

## BLACKFRIARS

### GROUPS

RECENT years have seen the birth and astonishing growth of a movement whose title, marking the place of its first organization, is the somewhat valuable one of the "Oxford Groups." Although the movement has almost ceased to be a factor in undergraduate life, the name remains: an annual meeting at Oxford—a distinction enjoyed by many other bodies—fosters the connection.

Catholics are not likely to be encouraged to take part in a religious movement outside the visible Church, "undenominational," and exhibiting many of the features of revivalism; that much may be said at the start. Often in the past treated by Catholics as a joke, the Groups at least merit attention; moreover, at certain points, they touch upon Catholic life. Part of their main programme of "winning the world for Christ" is, avowedly, the "awakening of the historic churches," with consequent overtures to Catholics: individuals, perhaps unwittingly, have found their way into its ranks. All the more reason then for Catholics to examine the nature of the movement, and form an estimate of its true worth: further, we ought all, priests and laity alike, to be on the look-out for any lesson that may prove of value when translated into Catholic Action.

The movement owes its birth and continued inspiration to an American Lutheran pastor, Frank Buchman.<sup>1</sup> Born at Pennsburg in 1878, he worked for some five years as a minister in Philadelphia. Following a disagreement with some colleagues, he left the United States in 1908, and came to England. While attending a sermon at the Keswick Convention he underwent an experience which changed the course of his whole life; a vision of Christ upon the Cross, he states, brought to him a realization of the infinite abyss which separated him from the Crucified. Deeply moved, he found

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<sup>1</sup> An accurate account of the movement, all the more interesting as coming from a Continental standpoint, by G. Lestang and E. Dupraz, appeared in *La Vie Spirituelle*, Nov. 1936.

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that he had gained fresh interior strength; his will was no longer divided; it seemed that the love of God in Christ had bridged the gulf that lay between them. This was something to be acted upon at once; he would set about repairing the past: he accordingly wrote to his former colleagues, announcing his conversion, accused himself of his own faults, and asked their forgiveness. The peace of soul that he experienced must at all costs be shared with others; if the same experience could be induced in others, the same remarkable change of heart would result. The life of the movement seeks to reproduce in others this triple aspect of the founder's experience, conversion, reparation, witness.

On his return to America, Frank Buchman became a university secretary of the Y.M.C.A., where he gathered together his first disciples. A man of undoubted zeal and energy, with a genius for contact with individuals, he determined on a world-wide campaign, and set off on extensive missionary travels in the East. The first "house party" was held at Kuling in 1918, at the house of a converted Chinese official. He returned to England, where he established himself at Cambridge in 1921, and made some fervent disciples who accompanied him in the course of the summer to Oxford. Here the movement became organized, attracted some attention by its numerous, and sometimes influential conversions, and received its new name; until then it had been known as "Groups of First Century Christian Fellowship." There followed more missionary activity; the United States in 1922; India and Australia the following year; Holland in 1927; South Africa 1928. In 1930 Scotland was visited; in 1932, Switzerland, followed by France and Canada; during the last three years the Scandinavian countries have been evangelized in turn. Large meetings have been held at Geneva during sessions of the League, and at the British Industries Fair at Birmingham.

At first more or less confined to town or university surroundings, the groups felt the need of furthering their activities in country and industrial districts, and of working side by side with Anglican and Nonconformist clergy in their

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parishes. In 1933 such work was carried out in the dioceses of Gloucester and Worcester, and in October of that year in London and the suburbs. It is noteworthy that the London campaign was inaugurated by a solemn function at St. Paul's, attended by the Bishop of London and other dignitaries of the Established Church.

The Anglican Episcopate is divided as to the attitude to be adopted towards the groups; from the Bishop of London, a warm supporter, who attends their meetings, to the Bishop of Durham, who does not disguise his hostility. The greater number of the Bishops, while acknowledging the good spirit that animates the groups, criticizes them on certain deficiencies of principle or danger of method. This year's meeting at Oxford has been attended by one of the Colonial Bishops. The groups throw themselves open to all, and are anxious to avoid identification with any one religious body, or the circumscribed position of a sect. It remains to be seen whether they are able to avoid this.

In its essence the Group Movement is a moral programme; its sphere lies in the practical order. It would have its members consecrate their lives to deeds that bear the stamp of holiness, rather than reflect upon the great mysteries of the Christian Faith; still less would it exact any close conformity in matters of belief. Here we may see something of the reason for the hold it has over so many, hitherto untouched by any form of religion. True, there is a certain minimum of belief, presupposed rather than stressed, and quite loosely held, acceptable to all who would call themselves Christians: the existence of a personal God, revealed in Jesus Christ; one who is all powerful and merciful, who seeks the salvation of sinful man, and who leads him and inspires him by the action of the Holy Spirit towards a holiness which he would be incapable of reaching by his own efforts; hence the universal fellowship in Christ; a certain dim seeking after the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. But the whole stress is on a simple plan of life, the perfection required by the Gospel teaching. The only condition for reaching this is a complete abandonment to the Divine Will: the only obstacle, sin: the only guide the Holy

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Spirit. Hence the frequent talk of "surrender"—to the Divine Will; of "sharing," or treating of one's state of soul with others; of "guidance," the inspirations from above that direct the least detail of one's daily life. To crystallize the rule of conduct, four practical points are put forward, the "criteria of Jesus Christ":

1. Absolute honesty and sincerity towards God, ourselves and others.
2. Absolute purity in thought and deed.
3. Absolute disinterestedness in all circumstances.
4. Wholehearted love.

This programme cannot be said to be lacking in generosity, and whatever failures there may be in method, or in the conduct of individuals, it is not the fault of these principles.

What has to be examined is the possibility of a moral programme that is so unanchored to any dogmatic teaching of the Christian Faith. Before we can *live* the supernatural life, we have first of all to *be* in the supernatural life; as soon as we are old enough, we need to know the supernatural end of our existence. If we pay no attention to revealed mysteries such as the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, the Holy Eucharist, the other Sacraments, the future life, our outlook will inevitably tend to become purely natural. Keep the Divinity of Christ in the background, and He becomes merely the eminent moral teacher, not a Person, legitimately adored. This is just the gap you would expect to find in the Group movement, with its neglect of the notion of worship, of the honour due to God alone. Sacred science is one, like the God from whom it is derived; it is both speculative and practical—indeed eminently practical—just as God both contemplates Himself and the things he has made; but its first concern should be with divine things rather than with human actions: moral doctrine alone is but a superficial thing; it needs foundation. It has ever been the work of sects to narrow the Christian field.

A great deal is made to depend on the setting of the meetings: one is tempted to say that the groups are fortun-

ate in being able to create an atmosphere where the seemingly irreligious will come to listen, and discuss their difficulties quite freely; but the comparative failure suffered by the groups in their efforts to evangelize the poorer working classes, suggests that the "Drawing Room," or "Common Room" atmosphere is a kind of religious anaesthetic, not taken by all.

Perhaps the greatest criticism has been levelled at the "sharing" and "guidance" of the groups. The "sharing" is of two kinds: "deep sharing," a form of intimate mutual confidence practised apart from the meetings: "sharing," or public confession and witness at the meetings themselves. It is hardly necessary to point out the dangers of this system; its aspect of "moral nudism" was strongly criticized quite recently by a well-known Shakespearean actress. As to the liberation, the peace and joy experienced by the soul after such manifestations, it is possible to see in this a purely natural, psychological release, following upon long-standing repressions. There may, too, be the element of moral support in finding that some other person, outwardly such a pleasing member of society, has been guilty of the same failings: added to this it may provide many, for the first time of their lives, with an intimate friendship. All this may be a process quite devoid of Grace.

It has so often been the hall-mark of a sect to isolate and over-emphasize a truth. The instinct and movement of the Holy Ghost, together with the Gifts, those permanent dispositions which make us readily responsive to His inspirations, are cardinal points of Catholic ascetical and mystical teaching; but the somewhat mechanical notion, prevalent in the groups, goes far beyond this. The "Quiet Time" in the morning is excellent; it finds place in the legislation of every religious Order, though it is not used in quite the same way as the following:

"I had started the habit of trying to find out God's plan by spending time with this purpose every morning before breakfast. That morning I had woken early, and asked for direction as to what plans I should make for the Easter holidays. Almost at once a thought came into my mind and I wrote it down. 'Take a party of schoolmasters to Canada.'"<sup>2</sup>

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Not unnaturally, it has long been a question in the groups as to how this guidance is to be checked; a question that in the last resort, in important matters, is referred to the central group and its leader. In this we may see a hierarchic tendency.

Among the possible lessons for Catholic Activity, we may single out first and foremost, the importance of giving people something to *do*. Catholics should here be at an advantage, for they are at one in their beliefs about Him who "began to do and to teach"; their moral programme already has sure foundation. Then, too, there is the importance of giving a man something to do in his own particular "milieu," whether it be university or workshop; wherever, in fact, he already has his friends. Coupled with this is the necessity of giving up something; the *doing without* in order that we may do. Perhaps the first thing of which we have to be despoiled is human respect: the Oxford Groups provide us with examples—almost of heroism, in this matter.

Again, if a movement is to take deep root, it must have its national adaptations; in substance the same, it should differ in the manner of its presentation. The success of the Oxford Groups might have been even more striking if their manifestations had been less American, more suited to the English character. As instances of promising forms of Catholic activity, where this adaptation to national conditions will have to be borne in mind, there is the Jocist movement, or Young Christian Workers, with its continental origin and its hopeful beginnings in this country; and another, more recent movement, among student and professional classes, English in origin, which is still feeling its way.

There is evidence that the Oxford Groups are changing their tactics; less use of the "house party"; more concentration on the training of leaders. It may well be that the time for a Catholic counterpart of the "house party" system is over, and that it is rather by the training and formation of "cells" that we shall achieve an effective technique of Christian revolution.

PETER WHITSTONE, O.P.

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<sup>2</sup> *Three lives—and now*, by Stephen Foot, p. 288.