

THE NEW COMMUNISM

An answer to a Priest

MY dear Father X—

You have set me a very difficult problem, which my fifty years study of theology makes me chary of solving. In using the word difficult I do not mean the difficulty of gathering from your long letter with its many anxious repetitions the few points of uncertainty which you wish me to solve. My main difficulty after having gathered the heads of your difficulties is to solve the few difficulties which I have gathered.

Of course I know that you are not a Communist. I know this in spite of the wide-spread opinion that you are a Communist in mind and heart, though not in name. I know that what men and some of your fellow Priests take to be your Communism is your quite rational conviction that many of the alleged refutations of Communism do not refute. Of course you are too good a logician to think that you have proved a man's opinion to be false merely by showing that the arguments for that opinion are false. A man may bring up wrong arguments to prove that the earth is round. But to show that his arguments are not true does not prove that the world is not round. Hence your refutation of the refutations of Communism does not prove that Communism is right. But still less does your refutation of the common refutations of Communism prove that you are, what many hold you to be—a Communist.

I say all this in defence of you; and of myself. But having said it in the hope that it may be believed, I pass on to the main points of your letter which will probably be accounted Communist by those who think you a—Communist.

You tell me that a new type of men calling themselves Communists is arising. Like myself you are often a little uncertain of what is Communism. Your uncertainty, and

mine, arises from the undeniable fact that no political party has killed so many Communists as those calling themselves Communist. Under the Soviet Communism of Russia an avowed Capitalist has almost more chance of escaping "liquidation" than has an avowed Communist who dares to side with Trotsky. Such wholesale destruction of Communists by Communists is going on everywhere in the U.S.S.R., that some of the more intelligent capitalists are purposely keeping their hands off Russia. They grimly joke about the ultimate fate of the cats of Kilkenny. They have a statistical graph showing that if the present state of liquidation of Communists by Communists is maintained, Russia will be made safe for capitalism after a Five Years' plan. For you and me this expectation of the Capitalists is not an unwritten page of Alice in Wonderland. We have heard East End hundred-per-cent Communists denounce Stalin as a Capitalist!

But the new type of Communists is not so much the one who is removing other Communists out of his way, as the one who is removing a good deal of Karl Marx's teaching out of the way. He is beginning to think and say that "Das Kapital" would be a better book if it were gutted of its Dialectical Materialism. To the new type of Communist, Marx is not what the first Bolsevist wanted. Lenin is to be considered a super-man who makes a very good successor to God. Marx was an over-sensitive, but not over-sensible German Mid-Victorian. But the Mid-Victorian of Germany meant a so-called Hegelian. The trouble about Marx was that he had studied philosophy, or, at least, he had studied that particular German Word-Fog called Philosophy; but had not studied it enough. Some of his followers of the automatic pistol type rather of the hammer and sickle type are beginning to suspect this dialectical materialism as reeking of capitalistic ideology.

But the new Communist whom we are beginning to meet merely thinks that this dialectical materialism, whether it is or not a device of capitalism, is the death of Communism. For the new Communist with his disinterested view of the

past, Communism is a healing programme and not a philosophical sticking-plaster. So the new Communism, imitating the Scotch-lasses with the herring, resolutely guts Communism of its Dialectical Materialism.

From this new attitude towards Dialectical Materialism there comes by many ways a new attitude towards Religion. Whatever might be said about the truth or falsehood of the Apostles' Creed it was more intelligible to the average man, and even to the average Russian, than was the very simplest explanation of Dialectical Materialism.

When our new thoughtful type of Communist began to wonder whether it was Religion or Dialectical Materialism that was dope for the people he began to see that his Communism could claim to supplant Religion, by claiming that Communism itself was a Religion. To have seen as much as this was to suspect that any active legal measures for suppressing Religion would be, for the Communist, not just homicidal, but suicidal. With that suspicion, changed to conviction, the new Communist became one whose attitude towards Religion was described wittily as "active non-interference."

A last attitude of the new Communism was always more implicit in the older Communism than was the new attitude towards Dialectical Materialism and Religion. Let me approach the subject historically; or, if you will, autobiography.

I have always considered that among the many momentous principles or recommendations of the *Rerum Novarum*, the most momentous was:

"The law should favour ownership; and its policy should be to induce as many as possible of the humbler classes to become owners."

The recommendation to increase the ownership system as much as possible and therefore to decrease the Wage-System as much as possible, whether Capitalistic Wage-System or Communistic Wage-System, justified Catholics in calling the *Rerum Novarum* "the Workmen's Charter."

My long experience in preaching this momentous recom-

mendation to every type of audience, non-Catholic and Catholic, has not lacked surprise. A large section, perhaps a majority of my Catholic listeners, have frankly called it "Socialism." My street-corner Communist has met it with derision. Usually he has called it "Capitalism"; and me, a Capitalist. I have rarely succeeded in convincing him that the Pope who wishes the workers to have some property wishes them more than the economists and politicians who wish them to have no property. Therefore my average street-corner Communist utterly rejects this Papal principle that the policy of the State should be "to induce as many as possible to become owners."

My long and wide-spread experience of the street-corner Communists' attitude towards the principle did not prepare me for what I heard in my debate with a scholarly academic Communist, Mr. Strachey. I could hardly trust my ears when Mr. Strachey read out, and emphatically approved, of the Papal principle so detested by his friends at the street-corner. Then he added words to this effect: "The Pope is here saying that all have a right to consumptive property. This is sound Communism. Karl Marx agreed that consumptive property should belong to the individual. On the other hand, productive property should belong, not to the individual, but to the Community. In other words there should be individual ownership in consumptive property; and common ownership in productive property." On hearing from the mouth of an accredited Communist this acceptance of the Catholic principle of widely-extended ownership in consumptive property I felt, and still feel, that the discussion with Communists had entered a new phase.

The significance of the new attitude can be gauged by two principles: (1) Production is for consumption; and not Consumption for Production; (2) If one thing is for another (a spade for digging; a boat for sailing) it is measured and valued by that other. A Communism that upholds the right of the individual to consumptive property has implicitly set up a tribunal for judging communal productive property; and of saying whether it is good or bad.

BLACKFRIARS

For the moment, I wish to go no further. I will sum up in a few words. A false materialistic philosophy, whatever it calls itself, should be condemned. An anti-God principle or policy, whatever it calls itself, should be condemned. A political theory which denies the individual's right to either productive or consumptive property, whatever it call itself, should be condemned. But a political theory which has no false philosophy, and no anti-God policy, and admits the individual's right to consumptive property should not be condemned merely because, rightly or wrongly, it calls itself Communism.

It is this new thing which is now offered to Catholic discussion. The discussion will be fruitful only if, as far as possible, Catholic disputants learn from another Church what St. Thomas Aquinas so fully learned, that in condemning even the wildest theories, care must be taken to sift the true from the false, lest in our headlong zeal against the false we fatally condemn what is true.

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