

LAY THOUGHT ON AMERICAN CATHOLIC ACTION

AMERICANS, as a result of regional divergencies, are often more remote in culture from each other than from England or even from the Continent. But the roots of our culture are Protestant and English and there is, moreover, a similarity of spiritual background and problem which unites American and English Catholics. We are confronted by the same religious apathy within the fold; we must combat the same ignorance from without. Americans are beginning to realize how different would have been the background and the atmosphere of our country had the French and Spanish continued to settle North America; not because these settlers were Latins, but because they were steeped in a culture engendered by the living tradition of the Latin Church. The friars in California, the French in the south and in Canada might have *moulded a people to beauty*, as M. Maritain says,¹ and we would not be in our present dire need of traditional influences and customs which must become aged in wood or stone or generation. Ere they were forged, our links with a Catholic past were broken by the Yankee ascendancy. In England the surviving faithful few held the broken ends together. So it follows that the culture of the American is more bankrupt than the culture of the average Englishman. But we may take heart, for as Mgr. William J. Kerby told the students of the National Catholic School of Social Service: "Our Catholic vision of life is wide and our country's need of that vision is profound. We bring the best in motive."²

As the work of the lay apostolate swings into the mental orbit of the earnest American Catholic, there are certain high lights which illumine his vision, certain dim torches which would burn bravely if given the impetus.

American Catholic youth appears to be avoiding even a brief dalliance with communism, if we may judge from the

¹ *Philosophy of Art*, Ditchling edition, p. 31.

² *Catholic Action*, official organ of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, October, 1934, p. 17.

BLACKFRIARS

considerable incentive given to the Catholic Youth movement in 1934. President George Herman Derry of Marygrove College challenged a sodality May Day demonstration in these stirring words: "And these tens of thousands of the college and university youth of Detroit, where do they stand? With Russia and the warfare against God? Or with Rome and the Prince of Peace? They stand where Pius XI stands; they stand where Washington stands. That is why they choose to-day, not red Russia, but rather eternal Rome." And in a large diocese of the middle west, seventy thousand youths marched in a parade to advertise the slogans of the Legion of Decency.

The militantly Catholic graduate of a Catholic college or university is apt to be a suspicious individual; he has a tendency to feel that there is a unanimous and deliberate prejudice against his faith and against him. Therefore he turns a prickly soul to the view of his non-Catholic associates. He is sometimes surprised to discover that the latter have not only a friendly attitude towards the Church but in some cases a genuine regard for her. The average American Protestant who has had some education is more ignorant than bigoted. If he has been to Europe, he has a tolerant artistic interest in the Church. Very often, unfortunately, a dawning respect will be shattered by the acid comments of Catholic *non-pratiquants*. Here among educated Protestants are harvest fields where the labourers are, alas, too few.

A few years ago, Miles Connolly, former editor of *Columbia*, the Knights of Columbus magazine, wrote a charming book—a novel of the soul—called *Mr. Blue*. The hero was a sort of Benedict Joseph Labre who threw away a million dollars and went to live among the outcast, the men who tramp the roads in summer and drift back to town in the fall. Mr. Blue, a contemplative at heart, planned to form a secular brotherhood who would live as themselves among pariahs,

talk with them too,
Who loses, and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And talk upon the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies.

LAY THOUGHT ON AMERICAN CATHOLIC ACTION

Is there not a kind of Catholic Action which is a secret service for Christ? A delicate diplomacy must have adorned the conversation of that group of Catholic women in a southern diocese who, by personal interviews during the past year, induced nearly two thousand to return to the exercises of their religion. In the chancery office of a middle western cathedral city there is, practically speaking, a bureau of skilful and highly organized Catholic Action, conducted almost singlehanded by a secular sister of the Third Order of St. Dominic. A Catholic of that city writes: "She averages about seventy converts a year, but these figures would not impress a British world where, I fancy, people enter the Church at the rate of two thousand a year."

Among the well-known convert organizations is St. Paul's Guild of New York, until lately The Converts League, at whose meetings in the past many distinguished English converts have spoken. The Guild carries on "that most exquisite charity" of helping materially any former Protestant clergymen and their families who may be in need. Throughout the land, here and there, are groups and societies which function either quietly within their own communities or, by reason of greater publicity, serve the entire country—thus gradually piercing through ignorance and breaking down intolerance. For example, the press committee of the Georgia Laymen's League never misses a newspaper slip on matters of Catholic polity or doctrine. The Catholic Information Society of Narbeth, Pennsylvania, also a lay organization, answers any questions pertaining to Catholicism and mails doctrinal pamphlets to all non-Catholics whose names are suggested. Although a writer to *The Commonwealth*³ declares that Catholics do not read, the Catholic Literary Guild of Parkersburg, West Virginia, endeavours to place Catholic books in the public libraries of the vicinity.

The name of the American Catholic Truth Guild was recently changed to *Catholic Campaigners for Christ*, a title thought to be more in keeping with the American idiom. One

³ January 18, 1935, p. 347.

BLACKFRIARS

of the most active campaigners is David Goldstein, the noted Jewish convert, who, in a series of outdoor lay missions in several states, and particularly in Texas, has preached to thousands. These thousands were interested, were avid, if we may judge even from the literary reflections of our separated brethren who no longer call themselves Protestant. The majority of our fellow Americans are hungering for something they can call the Bread of Life. This almost unconscious yearning has been crystallized in Thornton Wilder's latest book, *Heaven's My Destination*, a novel more graciously received in England than in the United States. A powerful satire on our spiritual sterility, it has proved its thesis *a posteriori* by becoming a best seller in spite of the cool comments of leading critics. Heaven may be indeed the "great American" destination when the Rural Life Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference has erected crosses of Catholic social service on the high-roads of the land.

The superb work of the Catholic social worker during the last decade cannot be sufficiently lauded and the reports of the Catholic Charities Conventions bear witness to the workers' unflagging zeal and great achievement. During 1934, the hierarchy as well as the laity were engaged in national problems of the highest importance. Bishops and priests were selected arbiters of strikes, an illustration of the trust which the public places in Catholic ideals of social justice. At the Episcopal meeting of last November at the Catholic University, the Bishops declared the inherent right of labour to organize. Monsignor John A. Ryan, although favouring the N.R.A., points out the fact that labour participation therein has been lacking. He finds a strong resemblance between the occupational group system of Pius XI and the N.R.A. trade associations. "But the Pope," says Monsignor Ryan, "is more radical than the President."

Nowhere has the influence of an individual Catholic upon the American mind been more strikingly manifest than at the Shrine of the Little Flower at Royal Oak, Michigan, where the radio addresses of the Rev. Charles E. Coughlin win perhaps more non-Catholic than Catholic supporters.

LAY THOUGHT ON AMERICAN CATHOLIC ACTION

Fr. Coughlin's aim is to bring five million persons into the membership of his National Union for Social Justice. The potency of his influence may be realized from the Senate's report of the tens of thousands of telegrams that were sent to that body in protest on the day following Fr. Coughlin's speech against the World Court. It should be noted that among the partisans of the World Court was the Catholic Association for International Peace, a group which has helped to organize more than fifty international relations clubs in Catholic colleges: Such have their place beside the units of cadets who follow courses in military training in preparation for commissions in the Reserve.

Since the war Catholic education in the United States is enjoying a second spring. The parochial schools are in a flourishing condition; their students frequently win first places in competition for national awards. Despite the decreasing enrolment in both parochial and public schools, due to lack of immigration and to social and moral causes, three dioceses have opened summer schools for the training of teachers. This is remarkable when we consider the fact that some cities have found it expedient, because of the large number of unemployed teachers, to close training colleges. The small chance of finding a job after graduation from grammar school has increased the Catholic secondary enrolment and has encouraged improvement of Catholic high school facilities. These advances may be the ground on which the Rev. Philip H. Burkett, S. J.,⁴ builds his hope that "under the aegis of Catholic teaching, which is receiving a more willing ear among high and low, we are confident of emerging in the near future from the impending disaster."

We need, however, a more alert Catholic youth in the schools and colleges, a youth that has been aroused to fighting pitch. As Owen P. Mackey writes in *America*,⁵ while communist columns in the state colleges have an attitude of bitter seriousness, our Catholic school press could be more militant and more in earnest about the big issues.

⁴ *America*, January 5, 1935, p. 301: *Whither Society?*

⁵ December 8, 1934, p. 200: *Can Catholic Youth Help Mexico?*

BLACKFRIARS

And here is a sad reflection on the intellectual interest of young Catholics in world affairs: "There is an absence in these journals of editorial comment and news reports on the Mexican situation."

Two grave problems cry for attention, not to speak of solution, in the world of Catholic education in America: the effect of the educated Jew upon the community, and the higher education of the negro. The faculties and graduate bodies of Catholic universities have apparently not considered these difficulties with the interest which their gravity demands. When one ponders upon the racial and religious cultures that are struggling to the foreground in the American scene, one must agree with T. S. Eliot that "the population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely to be either fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is the unity of religious background; and the reasons of race and religion combine to make any number of free thinking Jews undesirable."⁶ In the public colleges and universities of our larger cities, especially in the east, the Jewish students, who often form four-fifths of the student body, are swinging from orthodoxy to communism. The Catholic student who cannot afford to pay for his education rarely takes advantage of the public institution. There are Newman Clubs in the great universities, but their numbers are comparatively few. If young Catholics of slender means are not encouraged to reach out for higher education, the intellectual situation of the next generation will be perilous.

Last fall a negro was not permitted to enter an important Catholic university in the north-east. In the south, this action would cause no surprise. Yet it might be mentioned here that in the old Catholic city of New Orleans, Catholic negro students are independent, as the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament conduct Xavier University exclusively for young negro men and women. But such an instance as the foregoing demands that Catholic educators consider the ageless

⁶ *After Strange Gods*, Harcourt Brace, p. 20.

principles which transcend race and region. The problem is difficult; it cannot be, it must not be insoluble. Some bishops have imposed a conscientious responsibility upon parents to keep their children from non-sectarian colleges. What must be the reaction of the Catholic parent of negro blood, if his child is kept like a leper at the gate? Non-sectarian colleges and universities, the Protestant and Jewish intelligentsia take an interest in the intellectual negro that puts us—as Catholics—to shame. There is each year a more noticeable trend of negro conversion to Catholicism. But will the educated negro have the door slammed in his face? All grace and blessing to the African missions, yet we ought not to forget that *the desert is not remote in southern tropics but in the tube train next to us.*⁷

Catholic graduate study and superior enterprise have assumed tremendous importance in this country during the last ten years. There is an attempt to answer Archbishop Spaulding's demand of fifty years ago for "scholars who are saints and saints who are scholars." Scholars of international repute have become converts; their names are found on university staff and in leading review. A notable contribution to graduate study is the patristic series of the Catholic University. The recently completed translation of the letters of St. Basil the Great by Dr. Roy Deferrari, graduate dean of Arts and Sciences at the same university, deserves more than casual notice. In 1934, Fr. Julius A. Niewland, C.S.C., of Notre Dame University, was proclaimed one of the country's leading scientists. Doctor Hugh Taylor, professor of chemistry at Princeton, is second to none in his field, and his name may be a retort to the trite objection of the intransigence of the Church in physical science. The attention of philosophers of law has been attracted to the legal seminars now conducted at the Catholic University. The better informed Catholic lawyers and professors of law are beginning to realize that there is legal wisdom in the *Prima Secundae* that the heedless world has not dreamed of, and more than one attorney is bending

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Rock*, Harcourt Brace, p. 9.

BLACKFRIARS

over the unfamiliar pages of the *Summa*.

In history and philosophy the Church has not been marking time in America. The Catholic Philosophical Association and the Catholic Historical Society have made great forward strides, and there is a marked growth of friendship between these bodies and their counterparts in the non-sectarian world. The Protestant historical tradition is gradually becoming discredited and the *philosophia perennis* is winning the respect of the heterogeneous multitude of American teachers who have hitherto seen little wisdom in those nineteen centuries separating Plato from René Descartes.

As yet, American Catholic literary societies have not reached an intellectual peak, for there is an unfortunate tendency to give unqualified praise to the mediocre novelist, to the very minor poet. We ought to admit that Catholic literature in the United States is inferior to that of England. Perhaps we have not tried to learn at the feet of the so-called mother country. Until recently schools have neglected to cultivate an appreciation for art, literature and music. The average English Catholic has a keener aesthetic sense than his American contemporary. But those among us who deplore our artistic puerility are apt to forget that it took more than a century and a half to produce a Francis Thompson or a Gerard Manley Hopkins.

While there are some excellent American Catholic periodicals, too often our magazines are prone to the commonplace or are learned to the point of pedantry. There is also a definite interlocking of activity which is so disastrous to new ideas. The press bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, while carrying on a thoroughly fine work, has, unfortunately, encouraged syndicalism in the Catholic press. Because of the limited market, the young Catholic writer finds the first steps along his chosen path even more slippery than does his non-Catholic fellow journalist.

There are a few periodicals which, still largely unknown overseas, are earning their niches here. *Light*, the excellent organ of the International Catholic Truth Society, exercises a fine discrimination in selection of literary and historical material for the "man in the street." Pioneering for Catholic

art, its pages show original woodcuts and sketches rather than the eternal reproductions of Rubens and del Sarto, or worse, the pious sentimentalities that drop from contemporary brushes. *The Tablet*, of the diocese of Brooklyn, one of the finest weeklies in the country, will soon, it is to be hoped, expand into a daily newspaper. It has been unflinching in its prosecution of the two leading "religion" news items: the Mexican situation and the Legion of Decency. *The Catholic Worker*, however, is the most astounding Catholic newspaper that has yet appeared on our continent. Its editorials are often scholarly, sometimes translations from M. Maritain; its news reports, its illustrations are all daringly, unflinchingly Catholic. An increase in circulation parallel to its remarkable growth within a short life of two years will make *The Catholic Worker* a successful rival of the infamous communistic rag, *The Daily Worker*. (It may be noted here that "socialism" is a more dangerous breed in America than in Europe.) The editors of *The Catholic Worker* are two women, one an ex-socialist, who live at the offices of the paper, accept no salaries and subsist on voluntary contributions for themselves and their work—perhaps a quixotic but undoubtedly an evangelical poverty.

The campaign against the Mexican persecution has taken on new vigour since the annual meeting of the hierarchy in November, 1934. Catholic editors have written to the large dailies protesting against partisan editorials favouring the anti-God clique in Mexico City. Priests and laymen have been vociferous in calling upon Catholics to denounce the selection of Mexico City for the annual Rotary convention in June, with the result that many have severed their connections with the organization. Rallies and mass meetings have been held throughout the country with great popular success. *The Baltimore Catholic Review*, nearest to Washington in point of miles, has flung the question on the threshold of the White House. But on the whole the drive and urge to action have been feeble compared to the nationwide protest against the alleged Nazi persecution of the Jews.

BLACKFRIARS

The Legion of Decency, thanks to the great labours of bishops, priests, laity and the press, has really become that "noble crusade" which the Holy Father has graciously called it. Within a few months after its inception, the producers began to co-operate and the battle is practically over. Its opponents have been compelled to admit that the Legion has brought about the elevation of the dramatic calibre of the cinema. Yet there is a fear that the Legion is a prelude to a wave of puritanism which will sweep American art. Eugene O'Neill's *Days Without End* may have been more than a straw in the wind and now is the time, as never before, for a Catholic activity of the stage. Something has already been done. Despite grudging newspaper comment, Emmet Lavery's drama of Jesuit life, *The First Legion*, ran on Broadway for months and toured the larger eastern cities with remarkable success. In this we may descry an indication that the public will accept Catholic drama. Our Catholic criticism of the stage has not been constructive and the birth of our drama has not been hastened thereby. To counteract this passive resistance, the Blackfriars' Guild, a non-professional group, was founded three years ago in Washington by Fr. Urban Nagle, O.P., a playwright of whom much may be expected in the future. The Blackfriars believe that their group is the germ of a national movement for the expression of sound philosophy and ideology in contemporary drama. Mr. Shaw's testament of thirty years ago might be emblazoned before the eyes of drama-loving Catholics: "Fine art is the subtlest, the most seductive, the most effective means of propaganda in the world, excepting the example of personal conduct."⁸

Catholic Action in the United States is a mighty weapon of the Church. Some organizations count members in millions. Given deeper root in the Mystical Body, it will become mightier beyond calculation. Yet there is much to be done, for as a religious group we are amazingly apathetic. *The Economics of Sanctity* in the December BLACKFRIARS

⁸ The Author's Apology from *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, New York, 1905.

might very well be applied to us. We also are beguiled by numbers; we too "assess the spiritual in terms of the material." This is nowhere more apparent than in the general indifference to the liturgical movement. Leaflet missals have been placed in parish book-racks; periodicals, lecture courses and classes have been started in an effort to bring about a better understanding of the Act that is the Mass, of the appurtenances of the sanctuary and the language of the altar. But the most sanguine observer at a Sunday Mass is driven to despair by the absence of Missals. Perhaps one out of every hundred uses some sort of prayer book. Even the jangle of the Rosary seems to be a pre-war memory. The crowds at the noon Masses on Sundays are the most disinterested: bored, well-dressed "faithful" kneel, stand, and more often sit, like robots. They attend Mass, as one pastor remarked, "through superstition, or they are not at all sure why they do come." The opportunity to attend the very late Sunday Mass may be the cause of this demoralization. At any rate, one eastern Bishop has forbidden the practice throughout his diocese.

This indictment cannot be made without mention of the fact that there are many of our well-educated Catholics who do appreciate and who do practise the liturgy in an intelligent manner. And others with less of education than of excellent taste have studied the Missal and have found that it does not demand a superior mental equipment to be followed with profit. But the majority are marvellously indifferent to its treasures. The causes of the indifference are not hard to find. The liturgy is the residue of Christian centuries, while we are an infant nation. Our surroundings in the frail days of colonization had not even the liturgical smack of Anglicanism but savoured of the lower sects of which Calvin is still the dark angel. The disheartening refusal—during the past winter—of a Catholic alumnae association to inaugurate a course of liturgical lectures may be forgiven in the remembrance that the liturgy is a culture in itself. It must grow; it cannot be grafted.

The hope of the liturgical movement is in the coming generation, in which, as a consequence, springs the hope of

BLACKFRIARS

Catholic Action. Catholic Action must begin where the Catholic Church begins, that is, at the altar. This supreme fact was evidenced by the enthusiastic success of the Catholic Action Summer School conducted in New York last summer. Clergy, religious and laity combined, under the auspices of the Catholic Youth movement, to teach and to learn more about supernatural and natural things: grace, supernatural life and the liturgy, social justice and politics. In the cryptic words of Alfred E. Smith, "You can't legislate charity and social justice into men's hearts; you have to educate it into them."

One of our French critics has accused us, as a people, of falling from a state of primitive culture into one of degeneracy. Yet if credulousness be a characteristic of childhood, our very gullibility disproves this thrust. We turn with youthful fever to political scandal, to news thunder; guilelessly we swallow the advertisement of cinema and radio. The stupendous influence of Fr. Coughlin alone should demonstrate that Americans are groping for something beyond the wildest imaginings of the majority. *Lift up thy head and hark what sounds are in the dark!* Should we not be the first to lay the foundations of social justice in the new state—we who have the strength of the Church behind us, we who see with the clear eyes of Faith? In the shifting sands of American history, they have appeared in brief moments of time—these outlines of the ideal state—in the mission villages of Fra Junipero Serra, in Paraguay of the Jesuits, yes, even in the broken dream of Bronson Alcott at Fruitlands. Yet who but a Catholic can envision "a state which has arisen from the fusion of races, of conqueror and conquered, a state which has religion for its foundation, work restored to honour for its support and a new intellectual and artistic culture for its crown?"⁹

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⁹ Dom Ursmer Berlière, O.S.B., *L'Ordre Monastique*, Desclée De Brouwer et Cie., p. 41.