

## A NOTE ON CATHOLIC ACTION

**angles may be** evolved according to the circumstances of the Church.

**Which** figure will emerge in the English scene is as yet uncertain. The multitude of active organizations extant precludes the growth of a complete unitary organization such as has absorbed the energies of less heterogeneous nations—while the very scattered groups of English Catholics will prevent the formation of political or economic blocks. If one were compelled to draw a parallel, it would be simplest to foreshadow an achievement partaking of the elements of the National Catholic Welfare Conference of America and the Action Catholique of France. Each of these organisms has had to adapt itself to conditions which are familiar to their country, and there is unquestionably much profit to be derived from a study of their development. The arduous task of creating a central bureau will doubtless occupy much time and energy for a while, but the delicate business of tracing the general lines of activity will keep pace with the progress of the initial staff work.

The late Bishop of Salford, Mgr. Casartelli, used to prophesy that this century would be known as the century of the laity. Pius XI has proclaimed this to be the Crusade of the twentieth century, and it is for the laity and the clergy to vindicate the wisdom of the confidence reposed in them.

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## CATHOLICS AND **THE** NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

**THE** period of the visible expansion of Catholicism in England which began with the Oxford Movement and the Irish Immigration may be considered to have closed with the nineteenth century. Through the converts the Church entered the professional and upper middle-classes, and through the Irish began to leaven the new industrial masses. But the old English Catholics, though a minority

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in the Catholic population and despite the many changes introduced by elements foreign to their tradition, possessed the national stubbornness and power of assimilation; they preserved their type, remained the nucleus of the developing and extending temporal life of the revived Church, and largely determined its character. Ullathorne was perhaps the most representative Catholic figure of the period: by the time of his death, the Church was assuming its present form, was already an established institution in the national life, no longer an obscure sect but ranking among the four or five great religious bodies in the country. Since then the effort has been one of consolidation; the various elements in the Church have become more and more unified—partly as the result of time, partly of prudent government; a Catholic middle-class has emerged; internal organization has been perfected—education, the press, religious and cultural institutions; so that now the Church presents the spectacle of a going concern, well-run and secure, somewhat mysterious and exclusive to the outsider, a compact homogeneous body, with every appearance of being well-established, perhaps even entrenched.

But the more excellent a human tradition, the more marked is the tendency to become a privilege and a preserve. It is worth asking whether Catholicism in England, for all its external impressiveness, is not actually working as a closed system so far as the general life of the country is concerned; and whether our influence on the national life is proportionate to our strength. I am not thinking only of what may be called 'politics,' but of that stock of instincts, tastes, habits of mind, secret convictions and so-on which go to form a national consciousness at a particular period.

It is not easy to overestimate the effect on the country of the mere existence of the organized visible Church in its midst, and such specialized manifestations of Catholicism as the Walk to Tyburn, the Catholic Evidence Guild, the new Liverpool Cathedral. But there seems to be need as well for a more general action not concerned with what may be called the apparatus of Catholic

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practice, or with those details of Catholic teaching which to many appear either puzzling or irrelevant, even though their logical force is not denied.

The purpose of such action would be to bring Catholic values into every level of the national consciousness and to strengthen those that are already there. Now the field is itself so untidy and varied and shifting, at once so profound and implicit in its convictions and so tolerant and various in its expressions, that the Catholic action which should work in it can perhaps afford to adventure and experiment, and can be allowed considerable latitude within the terms of reference. The process might be called *infiltration*; rather than an assault or a confrontation of the world we live in with the whole formal equipment of the Church. To take an example from military history (though guarding against the implication that the Church is an army warring with the armies of other religious bodies and occupied primarily with their destruction), this action might meet with the success that Ludendorff gained in the spring of 1918 by adopting similar tactics. And we too have a mist to help us.

Naturally the improvisation and flexibility required would not have to be judged too narrowly and legally, and within limits wise allowance would have to be made for possible mistakes. But if now is the time for the Church to begin to grow again on a considerable scale, then untidiness must be expected, for most growth is untidy. The very fact that at present we are so remarkably united even to points of detail is not without its disadvantages, for in the opinion of not a few—non-Catholics mostly, but that is just the point—this appears as almost monotonous and mechanical. Of all bodies, the Church depends least on a stiff and unyielding outer defence; its strength is the life of Grace from within, and in firm and assured intellectual principles which articulate this life, but allow of great variety of movement. The higher forms of life do not have an external skeleton, like a crab's: but an internal skeleton that gives figure without rigidity, suppleness, free adapta-

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tion to environment, the power of shaping outside forces, the beauty of movement and a changing countenance.

In such an activity the laity must play the chief part. Ecclesiastics are principally professional men with clearly defined work, technical experts whose training has fitted them for the accurate and persuasive statement of doctrine and the punctual discharge of administrative duties. All religious action is, of course, subject to the hierarchy, who are our divinely constituted teachers and leaders in all officially religious matters. But below these there is a whole range of human experience into which Catholicism should penetrate, and yet in which clerical action cannot and should not be expected. Though many may have the gifts, few ecclesiastics have the time for such occupations as the writing of novels or the production of films, for literature and politics and 'secular' affairs, not to speak of the appreciation and criticism of matters which call for special information and training—Social Credit and the restoration of the Hapsburgs and slum clearance and the increase of the Air Arm and land settlement and Mr. Gill's sculptures, and so on. And if they embark on such concerns they start from scratch, and without special qualification because they are clerics. No human interest is outside the field which Catholics must work if we are to keep a Christian civilization, and it calls for action by an intelligent and courageous laity, willing to take risks, knowing they are not committing the Church in their possible misjudgments of a situation, adventuring into every matter of human concern, humble in the knowledge that their action is not official; preparing the ground by the action of Catholics for the full strength of Catholic Action.

Such activity is already being carried on by individuals in ordinary social intercourse, in the work of thinkers, writers, doctors, statesmen, soldiers, artists. Many of us can think of men in all ranks of life whose work without being explicitly Catholic yet exercises a greater influence for good on their surroundings than they realize. But for the co-ordination and extension of this kind of action a

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loosely organized group of laypeople might with advantage be formed.

It might begin by tackling two questions, the Press and the Cinema. There is already in existence a Press which efficiently reports Church news and interprets questions of domestic interest to Catholics. But it does not claim to look at the whole world, but only on that section of it covered by the visible Church; it does not consider all human interests, but confines itself to those more or less closely connected with ecclesiastical organization. Such journalism is valuable and is appreciated by thousands. But in addition we should have a periodical—a weekly, say, and as soon as possible, a daily—which should engage the interests of the many who have no wish to read about ecclesiastical affairs; which should range over all matters that form common topics of conversation and thought; which without any parade of representing the official Catholic attitude and without any didacticism should instinctively judge all human problems by that Catholic tradition which has formed our civilization and still remains the best vantage ground for appreciating English affairs. According to one Dominican opinion, the spirit of the venture should be thoroughly and stubbornly Catholic, but without explicit apology or explanation. Theology, especially dogma, Canon Law, full-blooded Catholic piety, all would take themselves for granted in it. It would speak of them as rarely as a healthy schoolboy speaks of his mother and sisters.

The proposed periodical might come into being in several ways. One would be to convince the directors of an existing Sunday newspaper or weekly review, preferably the former, that the adoption of a Catholic position would prove a commercial success. Signs are not absent in the publishing business that the proposal might be considered. There are well over two million Catholics in this country, and in addition there are many who accept the traditions of Catholic culture, nor are they only to be found among the Anglo-Catholics, who by their numbers and influence would provide considerable support to the venture. Another course would be the decision of an existing Catholic

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newspaper to widen its interests, to leave ecclesiastical news largely to its contemporaries, and to enter on the whole field of national life.

With the organization formed by such a periodical it would be possible to embark on the production of Catholic films. If the spirit of Locarno could produce such an excellent film as *Kameradschaft*, what could not Catholicism do, with all human nature to work on, and a secular history to draw on that is matchless in its interest and excitement? Such films should not be considered as Roman Catholic propaganda; they would aim at the perception and interpretation of life by Catholicism; they would do on the screen what Sigrid Undset has done with the novel.

Some assurance that there are lay people who sympathize with the views expressed in this article and who feel capable of doing something in the matter is the preliminary to definite action. By the personal exchange of views and projects, it might be possible to work out some practical plan whose objective would be to influence the masses of people outside the Church, not from any motives of sectarian aggrandisement, but from a profound and patriotic desire that a Christian civilization should be secured in England. But to judge from the enthusiasm with which some Catholics meet the suggestion, it would react also on the domestic life of the Church. For religion is not meant to be divorced from other human interests, and though there is a distinction there is no discontinuity between nature and grace.

The aims of such a loosely organized group would be the presentation of Catholicism in terms congenial to the life and interests of the people of our time; not the official preaching of theology, which is for professionals, nor the criticism of heresies, nor formal apologetics; but the formation of that cultural groundwork on which alone the sacramental and supernatural life of the Church can be congenially and firmly established.

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