

BLACKFRIARS

A MONTHLY REVIEW

Edited by the English Dominicans

Published at Blackfriars, St Giles, Oxford

Vol. XXX	OCTOBER 1949	No. 355
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PREOCCUPATIONS

THERE are certain preoccupations which have descended on the minds of most Catholics on account of the attacks which have been levelled at the Church throughout this century. These preoccupations are at once inevitable and in their sphere concerned with good things; but they are not concerned with ultimate things and therefore tend to bring wrong perspectives.

In order to correct perspectives a prophet is needed to proclaim the ultimate realities. Such in our day have been Father Vincent McNabb and Eric Gill with Chesterton and Belloc showing the wider implications of these ultimate realities. But in this country their prophesying has passed almost unheard; some admired the message, a few tried to act upon it, and now nearly all have returned to their preoccupations. In America the response has been noticeably different. Quite a number of groups have heard Father McNabb and Eric Gill with enthusiasm and have set about re-adjusting their perspectives in practical ways. The most outstanding example of such a practical response to the message of the prophets has been Dorothy Day, herself also a prophet; and standing with Peter Maurin¹ she has apparently succeeded in the States where

¹ Dorothy Day kindly contributed an article on Peter Maurin at our request in the last issue (September) of BLACKFRIARS. The loss of this great teacher must rank with that of the above-mentioned prophets, depriving the Church of great mainstays.

the Dominican friar and Tertiary failed in the United Kingdom.

During the war the *Catholic Worker* movement with its houses of hospitality and its farming communes seemed to come under an eclipse as Dorothy Day and her companions gave themselves more and more vigorously to the pacifism for which Eric Gill stood but which was at the time an embarrassment in a world at war. The particular preoccupation of war was so great that it made the voice of the prophet seem harsh and strident, so out of tune that few could make the effort to break away from the hubbub to try to catch the real tone. In those days it may have been inopportune and perhaps even of some harm to Catholics and the Church. But now that the war has gone to earth and our preoccupation is not so overwhelming we may perhaps attune our ears to the whole message.

For the pacifism of the American *Catholic Worker* as that of Gill is only part of a whole evangelical—to use the word in its best sense—programme and proclamation. Dorothy Day, in a recent rambling journal of her concerns, thoughts and reading throughout 1948, published by the *Catholic Worker* under the title *On Pilgrimage*, has revealed many of the threads weaving in and out of one another to make the whole fabric of her prophecy. The journal is professedly unplanned and is the more valuable for that as it shows the inter-relationship of the important truth working out in a real, concrete Christian life. Indeed it shows that her life and teaching are very much all of a piece and that the piece is Christian throughout and free from the more earthly preoccupations which tend to put everything in our modern Christian life so out of perspective.

We propose here to select the four major concerns of present day Catholics which have tended to become preoccupations and which need to be readjusted in tune with the five Gospel principles which have been reasserted by the American *Catholic Worker* group. Of these four by far the most evident is that of ownership. Ownership has been attacked root and branch by the denial of the right to property, and although this has been expressed in the main in economic terms from the beginning of the struggle there has never been a doubt that it is a direct attack on the Christian family and on the Church, an attack indeed on human nature in one of its fundamental rights. In order to defend this aspect of man's nature it has been necessary to insist over and over again that the Christian has the right to property, given to him in germ by God at his conception and certainly not handed to him later by any external human authority such as the State.

There were no two people more insistent on the right to property than Father Vincent and Gill—and Dorothy Day quotes at some

length from the latter on this subject—but unfortunately the word, like ‘charity’, has almost entirely lost its original meaning. It means wages, extortionate ‘rake-offs’, stocks and anything which industrialism and big business can produce to make *some* people at ease in the kingdoms of this world. Christians in their enforced defence of this right—and we must remember that they did not start the squabble on property—have not defined clearly even in their own minds what they meant by property so that they have often given the impression that they were defending the *status quo* of industrialism, or perhaps of the big business of some of the monasteries before the Reformation. And at the best of times they have been preoccupied with the goods of this world, preoccupied that is with natural things.

Again we must repeat that this concern is a necessary one, and it is a concern about good natural things. But the preoccupation tends to convey a wrong impression to the ‘outsider’ and to materialise those whose concern it is. In order therefore to keep the perspective and turn the eye of the Christian principally to the kingdom of heaven it is urgently necessary to preach what was on the lips of our Lord as he opened his mouth at his first sermon—‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’. Voluntary poverty was an essential feature of the life of Peter Maurin and it runs through the whole of Dorothy Day’s pilgrimage. ‘All the world admires and talks of the poor man of Assisi. Christ is honored even by the unbeliever, the hater of churches, as the poor man who washed the feet of his disciples and had no place to lay his head. Poverty is praised and sung of in song and story. But its reality is little known. It is a garden enclosed, a secret beauty. It is to be learned by faith, not by reason or by sense’ (p. 86).

The second great attack on the Church is also aimed at the family in an even more fundamental way with a denial, implicit or explicit, of the primary end of marriage, accompanied by practices directly contrary to nature. Here too language is difficult and misunderstandings are easy in defending what is proper to man as property. People often accuse the good Christian of having a stud farm mentality where marriage and the family are concerned; and yet at the same time a manichean attitude to sex sometimes appears because it becomes separated from its human context and treated of as selfish pleasure—which is to use the word as it is understood in unchristian circles. Dorothy Day has much of value to say on this subject and refers at length to an occasion when a censor refused to allow publication of a book because of its comparison between marital union and the beatific vision. He apparently viewed ‘with horror’ the comparison which appears in St John of the Cross,

the *Imitation* and the *Canticle of Canticles*. 'There is good and plenty written on the negative side', she says, 'but when it comes to holding up the vision of a holy marriage with sex as an integral part, to any positive and integrated teaching on this vital subject there is a conspiracy of silence. . . . Sex is shut off from the rest of life, tolerated in marriage as a necessary evil for the procreation of children. Instruction is given reluctantly and with embarrassment, and delayed until adolescence when the problem becomes impossible to ignore or suppress' (p. 61).

But she reminds her readers how Peter Maurin used to say that on the subject of sex the Catholic Church is foolproof. And of course the attack on contraception and its allied evils is of the utmost importance, greater than the defence of ownership. But again pre-occupation with the things of nature, and in particular with these most precious things of nature, can lead to the lack of perspective described above. The balance has to be regained by a far greater emphasis than hitherto on evangelical chastity. If the 'prophet', leaving father, mother and family in order to cleave to Christ, shows that he leaves a very good thing for the very best thing, he will be able to show that the very best thing can still be obtained in the very good by the virtue of chastity. Chastity establishes a union in the personality of the individual and a union in the family; chastity draws sex back into the context of integral Christian love, as the spirit of poverty draws property back into the union of the Kingdom of Christ.

The third preoccupation is one which is harder to describe but is perhaps more dangerous for its subtlety and centrality. It is more easily seen from the angle of the 'outsider' who views with frightened suspicion the Church's claim to authority. It sometimes seems that the authority to rule her faithful suppresses liberty of conscience, squeezes out any really Christian love and indeed often prepares Catholic countries for a totalitarian regime in the State. Others see it in terms of the Catholic husband who seems to be encouraged to lord it over his wife, or of the clergy who appear to exercise a local papal authority if not infallibility over their flocks. There is of course an immediate need to defend the fundamental authority which not only holds the Church in unity but also in other spheres plays an essential part in social life. The word democracy has been so bandied about that its significance has been lost and it has become the cloak for propagating tyranny and anarchy alike. Authority therefore needs to be proclaimed in order to rescue human society from its present swift decline to disintegration.

Nevertheless authority with all its make-up of law and external power cannot be more than the pedagogue who has continually

to teach men true responsibility. And true responsibility can only be found by way of the perfect obedience taught by our Lord, the obedience to the Father which led him to the height of Calvary. In other words in order to keep the perspective which will counteract the preoccupation with authority the prophet must call out the true self-giving which redeems mankind and leads him into the kingdom of purified love, the self-giving of sacrificial obedience. It is here that the reality of the 'Community' comes fully into play; and the community has to be small in order that the sacrifice of true, loving obedience may be personal to avoid the mechanical, robot obedience of the modern servile state. Dorothy Day quotes Gill: 'I am sure that all attempts to create cells of the good life in the form of small communities are not only much to be encouraged, but are the only hope. It is to me perfectly clear that communities of lay folk religiously cutting themselves off from the money economy are an absolute necessity if Christianity is not to go down, either into the dust or the catacombs.' (p. 141.)

To these three evangelical counsels, which are of urgent necessity if our present preoccupations are to be turned from man to God, one other must be added. The gospel is not only one of poverty; it is also the gospel of peace. This essential element in the Incarnation, which began with the voice of Angels, 'Peace on earth', has never been denied by a true Christian in theory. But often in practice it has become very theoretical in view of the pressing need of taking up arms for justice's sake. Modern wars have taken upon themselves increasingly the character of religious struggles, and in the intensity of the struggle for freedom and the triumph of justice Christians on both sides of opposed forces have been eager to find the hand of the avenging Lord in their support. Today, during the interim period of the 'cold war', the preoccupation with the defeat of the enemies of the Church has called forth from Rome itself a reminder that Communism will not be overcome by force of arms. The immediate relevance of the Gospel of Peace can easily be missed in the heat of the fight for survival, yet with the modern inventions which make war more and more a threat to the very existence of human nature itself there is evidently the greater need for the voice of peace. It is necessary for people to see the true perspective, and as soon as they begin to do so not only will the theologians begin to discuss with deep concern the present day implications of war in a way which has so far not been attempted in any serious or consecutive manner, but also the consciences of Christian people in general will be roused to consider their own personal duty in the threat of a world-devastating war.

The voice of peace has been raised too much in terms of

'pacifism', a word even more unfortunate than democracy or property; and there can be little doubt that some of the true prophets, including Eric Gill and Dorothy Day, have claimed too much for this pacifism. But their claims will not seem quite so outrageous if they are not isolated from the total 'word' of the gospel which they are attempting to proclaim. It is not an isolated fanaticism but part of a call to the counsels of perfection which is absolutely necessary if men are to be rescued from their preoccupations. Poverty, chastity and obedience go hand in hand through sheer convention but it is now necessary to add this fourth counsel. Not all are called to the voluntary poverty of a Peter Maurin; not all are called to the chastity which relinquishes the joy of the home the quicker to be at home with God. So also not all are called to forsake all participation in war for the sake of the gospel of peace. Yet all these go together as the saving and redeeming message of the Gospel.

The voices of the prophets have been raised. The answer to their voices in this country is to be seen almost exclusively in the courageous and persevering St Joseph's House of Hospitality which after years of adversity has now been able to open another house in London and to spread its roots into the country where it will soon be developing what is to all intents and purposes a farming commune. In America Dorothy Day's initiative and perseverance have effected almost a network of such homes of holiness, hospitality and whole living. But the message even there needs to be listened to in its purity. It needs to be taken not in part—pacifism *or* poverty, property *or* obedience—but as the whole thing it is, resting on divine Providence. Dorothy Day has to complain at one point that many of those who have followed her have not really managed to go the whole way in poverty, chastity, obedience and peace, but rest still with one foot in the city of this earth which is in conflict with the City of God. It will always be the way. Only the few can follow the full evangelical spirit. But they are the more needed today in order to show the multitude how it can yet remain true to Christ and escape the embroilments of preoccupations which arise from the concerns of the Christian today. These concerns are for human nature, for human existence even, but they will only issue in success if the Counsels of Perfection are followed by the prophets and their followers whose vision gives them the opportunity of redeeming the time and showing the nature of man as wed to God in the chaste, powerful, peaceful embrace of God.

THE EDITOR.