

## THE CENTRE PARTY

CATHOLIC political action in Germany dates from the period after the Congress of Vienna. Three main questions influenced its growth; the spread of Liberalism; the Austro-Prussian struggle for leadership among the German states; and the Kulturkampf. The question of Austria or Prussia was really settled in 1866 in favour of the latter, but the problem lingered on until recently under the name of Particularism (Rights of Federal States), though it had comparatively little influence upon the thought of the Catholic party. Liberalism and the Kulturkampf had a more determinate effect. Liberalism and, later, its counterpart Socialism resulted in the separation of Catholic political theory from the commonly held political theory of the period; a result of the Kulturkampf was to form this theory into a political party.

It was natural that Catholic politics and thought should be opposed to the Liberal conceptions of society and the State. Were not most of the contrary to the Church's doctrine of natural design? Thus in 1838 the mighty genius of Goerres already foreshadowed the rise of German Catholicism against the current political creed.

In 1848 some hostility was seen against the Church. Rationalism began to exercise its influence in the southern states, and in 1849 a group of Catholic politicians led by Bishop Geissel and P. Reichensperger was formed. They were already seeking to protect the Church against the encroachments of the State. In 1859 this group adopted the name of the Centre Party, but little action was taken since peaceful relations existed between Church and State.

In the meantime, Bishop von Ketteler was preaching Catholic social doctrine against the disastrous policy of *laissez-faire*. The uprooted masses of industrial workers began to drift into Socialism, whilst the tendency of the workers' movement in general was towards materialism. The seditious influence of Liberalism bore its fruit. Society became the theatre of class antagonism.

Catholic social philosophy found itself in competition with these modern errors. There was no need for a party, but there was a great mission to be fulfilled by outstanding personalities adhering to sound principles. The era of social policy began, initiated by Catholics but not 'Catholic.' Its leaders believed their place to be in German politics, and they opposed any tendency to separate Catholics from political unity.

After the defeat of Austria in 1866 Protestantism became dominant in the Northern States. Anti-Catholic feeling on the questions of religious orders and the infallibility of the Pope grew up and were fostered in official circles. It is hardly necessary to describe the fantastic agitation against Catholicism; but a still greater onslaught was soon to follow—Bismarck's Kulturkampf.

The attack upon the rights of the Church necessitated united action by Catholics. The first German Reichstag (1872) included a Centre Party with a membership of fifty-seven. Ketteler disputed with Bismarck about 'Fundamentals'; Windthorst, afterwards famous for his struggle with Bismarck, accepted the leadership; Catholics from Poland, Bavaria and Hanover united with those from Prussia. In 1871 *Germania*, the official paper of the party, was issued for the first time.

Whilst the Kulturkampf consolidated Catholic forces it alienated Catholics from their countrymen. Bismarck was defeated; Windthorst's parliamentary ability was unequalled, but the confidence of the mass of the German people had been lost. Windthorst tried to widen the basis of the party, as did many of his successors; all these attempts failed; the Centre Party was looked upon as the clerical party.

This development had two deplorable effects. The practical policy derived from the principles of the Church lost much of its popular appeal through its identification with ecclesiastical Catholicism. Catholics, living and working with their fellow countrymen in the same political parties, could have exercised a greater influence against current

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fallacies especially at such times, for instance, as when they belonged to the opposition party. Furthermore, the suspicion of a bigoted section of the population was directed entirely against Catholic statesmen, an effect which contributed largely to the failure of post-war parliamentarianism in Germany. A hostile environment thus prevented the growth of a middle party, including all creeds and based upon an organic conception of society.

However disappointing this development was to most of the leaders, they still aimed at the service of their country and their church in the limited field which remained to them. The Kulturkampf which was intended to smash a religious minority actually united it. The Centre Party stood firm in spite of all Liberal and Socialist hopes to the contrary. Whilst the Church had recovered a fair amount of liberty, the application of its principles became more and more impossible. The defence of these principles was the aim of the Centre Party during the last forty years of its existence.

Attention may be drawn to the fact that the party never possessed what might be called a programme in the true sense of the word. It always confined itself to the defence of those practical conclusions which were suggested by their *Weltanschauung* as soon as such defence became necessary. Opponents often maintained that the Centre Party had no principles—an objection against Catholic social philosophy made by rationalists all the world over.

There is no need to enlarge upon the principles to which the party adhered. All can be found in *Quadragesimo Anno*, and the dissensions among German Catholics, whether within the party or outside it, are of little importance. Where there is life there is friction—particularly in Germany. Ignorance of social principles, the opposition between conservative and progressive circles, all brought their problems. The Bavarian section of the party formed, in 1920, a separate organisation, the Bavarian People's Party. In spite of the original disagreement, good understanding was soon established between the two, and it was

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expected that close co-operation might lead, in time, to a reunion.

The last fifteen years of the party's existence were a period of trial and responsibility. About sixty per cent. of the Catholic population voted 'Centre,' and even the most extreme stresses in Germany's political life altered its strength but little. The electorate of the party was well educated in political principles by the *Volksverein* and the various *Standesvereine* (Working Men's Associations, etc.). A strong daily press with a high reputation supplied current information. Confidence and understanding could thus be promoted among the voters to an extraordinary degree. But outside the party there was distrust. Unselfish service has been given in a true Catholic spirit in times of great national disaster. Assassination and agitation were the return. Every shade of press opinion was united to poison the public mind. Political liberty and the freedom of the press were everywhere abused.

The national revolution swept away the party system. The Centre Party stood longer than all; but changing conditions made its existence impossible. On the sixth of July it dissolved itself in order to leave an open road for the new state.

The Centre Party belongs to the past, and one cannot but feel sorry for its sudden end, for a great tradition was linked up with its name. But Catholic political action has not ceased with the dissolution of the party. The past was chiefly a period of organisations; it seems that the future will be one of personalities. What will the new Germany be? German Catholics are ready to assist Hitler in the realisation of many of his ideas.

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