

CATHOLICS AND THE CROWN

AT the time of writing (December 16th) ministers of State and dignitaries of the Established Church show much solicitude that the mysterious events which culminated in the abdication of Edward VIII should be forgotten (and some would piously add, forgiven) as soon as possible. Since so many of the attendant circumstances still remain unexplained, the solicitude may appear to some to be sinister. But it is in no spirit of obstreperousness that we recall the remarkably non-conformist attitude adopted by our Catholic press during the "crisis." It seems probable, though the fact would be hard to verify, that among no one section of the community was there such sympathy for His former Majesty than among Catholics of all classes; and nowhere more widespread suspicion, founded or unfounded, that the affair was in some way a "frame-up."

On Thursday, December 3rd, with a uniformity in diversity that Dr. Goebbels might well envy, the London press—on the pretext of a constitutional crisis whose very existence was shortly to be denied—released the long-suppressed story of "the King's desire." Before the public had recovered its breath, *The Tablet* was out the following morning with a memorable leader on "The King's Matter" which was as remarkable for its penetration and its independence as for its promptness. The Editor of *GK's Weekly* followed shortly on a similar line. The following Friday, *The Catholic Times* gave unusual prominence to features as unmistakable in their import as they were, perhaps, difficult to substantiate, roundly announcing a "ramp" of Big Finance against the progressive King. *The Universe* and *The Catholic Herald*, if more judicious, showed obvious reluctance to add to the columns of unctuous reprobation which the press at large, led by *The Times* and *The Daily Herald*, offered daily to King Edward and Mrs. Simpson. *The Catholic Times* indeed, while emphatic in its assertion of the indissolubility of marriage, even hinted darkly that perhaps Mrs. Simpson (whom it nevertheless preferred to refer to as Mrs. Spencer

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rather than Miss Warfield) might never yet have been validly married. All said and done, the obviously spontaneous and unconcerted reaction of the Catholic press contrasted sharply with that of the bulk of the secular newspapers, and still more with those of the Church of England, the bitter vindictiveness and unfairness of some of whose spokesmen has been one of the least agreeable features of the whole affair.

But the Bishop of Bradford, whose excessive simplicity or excessive guile brought matters to a head, spoke no more than the truth when he drew public attention to the fact that the ex-King made no public manifestation of his sense of the need of grace. A deplorable fact; but Catholics would prefer this to a hypocritical pretence to a sense he did not possess or to conformity with rites in which he had no conviction that grace was dispensed. It does not seem anomalous that a non-churchgoing nation should have a non-churchgoing King, and that the King-Emperor of a non-Christian Empire should pay little heed to the established religion of one of his dominions. That the organs of the powers that be should turn on their King on moral grounds has seemed to many the extremity of our notorious national hypocrisy; and not all are yet satisfied that the reason for the abdication was less that King Edward's private life was too like that of many of his subjects than that his public life was too like that of a King.

Some may be surprised that the section of the community which is most unyielding on the sanctity and indissolubility of marriage and on the sexual moral code should have reacted as it did. Our very friendly contemporary, *The Church Times*, saw in the attitude of *The Tablet* "one more striking example of the Roman Catholic opposition to democracy." Nothing could be more untrue. What the "crisis" has made abundantly clear is that the real power which governs us is neither royal nor democratic; let alone, as many of us would wish it, both. The whole business was staged and arranged without any reference to the people, or even to their alleged representatives in the English and Dominion parliaments. The ex-King was not permitted, on

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“constitutional” grounds, to present his own case to the people so long as he was King.

Catholics had in common with their late Sovereign an instinctive repugnance to sham. Kingship, however constitutional, is authority; and all authority comes from God, all Kingship a partial sharing within a limited sphere of the Kingship of Christ, no matter by whom it is exercised. If they have a particular abhorrence for what they must regard as irregular living in high places, it is precisely because it does dishonour to the office: but it does not make a sham of the office itself. It may dishonour the Crown; it does not degrade it as we have seen it degraded. Anglicans have made much of the point that the religious coronation and anointing of one who notoriously intended to marry a divorcée would have been a sacrilegious mockery. But it would not make a sham and a mockery of the rite itself, as would the crowning of a powerless puppet. Ceremonial and symbolism occupy too large a place in the life of Catholics for them readily to acquiesce in empty ceremonial or meaningless symbolism.

Not instinctive Fascism, but instinctive democracy, put Catholics in the forefront of the movement for a petition to the former King for the remedying of the social and economic injustice which the *de facto* rulers do little or nothing to alleviate. Rightly or wrongly, many of them saw in Edward VIII one who would be a King indeed, the servant of his people. If a royalty which is a reality is “unconstitutional,” and if a real democracy which is before all things government *for* the people is “unconstitutional,” so much the worse, they are inclined to think, for the constitution. We may regret that the former King became convinced that it was impossible for him to be a real King without Mrs. Simpson. But Catholics are the first to recognize that it would not have affected the reality of the royalty, any more than the morality of a Pope affected the reality of the Papacy. As it is, it seems difficult to maintain that the reality of the royal office itself has not been profoundly affected.

Since the generation in which the Stuart tartan was first used at Balmoral the dynasty was held to represent an

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immemorial hereditary right. The legal consequences of December, 1688, had been long forgotten, and, in a phrase from *Mrs. Dalloway*, it seemed pleasant to be ruled by a descendant of Hengist and Horsa. There was a growing divergence between the position held by the Crown in constitutional law in practice and in popular myth. The position in constitutional law and in practice has been unaffected by the abdication. It will be long before the position in popular myth is repaired even by the most febrile press propaganda. It may be another century before the English people are convinced that the Crown is held by a primogeniture as unchanging and therefore as inevitable as a law of nature.

The Monarchy was perhaps the only institution that was universally respected in post-war England. The glamour of Victorian romanticism had been banished for ever from the House of Lords by Mr. Lloyd George's last creations, the Victorian respect for the dignity of the Commons had changed to a wearied and sceptical impatience. The glamour, the romanticism and respect had been transferred to the Royal House. No one can tell how deeply public opinion was affected when the tides of an intensive press publicity first turned against the occupant of the throne.

A change in popular myth can never be a triviality. The visit to South Wales had symbolized the return in England of an older and to us a more democratic conception of Kingship; the vision of Kingship as the refuge of the poor, as the final court of appeal from a class-ridden ministry. It was a short resurrection. Perhaps the historians of the future will place in December, 1936, the last victory of the Whig temper.

M.-W., O.P.