

THE NEW AGE

That European society is in a state of decline is generally accepted. That the Catholic influence on the institutions of that society has been seriously diminished if not altogether eliminated is deplored by those who appreciate the Church's civilising power. The latter naturally do everything possible to reassert the claims of the Church and serious men of all kinds endeavour according to their limited means to prevent the decline. It may however be more useful and it seems more in accordance with the facts to regard the new age as already begun and, if not completely to solve, at least to propose a number of questions about the newest tendencies.

The fundamental fact is that our civilisation is something utterly different from what is properly described as European civilisation. The latter was established through the contact of the Roman and Barbarian worlds under the guiding influence of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church fused them and gave to society its distinguishing mark.

It is not a question of whether there were more baptised or better Catholics in mediæval times than there are in our own day. It is rather that society was then Catholic in outlook, with religion influencing all aspects of private and public life, while to-day it can no longer be called even Christian.

The rulers of mediæval society, the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, the Hohenstaufens and the Carolingians, Henry II and Philip the Fair, quarrelling with one another, disobedient to the head of Christendom, were all Catholics by Baptism and profession. Further, even while rejecting it in practice, they recognised the authority of the Church in principle and again and again returned, submissive and repentant, composing their quarrels and abandoning their crimes, to the feet of Peter's successor. The same spirit prevailed amongst the turbulent barons and nobles who oppressed the common people as the capitalist exploiter does

to-day. Only the latter is not open as they were to more benign influences which might bring them to alleviate the lot of the poor. And the common people themselves, sinful and depressed, yet had a capacity for rising to the heights of sanctity and possessed a dignity which seem utterly lost to modern man.

There was deep Faith, properly based on the authority of God revealing Himself in the Incarnation and received from the Church which He established to propagate His Revelation. There was a moral system, recognized not only by the individual but by society and with it a deep sense of the real meaning of sin. The Church's teaching on Faith and Morality had far-reaching effects in the form of social institutions which attempted to ensure justice in commercial dealings and recognition of the dignity of human personality; her intervention too was often effective in promoting peace and reconciliation between princes and securing humane treatment for their subjects.

In the sphere of art, the mediæval achievement is visible in the clearest fashion even to modern eyes. Pictures and statues, churches and even public buildings retain a beauty which can only be the result of Faith. Recreation itself was a form of rejoicing at the good dispositions of the Almighty. Sunday was passed in imitation of His eternal rest and of His joy in the creative work He had accomplished, other days were set apart for rest and happiness because God had chosen then to take one of His saints to Himself.

There is not space to show how that influence faded. It must however be recalled that the Faith was attacked at its foundations by certain leaders of the pagan Renaissance and in the Reformation which followed it. The divisions of Europe were accentuated by the religious wars and the peace of Westphalia established the principle of secularism in politics. The absolutist rulers made the Church their slave instead of their director and when the mob rose up to overthrow them the Church also lost not only privilege but much of its power. Revolutionary liberalism was its sworn enemy but, precisely for that reason, also oppressed the very masses

whom it professed to free. To-day the long de-Christianized masses have either expressed themselves in entirely new religious, political and social forms or are still struggling against a decadent, bewildered but anti-Catholic liberalism.

Fascism, National-Socialism and Communism have this at least in common, that they are mass-movements. They may in the end betray the masses and in fact have already in many respects betrayed them, but what strength they retain is due to this fact that the vehement impulse of the mass which gave them their origin is still far from being spent. Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin are all men of the people and embody in themselves the spirit of their respective nations in the present age. The two last are implacably opposed to the influence of the Catholic Church or of any Christian body on the institutions over which they have control and they claim for their own movements the dignity of a veritable religion. The Fascist leader may not go so far, but the Church's influence on society is only permitted through her modification of the lives and outlook of individuals. Not one of them has the Catholic outlook possessed by the wildest mediæval freebooter.

Nor are their fellow-rulers in a much better state. There are men of State who are excellent Catholics and good Christians but practically none who are in a position to apply the Church's teaching to the elevation of society. Salazar is doing a great deal in Portugal, but that is at Europe's extremity. Imredy might do much in Hungary, were it not that his country is subject to the same pressure which brought about the collapse of Austria. Franco can help to restore the old spirit in Spain, provided that he regards the Church as a benign educator and directive force and not as a mere handmaid. The noblest Catholic statesman of them all, who really had achieved much with limited means and against the most stubborn resistance—Schuschnigg—was the first victim of the new barbarians.

The fate of Austria is indeed the most striking example of the advance into a newer, rougher age. In that small country an attempt was made to revive the spirit of Christen-

dom and the Catholic order, as it were, in miniature. It failed because there, as over the greater part of Europe, politicians simply did not comprehend the meaning of Catholicism as a way of life. It failed because the more powerful classes either saw the Church as a mere adjunct to the State or maintained an outlook which strangely mingled nineteenth century Liberalism with National-Socialist fervour. Above all, it failed because it had not been able to win over the masses and because the few capable educators had not had the means or the time to lift up the people to a healthy Christian view of society.

The new age is the age of the masses and the failure of the liberal politicians even to provide a temporary solution of their problems is a sign of the gravity of the crisis. Man does not live by bread alone. The German worker may have to limit his consumption of butter and many may be starving in Soviet Russia, but in both countries there is a little attempt to give to arduous labour a dignity and sanctity which is unknown elsewhere. And in every sphere, even while they are continuously exploited the masses are striving to express themselves.

The mentality of the age is expressed in forms of poetry, music and art which are often crude but bear unquestionably the character of the mass. In Russia all these things are professedly proletarian and in Germany all art is discounted which does not in some way reflect the ideals of the National-Socialist mass-movement. The average film, wildly emotional and amoral, at once appeals to the crowd and expresses its state of mind. Those who look for something different in the world of art are either in the last stage of liberal decadence themselves or have recourse to the older masters or, finally, strive to find a more noble realisation of the spirit of the new age. An interesting example of the last effort is Hindemith's Opera, *Mathis der Maler*. The period is that of the peasants' war in Germany, but a great deal of the text is equally applicable to modern conditions and in its original meaning describes precisely such a mass-movement as is typical of the present age. The music is

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undoubtedly of a higher standard than jazz, but it too belongs to the twentieth century and is so far removed from the delicacy of Mozart or even the particular grandeur of Beethoven that it must be regarded not merely as the product of a later period but of an entirely new age.

Almost without knowing it, it seems, we have passed into the atmosphere of a ruder, more primitive order of things; in fact, even such order as we now possess is threatened and chaos may come upon us at any instant. But we must avoid two grave errors; one is to attempt to return to an age which is gone forever and the other to regard the present as wholly bad. It is the same fundamental humanity which is involved, the humanity created by God, naturally good but tainted first by sin and touched afterwards by the Divinity of Christ, tending always to evil but yearning also constantly for complete union with the Divine. That humanity which was once joined to the Divinity is the raw material on which Christ's Church works and, out of the ruin to which it has been led, it will rise again and enter into the full glory of the newest age.

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