

RUSSIA AND REALITY

I WAS staying a few days in a Missionary College, where two hundred boys, of all ages and types, are doing their schooling, so that when they go forth to teach all nations they shall not be found wanting. I had said the Community Mass, and was making my thanksgiving. Two little boys—my servers—were putting out the candles, they were solemn-eyed, radiant, and the red of their cheeks outshone the crimson of their soutanes. I was distracted: insistently those children associated themselves with something. Remotely, subconsciously, an analogy was forming. But for the time I got no further. In the evening I remembered. I had been walking, and when I returned the college was wrapped in a toga of mist, the hills were frosted, the world white and grey, transfigured by the moon. A year back—almost to the very day—rattling through a land of frozen forest and morass, I had been sitting for twelve hours in a railway carriage. Opposite me were two young Bolsheviks. It was they (I realised with a shock) in their crimson exuberance that co-ordinated and completed my analogy.

They, too, were missionaries, those Bolsheviks. They even hoped to convert me. They, too, were ardent, sincere and well instructed. But the gospel they preached was not of the Saviour of mankind. Their gospel was the story of despair, man made, man tricked, man rebellious, self-assertive against he knows not what. (For here is a generation that cannot admit the God its heart is seeking, and secretly has always loved.) They preached, these two, the evil negative doctrine of mystical collectivism. It is not / that matter, nor you. What then? An abstraction, a veiled thing that never shows its face, a negation, an evil thing whose name is legion. It has called itself the People, the State, Humanity. And to the ardent

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eyes of this generation straining darkly in the mirror of this life, the negative mockery of life is Life itself. Values of fifty years ago, themselves on no sure foundation, are subverted, and in the new Russia (and not only Russia), the nineteenth century Calotype, the photographic plate made to look like a picture, is contemptuously cast aside. 'Back to the Real' becomes the cry. And to what do we revert? The pure negative where black is white and white black.

Can we not persuade our friends out of the dark-room and show them the true reality of God's Holy Church? Communism is a virulent, active thing, not a pale balloon that can be pricked by the capitalist press. We may have taken the trouble to study the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* to learn what Bolsheviks really say, we may have studied reliable statistics (most of us go no further than a journalistic anti-socialist propaganda which is as unworthy as socialism itself), and we may be able to confront them with ugly things. But this is not good enough. For those who live in an industrial society the charge *tu quoque* may be difficult to answer. Charity in such matters begins at home. Communism is a more horrible thing even than it is painted, but it is a theory that hangs together. Why do we not positivise it, not as the Victorian photographers with transparency and wax, but by holding it up that it may be pierced by the light of God's truth, that beyond it from the sincere and sensitive face of this generation His image may shine once more? The majority of Bolsheviks I have met have been good, sincere, philanthropic people. Especially the young. But if there is anything that delights their agents it is the ludicrous portraits with which propagandists gull the West of Europe. This sort of thing discredits the anti-Socialist case. It may be good enough for politicians and pressmen, but it should not satisfy Catholics.

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Let us meet unreality with reality. As Catholics, we have history to be proud of. We have all read of the part played by Cardinal Liénart in the strikes of Hal-louin. And we have stories to tell nearer home. From Westminster more than half a century ago came 'the prescience of democracy and the prophecy of its eventual alliance with Catholic forces.' Thence, in days when it was temerity for any but the sycophant of Capital to open his mouth, came a voice affirming the right of labour as a principle in the distribution of wealth and the futility of mere private benevolence.

It happened that my own experience of Bolshevism coincided with the month of St. Joseph. Here is he who combined the good servant with the good master, who knew both how to submit and how to thwart unjust authority, how to rob Herod of the Divine Child—a lesson for Russia and, incidentally, for the educationalists. Here was a man practical and alert, and yet a dreamer of dreams. But his dreams came from God; and herein is another of the world's problems answered. For hours did I argue with a Soviet official on Theory versus Fact. To him dreams were dreams, beautiful things, but (perhaps because of their beauty) impossible to translate into reality. In him the economist ran riot; there was one dream, the dream of Engels and Marx, the individual sublimated as a unit of Mankind—Mankind conceived as the combined labour power of the community—the characteristics of innumerable individuals converted into terms of homogeneous productivity. The metamorphosis of reality into unreality. A dream perhaps—and a nightmare. Of other dreams my Bolshevik was contemptuous. They might be more pleasing, but could they be put into solid fact? Why not? Perhaps because, unlike the dreams of Joseph son of Jacob and Joseph son of David, they are not from the living God. But it was a concession of conviction not flat-

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tery, I noted, when after a pause, the Communist admitted there was all the difference in the world between the living Rome and the corpse of Canterbury, yes and of the old Byzantium. Darkness and light, heat and cold, but twilight and tepidity are accounted nothing.

So through St. Joseph came the answer. The eternally beautiful paradox that is the vehicle of truth, the *complectio oppositorum* that signifies the sure and certain wisdom of everything catholic. The gift of balance, the true sense of justice that every one can have by listening to the Church. Humility and service (not servility) are fundamental conceptions and requirements of the Catholic Church. The life of our Lord was the re-establishment of service among men, the idea of obedience as opposed to that of revolt against the Divine mind. So, through humility, comes man's incorporation with the Divine reality—so perishes the vanity and emptiness of human conceit. Yet Catholicism knows how to confront the unjust demands of sheer worldly power and . . . the State.

But the Bolsheviks, the Pope is reported to have said, *have an idea*. Bolshevism is not just anarchy, it is a complete and rigorous system. It is not a boggy to be dissipated by old wives' tales. How many people really know what it is and what is the economical state of the world to-day? (Not that economics go very deep, save with Marxists.) And what are we and where are we? Cannot we teach ourselves to answer these questions? Everywhere in everything good the Church is a main impulse. In art, in learning, in poetry, in politics where policies are good, in social reform. Can we not, in all sincerity, face the shadow of reality with reality itself?

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