

THE ECONOMICS OF SANCTITY

IN our present state of spiritual emergency must some form of economic reconstruction precede spiritual revival? This issue is dividing Catholic opinion. On the one hand Mr. Eric Gill writes: 'Instead of doing anything about economics the moralists fulminate against the unborn child As someone said: "The drains are smelling—let's have a day of intercession!"' And again: 'The clergy are barking up the wrong tree when from the altar steps they talk about sin to people who have been deprived of the possibility of living according to common natural morals.' Then Father Drinkwater: 'The economic problem fills the whole sky, nothing, nothing, nothing, can be done until that problem has been dealt with.'

On the other hand, M. Maritain supports Péguy, and holds that if the social revolution is to come at all it must also be moral. He would go even further: 'One is condemned to a work primarily destructive, if one wished to change the face of the earth without first changing one's own heart, and this no man can do by himself. It may well be that if an almighty love really changed our hearts, the external task would already be half accomplished.'⁴

In supporting the latter opinion, I submit, therefore, that it is just as bad an error to over-emphasize the importance of economics as to under-rate it. Prevailing conditions of life can help or hinder, as both the moralist and psychiatrist never tire of reminding us—but how far? Who is to say, for example, in exactly what circumstances the keeping of the difficult commandment becomes heroic virtue? Birth prevention may be the result of bad housing, unemployment and slave-labour, but to what extent? Was it a highly industrialized nation or a Catholic peasantry

¹ *Money and Morals*, p. 28.

² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴ *Du Régime Temporel et de la liberté.*

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that first fell a victim to the doctrines of Malthusianism? And in England is birth prevention the vice of the poor or the comfortable middle classes? Would St. Thomas have applied his famous dictum—*magis est pascendus fame moriens quam docendus*—to a miner and his family of four living on thirty-seven shillings a week? Granting that the Servile State is with us, has not the Church previously encountered similar conditions and instead of directly and actively denouncing slavery ultimately triumphed by insisting positively on prayer and the spiritual life?

I am far from saying that urgent re-adjustment of the world economic structure is unnecessary, or that the uncontrolled machine is not a menace, but I do strongly maintain that reconstruction should begin in the realm of the Spirit and not *primarily* of economics or politics. Spiritual life is the very antithesis of modern mechanization; it seeks development from within rather than from without, aspiring to perfection in a life of charity with God and conforming in all things to the will and good-pleasure of God. When human desire is, in this way, thrown forward into eternity, our attitude towards life is changed, poverty is blessed, humility exalted, meekness rewarded, the machine useful but unimportant. Only in the Spirit can men find power to be still.

The same truth can be expressed in another way by saying that the chief obstacle to the re-making of England is the apathy of Catholics. We are children of the age, craving its comforts and distractions—the radio, cinema, motor-car, daily paper, telephone, central heating and so on. And why not? There is no reason, you will say, why we should not use these things. That is not my point; but rather that we have lost our power to surrender them. Secondary benefits of life are assuming an undue and even dominating importance. There can be only one way of restoring the power of voluntary renunciation and detachment and that is through the spiritual life. This fundamental truth must be recognized and accepted,

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especially by the growing school of *doctrinaire* lay-apostles. Right-thinking will help us, but alone it is impotent, giving us direction without inclination or power. Pioneer movements, such as the Land Associations and the Distributists, will never succeed (if they are to remain voluntary) merely as sound economic theories; they must be welcomed as spiritual opportunities. The spirit alone can drive men from the world into the desert of the Kingdom.

The acceptance of the principle above outlined, *viz.*, that world recovery must be heralded by spiritual revival, alters the direction of our apostolic efforts. Optimists tell us that the Church in this country is making headway; and when asked for reasons will immediately begin to assess the spiritual in terms of the material. We are given the annual number of converts, the increase in church and school buildings over a period, say, of twenty years; we are told of packed city churches. The same tendency may be noticed in certain schools where the spiritual level is measured by the number of communions each week or year. In the parishes a preacher's worth is estimated by the congregation he commands. And the preacher, himself, when addressing ten millions by radio, is often overawed by the importance of the occasion.

Now against this materialistic view we know quite well that the gifts of God are in His own keeping, and that spiritual benefit is not commensurate with the material means at our disposal. The great lessons of life are given to a few; the flame of truth is passed on to the individual and not to the crowd. God does not follow in the wake of the Empire builder. 'When they sought to make Him king He fled to the mountains Himself alone.' Nor does He especially bless modern methods.

To estimate the state of the Church in this country we must therefore, examine the depth of our spiritual life rather than its extent; what we *are* than the many things we *do*; and as a safe guide we might consider our attitude towards prayer.

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Experienced priests up and down the country confirm my own view that many Catholics are practically ceasing to pray. Whatever be the cause of this, whether it be ignorance, for which (*pace* Mr. Gill) those who turn the Catholic pulpit into a chair of economics are partly responsible, it is difficult to say; but the fact is indisputable. Note, for instance, the gradual decline of the Rosary as a personal devotion, especially in the south. Or on Men's Communion Sunday remark how few of them use prayer-books, or show a spirit of recollection after communion, or stay behind to make any thanksgiving. The same observation applies to children. At a recent retreat, out of twenty-four lads from representative Catholic families, two brought prayer-books with them, and only four had one at all. This attitude towards the prayer-book is more significant than many people realize. To the old generation of Catholic the prayer-book was not merely a collection of prayers but a book of favourite and repeated prayers which revealed through constant use greater and greater depth of meaning; it was a familiar avenue of approach to God—a simple and safe way to contemplation.

This shallowness of our spiritual life is also shown by our neglect of asceticism and mortification. On the one hand we are reminded that the faithful have neither the physical strength nor stamina of former days, whilst on the other we are witnessing the formation and growth of Youth Movements which are vital in everything save the spiritual. We have adopted, so to say, the material of asceticism without its motive. We slim and diet like heroes but cannot fast; vigils ruin our health but never night-clubs and dancing; we abstain joyously, even vain-gloriously, by doctor's orders but demur on Fridays. It is eloquent of present-day Catholicism that whilst our timorous Victorian grandmother was able and willing to fast, her grand-daughter who smokes, drives a car (sports model), runs a hundred yards in eleven seconds, plays three vigorous sets of tennis before dinner and occasionally swims the Channel, blenches at the idea! She is pre-

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pared to be martyred for any cause except religion.

We are not, however, to suppose that the modern generation is frivolous or irreligious; it is merely untrained. Religion has become a sacramental formalism divorced from the ascetic life; just the sum-total of things to be done if we are to avoid the divine wrath, and not the joyful following of a beloved Friend. We have lost the *sensus Christi*, the love-motif which alone can inspire the spirit of adventure. Who is to blame? Are we not too busy doing many things—'getting results'—and neglecting the better part? The method of Christ is to hide the leaven in three measures of meal, *former une élite*, as our French brethren have always insisted, and this in spite of any prevailing conditions whatsoever. The first need of our times is contemplation.

As shrewd an observer as Mr. Hilaire Belloc can say, referring to the conversion of England: 'Humanly speaking it is impossible. I do not say impossible in a thousand years, after I know not what transformations and catastrophes, when our civilization shall have broken down, as every civilization does in its turn, and when men shall have been taught by chastisement. But humanly speaking, it is impossible.'⁵ When Mr. Belloc can write like that surely it is time for prayer and not economics. And in that lies our hope. Let those alone despair who imagine that the conversion of England and of the world is impossible because their vision is limited by a human horizon.

'I beseech thee,' saith Abraham, pleading for Sodom, 'be not angry, Lord, if I speak yet once more: What if ten just men be found there?' And He said: 'I will not destroy it for the sake of the ten.' Abraham failed, and so may we, but the incident does, at any rate, give us some idea of the Divine condition for world recovery at a time when humanly speaking the future is dark and desolate and the days of the prophets are gone.

FERDINAND VALENTINE, O.P.

⁵ *Essays of a Catholic*, p. 89.