

RUINS AND REVIVAL¹

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*These were men of mercy whose godly deeds have not failed.
Ecclus. 44, 10.*

THERE are still a great many people in England today who regard Catholics as strange and even sinister folk who worship with strange rites in a foreign tongue, render allegiance to the Pope of Rome and have a notable reverence for the Mother of Christ. Yet four hundred years ago there was scarcely a man, woman or child in England who did not accept these rites and this allegiance and this reverence as part of their daily lives, as had their forefathers for many centuries before them. Gathered around this temporary altar, to be present once again at the eternal sacrifice of Calvary within these ruins of a once magnificent abbey, our minds and imaginations inevitably take us back to those days of Catholic England when the great abbey church of St Mary at Hayles resounded by day and night to the prayers of the Cistercian monks who had dedicated their lives here to the service of God and of their fellow-men.

Nearly nine hundred years ago Hayles Manor came into the possession of one William Leuric of whom it is recorded that he freed twelve serfs here. In 1246 Richard, Earl of Cornwall, founded the Abbey of St Mary at Hayles in fulfilment of a vow made on escaping from shipwreck. A few years later his son presented to the abbey church the venerated relic known as 'the Holy Blood of Hayles', contained in a crystal phial and believed to contain some of the blood shed by our Redeemer on Calvary, which, until it was ruthlessly destroyed by Cromwell's agents at the destruction of the monastery, was the venerated object of pilgrimage for countless devout men and women both from this country and from over the seas. Finally, there is a bell to be seen in the museum here upon which is this inscription: *Trans mundi*

¹ Sermon preached during the Pontifical High Mass celebrated in the ruins of Hayles Abbey, Gloucestershire, on the Feast of the English Martyrs 1950, in recognition of the Holy Year and to mark the Centenary of the restoration of the Hierarchy in this country.

mares duc nos pia Virgo Maria—‘Across the seas of the world, lead us O loving Virgin Mary.’

In these brief details from the history of Hayles we find a summary of the whole Incarnation: the men freed from the bondage of their serfdom, as mankind was freed by the coming of Christ from the bondage of sin; the safety from shipwreck and the recognition of man’s absolute dependence on God shown in the vow and its fulfilment; the establishment of the monastery and house of God dedicated to our Lady, a very symbol of the Church of Christ, his Mystical Body born of his Holy Mother at the foot of the Cross; the veneration of our Redeemer and his sacrifice offered through the medium of the precious relic of the Holy Blood of Hayles; and finally the pathetic yet hope-inspiring remnant of the days of faith—the bell with its cry for help to the Blessed Mother, to her who can show us again the fruit of her womb, who can bring Christ our Lord once again into the lives of men who have rejected him and yet need him so desperately.

For more than two hundred years this abbey and church were the centre and inspiration and support of the daily life of the people round about, the guarantee of their peace, their security, their happiness. But this same abbey and church of Hayles was destroyed, like so many others, at the bidding of Henry VIII, as part of his plan to make himself supreme head and controller of the Church in England. No one of honest intelligence, neither then nor now, could believe that Henry was inspired by spiritual motives in his destruction of the monasteries and outlawing of the monks. In his early years he seemed to give promise of a fine, religious character—and won for himself from the Pope the proud title of ‘Defender of the Faith’ (so strangely retained to this day); but as the years went on he became more and more lustful after the material things of this world, sought the satisfaction of his baser desires at no matter what the cost to the bodies and souls of others. The Church stood in his way; but the new doctrines of the German reformers provided an excuse to his hand whereby he could gain his ends and yet preserve the outward facade of righteousness upon which he seemed to set such store. He saw in the monasteries a great treasure of material riches and these he coveted for his own ends.

This abbey of Hayles did not gradually fall into the state of ruin we see today. It was torn down; its valuable lead was stripped

from the roofs to be sold for the replenishing of Henry's coffers; the sacred vessels and jewelled vestments of the abbey church, consecrated to the service of God, were seized and put to profane uses; the very stones of church and abbey were used to build a mansion for one of the king's sycophants, and the rich farm lands that provided work and food for the people round about were turned into a rich man's pleasure garden. It was alleged that the monks were living in idleness and ease, that the monasteries were sores on the body politic and inimical to the common good. Why then did the common people of England rise up in revolt against this destruction of the monasteries? Why did the great risings such as that in Lincolnshire take place? Why was the Pilgrimage of Grace organised—and so ruthlessly suppressed? It was because the common folk of England knew only too well that in the suppression of the monasteries something necessary to their own well-being, both spiritual and material, was being tyrannically and unjustly taken from them. They were not all of them, perhaps, so vividly aware of the extent of their spiritual loss, not aware that the lifeblood of their religious practices was in process of being destroyed. But they were at least acutely aware of their loss in more material ways; they realised with dismay that their whole Catholic way of life was being destroyed.

That is the true significance and the actual result of the destruction of the monasteries, for they were built into the very structure of this Christian and Catholic England. In our own day we look with horror and contempt upon the destruction of the Church and the persecution of Bishops and priests and monks and nuns in the countries under communist domination. But that same persecution and destruction was carried out in our own country and against our own flesh and blood in the grim days of the English Reformation.

The new domination of the State over the Church was not really designed for the curing of abuses, it was not even merely a determination to destroy by violence a belief in doctrines of the Catholic Church which were an inalienable heritage of the people of England. This supremacy of the State destroyed the Christian way of life of our forefathers and took away their freedom. The monasteries were the framework of this life; when they were destroyed, the Catholic way of life was also destroyed. The candle which the reformers claimed to have lit with the Reformation was

a poor substitute for the sun of justice and truth that was obscured by it in England.

Neither on this day nor at any time should Catholics involve themselves in recriminations against those who have not now the light of our ancient Catholic faith. If we recall the destruction of this abbey of Hayles and of the other religious houses in England four hundred years ago, it is only that we may know what England lost and what we can help restore to her. For in that destruction was the loss of something far more important than that of the monasteries and churches themselves, the loss, namely, of truth, of freedom of conscience, and therefore of all true freedom, amongst the people of this land. In the beginning of the history of Hayles, the freedom given to the twelve serfs was a symbol of the wider freedom given to men by the truth of Christ, that truth which alone can make men free. The destruction of Hayles was no less a symbol of the loss of that freedom of the sons of God, as surely as in the persecution of the Church in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, which appals us today.

But there were great souls then (as, thank God, there are today) ready to face imprisonment, torture and death in the cause of this same freedom. The Pontifical Mass which we offer is sung in honour of those great Englishmen and Martyrs, St John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, and St Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, who suffered in a state prison and were executed on the scaffold in the cause of truth and freedom of conscience. If you wish to read a travesty and mockery of human justice surpassing even that accorded to Cardinal Mindszenty, you need only read the official account of the trial and condemnation of Thomas More. These two great-souled martyrs, the Bishop and the Statesman, died for all men's right to freedom. They were accused of treason because of their loyalty to the Vicar of Christ. But their very loyalty to him was the inspiration and guarantee of their loyalty to their own country. 'I die', said St Thomas More on the scaffold, 'I die the king's good servant, but God's first.' When these two went to their martyrdom something essentially great and vital was gone out of English life—for with them went truth and freedom and justice.

Did these martyrs, and those many others who died in the same cause, did they die in vain? Assuredly not so far as they themselves were concerned; for they discovered the truth of the

paradox uttered by our Lord: 'He that shall lose his life for me shall find it.' They found life, life eternal in that freedom where-with Christ had made them free. But neither for those who came after them did they die in vain, for these are the men we Catholics proudly, yet humbly, call our forefathers, these are the men of renown we now praise, our fathers in their generation—and we remember too that 'there are some of whom there is no other memorial—but these were men of mercy whose godly deeds have not failed.' By their sufferings, sufferings which continued in their degree almost to within living memory, the divine spark of true faith and freedom was kept alive till it could burst once more into flame.

The Catholic Church in this country was, to all outward appearances, destroyed by evil men; but, like this abbey of Hayles, it was destroyed only in the material sense. Just as evil men thought to destroy the Son of God-made-man by crucifying his mortal body, so throughout the history of the Church evil men have tried to destroy him in his Mystical Body. For a time they seem to succeed and Christ is buried in the tomb—the Church is driven into the catacombs. But Christ rose again to a new and more glorious life. So again and again after years of ruthless persecution, the Church of Christ rises to a new life. The spirit of the men who built this abbey and dwelt within its walls lives on and a new resurrection is already manifest in the land they loved.

This year we celebrate the centenary of the restoration of the hierarchy in this country. A hundred years ago the Catholic Church in England emerged from the catacombs, to make the contribution that it alone can make to the well-being and common good of our country. No longer were Catholic Bishops in this country to be regarded as outlaws, no longer were they required to pursue their pastoral work in peril of life or limb, no longer were they obliged to hide their identities under aliases or to administer the Sacraments by stealth. The Church became once more a vital and growing organism, its Bishops came again to be recognised as leaders of thought and action; its influence, under their spiritual leadership, a powerful weapon for good in a society that was in grave danger of losing even the remnants of a Christian way of life under the onslaught of a godless materialism.

Look back over the century that has passed. Even apart from the immeasurable spiritual good that has been accomplished, is

there any department of English life to which the Catholic men and women, under that same spiritual leadership, have not contributed in an outstanding way? The restoration of the hierarchy was not merely the re-establishment of our Bishops in episcopal sees, not merely the re-establishment of Catholic parishes and organisations. This abbey of Hayles stood in the old days for a whole way of life, the way of life revealed by the Son of God in his Incarnation. And the restoration of the hierarchy in this country was the restoration of that same way of life. During the past hundred years it has become more and more surely established in depth and extent; and gradually the value of this way of life for the common good is becoming more and more recognised.

As never before in the history of men since the coming of our Lord the world is in desperate need of this way of life. It is freedom of soul that is needed, and who can give this freedom but those in whom it lives already? We Catholics have a great responsibility laid upon us by the godly deeds of our forefathers. These deeds must not fail; the blood of our martyrs must not fail; the blood of Christ our Saviour must not fail. But it is upon us that the responsibility must fall.

This is Holy Year. The common Father of us all, our Holy Father the Pope, has called upon all his children in Christ to make this year one of sacrifice and prayer for the peace of the world. There is only one way that peace can come into the world—Christ's way. 'Peace be to you', he said; 'as the Father hath sent me, I also send you.' Peace came to the world when Christ came to the world; it will return now to the world only when he returns to the lives of men, when he lives again in men's hearts. How will he return? 'As the Father hath sent me,' he says to each one of us, 'I also send you.' When we make our pilgrimage to Rome, be it in actual fact or only in the desire of our hearts, we go to the Vicar of Christ on earth and to the tombs of the Apostles; and we go to receive in a special way the commission of our Lord that we may become the apostles of today.

The world we know is in dire peril; Christendom is threatened with destruction and we know that we must resist the evil that is so surely spreading. But let us not imagine that our fight is merely against flesh and blood; it is against principalities and powers and the spirit of evil. It is the agelong war of the Evil One upon those

chosen to be the children of God, it is the great red dragon of St John's Apocalypse awaiting the birth of the child of the heavenly Mother that he may devour it. And in our own day the Blessed Mother of God has appeared and warned us, through the children of Fatima, that this evil spirit can be cast out only by penance and prayer.

In these ruins of a former Catholic way of life, on this feast of the English Martyrs, during the great sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Mass, while we praise men of renown, our fathers in their generation, let us remember the debt we owe to those men of mercy whose godly deeds have not failed, and let us remember the obligation that our inheritance of the Faith puts upon us, the obligation of a truly Catholic way of life, and especially of penance and prayer. And let us turn again in our hour of need, as they did, to her who is the help of Christians, begging that under her guidance we also may lead others across the perilous seas of our day to the haven of God's peace in the oneness of Christ's Mystical Body. *Trans mundi mares duc nos pia Virgo Maria.*