

## COMMENT

A hundred years ago Vincent McNabb was born, the founder and first editor of this journal and the man who more than any other individual, except perhaps Bede Jarrett, was responsible for the distinctive, not to say peculiar character of modern English Dominican life. At first sight the two men represented wholly different styles of life, and at this superficial level the influence of Vincent was the first to disappear into history; romantic attitudes to medieval or rural life are no longer to be found in our priories. Bede's world of charming public school men with liberal leanings took a little longer to collapse but has left even less trace. It seems as though the things that Vincent really stood for are the things of lasting importance.

The first of these for the working class preacher from Northern Ireland was truth. In the first article in the first issue of *Blackfriars*, "Our Aim of Truth", he declared himself resoundingly for St Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of the primacy of truth over goodness; knowing is more fundamental than desiring. It is only in the case of God himself, who transcends our minds, that it is better to settle for tending towards him in desire than to try to have him in mind, for he will not fit into our minds. So far as history and the things of this world are concerned it is greater to know them correctly than to desire them rightly, for desire is directed by knowledge; good will without the right analysis is helpless.

This doctrine is directed against all pragmatists and all who interpret the unity of theory and practice in a pragmatist sense. Certainly we shall not attain the truth unless we are involved, and that means faith and a passionate commitment to the historical struggle, but truth is not merely the expression of that involvement. Truth is *absolute* in St Thomas's sense—that is, it is independent, not a function of something other than itself. It is nonsense to talk of what is 'true for me' or 'true for the revolution'. Neither I nor the revolution are authentic except in so far as they are for truth.

Both Christians and Marxists are right in their continual railing against a merely academic and theoretical approach to truth, whose apparent detachment only conceals an attachment to the values of this world, this society; but both faith and revolutionary commitment demand a real detachment without which one degenerates into pious fideism, the other into subservience to a party line.

Journalists, said Vincent, often 'frankly, and therefore humbly, admit that they speak to their fellowmen through the printed word, not so much because they have something to say but be-

cause they must say something. Their primary object—quite a noble one—is not, indeed, to tell the truth but to make a living. Very differently, and diffidently, we purpose to tell the truth; not knowing or enquiring whether we shall or shall not make a living. Indeed we have been assured by one of our chief advisers that after a long experience of the world he never knew a man who made a living by telling the truth; but he knew three who met their death.

Well *Blackfriars* visibly has not met its death, though it has come near enough not so much to death as to execution—there was the crisis over Vincent's own outspoken and 'premature' ecumenism; there was Thomas Gilby's equally 'premature' advocacy of the rhythm method of birth-control; there was the time when the Curia got frightened by Gerald Vann's sympathy for those who were trapped in 'muddled marriages', and there was the farcical fracas of 1967.

We have survived; and looking at Vincent's first issue it is fascinating to note how much of the pattern of our survival and of its risks were already outlined. What, for example, are the two commonest complaints against the current policies of *New Blackfriars*? It is obsessed with socialism and with Ireland. That first issue had Shane Leslie assessing the importance for Sinn Fein, and for justice, of the Irish American vote—'the financial hegemony of the world has moved from London to Washington where it might be subject to an indirect Irish influence.' And in another article, we find: 'the assumption that the present relations of capital and labour are, subject to slight modifications, permanent, or, to put it another way, that the directing control of labour must remain in the hands of the possessors of capital, commonly sways our minds. And this assumption, made somewhat rashly, largely prevents our clearing up present difficulties, or getting at the question of the purpose of production. Is the purpose private gain and profit? or the convenience and comfort of the community?'

It is perhaps because, in different ways, Britain and Ireland each reveal the unpleasant truth about the other, the truths that each would like complacently to forget, and perhaps because socialism is no more than a matter of spelling out the truth about capitalism (it is a mark of the anti-socialist to deny the importance, or even the existence, of capitalism) that to be concerned in England today with truth is to be concerned with just these topics. Certainly we have never sought to provide a 'Dominican truth' or to be 'true to the vision of Vincent McNabb', and if we do find the 700th issue re-echoing the first it will be, we like to think, simply because there is in both some approximation to the way things are, that we have not, in our aim of truth, wholly missed the mark.

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