

PIUS XII AND 'THE FLIGHT FROM THE LAND'

'ALL over the world . . . our troubles have one bitter root . . . the ignoring of God's majesty, the complete neglect of His heavenly commandments or, at best, a woeful inconsistency that can do nothing but hesitate between right and wrong.

'It is this that gives rise to our blind excess of self-love—to our thirst for pleasure . . . the *Flight from the Land* (*Agrorum desertio*), to levity in contracting marriage (*in matrimoniis contrahendis ludificatio*).' Encyclical Letter, *Sertum Laetitia*, to the United States Hierarchy on the 150th anniversary of their establishment.

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We have set down this authoritative statement on a fundamental principle because only through authoritative statements and not through individual opinions can a sick world be led back to health. Individuals, and perhaps especially the young when endowed with a sensitive nature, are often capable of sensing social ailments. Yet their power to descry and describe social disease does not empower them to prescribe the remedy for the disease. Zeal to staunch the wounds of the world is amongst youth's most engaging qualities. But those of us who once were young—'and that was long ago'—know that the best words an individual in the Church can now say to a world *in extremis* must only be words of commentary on what the Church's authority has already said.

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(2). Two anecdotes will serve to prepare the readers of this commentary to see what the commentator sees,

First anecdote. To index the last edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* the American publishers employed a large staff of American women graduates. As few of these were Catholics, the mistaken classifications they made were many and sometimes amusing. Some betrayed an ignorance of fundamental spiritual realities that was tragic. Perhaps the most tragic was detected by a Catholic member of the indexing group. She found that one of her fellow-indexers had classified Marriage under *Sports and Pastimes!*

If this almost gruesome story comes from across the water, two equally gruesome confirmations of the story are a home-product.

Some little time ago a group of young Catholic factory workers in the South Lancashire district made investigations and reports on the state of morality in the factories. Some of these reports were published in *The Catholic Worker*. Two of the young workers investigating two different factories reported that 'in our factory Marriage is looked on as a sport.'

These data from the two most industrialised countries in the world would warrant our translating the Pope's words 'in matrimoniis contrahendis ludificatio' as 'Marriage is looked on as a sport.'

(3). The Latin phrase which we (and the official Roman translation) have translated 'Flight from the Land' is *Agrorum desertio*. Its terse Latinity cannot be given an equally terse English equivalent. It means primarily that the land of the United States is being deserted, and therefore is becoming desert.

Millions of Americans, and almost especially millions of American Catholics, have either left the countryside for the town, or still prefer the town to the countryside. No wonder that Catholic statisticians of the moderate type estimate the leakage of Catholics as between 20,000,000 and 30,000,000, whilst others estimate the leakage as somewhere about 60,000,000.

(4). What is perhaps of greatest significance in the Pope's words is that, as far as we know, this is the first great Papal document calling the attention of Catholics to the 'Flight from the Land.' Circumstances in the career and experience of Pope Pius XII have led him to see in this Flight from the Land not a vital circulation of blood, but a deadly social and indeed religious haemorrhage. His homeland is now, for good or evil, governed by a group of men who know that Italian greatness does not rest so certainly on Italian soldiers and foreign battle-fields as on Italian peasants and Italian ploughing-fields.

To this homeland experience Pope Pius XII is added another experience unique amongst the Popes. As Cardinal Pacelli, sent by Pius XI to the Eucharistic Congress in South America, he made a tour of the United States. No other of the Popes has had this first-hand experience of the opportunities and difficulties which the United States offer to Catholic culture. A short stay in any of the great Eastern cities would sadden his Italian heart by the sight of thousands of his fellow-Italians lost to the Faith. One high ecclesiastical dignitary summed up the state of the case in these words: 'In the last few years, two million Italians have come to the States. Most of them have given up the Faith.'¹ Sprung from hardy Italian peasantry, they had become labourers in the great American cities.

Moreover, a mind as serious and observant as that of Cardinal Pacelli could not fail to observe the millions of untilled and almost desert lands which the desert, once robbed of them, is again turning to weed or marsh or sand.

(5). Papal insight is almost at its keenest in assigning the motives for this Flight from the Land.

¹ I cannot guarantee this generalisation. I can guarantee only that it was made to me by one with unique sources of verification.

Here and there an individual, cleric or layman, may deliberately leave the countryside for the city; here and there an individual may deliberately leave the town for the countryside with a high unselfish motive. But this national drift from American countrysides to American cities is now seen by the Chief Shepherd as an effect of America's practical ignoring of the Natural Law, the ten divine Commandments. Papal wisdom could hardly fail to see that these same Commandments—the greatest gift a race of men ever gave to mankind—were the gift of a little people who had the daring to take FLIGHT FROM THE TOWNS to the land. It would, therefore, almost seem to be an economic and social inevitability that a people leaving the land for the town would grow indifferent to God-inspired ethics of a people who left the town for the land. The happiness of Italian homes and homesteads contrasted with the homelessness of American deserted countrysides, and crowded American cities, has no doubt had its influence in making Pope Pius XII's teaching historic by its first papal reference to the FLIGHT FROM THE LAND.

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(6). The Pope's linking of the Land with Marriage is of such seeming inspiration that it must be prefaced by a quotation from the teaching of one of his predecessors:

'The law should favour ownership; and its policy should be to induce as many as possible of the people to become owners' (Leo XIII: *Rerum Novarum*).

To the present writer this has always seemed the most positive and valuable teaching of Leo XIII's great Encyclical. There are not a few Catholics who value the *Rerum Novarum* for its condemnations. These condemnations should, indeed, earn our gratitude. Yet we should always remember that truth is not finally reached by a series of denials or condemnations. Truth comes to the mind only and finally by a series of positive statements like: 'This

is my body' or 'Thou art Peter and upon this Rock I will build my Church.'

(7). Now if ownership should spread as far as possible, and the ownership of the home is the family's first need, the flight from the land to the town is seen as a flight from marriage a sacrament to marriage 'a sport or pastime.'

Again and again for the last twenty-five years we have urged that 'our modern urban industrial arrangement of the world cannot pay an economic wage which will pay an economic rent.' If this principle is true, it is fundamentally and dramatically true. To ignore it is to have no accurate view of the nidus of the socially mortal disease of Race Suicide.

Where well-distributed ownership, as proposed by the *Rerum Novarum*, allows the parents of average virtue and average self-sacrifice to have the average family, Marriage remains on a psychological, ethical and social plane which is high without being heroic.

But this high plane becomes heroic for the husband and wife of only normal virtue and normal self-sacrifice in the abnormal circumstances of uncertain wages and excessive house rent. No wonder that these poor average townfolk, led by circumstances to despair of reaching the high divinely-ordered plane of wedlock, express their despair and their acceptance of a merely sexual plane by classifying Marriage under 'Sports and Pastimes.'

Their despair, thinly masked under a show of city jauntness, recalls that one day their Redeemer, 'seeing the multitude, had compassion on them.'

(8). There was a time, not so long ago, when anyone, even a Catholic, would accredit himself a hopeless fanatic by suggesting an Exodus movement of 'Back to the Land.' But that time, which once seemed as if it would never pass, is now past. Our beloved country has set up in public places pictures of English boys and girls, with the slogan — 'They are safer in the country; leave them there.'

Our letters have come from the Post Office imploring us

to 'Grow more Food. Dig for Victory.' This would be grim satire if addressed to the dwellers in town-slums or the rapidly increasing town flats. But it is war-wisdom, and peace-wisdom, inviting the over-crowded towns to go out to the untilled or undertilled fields of England.

The greatest of these crowded towns, London, has for the first time in its history meekly confessed that it has outgrown its usefulness. 'In its evidence before the Commission' (on the Distribution of the Industrial Population) 'the London County Council indicated that in the Council's view *Greater London is already larger than is desirable either on proper planning principles or in the interests of the population of the County of London.*'²

For some of us this is the most momentous social statement made since the beginning of our present war.

To all these civil declarations—and they are all of first magnitude—is added the weighty statement of the chief religious leader, the Shepherd of a world-wide flock. Had he merely told his flock and those who are not his flock that the FLIGHT FROM THE LAND came of disobedience to God's commandments, this first papal pronouncement would be a justification of his Head Shepherdship. But by an instinct which seems to touch the divine he has linked this flight from the homestead with that use of Marriage which makes its lowest sexual side of chief concern to a propertyless proletariat.

With this cloud of civil and religious witnesses inviting mankind out of the overcrowded towns, Catholics, who should be patterns of civil and religious loyalty, must now begin to show cause why they so often listen to the advice of their leaders as if this advice was but 'the harpings of a harper on his harp.'

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² Report of the Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population, January, 1940, p. 84.