

## AN EAGLE WHITER THAN A DOVE

DURING four generations Poland has been specially dear to the hearts of English Catholics. One reason assuredly for this attachment arises from the strong Irish element in our make up, with its memory of suppression of the faith and violent persecution. Yet the native Catholics too share an affinity with the Polish people that is strong and peculiarly English. The English have always shown a keen sense of injustice. The enemies of our race would say it was a sense only outraged by injustice of a continental brand. It is, however, a commonplace that England has afforded an exile's home for every kind of Ishmael: The Seers of the Enlightenment followed by Bourbons and Eugénie: Dom Manoel and Don Sturzo; Garibaldi and the French émigré clergy, whose names are honoured in the history of many London parishes; Marx and Chateaubriand; Einstein and Chopin. But more than this, for English Catholics Poland typifies splendidly the spirit of resurgent Catholicism. The English remnant can take heart from the example of Poland.

The first lesson I ever learned in the study of the European scene was that there were two bastions in Europe, Ireland and Poland; both were rooted in tradition, both were vital in a dying world, because established on the four-square gospel of a sane social creed: a Faith, the land, family and patriotism—i.e. the love of the hearth. I was taught later in the insularity of English University life with its fear of metaphysics and again in the cosmopolitan fever of the Sorbonne that Poland and Ireland were despicable blockhouses of superstition and reaction. It was taken for granted that Weygand had saved Warsaw: so miraculous in achievement was that strategy that it seemed incredible otherwise. Weygand denied his responsibility. It belonged to Pilsudski's second in command. Nevertheless, in the thunderous days of June, 1940, when men's eyes were once more on Weygand in Syria, the story of his victory by the Vistula was retold, as deathless as the magic of Pope Joan.

The defeat of Poland saw the most remarkable trek of modern days—the youth of Poland filled the roads and villages of Hungary, Rumania and Jugoslavia, making for Athens, where the British helped them on their way to France or Syria; or the lads walked along the high mountain paths of the Despoto Dagh and so on to Istanbul, where again they were welcomed and shipped to Africa and Marseilles. These Polish refugees, not in hundreds but in tens

of thousands, were tended kindly on their way by the Hungarian peasantry so soon to be press-ganged into the German alliance and decimated on the endless Moscow road. On the Fall of France many of these Poles reached England. The English Catholics had watched this epic Odyssey. Their arrival in England, for them, was a moment of history. It was a moment that was lost.

This paper is not a mere eulogy of Catholic Poland. To no man (or people) can uncritical praise be welcome—if praise in any measure be due. Whatever weakness may be detected in the White Eagle in England, it is weakness far outshone by the glory that is Poland. But there is a weakness of which English Catholics are especially free. It is unusual for praise of England or the English to be sounded in these days—even to claim so negative a trait as the lack of a certain fault. Let me add that the weakness of Catholic Poland and the strength of Catholic England in this particular regard is solely due to the vicissitudes of the history of the past four hundred years and not to any meritorious achievement whatsoever of the genus of English Catholic.

The Polish plains are vast well-populated regions to the East of Central Europe. It is historically true that the people of those plains have frequently been the victims of invading hosts. It is also true that the peoples of plains are often tenacious, patient and recuperative in ways that surprise the hill-dweller, so often contemptuous of his neighbour in the river meadows. The Lombards and the Venetians, Magyars and the East Anglians, are of this character. The Polish folk, in spite of much foolish sifting in the dark alleyways of minorities, is a closely knit group of people with a common language and a common faith, difficult to assimilate into neighbouring races. Here we see a large body of people under three foreign dominations and yet remaining a unity, conscious of its own entity and gazing with hope on the star of its new Birth. Academically men spoke of a Polish restoration. The Tsarist and Central European politicians were not interested in the question save as a bribe in their play one against another. In the twenty years of freedom the future was never cloudless; security was ever elusive. To the East, in Tsarist days, there had stood an Asio-European power, despotic, schismatic and alien. Later in its Marxist garb it became even more alien to its Polish neighbours—a neighbour that claimed to be a republic but had class distinctions as definite as any pilloried by the Soviet. In the West, Poland was faced with the very core of that Prussian thing that has been the curse of modern European life. There was a gulf between Warsaw and Berlin, between Poznan and Frankfurt. The Prussian is materialist, the Pole romantic. The

Prussian is a sceptic or Lutheran, the Pole Catholic and, of all the faithful, the most childlike—*nisi sicut parvuli non intrabit in regnum caelorum*.

'Fools have their second childhood but the great  
Still keep their first and have no second state.'

The result of this political and geographical position of Poland has been an intensification of nationalist feeling and a consciousness of isolation. This introspective character of the Poles can be seen in a dozen ways—all small, insignificant in themselves, but taken in bulk they become a mighty stream of witness. I have just spent a day or two at a Polish bomber station. Many of the airmen had been in England two years, most of them over a year, yet few spoke English well, few even bothered to learn English. They were in England to fight the aggressor. If they were spared, they would, God willing, return to Poland and build up once more the heroic house, where 'God made anger glorious.' That vision, that challenge, that 'budding morrow in midnight,' was the frontier of their endurance, the limit of their interest.

In Poland the *fiat* of Rome is a more distant thing than elsewhere in the world. I am not speaking of heterodoxy but of custom. In Lisbon and Bombay, in San Francisco and Sydney, one senses a renewal of interest in the liturgy. The school children are learning more of the co-victimship of Christ and his Christian. In France, Germany and Anglo-Saxon countries, books on the Mass, on the sacraments and on the Mystical Body sold well before the war. To mention only the popular authors would take too long: Anger, Adam, Vonier, Fulton Sheen, Kearney, Les Editions du Cerf, Guardini, Martindale, and the American Benedictine Crusade in popular literature—these are but a very few, chosen haphazardly. In Poland the movement is still-born.

The reign of Pius XI was the reign of Catholic Action. From Pius XI to the Jocistes, from Rome to the A.C.J.B. of Louvain, the invitation had gone out to the laity, 'the children of the miracle,' the 'Revolutionaries of Christ.' In Spain and Spanish America men had heard the echo of *Quadragesimo Anno*—in Spain too late. Over the Catholic world generally blew a freshening wind. But in Poland the suspicion of a long oppressed people withstood the invitation. The Russian experiment tended to stiffen a native Conservatism.

With the war a new element had arisen. In the iron domination of Central Europe by the Nazis, Poland is still further divided from the Holy See. In the stress of a savage war of self-preservation it is difficult to keep a sense of proportion. It is easy to attack the

Holy See for favouring the paganism of the crooked cross. It is easy to misinterpret diplomacy for lying and weakness. It is easy, if one is looking for an out-and-out condemnation of one's enemy, to pass over the quite stern rebukes meted out from time to time by the Vatican Radio and the *Osservatore Romano*. For Englishmen the remembrance of the obloquy which shrouded the name of Benedict XV in 1917 (cf. *The Times*, August 15th, 23rd, 1917) is a steadying influence against superficial and partisan judgments. Yet even in England it has been deemed necessary to print and distribute leaflets: 'The Pope and the War'; a pregnant indication of an impatient spirit. If one senses a critical attitude in English Catholics it is to be expected that an attitude more critical and impatient of Roman diplomacy should be found in the centres of Polish resistance.

Lastly, and most fearful in its potentialities, there is the reaction of the exiled Polish communities to the Church of England itself. The Malines Conferences proved that the *genre* of Anglicanism is too subtle even for the Western European mind. To the Pole, on the other hand, the courtesy, tradition, and glorious inheritance of fine choral worship and congregational singing to be found so frequently in the English Church strike a note at once sympathetic and attractive.

One day, in conversation with an Anglican Canon—a fine Patristic scholar and Dean of a famous Oxford College—and an Anglican clergyman of strong Scots ancestry and Anglo-Catholic leanings, I found that both these men showed a yearning towards, and groping for, a security based on authority, that are not, I think, unusual. Next day to my amazement I saw an editorial in the most widely read of the Polish weekly publications, unblushingly praising the very traits in the character of the Anglican communion that my companions of the previous day had confessed to be hurdles in the avenue towards a united Christendom—an independence that spells isolation; a nationalism that short-circuits the mark of catholicity; a social consciousness that has lost the common man; a security that is not far distant from stagnation.

There is a house on the Lytham Road on the outskirts of Blackpool. In it lives a non-Catholic family; a family with Catholic connections; a family in which the relics of Christian virtues, the hedgerow flowers of mediaeval England that escaped the trampling of Reformers, are honoured; a family whose hearth is a home but whose door is no drawbridge. This home has become an *Ognisko Polskie*—a Polish hearth. To it come Poles on their leave from the Army or Operational Stations of the R.A.F. Back from the hazards of a

raid on Germany, I have seen young Polish pilots, hardly out of their 'teens, relax and come back to the simple, homely pleasures of a family, hard-working, generous, kindly and unaffected. Over the fireplace hangs the Eagle of Poland, gilded and proud. Around the walls are photographs of Tadek and Bolek, of Marian and Czeslaw, and many others—the living and the dead. When I think of that home I am sad because it is the symbol of what might have been—perhaps I may dare to hope, a dawn star of what might yet be.

The Polish communities in our midst are in danger. They are in moral danger, shared alike by them as by our own youth, uprooted from home and living the coarsened life of barrack and guard-room. But they are in danger too of taking on the colour of a community whose whole religious temper is guided by enterprise, efficiency and prudence. They came, these Polish soldiers and airmen, to our shores, and passed the shuttered windows and barred doors of our Catholic homes. We may have stronger ties with Rome: our priesthood was nursed for generations in seminaries abroad. It was with the blessing of Popes that tiny bands of fearless Campions and Bryants, Walpoles and Sherwins entered England with undaunted hope. But the unbroken lineage of Catholic Poland, the devotion of its sons and its love of Mary tempering brutality into strength—these are vital springs of Catholic life which we need, we English, who dwell in the bankruptcy of a usurous age.

Persecution shut Poland in and intensified its isolation. Persecution opened England to the multi-coloured facets of the Bride of Christ. What Poland has, we lack. Enter a Church in Poland and a statue or shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes will appear incongruous in the company of the sad-eyed, crowned Virgin of Vilna. On the other hand, when we enter a Catholic Church in England we are never surprised at anything we find within! French, Irish, Italian, Spanish, German influences are evident everywhere. Douai, Valladolid, Louvain may be English towns. Convents with mother houses in Belgium and Munich teach our children. There is a native character in our English Catholicism. None can deny it. The easy relationship between priest and people is unparalleled elsewhere in Europe. The fact remains that the Church in this country is open to influences, is malleable and unmoated. No two communities can be of so much mutual advantage as this strong English Catholic minority and the very large body of Polish exiles.

It would be unjust and ungenerous to imagine that Polish priests in this country are unaware of the corroding influence of Erastianism and Protestant humanism—if we can speak of such a hybrid. It would be impossible to write of Poland in England without men-

tioning the excellent weekly, *W Imie Boze*, 'In the Name of God,' published for the troops in this country. More remarkable yet is the collection of little booklets edited by the senior chaplain to the Polish Forces in Scotland under the general title of *Nauka Chrystusowa*, and obtainable from the Allen Litho Co., Ltd., Kircaldy. In this series there are clear expositions of Anglicanism and the Episcopal and Presbyterian creeds in Scotland—chiefly from an historical point of view. There are pamphlets on Spiritism, Cardinal Newman, the 123rd Question of the *Secunda Secundae* 'On fortitude,' and one on the need of the Papacy. But I am sure these booklets, excellent as they are, touch but the fringe of the problem. There is a weapon much neglected in these times lying rusting in the armoury of the Church. The corporal works of mercy require thought, tact and perseverance. A bank note is so much less trouble. We need to dig back to the roots of the Sermon on the Mount and discover that largesse becomes duty, and charity justice. A brother has a right inalienable by blood. How much more inalienable are the rights of a brother by the Precious Blood? No lesson is of more importance to learn than the lesson of the vine that is the Church—Christ and his Christian—and it is a lesson that cannot be learnt in books but only in life and in the social contacts of the faithful. 'If you do this to the least of my little ones you do it to Me,' is echoed in the Epistle, 'Whilst we have time, let us work good to all men, but especially to those who are of the household of the Faith.'

We teach as a corner stone of our Faith that suffering is no sterile thing, rather the anvil on which is struck out the pattern of the *alter Christus*. Out of war the possibilities of enrichment are legion. Not least among these possibilities is the mutual gain that must accrue from the fellowship of English and Polish Catholics. How better 'Redeem the time, because the days are evil'? Over two years of warfare, with Poland in our midst, have passed. Time slips by and, with time, the opportunities. Many whose place by right is by our hearth and table have found hospitality elsewhere—others have been driven, as our own youth is driven, by the padlocks on our doors, to play 'at half a love with half a lover.'

In spite of our neglect much might yet be mended. I know even now a certain station where in the roughly furnished Sergeants' Mess there is an easy chair. Turn by turn that chair belongs to the pilot or air gunner who has leave but has nowhere to go. They joke about that chair, these Polish boys. To me it was an indictment bitterly deserved. The vine of Christ spreads over the earth. Men see the Church as a system of belief, an organisation for charity,

an army of reactionaries, an insurance against fire. The sap of the vine is unseen, but, oh the bitterness when the branch itself rejects the sap, is indifferent to it! The branch indeed is still part of the tree—leafless in virtue, brittle in faith. We have allowed America to lead us in the praise of Newman, as Archbishop Williams pointed out recently, and allowed our glorious dead, Challoner and others, to lie forgotten in their neglected graves. Let us at least be wise as it behoves us to be wise in learning something from our Polish brothers of the simplicity and depth of the faith and in turn allowing them to feel the surge of life, centred in the authority of Rome, but pouring out in abundance from the Five Wounds, making us one—*ut unum sint*. A oneness that alone can break the barriers of hatred and build up a peace.

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