

COMMENTARY

NEED CATHOLICS BE AWKWARD? The last few weeks have seen a number of political issues which have evoked comment—if not protest—from Catholics. The recent visit to this country of the Soviet leaders, the proposals for the ‘integration’ of Malta into the Westminster Parliament, the dangers of the Middle East situation with its renewed threat to the Holy Places: these are issues which can essentially affect the Church’s mission. But the ground of the Church’s intervention can be misunderstood, and Catholics themselves are not always the best advocates in a cause that fundamentally appeals to justice and not to privilege or inherited tradition.

What was properly demanded, and indeed was admirably stated in the Joint Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of England and Wales in connection with the Russian visit, was an assurance that the hope of a political accommodation should not mean a condonation of the religious persecution and organized tyranny associated with Soviet Communism. The fear is—and it is a justifiable one in terms of the weakness of the present Government and of its apparent inability to accept the hard cost of an unambiguous stand for moral principle—that a political advantage should be achieved at the sacrifice of something that is sacred to man, namely his freedom to worship God. The art of political negotiation cannot, it is true, await a millenium of human disinterestedness, but it must nevertheless weigh the consequences of, for instance, an apparent indifference to the fate of millions of Christians. Is the pragmatic business of seeking an ‘agreement’ with Russia even likely to succeed if justice itself is betrayed in the very process? To give assurances that this country abominates religious persecution is not enough. Since any agreement must presumably be a matter of bargaining, a demand for a measure of religious freedom could properly be a condition of any negotiation.

But Catholics have never the right to demand justice for themselves—in Malta or anywhere else—unless they are totally committed to justice itself. The reproach is that Catholics are loud in their protests when their own position is threatened: their appeal,

they say, is to natural rights and to the primacy of religious values. The truth is that justice—like peace—is indivisible, and eloquent demands for the release of a Catholic archbishop may indeed be matched by the retort that an Orthodox one can be interned without much question or concern from Catholics. Doubtless the issues are not parallel, and a military necessity may explain the presence of Archbishop Makarios in the Seychelles, but a Catholic Tory M.P. should feel some embarrassment when told that here at last is an imprisoned archbishop he *won't* complain about.

In the meantime there are moral and spiritual factors in political action which Catholics have the right to defend. But rights go with duties, and the duty of the Christian is a universal one—to seek peace and to pursue it, not only when his own allegiance is threatened, his own family attacked, but whenever justice is betrayed, however far from home and however remote the circumstances may seem. For 'no man is an island', and the frontiers of justice and charity are never closed.

A 'BLACKFRIARS' MEETING. It is hoped to have an afternoon's gathering of friends of the review at the Aquinas Centre, St Dominic's Priory, Southampton Road, N.W.5, on Saturday, July 7. Details will be available in the next issue of BLACKFRIARS, but we ask London readers to make a note of the date in good time.