussing now, we can only do it by having a common social and economic aim which is both Christian and practical. It is profitless to spend our time defending either Capitalism or Socialism; it is demonstrable that neither system has improved in the things that matter the conditions of life for poor people. The poor did not get richer during the nineteenth century; they got more money but it had less value than the money a peasant got when St Thomas More was a boy. Christopher Hollis has brought this out clearly in his summary of Thorold Rogers's figures²²; the modern poor man, he says, 'possesses, so to speak, more alternatives than his ancestor, but he does not possess more goods'. It is true that the labour movement of the nineteenth century has brought social justice, at least in the improvement of working conditions, welfare, insurance, and so on; but is it any real advance in principle on the statutes of the old craft guilds? Those of mining guilds, for example, 'show . . . a remarkable care for the well-being of the labourer and the protection of his interests. Hygienic conditions in the mines, ventilation of pits, precautions against accident, bathing houses . . . care of sick and disabled . . .' etc. etc.²³ Are these systems any nearer to 'forming the complete man'?

There is a nation-wide *malaise*, a listlessness, which is not due primarily to the war or to physical malnutrition; it is a spiritual starvation, although the sufferers do not realise it, afflicting them

²¹ *Bowman v. Secular Society*, 1917. Appeal Cases, 452, 464. 'My Lords, in all respect for the great names of the lawyers who have used it, the phrase "Christianity is part of the law of England" is really not law: it is rhetoric'. Lord Sumner giving leading judgment for the majority.

²² *The Two Nations*, pp. 42-52.

²³ *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, New York, 1910. 'Guilds'.

because a century and a half of social and economic experiment has made them only half men. They have been deprived of two natural birthrights, the independence and sense of responsibility which come from being the possessor in sufficient measure of the means of production—which is indeed a spiritual effect although from a material cause, and the freedom which comes from the love of God. We come back always to the natural and the supernatural planes of the common good. Catholics know the cure for this *malaise*, indeed we are always recommending it, but only in abstract, theoretical terms which seldom reach the people it must reach, those masses whose loss to the Church is the scandal of our age. The cure has not been more forthrightly declared than by the *Tablet*: 'Widely diffused small ownership is exactly the right policy for Great Britain'²⁴; or more succinctly summarised than by Mr Woodruff in *BLACKFRIARS* in May: 'The Catholic social philosophy . . . of the plural society and subsidiary function, and voluntary associations, of the family unit and of personal responsibility, of diffused ownership'²⁵.

The reply comes back to Mr Woodruff, to me, to all who try and say the same thing, in a furious crescendo: 'You will never get Catholics to agree about that'. To which I would answer: 'Have we ever really tried? Have we ever seriously tried to explain to poor people, to wage slaves, what this doctrine really means in solid concrete terms to Bill Snooks working in a factory and living in a slum?' As Mr Woodruff rightly says, the English are 'practical empiricists', they like to know if an idea will work, and if so, how it will work. It is a major tragedy that for years they have been fobbed off by plans for land settlement, Catholic farming communities, all wrapt in a misty bucolic romanticism which belied the Catholic claim to be able to think, and obscured the fundamental rightness and sanity of the whole Catholic position with regard to land, to agriculture and the soil.

Moreover, it would help if Catholic business and professional men were to show more interest in the idea. It would help greatly if there were Catholic firms being run on sincere and practical co-partnership lines to be given as samples; welfare alone, however generous, does not suffice. Curiously enough working men are not so material as we like to allege; it is not really wages that worry them now but status and dignity. I can claim in a small way to have brought this doctrine of property in the modern sense, co-ownership through the machinery of company law, to a certain number of trade unionist

²⁴ *The Tablet*, November 2nd, 1946. Leading article: 'Diffused Ownership', p. 223.

²⁵ *Blackfriars*, May, 1949, p. 205.

working men, having been able to see examples of it working abroad and to get the ideas of both trade unionists and employers there on the subject. The reaction has always been the same: general acceptance of the principle and keen and intelligent interest in the practical application: far more intelligent and open-minded, I must say, than the reactions of most of their educated union leaders or business bosses. It is worth remembering that the colour of this sociology of property, of ownership by co-operation and co-partnership, runs through the whole history of the Labour and Trade Union Movement, a thread in the weaving often weak and tenuous but persistent, even after the Fabian ideas of Socialism became dominant in the 'nineties. It crops up continually in contemporary documents, and is fairly recorded by the Webbs in their *History of Trade Unionism*.

I do not wish to draw too much from these elementary and limited experiments, nor to idealise working men; but I do suggest that they show how to develop Catholic activity and influence in politics. We have by now, thanks to the work not only of Leo XIII and Pius XI but of the present Pope, whose sociological pronouncements in the last few years have been many and extraordinarily definite and precise, a weighty and comprehensive body of Catholic sociology. We can, if we like, ignore it because it does not suit our prejudices political or social—as indeed happened with *Rerum Novarum*—or we can select from that part of the teaching which suits those prejudices and run it to death—as is almost the usual practice now; but we cannot complain if we continue to have little or no influence on national or local politics as a body, and if we fail to put over the 'positive' answer to everything of which we are always claiming possession.

On the other hand, we can make the effort of looking at that body of teaching comprehensively—seeing it whole—and get rid of our prejudices. Then, instead of fruitlessly arguing about nationalisation or the evils of wealth, or whether Conservatives are Whigs, we may be able to discover that the Catholic sociology is workable, has worked in the past, and can be made to work again; indeed that it must be made to work if we are to fulfil the natural part of our mission. Could not the leaders of Catholic thought of all parties, politicians, trade unionists, writers, lawyers, accountants, bankers, get together—even unofficially—to study at least the evidence that can be laid before them of the methods of restoring ownership in an industrial age: the ideas of the C.F.T.C., of the U.C.E.A.C., and the *Communautés de Travail*, in France; the co-operative achievements of Nova Scotia; the 'Labour Shares' of

Henry Valder in New Zealand; the results of the Lincoln Incentive System and the McCormick Multiple Management in U.S.A.; and similar examples? There is something to be learnt from them surely, not only from their financial but their human results. If they went into the discussion with 'prayer and fasting', with a full consciousness of their supernatural responsibility, perhaps a Catholic view of the common good would evolve, which Catholics could place before their own party candidates and party organisations, and before the public whenever necessary or appropriate, and insist upon its receiving full consideration. *And in such conditions it would get it.*

This has ended in a defence of ownership, where indeed any political discussion must end, for the materials of politics are the social and economic needs and activities of men. So it may be appropriate in conclusion to emphasise the one prime requisite of any Catholic approach to the question of property and its expounding to the world at large—the necessity of poverty. 'The paradox of the Catholic position today', wrote the Editor of *BLACKFRIARS* just a year ago, 'is that while the Church has to defend the natural right to ownership she may not preach property but poverty. . . . The defence of property must be guaranteed by the preaching of poverty.'²⁶ This poverty, this being 'poor in spirit'²⁷ which is detachment from material things, is of universal application to rich and poor alike, and without the conscious practising of it in industrial relations all our efforts and our preaching will be vain.

It is a colossal task, impossible of accomplishment in our own time perhaps, but surely one all the more urgent to be begun. And surely it is a task worthy of Catholics 'to build a new world, to define and prepare the structures which will permit man to be fully man, in a City worthy of him, to transfigure all things in order to make of them a Christian world'²⁸.

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CATHOLIC SOCIOLOGY

CATHOLIC sociology may perhaps best be described as the mind of the Church on social questions. It is the application to social life (man in society) of the universal concepts of the faith. This is the first thing to be grasped about Catholic sociology, that it is essentially an inference from Catholic theology, and such as could be made therefore by anyone having a perfect knowledge of the faith.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, July, 1948, p. 307.

²⁷ *Matthew*, v., 2.

²⁸ Cardinal Suhard, *op. cit.*, p. 83.