

THE CHRISTIAN AS PIONEER

' I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.'

(*The Ballad of the White Horse* by G. K. Chesterton)

FATHER Conrad Pepler has done well¹ to emphasize the sacrifice involved in a return to the land upon which more than one of the older hands at Catholic land propaganda has found it necessary to insist, as against the 'Arcadian Shepherd' school on the one hand and the 'Sound Economic Proposition' enthusiasts on the other.

In the Catholic Truth Society pamphlet on *The Catholic Land Movement*, the first attempt at systematic public exposition of our aims and motives, the present writer expressed a point of view which he ventures to quote:

' Now while we believe that, whether in the meanwhile we work for or against it, this [the basing of our social system "on the land whence all our subsistence comes and on the labour of our hands which God has ordained as the means thereto"] is the only possible ultimate development, the continued existence of the vast *commercio-industrial* organization, with its specious offers of wealth, luxury and "convenience," its false philosophy of ease, "leisure" and mechanical distractions as the ends of human life, and of work as mere irksome toil to be curtailed as much as possible, must remain as a stumbling block and an irresistible temptation to those not supported by true principles in facing the undoubted physical hardships and inconveniences involved in the return to a peasant life. It has been said that no people has ever voluntarily gone out from the city into the wilderness, save under the influence of a religious ideal. Mere economic considerations are not enough. Individual selfishness keeps its victims in the doomed city right up to the moment of its final chaotic

¹ Cf. *The Land of Hope*, BLACKFRIARS, November, 1934.

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debâcle, when at last famine, disease and bloodshed drive them from the smouldering heap of ruins. Only those with faith in the divine guidance, with trust in the divine providence for the future, will flee as Lot fled from Sodom. The rest will wait until it is too late, and the fire and brimstone, once it begins to rain upon them, rains faster than they can fly. So, as the Faith was the means of recivilizing Europe after the break-up of the Roman Empire, only that same Faith can be the means of re-creating the modern world. Only a firm grasp of ultimate truth and the assistance of God's grace can strengthen our weak human nature to become the pioneers and exemplars of the finally inevitable exodus. Without such pioneers and exemplars the new British exodus can only become a blind panic, in which our civilization will be destroyed as utterly as that of Ninive or Babylon. On the Catholic minority must fall the burden of saving our country.'

In the same pamphlet, too, Father Vincent McNabb warns those with too rosy an outlook on the 'liberty' to be regained by a return to the land. 'Yet this liberty,' he says, 'is not a man's physical and moral power to do what he would, but to do what he ought. The half-truth, and therefore heresy, of "self-expression" takes no lasting root on the land.'

This pamphlet was written three years ago. What has been the trend of Catholic opinion towards land settlement since then?

Of interest and even, within the obviously circumscribed area of their material means, of action on the part of higher ecclesiastical authorities there has been a very gratifying increase. Of action, too much of it unco-ordinated, by laymen there has been, perhaps, as much as could be expected in all the circumstances. Of anything like general approval, to say nothing of general co-operation, on the part of Catholics, clerical and lay, as a body there has been no sign. Why is this?

It is submitted that a foremost reason is that the appreciation of the real economic position is still confined

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in this country to a very small group; and that group, though including probably all the *leaders*, does not include by any means all the rank and file of the Land Associations. The kind of 'Arcadian Shepherd' talk deprecated by Father Pepler still persists amongst these latter and tends to give outsiders a very false idea of the official and responsible movement itself.

Years ago Father Vincent McNabb formulated an economic principle which seems still to be regarded in this country as, to say the least, a mere eccentricity on the part of a gifted but impractical visionary. Whereas in fact the whole world outside Great Britain, but including Ireland, is daily embracing it more and more as the over-riding principle of economic policy. That principle is, in Father McNabb's words, that 'things should be produced where they can be most economically consumed.' In the language of the politician its application to-day is called 'Economic Nationalism.'

It is not proposed to discuss this, the most striking symptom as yet of the beginning of the new age of decentralization which is coming upon us masked by the, probably temporary, strengthening of central governments necessary to deal with the great but moribund aggregations, both economic and political, of the capitalist era. To do so would probably lead to an accusation against the writer of 'party politics,' there being, apparently, many persons unable to distinguish a statement of fact from the advocacy of a cause. But the failure to realize the *fact*, as distinct from any approval or disapproval of a policy, still blinds the mass of our Catholic, no less than our non-Catholic, fellow countrymen to the need of recreating our primary subsistence production, quite apart from the desirability or otherwise of the mode of life this involves for those who must do it. This affects the minds both of potential settlers and of potential financial backers.

To take the settlers first. Though one could wish he had avoided the loose and inaccurate use of the word 'slavery' in its popular sense, Father Pepler has undoubt-

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edly pointed out a *fact* in referring to the very real immediate sacrifices these are called upon to make. Neither can they hope, so long as the present economic order lasts, for a return for their labour proportionate to that available to the industrial worker *while he is in work*. They can be offered only hard work for a pittance; generally, so long as they must compete with the overseas imports necessary to square the accounts of industrialism, but little above a bare subsistence, whether in money or, if they consume their own products, in kind. The latter, indeed, is but very partially possible, so long as they must meet industrial 'overheads' and rely on industrialism for their secondary needs.

A good many men will face this in order to preserve their self-respect by avoiding the dole; a smaller, though still a considerable, number will make the sacrifice of town comforts because they recognize the compensating advantages of better, even if plainer, fare, of freedom from many of the dangers to health of soul and body inseparable from town life and of variety of interest in work. I do not think Father Pepler recognizes sufficiently the value of this last advantage. One does not hoe mangolds all day all through the year. But very few will feel themselves justified in expecting a family or even a wife, who may not appreciate the compensations as they do, to share their sacrifice when they are doubtful of the ultimate relative future of the new country and town bred generations.

Unless the Family Farm can become a family tradition and the true village community an established institution, so that the struggle is no longer a single-handed one, the individual who goes back to the land will remain the drudge with never a day and hardly an hour of leisure that he too often is at present. This is the lot of the pioneer, and it is for pioneers that the Catholic Land Associations have called, asking them to face the hardships for the love of God and for the generations to come. The two loves are interwoven. But before they can become the inspiration of a great body of pioneers there must be widespread cer-

titude amongst those from whom we are to recruit them that they are enduring now so that their children may not have to endure worse things. At present that certitude is not widespread. The great value of the BLACKFRIARS article on the *Land of Hope* is in providing this class of potential settler with a new angle, hitherto I do not think explicitly stated in Land Movement literature, from which they can look on their sacrifice as vicarious sacrifice for actual fault.

The potential financier is sometimes the potential settler himself, more often what is to-day called a 'backer.' Both these classes are affected by more or less the same considerations, though in a rather different way. The man hesitating about embarking his own capital in settling himself naturally again thinks of his family, in whose interests it is, of course, his duty to lay it out. Now there can be no question that all the evidence is that to-day 'farming doesn't pay.'

This does not necessarily mean that a living cannot be made at it. But it does mean that the investment of a certain capital in farming will not provide an income so large—or even, taking a short view, so certain—as its investment in other directions. This may be challenged; indeed, the writer expects it to be challenged, by certain optimistic supporters of the Land Movement. Nevertheless, taking, I repeat, the short view and assuming conditions will not change, or will continue to change in the direction of developments up to the present, it is certainly true. The man with £10,000 can get an unearned income of, say, £400 a year. He will have to work pretty hard at farming, especially if he has to 'buy a learning,' to make a great deal more. He will not have to work nearly so hard in business to get, I do not say necessarily to earn, double or treble the amount. All this is true *so long as the present system lasts*. Unless he is convinced of its more or less imminent passing, the potential farmer may well hesitate, not from selfish, but from purely unselfish motives.

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To the potential 'backer' this regard for his posterity may, of course, also be of weight. But let us assume simply that, being of good will, he is also blessed with sufficient of this world's goods to invest or give of a surplus. He naturally wishes either simply to invest for a return—I am here dealing with current practice, not with ultimate theories of moral principle—or to ensure that his money does the maximum of good. Now, to invest it in a concern obviously financially unsound, as is farming to-day, is mere folly, unless he believes that in the long run it will pay, in a return to himself or his heirs; as, *e.g.*, by the ownership of a piece of land when all paper securities have vanished in a financial collapse. Meanwhile, he must be content with no return, or at any rate with a return below that obtainable in other investments. To attempt to finance land settlement by loans at ordinary commercial rates and on the ordinary commercial conditions of to-day is to court failure. It is, of course, another matter to borrow money and rely on contributions from sympathisers for repayment of principle and/or interest. Which brings us to the consideration of the 'giving backer.'

His motives may be of two kinds. He may regard the Land Movement as merely a palliative for temporary unemployment, the relief of present distress. Of this class there are, it is to be feared, too many. The danger of them, as also that of the lender of similar views who 'wants to help but cannot afford to give outright,' and looks for repayment from subscriptions of those who can afford to give perhaps in smaller sums, is that he tends, by controlling the finance, to control also the policy of the organization to which he subscribes. It is not necessary to enlarge upon this. It will be obvious that, under such control, the task of recreating a true peasantry will be greatly hampered, if not made impossible. A consideration which applies also to the acceptance of Government aid so long as the mentality of the Government remains commercialist.

If, on the other hand, the giver gives simply with the idea of helping the deserving to help themselves, he must

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have a true view of the real position, or he must feel that he is doing not good but harm in wasting his money to enable fools to consummate their folly.

Is it then necessary to convert the country, or at least the mass of our Catholic fellow-citizens, by the rather arid and difficult road of economic reasoning? Can we, indeed, hope to do so, in view of the fact that the ultimate lesson must be that it will pay, not necessarily themselves, but only, possibly, their posterity, for them to work or invest 'at a loss' for an indefinite period? It is to be feared that not many will be convinced that much. 'My heart bleeds,' said a sympathizer to (I think) Wilberforce, 'for the poor slaves.' 'How much does it bleed?' returned the abolitionist. 'Does it bleed five pounds?' It is understood that it did not. Nor, I think, will many well-to-do Catholics believe the collapse—until it is upon them and they have lost all—the price of a motor car, still less an appreciable 'come down' in the fictitious social scale.

Is the Land Movement then already doomed? No, most emphatically. As it is certain that the pioneer settler must face hardships, as it is certain that comparatively few will unswervingly believe that the ultimate (temporal) reward that awaits, perhaps not even themselves but their children or their nation, is worth their sacrifice, so, in the present writer's opinion, will few of those having this world's goods face the corresponding sacrifice involved in financial help for an equally distant and, to most of them, problematical gain. But put it in both cases, as Father Pepler does in the case of the settler and as against the advocate of mechanization (on which there is much to be said or reiterated did space allow), on the footing of *atonement* on the moral basis, and the appeal, properly and repeatedly made, should go home.

We have wasted our native land, we have ruined our native husbandry, we have driven the sons of our dead peasantry into the dole queue, their daughters on to the streets! For what? That we might enjoy the cabaret club and the cinema, Newmarket Heath and the dog track, the

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Rolls Royce and the motor-bike, the steam yacht and the 'Brighton Belle,' caviare and tinned peaches: We are all implicated; there is no class monopoly of blame in this matter. It is true that the original devastation of our countryside was the work of the rich. But to-day the humbler townsman enjoys—so long only, be it granted, as he is in work, but that is again another aspect we cannot deal with here—comforts bought also by the wastage of that land God gave us for our sustenance and by the exploitation of the ends of the earth which are not *our* heritage. Here is clearly a national dereliction, here surely something that every Catholic must feel, once it is brought home to him, the call for *penance*. Here an opportunity of fruitful mortification for all in some degree, for some, as I at least verily believe, a vocation to a life that shall blossom in truly heroic virtue.

HERBERT SHOVE.