

DANGERS OF DIAGNOSIS

THE body politic is sick, and physicians crowd to the bedside. We must surely still be very rich, for only the rich ever have so many doctors. It is the paradise of the diagnostician. Take up any paper or review, and you will find some symptom of the general disease explained: get this right, they say, and health will return. Unfortunately, the doctors do not agree, and this is not really surprising. If you are ill, the doctors may disagree about the treatment, they may even differ in their diagnosis, but they are at least agreed about one thing, and that thing is health. Here the parallel breaks down hopelessly; there are nearly as many different ideas of social health as there are diagnoses. The patient may sometimes be excused for feeling that he prefers the disease he already has to the other disease that he is promised as a cure. And it is not as if the notion of health were always a reasoned thing. All kinds of preferences based, however unconsciously, on prejudice or personal taste and convenience have their say in it. If you doubt this, read Mr. Clayton's article in the December *BLACKFRIARS*, apply the method to yourself, and then plead Not Guilty, if you can. This is, in brief, the case for Catholic diagnosis of the public disease, for Catholicism knows what health is, and therefore knows what is disease and what is not. Not that individual Catholics may not be mistaken; failure to apply their own principles to themselves will make them as liable to prejudice and self-interest as other men. But the principles are there, clear and ascertainable and constant, and for this reason alone Catholic diagnosis would be irreplaceable.

Yet there are dangers in the habit of diagnosis, even when it is sound. It is a means to an end, which is restoration to health. It is the first step to a cure, and an essential step; but it is useless unless it is followed by prescription of treatment, just as prescription is useless unless the treatment is carried out. It is no good your doctor's telling you

DANGERS OF DIAGNOSIS

what is the matter with you if he cannot prescribe, and it is no good his giving you medicine if you do not take it. And continued indulgence in diagnosis which is not followed by appropriate action is not only useless, but is positively harmful. It stirs vague desires for improvement, and, as William James pointed out and every confessor must know, vague desires for improvement that do not issue in some sort of action tend to make the subject morally weaker. To start with, there is such a thing as a morbid interest in diagnosis. It is an interesting process, and it can generally be relied on to make a good article, but the constant reader may catch the joy of investigation and come to relish it for its own sake. The means can become the end. There is a dreadful passage in Tchekhov's *The Duel* that pins this particular specimen to the board: "I know very well you can't help me," he said. "But I tell you, because unsuccessful and superfluous people like me find their salvation in talking. I have to generalize about everything I do. I'm bound to look for an explanation and justification of my absurd existence in somebody else's theories, in literary types—in the idea that we upper-class Russians are degenerating, for instance, and so on. Last night, for example, I comforted myself by thinking all the time: 'Ah, how true Tolstoy is, how mercilessly true!' And that did me good." There is no particular need to expand that. This complaint is not everybody's danger, but there is another which is more general, and it comes from inability to follow diagnosis with action.

Go back to the family doctor for a moment. When you are ill, you want him to tell you what is the matter with you, and then you want him to tell you what to do to get right. If he does not make any suggestions at all, you either feel that the thing is hopeless or conclude that he doesn't know his job. But it is not enough for him to prescribe; he must prescribe something that you can actually do. If I am told to drink champagne and winter in Egypt, I must either regard myself as incurable or get other advice. The case of social disease is not so very different. If we go on

BLACKFRIARS

reading and hearing careful accounts of the nature of the general ills and find no suggestion about the measures necessary to cure them, we shall become either apathetic or despairing. If we find measures indicated, but they are not such as we can work for, we are in no better case. For, after all, it is not wrong for the individual to take these diagnoses to himself. It is the whole social order that is sick, and it is the whole social order that needs treatment; but the social order is made up of men and women, and it will only be altered by men and women making a move. Things stagnate because everyone waits for somebody else—a leader, the State, a group. St. Benedict, St. Francis, St. Dominic, St. Ignatius, did not wait for somebody else to make a move. But they were leaders of men. Not at first. It is arguable that, humanly speaking, they found their leadership just because they had the courage and sincerity to do what they saw to be done without waiting for other people. But at any rate they had that courage and foresight which put them head and shoulders above ordinary people. That is so. We cannot all lead, or ‘unfold programmes,’ or make plans, but unless we are all the time squaring conduct with principle and doing what does fall to us to do, the leadership will be vain and the programmes so much waste paper. I am arguing that every good diagnosis of social disease is likely to be read with a personal reference by men of good will, and that such reference may be good. If by personal reference we mean considering only how remedial measures are likely to affect our own prosperity or comfort or ease or pleasure, and so judging them, it is, of course, bad. But if it is a self-examination, it is not only not bad, it is the only way in which anything will ever be freely done. In fact, there is no lack of prescriptions; the trouble is that so often I read them without being able to discover what I can do. There is the vote, of course; but the most determined enthusiast for the electoral system can hardly regard that as completely adequate action until the next election. There are societies (and the readiness of people to subscribe is often a sign of their desire to *do*

DANGERS OF DIAGNOSIS

something); but mere subscription may be a substitute for personal action. Too often the only result is that I feel that nothing I can do can possibly affect the issue. One of two things may follow: either I become less responsive, or I fall back on doing the best I can with things as they are without regard to Utopias. I may be told that at least I can pray and try to live a Christian life; but that does not help in this connection. For those things are my duty anyhow, and I do not need to read diagnoses of our ills to learn that. There is clearly something to be done, as part of the Christian life, not merely done by 'Christians' or 'the laity,' or people in general, but by me, for the mass is made up of individuals, and association is useless unless it is a grouping of people prepared each to do his bit. It may be thought that I have exaggerated the case; I hope I have. It may, with greater reason, be thought that this is only another piece of diagnosis; and so it would be, were it not designed to lead to a practical conclusion. William James urged, if I remember, that all good resolutions should be at once reduced to some piece of practice which could be carried out and should be carried out without fail. Is it too much to ask that books or articles or talks intended to awaken the Catholic social conscience should *always* indicate some way in which the individual could act, so that conviction might not evaporate in mere feeling? And that if collective action alone can be effective, that should be clearly stated for the relief of the conscientious? What, for example, for a townsman with a wife and children does the Catholic land movement mean in terms of practical politics? What 'discarding the lesser worship of Mammon' and giving up 'clinging despairingly to dividends' (the perfect adverb!), to people who are too old to start afresh? It is the conscientious and convinced who are the trouble; the others do not read it, or regard it as so much nonsense. But some read and read again, and are troubled. They feel they are all wrong, and they would wish to be all right. They do what they can, but they feel it is not enough. They would gladly do more, if they could only see what it was.

BLACKFRIARS

How many, vaguely lumped together as ' apathetic ' or not awake to modern problems, have gone through this stage?

A. E. H. SWINSTEAD.

PICTANTIAE.

IF the poorer classes were to regulate the expansion of their families, as the middle and upper classes have long been doing, the hideous poverty now so widely rampant would disappear; throughout the world there would be a higher standard of living, and machinery would no longer dominate a large section of the population, but would usefully minister to the expanding wants of man.—Mr. Harold Cox, in a letter to *The Times*.

Wycliffe was no Friar but a practical reformer.

—Sir Charles Mallet, in the *Oxford University Handbook*.

On the occasion of my visit to the radio station, Father Gianfranceschi took from the folder in his desk an excellent photograph of a beautiful German moving-picture actress and displayed it with evident pride. 'This just came from Berlin by wireless,' he explained.—From an article, *Modernizing the Vatican*, in *The Commonwealth*.

Like *The Tablet*, our French contemporary (*La Croix*) endures obloquy from its adversaries, which is a Note or Mark of Catholic faithfulness.—*The Tablet*.

Birth-control might well have been mentioned, for it is not a subject one can, or need, keep from children, who, if they hear of it in a matter-of-fact way, take it with admirable matter-of-factness, realising the need for spacing a family.—Mrs. Naomi Mitchison, in a review in *Good Housekeeping*.

' Reunion, not submission '—a vain hope until that day when Rome shall change her attitude, and cease to excommunicate all outside her own communion.—Archdeacon T. E. Usherwood, in *The Church Times*.