

Comment

What is the difference, morally speaking, between deliberately putting your life in serious jeopardy by going on hunger-strike for a cause you passionately believe in, and deliberately putting your life in serious jeopardy in order to save, perhaps even only temporarily, someone else's? What is the moral difference between the actions which led to their deaths of Bobby Sands and Captain Oates, or Raymond McCreesh and Maximilian Kolbe? Is there a distinction? It was, of course, predictable that the British government, aided by most of the media, would with confidence and alacrity answer yes to that last question. Bobby Sands was literally hell-bent on suicide. Captain Oates is a hero to be admired by every English schoolboy.

In next month's issue of *New Blackfriars* Herbert McCabe will be discussing the morality of hunger strikes and we leave a detailed discussion of the problem to him. What, however, has been alarming has been the anxious haste of certain English Catholics, (Lord Rawlinson and Shirley Williams among them), to identify all English Catholics and indeed the whole Catholic Church with the view that Bobby Sands, Raymond McCreesh, Francis Hughes and Patsy O'Hara, by going on hunger-strike to achieve political prisoner status and dying in the process, have committed suicide. Their deaths, so this view goes, were their own choice and their own fault, and anyone who suggests that some of the blame lies with the British government or with Mrs Thatcher's customary chilling ruthlessness and pigheaded inflexibility is either in a moral muddle or a crypto-supporter of the Provisional IRA. Thus Cardinal Ó Fiaich is branded as a provocative nationalist because he has dared to question the role of the British government in the affair and called for compromise and flexibility on both sides, and a priest — from 'Eire' of course — in Berkshire is accused of wilfully misusing his priesthood because he held a Requiem Mass for Bobby Sands.

The editorial Comment of this journal has never supported or condoned the methods of the Provisional IRA. On the contrary, neither has it supported or condoned the presence of the British in Ulster, nor the methods used to maintain that presence and 'beat the terrorists'. We wonder, however, why certain English Catholics should rush to the support of the government shouting 'suicide' without pausing to reflect that perhaps they may be using 'suicide' in an odd sense when they apply it to the hunger-strikers — normally we use it to describe someone who deliberately takes his or her own life either because they find living intolerably painful and dire, or to escape punishment for, or the consequences of some action of theirs. We wonder too, why certain English Catholics, in their anxiety to join the "we-tooism" of condemning the

IRA, assert that the Catholic Church condemns all violence, when they must know that it does no such thing. The Catholic Church has never held or taught the pacifist position on violence.

Would it be harsh to suggest that it is because they share in a certain brand of English nationalism (of all peoples we are the most fair, tolerant, compassionate, just and incorrupt, especially our soldiers and police) that certain English Catholics hurry to join in the chorus of moral revulsion at the IRA while ignoring the barbarous behaviour of the English not only in Ireland but in Cyprus, Aden, Malaya and numerous other colonies where 'terrorists had to be beaten'?

It has been said often enough by people like John Hume, and others certainly not sympathetic to the IRA, that British rule and the activities of the British army in Ulster continue to be the most efficient recruiting sergeants for the IRA. The squalid pretence that the problems of Ulster flow from the flaring up of mysterious sectarian differences and not from the misery, anger and frustration produced by the sorry mess of 50 years of British rule, the whitewashing of the massacre of Bloody Sunday of January 1972, the arbitrariness and brutality concomitant with internment without trial, the hypocritical shunning of the Strasbourg report of 1976 which found Britain guilty of the crime of torture and inhuman treatment in Northern Ireland, the methods used in the interrogation centres like Castlereagh to extract 'confessions' for the political Diplock trials, the killing of civilians by rubber and plastic bullets and speeding ferret-cars: all these and many more are equally if not more responsible for the deaths of the hunger-strikers and all the violence and misery that has followed.

So long as those beams in the English eye remain, so long does the English condemnation of hunger-strikers lack moral credibility, even when it is made by those 'speaking as English Catholics'. We have to pause and reflect on the possibility that Cardinal Ó Fiaich and the other Northern Ireland bishops may be able to see more clearly, and certainly with more compassion, the complexities and the subtleties of the sorry problem.

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It grieves us to announce that from September 1981, the annual subscription will have to go up by the small amount of £1.00, from £8.00 to £9.00 (\$23.00). This is the first increase since October 1979, during which time the cost of paper, printing and postage have risen alarmingly. The cost of an individual copy will be 75p.