

CATHOLIC ACTION IN THE ENGLISH MILIEU

THE object of Catholic Action is to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. It is identified with the mission of the Church to teach all nations "to observe whatsoever I have commanded you." The Bishops, by their strict apostolic succession, acquire the right and the duty to lead in the Church's mission. With themselves they associate priests, who are ordained for specially sacred functions in the Church, and lay apostles who, by Catholic Action, share in the Divine Mission. The methods adopted by Bishops and priests in pursuance of this mission—prayer, exhortation and the Sacraments—are universal in their application and effective under all conditions. The methods of the lay apostle must depend largely on conditions of time and place, on the atmosphere in which he works, on the temperament of those with whom he comes into contact and even on his own human qualities. In a word, the method of Catholic Action depends on the *milieu*. It may therefore be of value to the apostles of Catholic Action in this country to attempt an analysis of the *milieu* in which we find ourselves and which we seek to supernaturalize.

To what extent is that *milieu* already supernaturalized? What can we presuppose, and how much constructive work lies before us? This *milieu*, this atmosphere, is something vital, created by living people. A knowledge of the lives and character of the people of England provides also a knowledge of their surroundings. To know how to restore England to Christ we must understand how far our fellow-countrymen need and are capable of receiving Christian influence. There can be no doubt that they are in need of this, and are largely estranged from it. And this thought must give us pause.

England is unique in this, that she has a large Catholic population, intermingled with a non-Catholic majority. In other countries the situation is very different. In the so-called Catholic countries the population is mainly Catholic, practising or apostate. In Germany the large Catholic

BLACKFRIARS

minority is concentrated in well-defined districts, not mingled with the rest of the community so much as in England.

Catholic Action in England as in other countries must influence the weaker, the lapsed and apostate members of the Church, but it must also extend to large numbers of our non-Catholic fellow-countrymen. This apparently twofold mission has actually a single purpose, to satisfy England's need of Christ—a need which is not confined to the non-Catholic section of the community.

Taking a view of the nation as a whole, it has long been admitted that it can no longer be described as Christian. And even the facile transition from this fact to the judgment that England is pagan is not entirely legitimate. There is certainly an ignorance which can be regarded as akin to the darkness of paganism. At the Church Assembly at Westminster on February 4th it was stated by a competent authority that, in one of the new London housing areas, over fifty per cent of the children between twelve and fourteen years of age did not know what happened on the first Good Friday, and that three children out of four were receiving no religious instruction. Catholics are certainly more adequately instructed, but we have all been shocked occasionally by the appalling ignorance of fundamental truths which many of them display. There is a want of real appreciation of the meaning of the truths of the Faith. In a class of girls, aged twelve to fourteen, in a Catholic school, a priest could obtain no reply to the simple question, "What is the Church?" He was reminded by the teacher that he could expect a reply if he asked the Catechism question, "What is the Catholic Church?" Again, well-educated Catholics are genuinely surprised when warned of the dangers of projected mixed marriage. And deeper knowledge is almost entirely wanting, such a knowledge for instance as Père Prat, S.J., supposes in his readers when he says that his monumental work on St. Paul is intended to be beneficial to seminary students "*ainsi qu'aux laïques instruits.*" The best commentary on that was furnished by a theology student, already the possessor of an English university degree, who described Karl Adam's *The Spirit of Catholicism* as "too difficult for us."

CATHOLIC ACTION IN THE ENGLISH MILIEU

There is ignorance, appalling among non-Catholics, deplorable amongst educated Catholics. But the nation is worse than pagan, in that it has lost that natural instinct and propensity to worship which is found amongst the most barbarous savages. Pagans may encourage idolatry, may offer human sacrifices and practise abominable sexual rites, but these things are expressive of a desire to worship and adore which, however unnaturally satisfied, is in itself natural. Our so-called pagan nation has ceased to worship. This is true not only of those who do not attend Church but even of those who do. It is, amazingly enough, even true of Catholics.

The mere fact that the total Church-going population of this country is optimistically estimated at twelve per cent indicates that the country as a whole is not concerned about organized public worship of God. There are those who say that God can be worshipped "in the great open spaces," but few of them attempt to worship under these circumstances; a momentary consideration of the grandeur of Creation is all that is permitted; and even this is intellectual, a thought, not a volition and not an act of worship. And those who do go to church, at least the non-Catholic section, often go not to worship but through sentiment, to give good example to the children, from a lingering sense of respectability, to listen to an eloquent address, to enjoy the aesthetic pleasure of good music, at best to offer a prayer of petition. The thought of adoring God for His own sake, because He is God and Lord of all things, is entirely absent. A further proof of the non-existence of the notion of worship is to be found in the difficulty which most converts have in grasping the Catholic doctrine of the Mass.

Both churchgoers and absentees retain, however, a desire to know something about God. Therein lies one hopeful aspect. It is indeed this desire which moves some to take up Spiritualism and Christian Science. In the last-named there appears to be something of an attempt at worship, but the motive is rather the healing of physical pain than the desire to acknowledge God as Supreme Lord. The great mass of non-Catholics in this country, however, do not go even so

BLACKFRIARS

far, and are left in a state aptly described recently by Fr. Woodlock, S.J., as one of "wistful agnosticism."

Catholics are not exempt from the conditions described above. In the first place, there are large numbers of Catholics who never attend church, even at Easter. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that, in the whole country—especially in the cities—there are fifty per cent of the Catholic population who do not attend Mass on Sundays as a regular habit. The proportion of those who neglect their duties altogether cannot be much less. Even those who do attend too often fail to worship there. To large numbers Sunday Mass is an obligation to be hastily observed with the minimum of effort. The mere suggestion of an instruction at Mass has been known to create in the congregation a distinct expression of impatience. The failure really to appreciate the value of the Mass as an act of worship is evidenced by the small numbers at daily Mass, the comparatively small number of stipends offered, the rare Nuptial and Requiem Masses. Even those who show their appreciation of spiritual values by frequent Communion often exaggerate the importance of this and minimize the value of the Mass. An essentially private devotional act is put before an act of public worship when, as often happens, Holy Communion is received before or after, or outside the Mass, without any necessity.

Comparisons are odious but sometimes helpful. Every priest has experienced the difficulty of organizing men for confraternities, processions, and generally for acts of public, corporate worship. Yet the Germans, who are not very different from ourselves in temperament, are particularly successful in this direction. Any traveller in their country is struck by the number of men in church, even at times when it is not of obligation to attend. And if he has been privileged to hear them sing or to see them honour God by a public demonstration, he will have experienced something like the first blissful reception of the Faith. In Germany, too, there is the institution of the weekday *Schulmesse* (School-mass), at which one may well see as many children as on Sundays. Yet the Mass is celebrated early in the

morning, before school starts—and school begins at 8 o'clock in Germany. Most important, this attendance at daily Mass is regarded as a perfectly natural thing. The children who attend are the same lovable ragamuffins whom one finds everywhere, but they begin the day with the worship of God in the most perfect and natural way. In this country it is difficult enough to bring large numbers of children to church on Sundays and everywhere it is noticeable that the numbers fall off considerably at holiday-times, when they are not given reminders in school.

Even anti-clerical wayward France, by her very disobedience, can teach us something. Members of the *Action Française* movement there, passionately devoted to the aims of that movement, forbidden the Sacraments, continue to attend Mass and find the deprivation of the Sacraments a real hardship. Happily such a movement would not be possible here; less happily such devotion could scarcely be expected. A Frenchman can be disobedient but keep the Faith. In this country it seems that disobedience is too often accompanied by the loss of Faith and of the instinct to worship.

But our ignorant, non-worshipping Catholics have a real desire to know more about the Faith. It is less clearly expressed than amongst non-Catholics, but it shows itself whenever it is encouraged a little. A priest who can explain in a simple way an interesting point of theology is always popular. Catholics are not inclined to come to classes with the definite object of obtaining instruction, but they are always ready to seize on some less formal occasion to ask a question and seek enlightenment. Their attitude is not agnostic, but it is wistful.

The English people are not pagan nor anti-religious; they are ignorant, non-believing, non-worshipping, but desirous to know. Similarly they are not immoral, but non-moral.

Some of the Catholics who have retained sound notions of morality have criticized the late John Galsworthy on the ground that his novels were untrue to life. In their healthy vitality, they forgot that their fellow-countrymen have not that same healthy life. They are non-moral and Galsworthy

BLACKFRIARS

describes them perfectly. Soames Forsyte, with his material view of marriage, is no more detestable than his wife Irene, who deserted him for the sake of what is presented as a more spiritual love. But both characters are perfectly true to life in a country where even adultery is lawful as a prelude to divorce, where the "naturalness" of sex is so far insisted on that even excess is not regarded as immoral and abuse is rendered harmless by the instruments of modern science. In place of a moral standard we have respectability. Thus, a boy and girl may have sexual relations before marriage, but if the girl is foolish enough to have a child she is condemned in all classes of society and, if possible, the child is hastened out of the world before it has the opportunity to see the light. Sound morality condemns extra-marital sexual relations as deadly sin, but not the sinner whom God, through His Church, has forgiven. A society which upholds sound morality is ready, too, to receive with joy the child whose soul God has created.

Catholics have preserved more completely than others the notion of morality, but they are considerably influenced by the prevailing standards of respectability. There is a good deal of truth also in the contention, made some years ago by Fr. Pruemmer, that Catholics are beginning to regard the less immediately obvious immoralities like contraception as outside the sphere of morality, beyond the priest's authority, and therefore to be kept back in Confession.

The English sphere of Catholic Action might not inaccurately be described as ignorant, non-worshipping, non-moral, but desirous to learn. And English Catholics must be regarded as belonging to that sphere.

Catholic Action is concerned with the real state of affairs and not, directly, with the causes which led up to it. But it may be helpful briefly to examine some of the causes.

That England is in this state is not due quite simply to national temperament, but also to the historical causes which have shaped that temperament. The Englishman of St. Thomas More's day was very much like the Continental Catholic of to-day (or should one say "of some years ago"?); he tended to be anti-clerical but believing and

CATHOLIC ACTION IN THE ENGLISH MILIEU

worshipping. The Reformation attacked the principal act of Catholic worship with especial vehemence, made martyrs of priests, encouraged weaker Catholics to concentrate on the Communion, the Lord's Supper. Thus gradually did the desire to worship cease. Anglo-Catholicism attempts to revive it but is not very successful. The rejection of authority led to loss of real Faith and logically to Agnosticism. With no God to worship or believe, there can be no law and no morality. These are some of the reasons for the present condition of the non-Catholic section of the community.

Catholics who are descended from a family which has kept the Faith through all the period of persecution are rare. Even some of these fall away, but those who retain the Faith resemble more closely than others the Continental Catholics. For the rest, Catholics in this country are either Irish immigrants, converts, or the children of these. The first Irish immigrants are always model Catholics, but their numbers are rapidly thinning and their descendants, influenced by prevailing standards and led astray by mixed marriages, have lost the Faith themselves or neglected to bring up their children in it. Converts are not so much a glory to the Church as is sometimes thought. Not a few of them fall back, and there are many who stay who never really grasp the spirit of our religion. These latter fulfil the observances of the Church, but often with real difficulty and even pain.

That must suffice as an indication of the causes of the situation. There are many remedies suggested, many which should be tried and not a few which are beginning to produce effects. The whole system of instruction of children is being examined and new methods tried. How far these are satisfactory is beyond the scope of this article, which is only considering what contribution Catholic Action can make towards improving matters.

The difficulty about supernaturalizing this *milieu* is that the apostles themselves are largely subject to the same failings. They are ill-informed, badly educated in religion and in morality. The first task therefore of Catholic Action must be to train its apostles.

Since it has been made clear that Catholic Action will be

BLACKFRIARS

directed through the existing societies, the training of apostles must be provided in these societies, if necessary by adapting their rules and entering into new relations with one another.

Provision must be made for some instruction in Theology to be given to members of the societies. They must learn to appreciate the more profound reasons for their Faith and no longer be put off with "popular" answers to objections. It would scarcely be practicable for each society to arrange a course of lectures for its members, but they might be encouraged to attend some central institution where lectures are given. Advantage could be taken of those given to members of the Catholic Evidence Guild or in Catholic Truth Society premises, where these exist. But the lectures must be made attractive, dealing with fundamental points of Theology. They should be more advanced than the secondary school standard of religious instruction, but not much beyond that. On no account should they be concerned with highly specialized aspects—such as might be suitable for an Aquinas Society. The lecturer would have to aim at presenting the old truths in a new and interesting fashion, in language appropriate to make clear the most profound thought. The work already done by the Catholic Social Guild, in study circles and the Workers' College, is an admirable example of a method which could well be transferred to the study of Religion.

To create the proper attitude towards worship, the lectures could sometimes have reference to Liturgy and Ecclesiastical Music. More effort, too, must be made to organize public and corporate attendance at Mass and Communion. It would have far-reaching effects if the societies attended Mass on certain occasions, not as individuals but as societies, clearly distinct from the various confraternities. The direct object of the latter is the sanctification of the members, that of Catholic Action is the sanctification of others; and this is most effectively achieved by public manifestations. The fact that some would be attending publicly on two occasions for diverse motives would not be a drawback but an advantage.

Sound notions of morality would inevitably result from

CATHOLIC ACTION IN THE ENGLISH MILIEU

increased devotion and dogmatic instruction. Sanctity of course is fundamental, but sanctity cannot be taught. Some guidance in the ways of ascetical and mystical theology might be given in the lectures however.

It is most important to inspire the members of the societies with the apostolic spirit. At present the guilds and organizations are inclined to regard themselves as existing for the benefit only of their members. Every effort is made to increase membership, but little is done to influence those who never will be members. The extreme example of this is the boys' club, which does excellent work in keeping its members out of mischief but does nothing to train them to bring to others the grace of Christ, which they have preserved through the influence of the club.

Training is necessary and must be provided, by capable lay persons to some extent, but mainly by priests. The latter must be definitely set apart for this work; they can more effectively carry out the mission of Christ through the training of lay apostles than by directly working in a *milieu* largely estranged from God. For this task they themselves need special training, which is not completed by the usual study of Theology. The seminaries must provide for training in the method of presenting Theology to the lay-apostles; the direction of Catholic Action might well become a special subject.

This implies that secular priests must be the directors of Catholic Action. And this is as it should be, since Catholic Action is organized under the hierarchy (whose personnel consists principally of secular priests) and in parochial units. This direction of Catholic Action should indeed be a parochial activity, like the organization of confraternities. But because it cannot be left entirely to the parish priests and their assistants who have their many other duties to perform, a number of secular priests must be free to give their whole energies to the work.

Not that the religious orders are excluded. They must indeed often be called upon for lectures on subjects in which they are specialists—Benedictines, for instance, for Liturgy, Dominicans and Jesuits for certain aspects of Theology.

BLACKFRIARS

They, too, will continue to direct retreats which are essential to maintain and increase the sanctity of the apostles. But the main current of Catholic Action must be directed by the secular clergy. Imbued themselves with the apostolic spirit, they must impart it to others who will re-create their faith and devotion, maintain their own moral stands and bring back our fellow-countrymen to a new appreciation of eternal values. Thus, gradually, under the direction of the hierarchy, in perfect co-operation with one another, may we hope to rebuild Jerusalem "in England's green and pleasant land."

EDWARD QUINN.