

IS CAPITALISM BAPTISED?

THE EDITOR

UNTIL recently the majority of Catholics would have instinctively felt that the Church was on the whole opposed to capitalism. They would not have made a conscious judgment about such a thing because the majority of Catholics was hard at work trying to keep the obvious day-to-day demands of the Christian law in the face of a mounting antagonism from the non-Christian environment. But they would have instinctively recoiled from associating the direct moral teaching of the Church with an approval of the possession and accruing of wealth without labour and without responsibilities. They knew their Gospels too well for that, and they had often heard the Franciscan message declaring the blessings on the poor in spirit.

Non-Catholics on the other hand would as naturally have tended to associate the Catholic Church with capitalism in view of the apparent association between her ecclesiastical organisation and what had come to be regarded as traditional business methods. They had seldom heard of the social encyclicals that came from Rome and they had never read them. They thought they recognised the Church as most securely established in those countries where the peasants and artisans were most exploited for the benefit of the rich few. Today, with war between the Church and Communism at its height, there can be only a handful of non-Catholics who do not regard that conflict as implying an identification of the Church with capitalism or who, on the other hand, have read such books as Fanfani's *Catholicism, Protestantism and Capitalism* which concludes an intelligent analysis of the question with the judgment that 'Catholics, so long as they held closely to the social teachings of the Church, could never act in favour of capitalism'.¹

It must be admitted that there is a certain section of Catholic opinion, particularly vocal in the press, which suggests that the Church should be associated with capitalism in its attack on Communism. A significant example of this opinion occurred

¹ *Catholicism, Protestantism and Capitalism*, by Aminatore Fanfani (Sheed and Ward, 1935), p.153.

earlier this year in Canada at the resignation of Archbishop Charbonneau, who had always shown himself a friend to the poor and dispossessed and had in particular assisted strikers in a recent dispute. Immediately the resignation became public, it was rumoured that 'Wall Street and American management had secured the Archbishop's forced resignation' (we quote from an informed and interesting article in *Commonweal*, 21 April, 1950). It became necessary for the Apostolic Delegate to Canada to make a public declaration that he fully sympathised with Archbishop Charbonneau's social policy. This was a straw in the wind. But a breeze of erroneous opinion blows only too steadily from this unsavoury quarter. It is unfortunate enough that non-Catholics should suspect the Church of being hitched on to the waggon of big business; but it is surely rather disastrous when Catholics themselves publicly acclaim, as they have done, the coupling of the Church to American capitalism.

We might well enquire what the official attitude of Rome is in this matter. Last year we published an article by the Editor of the *Osservatore Romano* in which capitalism was strenuously denounced in terms of the papal social encyclicals. Since then, however, the Holy Father himself has addressed, with blessings and approval, a group of Italian bankers, and has condemned complete nationalisation as 'against the Christian conception of social economy'. So that it might be argued that the papal policy was to support money power as well as private enterprise. But an examination of the Pope's words to these pious bank officials, who had just completed a spiritual retreat in preparation for their Easter Communion, will reveal some interesting subtleties. It must have been with a smile that the Holy Father sought Gospel support for their profession in the parable of the servants who were praised for banking their talents. But it was surely a stroke of genius that emphasised, in the address to members of this profession, the honour of professional labour in pursuance of the common good.

Even though professional labour may become, with time, monotonous or, in obedience to the law of God, weigh heavy as a tiring effort and a fatiguing burden, it will, nevertheless, remain for you Christians above all one of the more important means of sanctification, and one of the most efficacious ways of conforming yourselves to the divine will and gaining heaven.

The banker, then, if he is fulfilling his social function finds himself on the side of Labour rather than of Capital. And the shareholder too banks his money for the sake of the common good.

Does not the social function of a bank consist in permitting the individual to make his capital bear fruit, even though little, instead of wasting it or allowing it to remain dormant without any profit either for himself or for others?

And the Pope goes on to describe the various social services supplied by the bank. In the same week the Holy Father spoke to business men, when he condemned total nationalisation; but in that talk too he insisted that the business man was 'a servant of the community'.

All this suggests something very different from a complacent acceptance of the American economic organisation. Americans are sufficiently critical of their own system. *The Catholic Worker* of England reprints an Editorial from *The Sign*, published by the American Passionists, which deprecates the fact that some Catholics believe that 'the Church has in some way canonised our American system of "free enterprise"'.—'There are passages in papal declarations which quite patently excoriate our American capitalist system.' The Canadian hierarchy following on the resignation of their confrère with its groundless reactions and rumours have issued a very long joint pastoral on 'le problème ouvrier'—commented on below by Fr J. Fitzsimons—which shows little sign of supporting the capitalist system as practised by the anti-communist states today. The German bishops, too, have come out strongly in opposition to the materialism of capitalist countries. 'To the capitalist countries a serious word must be addressed', declared their joint pastoral, 'for they deceive themselves by the opinion that by referring to their higher living standards and their liberalistic freedoms they would overcome a movement which has arisen because of the injustices still widely prevailing in the world. . . .' We need hardly remind the reader of the immense work in favour of the worker and the dispossessed carried out by the late Cardinal Suhard of Paris. So that it can safely be concluded that the official representatives of the Church all over the world are concerned about the evils of materialism which show themselves as part and parcel of both the opposing systems of the day—capitalism and communism.

In spite of all that has been written on this subject it still, there-

fore, remains one of the most pressing problems of today: how far are Catholicism and capitalism opposed, and is any compromise possible? It is necessary especially to make clear what is meant by capitalism—in itself it is an economic method, is it then a neutral method which is however open to the most terrible abuses? In the present establishment of society with its organisation for big business and the control of the many by the few capitalism is likely to be as evil and atheistic as communism. Modern conditions demand that the Christian seeks elsewhere for the economic background of his life. And, in view of the inroads of communism among the dispossessed, modern conditions quite patently show that the Church will not regain these millions of men and women for the kingdom of God if it allows the people to believe that that kingdom is a capitalistic kingdom of land-owners and industrialists.

We make no apology therefore for continuing in the present issue of *BLACKFRIARS* the struggle to clear the Christian air of the gaseous exhalations which rise from the corrupting mass of material standards of life unredeemed by Christ.