

# BLACKFRIARS

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## CONTRITION AND ACTION

“THE preaching of the truth,” said the Pope last year to the French bishops, “the preaching of the truth did not bring many victories to Christ: it brought Him to the cross. It is by charity that He won souls and drew them to follow Him. That is the only way in which we shall win them.” The importance of the question of means cannot be overstressed. Over and over again, great enterprises, christian enterprises, have been brought to nought because evil, unchristian means have been adopted to achieve them. What is the business of the christian, as a christian, in regard to the temporal order? It is to work for the building of the temporal City of God: the remedying of injustice and hatred, the establishment of justice and charity. Temporal and spiritual meet and fuse in the structure of society inasmuch as this or that social structure preserves or destroys the eternal values; so that when a social structure destructive of christian values obtains, it is part of the duty of the christian to work to change it. What kind of means is he to adopt?

We shall certainly be misled if we allow ourselves to forget—as so often we do—that on the one hand catholic means universal; on the other, that to-day there is no existing christian temporal order.

We shall certainly be misled if we think of the work of the christian in the world in terms of making the world safe for the (existing) christians. *Teach all nations* is what we were told to do; not *Liquidate all non-christians*. In other words, wherever catholic action is concerned, we have to keep the thought of a christian world, a world brought to Christ, in the forefront of our minds. Which means that we shall be forbidden to adopt such methods as may turn men from Christ instead of to Him. The Church is universal.

If a Christendom really existed to-day, if there were a

social structure which not merely preserved in diluted form some of the christian ideals but were really founded on, and faithful to, christian principles: aiming at beatitude in this life as preparatory and conducive to perfect beatitude in the next, and aiming at it through christian means; if all this were the case, there would be a sense in which the foregoing paragraph might stand in need of qualification. For if that Christendom were threatened, either from without or from within, either spiritually or temporally (since spiritual and temporal are fused in such a structure in the sense that heresy, for example, threatens the good of the society as a temporal order), then it would be licit to suppress such attacks for the good of the society and indeed of the world, even in face of the fact that the attackers would be unlikely to acknowledge God in their hearts as the result of being defeated or liquidated. To-day at least, whatever may be said of earlier ages, this is not the case. There is no temporal order which is christian. There are temporal orders in which, relatively to other temporal orders, much that is christian, in source and inspiration, remains. But they are decayed: much that is christian in inspiration is so dechristianized in fact as to be unrecognizable; and much that is not christian at all but on the contrary anti-christian is mixed with the christian elements. Christianity itself, in the person of those who represent it, may be too easily identified with a purely temporal structure which if not wholly evil is at any rate incompatible with the aspirations of those who legitimately look for a new order. And what is more important still, the spiritual atmosphere of a worldly order tends to impress itself unnoticed on the minds of christians living under that social order; so that while thinking consciously as a christian a man may in fact be thinking unconsciously as a member of that temporal order: and too often it is the unconscious which finds ultimate expression in action, for the unconscious has the power of colouring conscious thought, and moulding it nearer to unconscious desire.

Two of the ingredients in the spiritual atmosphere in

which we live are materialism and pride. Materialism which looks to material means for the bringing about of even the most spiritual ends; pride which looks to those same means to produce *ex alto*, by imposition, what by definition can come only from within.

Only spirit can really influence spirit. Hylomorphism; yes: diseases of the soul are often to be cured by physical means, and *vice versa*; economic pressure is potent in changing a mental outlook. Man is a unity of body-spirit; and the implications are clear. But it remains true that, in this context, a change of heart—and therefore of outlook, for knowledge is only really complete and operative, personal and therefore dynamic, when it has passed into the will, through love—a change of heart is brought about only through another heart. Material means may still play a part; but only remotely and, in the strict scholastic sense, as material cause. The material giving of many gifts will not produce, of itself, a loving heart in the recipient: though if the giving be informed with love it may. And we have to stress the fact that, whether we are thinking of the first aim of catholic action, the “reintegration of the masses,” or of the problem of the gospel and the world in general, there is, in the way of all progress, a dead weight of resentment and suspicion which can be overcome only by love. The masses “have had to witness, if not to endure in their own persons, any amount of undeserved misery, a want and distress, in face of which the Church and State have always failed them. . . . The Church for the most part only offers phrases and exhortations, references to a life beyond, while her representatives in the vast majority of cases give loyal support to capitalism which cares nothing for the life beyond.” Hence, “these people, whose whole life is a Heaven-crying indictment of all the institutions of a complacent bourgeois society, reject with an *indescribable hate*—let us call it by its true name—not only the Church but everything that has anything to do with religion.”<sup>1</sup> There

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<sup>1</sup> From a letter to the Fellowship of Reconciliation: quoted *Peace and the Clergy*, pp. 132-3.

is little enough "loyal support" for capitalism in the papal encyclicals; but the voices of the Popes are too often unheeded; and we are faced far more often with the spectacle of a catholicism content to buttress itself, to seek material support, precisely from capitalism. Again, we cannot allow ourselves to forget the verdict of the Buddhists and Brahmins assembled at a religious congress in Chicago: "After an experience of two hundred years we see that your life is a complete contradiction to what you preach, that you are led not by the spirit of love, but by the spirit of self-seeking and brute force, which is what rules in all wicked men."

That is what we have to contend with, through our faults. We are reaping the fruits of our reliance on brute force (materialism) and complacency in face of social evils (pride). But it is difficult to become christian-minded. Every day we hear suggestions for meeting our problems—problems which, because of the principles involved, concern us as christians—with material means. And so we come to think it natural to turn, for the solution of these, if not of more exclusively religious problems, to similar means. The Church is threatened in this country or that, by this regime or that: then let us have a crusade, and banners of St. George, and of course bombs, and wipe out these vermin, and set the Church free. *Teach all nations*—but that can be squared, with a little neat exegesis. And the wiped out vermin will be millions of Christ's poor, Christ Who said *As long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me*—but that text can for the time be forgotten. And so we do evil that good may come, adopt the methods of the world in the name of God; and rouse against the Church a new wave of hatred and rancour. "How these christians love one another!" the observers of our methods then excusably cry, as they see christians who are in favour of an established temporal structure massacring christians who are not. But we are supposed to be first of all citizens of the city of God, in which there is neither Jew nor Greek. "How these christians love the world!" they might add,

remembering that "God so loved the world . . ." "Christian liberty is one of the last hopes of mankind," writes Maritain. "It was that liberty that John Sobieski saved from the Turks at the gates of Vienna in 1683. To-day, it is the swastika which has entered Vienna. The death of Austria has the value of an historical symbol of the first magnitude. If catholic liberty loses its last political bastions and ramparts, it is perhaps because the time has come for catholicism to look for her weapons only to the poor means of love and charity."<sup>2</sup>

It is the same in the social context. The masses are turning communist, we cry; and communism is the enemy of the Church; let us crush communism. Which means—it does not take very much intelligence to see—let us crush the masses. *I was an-hungered, and you gave me not to eat; I was athirst, and you gave me not to drink.* That there should be talk of a christian war—class war—against communism, which means that christians should engage themselves *as such* in helping the bourgeois bomb the proletariat: that is the nadir of christian thought. "If it be true that the great scandal of the 19th century," to repeat the words of Pius XI, "was the divorce between the working masses and the Church of Christ; and if it be true that their spiritual reintegration, their return to christendom, is a first condition of the salvation of civilization, than it is clear that these multitudes must be approached, not with violence and threats, but with love—the love that is stronger than death, the fire that Jesus Christ came to kindle on the earth."<sup>3</sup>

Or again, we think that if we can find a strong government allied with the Church, a government under which it will be tantamount to a civil offence to neglect the sacraments, then we shall have a new era of christianity; a revival of faith. A resounding victory for the Church. But "the preaching of the truth did not bring many victories to Christ; it brought Him to the Cross." You cannot make a christian at the point of the bayonet.

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<sup>2</sup> *Questions de Conscience*, p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 220.

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Similarly, we think that it would be possible to impose a christian order from above, if only we could acquire the power. And if we did acquire the power, and did impose our order on the masses, it would be precisely the end of that christian liberty which is "one of the last hopes of humanity." The masses will be converted, will regain the personal liberty of which they have been robbed, by their own efforts or not at all. "The worker of to-day has too lively a consciousness of the illegitimacy of capitalist power, he is too full of accumulated rancour and humiliation, not to feel himself in a state of degrading dependence in the face of every effort made by the capitalist class as a whole in his behalf. Individual cases can do nothing to offset these historical experiences and these collective psychological crystallizations. *The worker will improve himself.* As with all the oppressed, he too has got from his oppression a sullen and ineradicable desire to be his own instrument of emancipation. But like every demand for autonomy, especially when it has long been refused, there is danger that this claim may mislead the worker into a proud presumption. However, let him who is without fault here throw the first stone. One can labour to correct the excesses inherent in this consciousness and to prevent its onesidedness, but there will be chance of success only if one takes into account the historical momentum behind it, which is also bringing into being, together with all kinds of impurities, the humanism of the morrow."<sup>4</sup>

By visible things the invisible are made known. But it is easy to forget the invisible. It is easy to forget, to deny in practice, the existence of the Mystery of Iniquity. For that mystery is to be found in the heart of good things, of christian enterprises, as well as of those which are wholly and unmistakably prompted by evil motives. The greatest triumph of evil is to cause the adoption of evil means by the promoters of good. We shall secure that triumph for evil if we content ourselves with advocating the adoption

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<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Mounier: *A Personalist Manifesto*, p. 204.

of worldly means. Politics cannot be for us primarily a matter of a satisfactory balance of power, of judging this or that situation simply in the light of its repercussions on the British Empire; we cannot simply acquiesce in "power politics"; because the citizens of other states are, for us, first and foremost actual or potential members of the City of God. We cannot think of economics simply in terms of an external order, to be established or upheld by purely external means; because the masses, and the members of all classes, are for us first and foremost members of the City of God. The first thing to consider is not political strength, or economic order, but the souls of men. The first quality of our attitude must be, not the desire to impose a solution willy nilly on nations or classes; but to redeem past lack of understanding by present charity. Material means have their place; must have their place. We are not a world of spirit. But we are a world in which spirit is the greater reality. And because we have in fact in the past trusted to power politics and force and the weapons of pride—*hi in curribus et hi in equis*—we are constrained now to start whatever we do with contrition.

What is the use of preaching the gospel of love with the weapons of hate? Obviously, nobody will believe us. They will believe in our belief in the weapons, not in our belief in the gospel. And if we persist in our use of the weapons of hate—if, to take one example alone, we condone the use of weapons of war which theology and international law have alike condemned—then we are giving scandal in the strict sense; we are impeding the spread of the gospel, because we are allying it with the mystery of iniquity.

Our business to-day is not to buttress up the crumbling fabric of a dying, and largely evil, social structure, but, salvaging what is of worth in it, to build up a new and living social structure. That is why this question of means is of such immense importance. And because the new must come slowly from the shell of the old; because we are not starting a clean sheet, but continuing, necessarily, on the old; because we cannot sweep away the spiritual (though we may sweep away the material) accumulations of the

past; it is to the remedying of past rancours, the righting of old wrongs, that we must first turn. "A single tear, a single cry torn from the heart by injustice—there can indeed be a recompense for these things (for that cause Jesus died), but they can never be effaced, they will never be effaced, no, never in all the world again." A sin is not something that is done here and now, at this moment, and then finished with, forgotten. The accumulations of the cries and tears, of the injustices, of the evils wrought in the name of good, weigh down on the generations; they strengthen the arm of the mystery of iniquity; they oppress the Church; they impede the gospel of love; and as the accumulation grows, so the need of an ever greater and greater force of love grows too, if evil is to be vanquished.

But what gives yet more scandal than the commission of the injustices themselves is the condonation of those injustices, or, negatively, the failure to repudiate them. If any given war, or any given social experiment, has been identified with christianity, and that war or social experiment (supposing for the moment their original justice) begin to rely on wicked means; then it is the duty of all those who have made this identification to proclaim to all who may have heard them that in this regard at any rate the identification is no longer valid. If this is not done, christianity is excusably identified with crime. It is incredible that this point should be apparently so difficult to see. A thing which is good in itself will become evil if evil means are adopted: to help the needy is a good thing, but if in order to help one needy man I rob another, my help becomes immoral. The order of means must correspond to the order of ends; a good end cannot justify evil means; those are the principles which have to be repeated again and again. They are the principles which we are for ever forgetting. That is why action must for us begin with contrition, and consist in love.

But love—and this is the practical difficulty for human nature—love is self-abnegation. It means casting away all the comfortable security of material props, and life-lines,



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and bank balances. It means rejecting all the lines of defence we have taken so much trouble in building. As long as we can talk in terms of solid earthly material things there is the feeling that we are still on terra firma. The christian life begins when we school ourselves to be independent of that feeling. *Naked to follow the naked Christ*: the commonplaces of asceticism have their application to social affairs. We shall not be able to work as christians, we shall not cease to give scandal to the world, until we have learnt the lesson of the purification of means. When we have learnt that, we shall have a contrite heart. Then we may begin.

GERALD VANN, O.P.