

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND BRITISH LABOUR

This is not a subject on which I would dare to dogmatise or attempt to say the last word at this stage. It would, however, be an affectation to pretend to more diffidence than I feel. Soon after I took my degree, I worked for two years in Neville Chamberlain's Conservative Research Department; later I became a Labour City Councillor and prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Oxford. Brought up a Protestant, I was received not very long ago into the Church. I should indeed be a poor creature if the topic under discussion aroused in me no individual reactions.

The Editor of the *Catholic Herald* has recently computed that out of three million or so Catholics in England, 90 per cent. vote Labour. Be the figure 90 per cent. or 75 per cent., as more often suggested, the fact in any case is striking. It is seldom animadverted to by those who exploit the authoritarian tendencies of a small group of gifted Catholic laymen in the service of an argument that the average British Catholic is a British (not too British) version of General Franco.

It cannot be pretended, however, that the substantial Catholic element in the Labour vote exercises a distinctive influence on Labour principles or policy remotely proportionate to their number or to their merits as citizens. They do not vote Labour because of their Catholicism, nor yet in spite of it. For the most part poor men and women living in large towns, many of them of Irish extraction, their natural bias is towards the party of the under-dog. Individual leaders such as the late John Wheatley have done splendid work. On a few issues mostly concerned with education it is known to be dangerous to tread on Catholic corns. But it is difficult to point to any specifically Catholic contribution towards the creation of the Labour Party or the formulation of its fundamental attitudes.

Must this disappointing state of affairs inevitably continue? A good Catholic who knows anything of social conditions must surely be an ardent social reformer. Is he to be sent forth to the struggle with one hand tied behind his back? Shorn of many of those utopian illusions which have not infrequently brought material benefits, if at the same time much spiritual confusion, can he ever compete with political colleagues and rivals on the Left whose imaginative promises are restricted by no scrupulous consideration of man's

actual nature and potentialities? How far can the Catholic nurtured on *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, even supposing he votes Labour in the absence of a better alternative, really throw himself into the Labour movement with that whole-heartedness which is the prerequisite of political effectiveness?

In my view, he will never do so until he effects a clear separation in his mind between social welfare work and political action. The former kind of activity is properly regarded as 'non-party,' a proper field of co-operation between—shall we say—the Duke of Norfolk and Mr. Richard Stokes. It provides opportunities for vigorous leadership by the clergy, who may find it wise to stand above the tumult of party conflict. Political action, on the other hand, cannot in England to-day even begin to be discussed except in relation to the great political parties. Those who decline to take sides in their frequently uninspiring tournaments can exercise at the best a very limited influence and will usually find themselves painfully impotent. But Catholics, in many political matters more realistic than the mass of their British contemporaries, seem reluctant to face the implications of the fact just mentioned. They seem to hesitate before taking the final pledge of party loyalty, uncertain how far this new allegiance will conflict with doctrines laid down in the Encyclicals, doctrines of over-riding validity and, it is understood, of great practical significance.

Speaking with all reverence, I cannot help feeling that there is a tendency among British Catholics to attempt to extract from the Encyclicals more practical political guidance than they were or are intended to yield. The Encyclicals enjoin elevated and inspiring rules of moral conduct for our dealings with our fellow-men whether we be engaged in political business or private life, and whether we be acting as individuals or in group-formations. They insist on certain reforms of immediate over-riding urgency—none more pressing than the establishment of a wage for all on which a family could decently be raised and educated. There is no doubt that any society in which this programme in its spiritual and material fullness was applied would be transformed overnight beyond our most sanguine calculations. But there seems to be an idea abroad, espoused by, among others, the spirited editor of the *Catholic Herald*, that the Encyclicals go further and prescribe in some sense a Catholic 'social system' which is capable, in some foreseeable future, of being introduced into England. And this is where I join issue.

The Encyclicals do, indeed, expound an ideal system—a system equally far removed from contemporary British capitalism and from any utopia officially pursued by socialists in this or any other coun-

try. It is a system based on the widest possible distribution of property as a means to the provision of the widest possible opportunities for the development of human personality. Described by a variety of names, of which 'Distributism' and 'Personalism' bring out two of its most significant aspects, its virtues make instantaneous appeal to the intelligence of Catholics and of many thinkers outside the Church. There is no need to be pessimistic about its prospects in, say, Ireland, a small agricultural Catholic country. But does anyone seriously suggest that in England in our lifetime there is more than one chance in, say, a hundred of our effecting or witnessing the revolution—for it would be no less—which the introduction of Distributism would involve? And, that prospect failing, the only choice left to the Catholic is between standing apart from the decisive political struggles in order to throw his whole energies behind such bits and pieces of 'distributist' legislation as crop up from time to time, or on the other hand joining forces with one of the two great political parties—with neither of whose ideals can he be altogether in sympathy.

Conditions can be imagined in which the first of these two policies would be the only one honourably open, or indeed permitted, to British Catholics. But in fact, as is well known, Catholics in this country are not discouraged from joining any contemporary party (except the Communists, whose professed atheism rules them out). True, the Conservative ideal, though romantically stated, stands in its social essence for the continuance of inequalities which the Church has repeatedly denounced. True, the Labour Party, in its search for a means of obviating the grosser inequalities, is theoretically committed to a degree of state interference which it would be hard (though not quite impossible, in view of Papal denunciation of monopolistic abuses) to reconcile with the Encyclicals. It is not perhaps impertinent, however, to suggest that the Church has seen fit to take the official ideals of all political parties with just a trace of salt. She prefers to judge them by their works, that is to say, by what they *try* to accomplish.

Applying this test and ignoring for the moment those spheres where the Catholic guidance is infallible and unchangeable, the devout student of the Encyclicals can have little doubt which party during the last twenty years has striven unceasingly to introduce the immediate social reforms envisaged by *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*. Nor do I feel that it is mere Labour fanaticism to express the certainty that after the war it will be once again the Labour Party which will make all the running towards achieving those minimum conditions of decent living asserted once for all in

those two classic documents. Judging the parties, then, not by their admittedly inadequate philosophies, but by their immediate and practical objects, it is not surprising and is, moreover, a matter for discerning approval if 90 per cent. of British Catholics vote Labour. But seeing that the aims pursued are neither unworthy nor unimportant, cannot they permit themselves a measure of enthusiasm and energy in the struggle, so they obtain, as never hitherto, some say in influencing its course?

How will the 10 per cent., including the best-known writers among laymen, resist the conclusion that they ought to be on that side. By pointing, I suppose, to history, and arguing that the forces of the Left have so often proved themselves anti-clerical that they must always be reckoned the enemies of true religion and, with their false conception of man's perfectibility, the chief stumbling-blocks in the way of man's acceptance of the duties of humility and discipline. Those who have arrived at settled conclusions along those lines deserve something better than a reply in a sentence or two at the end of an article. I would suggest, rather, that they ask themselves and answer two questions: (1) Is effective participation in English politics likely to be possible except on the basis of membership of a political party—membership, in fact, of the Conservative or Labour Party? (2) Assuming that the answer to this question is No, are Catholics in the years after the war (a) to wash their hands of practical politics; (b) to criticise from outside with fine contempt for both parties; (c) to join the Conservative, or (d) to join the Labour Party? A number of gifted individuals can through their books or articles do a little under heading (b) to state a truer ideal than that of either party and so *improve* one party or both. But achievement of this character is open only to a handful. The average Catholic must decide between (c) and (d). He may not welcome the choice, but he only escapes it by neglecting his social responsibilities. And once he faces up to it, can he conceivably prefer the party which by and large has always stood for the perpetuation of a system permeated with current evils to the party which, in its blundering over-helpful kind of way, labours unceasingly to bring about those immediate changes which the teaching of the Church demands? On the spiritual plane—if you will—a sad neutrality. On the level of practical improvement, can comradeship be congenial with the party of Dives? Or altogether uncongenial with that of Lazarus?

FRANK PAKENHAM.