

# BLACKFRIARS

Vol. XVIII

AUGUST, 1937

No. 209

---

---

## THE POPE IN POLITICS<sup>1</sup>

IT is a dangerous thing to describe the present in terms of the past. The pontificate of Pius XI is not yet history; nor are we sufficiently removed from certain great political events in which the Holy See has been involved in the last fifteen years, to judge them without passion and with due proportion. Mr. Teeling has made an ambitious attempt to describe and to account for the apparent trend of Vatican diplomacy, which, especially since the beginning of the Abyssinian war, has been the object of so much unflattering attention in this country. In so doing he has sought to place this prickly subject in its proper setting by describing the manifold moral, political and social problems with which the Catholic Church is confronted in every part of the world. It is a cross between history and guess-work; but it is not without value to non-Catholic readers for whom the book seems to be mainly intended. On balance it may be that it will do more good than harm in those circles where ignorance of the immensity and complexity of the Church's task is as monumental as is, on the other hand, that Catholic prejudice which the author has so rashly challenged.

Mr. Teeling is an efficient journalist. *The Pope in Politics* is indeed little more than a collection of "feature articles," each of which, according to the canons of modern journalism, has to be more or less self-contained and written in simple non-technical language. But is the idiom of the newspaper the right medium for examining such extremely delicate subjects as the mind of a Pope still living; the impact of contemporary nationalism upon the teaching Church; the merits or demerits of political decisions, which involve in each case a composition between deep-rooted principles and

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Pope in Politics: The Life and Work of Pius XI.* By William Teeling. (Lovat Dickson; 7/6.)

traditions and the changing phenomena of human society in Italy, Europe and the world? I am afraid not. And in matters which are bound to arouse strong feelings because they touch the Catholic's spiritual loyalties, it is inevitable that the superficial treatment of journalism should invite misunderstanding and resentment. This is no less true of the sphere of moral philosophy. To say, for instance, that, if some definite impediment existed "no real marriage took place, *whether they* (a couple) *wanted it to or not,*" is surely a dangerously loose statement.

Mr. Teeling, by covering too much ground, treats no subject thoroughly. He gives a mass of information about all sorts of things—the Pope's early life; Missions in Africa, the Far East and the South Seas; Catholic organization in the United States; Anglo-Irish friction in the Dominions; Catholic social teaching; Reunion and Communism. It is all very readable, but of uneven value. One can only hope that his treatment of Catholic life in countries with which one is unacquainted is not so inadequate as it is in respect of those with which one is familiar. Belgium, for instance, which gets half a page solely concerned with the rise (but not the decline) of the Rexistes. You might as well devote a description of religious and political life in England to a study of Dick Shepherd or Oswald Mosley. Switzerland gets a little more space; but all the information to which we are treated is evidently derived from a handful of French-Swiss patricians concerned with the League of Nations who, charming as they may be, are, one would think, the least typical Swiss Catholics you could find. The strength and vitality of the Church's life in the German-speaking cantons passes unnoticed. It is perhaps unfair to pick out the obvious defects in a necessarily sketchy survey of so vast a field. But they are sufficient to make one sceptical about many of the author's facts and consequently his deductions from them. More objectionable is his rather patronizing and inaccurate description of "Catholic Action" and his deplorable habit of attributing *motives* to the Holy Father. This, as a speculation, no one has a right to do. I find it quite incredible, for instance, that His Holiness seeks the

Reunion of the Eastern Churches with Rome simply to counterbalance the influence of Western "democracy" in the Church, as Mr. Teeling continually asserts.

The part of the book which we gather has caused a major explosion, is that dealing with the Holy Father's attitude during the Abyssinian War and the prejudice created against the Catholic Church in many countries by the apparently strong influence of the Italian Government upon the diplomatic action of the Vatican. Why all this noise? Is it simply because Teelings rush in where Melvins fear to tread? Or is it because it is hoped to hide inconvenient truths? One cannot see what good Mr. Teeling can hope to achieve by dilating on this subject. But he has nothing original to say, nothing which is not the commonplace of conversation between informed and intelligent Catholics, clergy and laity, in Belgium, France, Great Britain and, doubtless, other countries. That the Holy Father wages war against Atheistic Communism—itsself surely rightful and inevitable in one whose duty is to defend the Rights of God—and that Italian official propaganda, by unscrupulously exploiting this fact, has become one of the stock nuisances of international life—this we all know. That the personnel of the Vatican is predominantly Italian; that the Sacred College has a heavy majority of Italians and no English members; that all the Nuncios, Internuncios and Delegates Apostolic, with one or two exceptions, are Italians; that the Holy See has an immense holding in Italian Government stock—these facts are familiar to everyone. To pretend that they do not, in the existing political circumstances of the world, give rise to many unfavourable reactions would be simply dishonest and would deceive no one, least of all the Vatican. It is not an ideal state of affairs. I have given elsewhere my reasons for believing that owing to the rise of the totalitarian State in Italy and the secularization of international politics—two developments for which the Popes cannot by any stretch of imagination be held responsible—the Holy See is likely to be precluded for many years from exerting any active influence in favour of international justice and peace. It will not be for the first time. The

Papacy survived the Babylonian captivity of Avignon; the Great Schism; Compiègne. It will survive this present tyranny, with all its potentialities for good intact.

If, however, the present political conditions which determine papal action are to be studied, they require far more profound and careful treatment than Mr. Teeling accords to them. Take, for instance, the precise issue of the Pope's alleged indifference to the moral question raised by the Abyssinian campaign. If we remember that from 1933 onward, as Marshal de Bono has coolly revealed in his latest book, Signor Mussolini had determined upon a war of conquest, without the remotest concern for Christian teaching upon the conditions of just war; that, while bamboozling the other Powers and the League, he had complete control of every means of influencing and inflaming the minds of his own people and used it to the full; that nothing, humanly speaking, could apparently deter him from his project, having gone so far, saving the military defeat of Italy with all the appalling perspective of a European war—then the acute difficulty of the papal position is manifest. What is remarkable is that, despite all this, Pius XI, patriotic Italian as he is, condemned in advance both a war of conquest and the unjust use of the right of defence, and that in a great Roman church, preaching to a vast congregation of soldiers, he made a passionate plea for peace, saying that he would not be worthy of the name of Pope, did he not incessantly labour and pray for peace. This sermon, in St. Paul's without the Walls, was suppressed in the Italian newspapers. Why is it also all but suppressed by Mr. Teeling? Is it because it would spoil the rather too simple presentation of the "case for the prosecution"? And if, from bearing witness to eternal principles, Pius XI, without any of the power of an Innocent III or a Hildebrand, had descended to a vigorous application of them and excommunicated the rulers of his people, what exactly would have happened? An English Catholic friend, himself devoted to the cause of peace, has just returned from two months in Italy. He writes:

## THE POPE IN POLITICS

"In spite of political considerations, I was enormously impressed, not only with the material progress of the country but—more than that, with the spiritual development and piety of the whole population. This, I was told on all sides, was due to the Concordat. Schools full; religion taught; churches crammed; Masses in Rome continuous and Communion every half-hour in the principal churches. The same at Florence, Portofino and Alassio. It really seems like a spiritual revival; and I was not surprised that the Holy Father weighed this great gain against the horror of the Abyssinian war."

Here, then, is one important ingredient of a fair judgment of these events; when the time comes to write a history of them in a proper spirit of scholarly detachment. I venture to suggest to a future historian that, in reflecting upon it, he should follow two lines of thought. One is the effect of national temperament upon the emphasis given by men, with all their limitations, to one aspect or the other of Christianity. It was suggested to me by the late Cardinal Gasquet when, in discussing the attitude of Italians towards the League of Nations, he whimsically used the Irish verdict, "They've got the Faith: it's the Morals that beats 'em": a judgment which can be exactly reversed in describing the English. The other is the more profound observation of Cardinal Newman in his preface to the Third Edition of the *Via Media*, in which he treats of "the collision and adjustment of the Regal or political office of the Church with the Prophetic" and concludes thus:

"Whatever is great refuses to be reduced to human rule and to be made consistent in its many aspects with itself. We need not feel surprised then, if Holy Church too, the supernatural creation of God, is an instance of the same law, presenting to us an admirable consistency and unity of word and deed as her general characteristic, but crossed and discredited now and then by apparent anomalies which need, and which claim at our hands, an exercise of faith."

JOHN EPPSTEIN.