

THE NOVELIST AND PLAYWRIGHT IN
CATHOLIC ACTION

SINCE the preoccupations of an age are expressed in its current catchwords, it is perhaps not strange that our contemporaries should employ, in every context and without examination, the idiom of pseudo-economics in which is enshrined commercial wisdom. Among the stock phrases which recur in everyday conversations, and which appear to exercise an incantatory power over the minds of those who speak or hear them, 'the law of supply and demand' is most frequently evoked; not necessarily because the speaker is intimate with the workings of this mysterious law, but because it is intended to place the discussion, whether moral, political or artistic, upon a wholesome basis of commercial expediency.

Thus it is argued that in the work of the English playwright or novelist there is no scope for Catholic Action, not because of any incompatibility in the activities which it is proposed to combine, but because 'the public does not want religion; there is no demand for it.'

Before trying the strength of this objection, it will be good to question whether a medium as comparatively frivolous as that in which either the playwright or the novelist works, can be employed in Catholic Action. To do this we must examine the common function of the playwright and novelist, which is to provide the public with a means of living vicariously, projected into an imagined existence, and thus forgetting present circumstances. Where there is great ignorance of the supernatural, such as religious 'reformation' has achieved in English-speaking countries, this escape from the apparent harshness of reality must become particularly desirable. Life without the Faith is not romantic, its intellectual satisfactions are incomplete and colourless, its physical implications are despairing; in an age and a country devoted to pagan materialism the playwright and novelist, as escape-makers, must have great opportunity.

This is witnessed to, not only by the immense circulation of modern novels and the prolonged repetition of certain plays, but by the peculiar personal prestige of novelists and playwrights, whose opinions on questions of moral and philosophic importance are respectfully entertained and commented by a large public whom their talent for fiction has impressed.

This functional opportunity of the playwright and novelist is also, in its very nature, an opportunity for Catholic action. It is two-fold; the vicarious existence in which their listener will be involved is of their choosing, it is theirs to create the people with whom intensely he will associate, to give voice to the ideas with which he may identify himself. It is frequently urged that Catholicism is judged by the behaviour of Catholics, and a constant realization of this would no doubt restrain our daily unworthiness and fortify us in the practice and example of Christian virtue; but if, in place of our limited personal contacts, the influence of our words and behaviour were indefinitely extended, if our lives were shared in intimate detail by numberless people, Catholic and non-Catholic, for whom, in addition, we had been endowed with especial persuasive charm by the suppression of every uninteresting quality in our character and environment, then indeed we might feel responsibility, and walk with care. And this, in fact, is the inescapable responsibility of the playwright and novelist, not in their own persons, but in that of the fictitious people whom they create; through these imagined lives they bear witness, and witness that is not momentary like that of their own actions, capable of immediate modification, but invested in the relative and uncompromising permanence of print.

In addition to this opportunity and responsibility latent in every phrase they write, the playwright and novelist have a second occasion for Catholic action, since, by reason of the unprecedented mental ascendancy which we have noticed they at present enjoy, their publicly-uttered private opinions have a direct influence which can supplement the indirect persuasion of their pro-

fessional work. Unfortunately, since the majority of playwrights and novelists belong to their setting, opportunity finds them unprepared; they are looked to for ways of escape, and are themselves bound, they worship the gods of despair, and know no words of power: and this suggests a third field of action for the Catholic writer.

Having then established in our own minds the possibilities for Catholic Action of the writer's trade, we may consider the objection with which we shall most often be met, that 'the public does not want that sort of thing.' Here let us invite our interlocutors, obsessed by commercial formulas, to study for a moment the statistics of supply, wherein they will discover that the public 'wants' a vast variety of interdependent mechanical contrivances, of dentifrices, sensations and patent panaceas, of cosmetics and experiences, which are quite irrelevant to its physical or spiritual comfort, and it wants these things because they are offered to it with emphasis and conviction. Indeed, of the gigantic effort which spends so much of the world's energy in the service of supply, not the least frenzied spasm is directed towards provoking a sufficiently widespread attitude of demand. Since the absence of objective standards of worth and use, and the consequent preponderance of personal inclination, have made the public increasingly susceptible to suggestion, success in this undertaking is obtained by means of calculated and reiterated enthusiasm. If the manufactured conviction of advertisement can prevail to this extent, what, we may reasonably ask, of the conviction implicit in Catholic Action?

It is unprofitable to give examples of modern plays and novels, dealing with the adventure of faith and the struggle of charity, which have proved that these things are enthralling to the people who must always live in life-giving danger of them, because there can be no mass-production of this particular supply, each different play or book will show the impress of truth upon a mind that is, like every mind, unique. It will suffice for the Catholic writer, abandoning commercial preoccupations, and striving to achieve that forgetfulness of himself wherein alone

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his spirit can flower, to concentrate in stillness and attention upon the purely Catholic aspect of his subject, and forthwith, as he writes, he will be engaged in Catholic Action. He may also in spite of himself, because of the strong light above his head, have traced upon his page a pattern thrown there in shadow from the leaves of an invisible Tree.

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LAY INITIATIVE IN CATHOLIC ACTION.

There is a widespread, if inarticulate, misgiving about Catholic Action which needs ventilation and elimination. A particularly vehement layman might express it in some such terms as these:

' Catholic Action? Ecclesiastical Fascism! A pretext for further encroachment by the clergy on the layman's business! More clerical domination and interference! More paralysing of lay initiative and endeavour! Apostolate of the Laity! Clerical *Gleichschaltung!* '

The Englishman, especially, has a horror of being 'organized.' And organization, it is universally agreed, is of the very essence of Catholic Action. The adoption and organization of an *oeuvre* by the Hierarchy is precisely what makes that *oeuvre* entitled to be called Catholic Action. The local establishment and direction of Catholic Action is committed to the parochial clergy. Must we not then infer that the disgruntled layman is right?

The most effective way to disillusion him would be, perhaps, to take him abroad to countries where Catholic Action is really in action and is already fully organized and vigorous. Failing that, these few considerations may help to shake the prejudices.