

EXTRACTS AND COMMENTS

MEDDLESOME DOMINICANS. It is more than twenty-seven years since Père Barges, O.P., shocked convention by founding *LA REVUE DES JEUNES*. Unlike most of the "religious" periodicals of those days, it was much concerned with "secular" affairs: with the sympathetic study of the latest ideas and movements in the science, art, literature, social aspirations and politics of the contemporary generation. Since then a formidable group of Dominican-edited publications has grown up to continue and develop the work of the venturesome pioneer; besides the still flourishing *REVUE DES JEUNES*, mention may be made of *LA VIE INTELLECTUELLE*, *SEPT*, *KULTURLEVEN*, *ORIENTATIONS*, *BLACKFRIARS*. Why, it is still sometimes asked, cannot these meddling friars keep to their own job of theology and philosophy instead of concerning themselves with politics, social and economic reform, and the latest novels, plays, films, gramophone-records? Père Barges gave the answer when he wrote: "Le catholicisme ne contrarie rien: ni le progrès matériel, bien compris, ni le progrès social. Il faut au contraire apprendre à envisager l'harmonie et la solidarité des problèmes." The Christian life subsumes all things; it cannot be departmentalized. And the Dominican has a theology and philosophy of universal application which he cannot keep to himself in academic isolation from life in general and the intellectual and artistic strivings of his time. The gift of St. Thomas Aquinas to mankind was a theology and philosophy which unified human thought in all its branches by viewing all things in their relations to God. The modern Thomist must make that gift available for the needs of our own age. As a Christian he seeks to restore all things in Christ; his Thomism is his instrument. *Nothing* can be beyond his horizon; least of all the everyday realities of contemporary life which mould and express the thought and action of the world in which we live. To foster the reintegration of that thought and action in a specifically Christian synthesis is the aim of this group of publications; only so can they be unified and healed.

KEEPING ABREAST OF OUR TIME. But there is another reason for our concern for the world around us. Too often is our

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apostolate a failure because of our ignorance of it. An editorial in another Dominican periodical, *LA VIE SPIRITUELLE* (March), reminds us forcefully of our shortcomings and our duties in this respect:

Few priests and few laymen are adequately equipped for apostolic work in the world of to-day. A well-known preacher once told me that his feeling on coming down from the pulpit was of *failure*: his hearers had not had their due; and that preaching, when not hopelessly banal, is commonly far above people's heads, utterly unattuned to the needs of flesh and blood. Catholic social workers would often have to make similar admissions.

Our activities are too often mere surface-work and fail to go deep; our own experience of tense inward thoughts and feelings in its outward expression is virtually *nil*. Earnest desires and ideas clear as daylight still leave us with the problem of "getting it across" and the herculean task of stirring minds and wills. Happy phrasing, carefully thought-out subject-matter and ability in arranging it are no guarantee that we shall convey our point. We may be on very sure ground, re-echoing the Gospels, the Fathers, St. Thomas and the Encyclicals; but when it comes to outward contacts we are merely feeble, failing in any vitality that can galvanize others. . . .

The tendency is to plunge into apostolic activities before the necessary foundations of adequate human experience and culture and of a specifically Christian formation have been laid. Naturally, the results achieved by such workers are in proportion with their capacities; generosity is no compensation for ineffectualness. They can awake some response in one or two limited spheres: among schoolchildren, nuns, a handful of devout souls, a small circle of friends. But before the generality of men they are powerless, because their only armoury consists of ready-made formulas—abstract, threadbare, bookish—culled from textbooks and pious manuals. Even Papal Encyclicals become ineffectual documentary matter when applied by men out of touch with the society in which they live.

Certainly, grace can make up for a lack of natural gifts. The apostles were hardly cultured men, but they changed the face of the earth. The saint who fosters within himself an intense will for his neighbour's good achieves more by his unbroken prayer than by outward action. And even for His greatest achievements God finds use for feeble instruments—provided they give themselves wholeheartedly to Him. In all apostolic work it is God, and *God alone* who inspires, leads, sustains; to trust in our own capabilities is to anger Him. In the long run, humility wins the day; but all the virtues are interconnected, and courage and magnanimity must follow upon humility.

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The magnanimous, large-hearted man is the man of wide vision, the man who desires and achieves on the big scale—not in spite of, but because of, his humility. Conscious of his own true place in the universe, he sees all things in their right order and perspective: God, infinitely transcending all things; the world, the human race, the nations, the professions, human endeavours, the family, politics, economics, science, art—all subordinated to Him. Each thing takes its rightful place in the vast vision of his reason and his faith.

Apostolic workers may be failing because they started before they were ready, too satisfied with their own little sum of knowledge or experience; too soon they hoodwinked themselves into believing that they were ripe for their work. This is true of too many laymen who have remained third-rate protagonists or, if specialists, too narrowly so. It is true, too, of some of us priests who have been out of contact with life and reality and who, being unpliant and incapable of adapting ourselves, have been persistently misunderstood and have persisted in droning out the same dry-as-dust and hackneyed sermon-matter. We have been content to work for a few whose praises are too easily won; and in the meantime the great mass of the people has quickly lost sight of God and of the Word made flesh. There has been nobody to make their leaders and those who influence them conscious of their obligations; nobody to censure evil except in the most general terms; nobody to take the lead in healing the evils of society.

I fear that too many of us lack intense love for our fellow-men—souls redeemed, sons of God, brothers of Christ. We also lack knowledge of men and of mankind and of the world of to-day of which we are part. Have we really tried to diagnose the ills of society? How few of us have devoted time to thorough study of the foundations of our social life, its intellectual cross-currents, its vast economic machinery, its legal and political complexities! Yet if we are to act upon our world, we must first *know* it. Before treating its terrible and complicated diseases we must both diagnose them thoroughly and be masters in the art of healing. Sketchy outlines of theology are inadequate; there is an imperative need for *Wisdom*; for the humble man who, because his eye is single, acquires views like God's views; for the gaze of the contemplative on Christ who is the Head and fulfilment of all, who in His own Person began the work of the salvation of all generations. The apostle of to-day must merge his own little efforts in the great plan which Our Lord has for the world *as it is*. In a word: he must know Christ well; he must know the modern world well; and then he must weld them together—with love.

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE PORNOGRAPHIC. Disgust and the repudiation of responsibility is so much easier than diagnosis

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and the effort to cure and save. But the Church has a positive and constructive mission to the modern world, including its art and literature. The purely negative attitude of the puritan is disastrous and intensifies the very evil it pretends to exorcize. It is well described in an editorial note in the *SOWER* (April):

The inevitable alderman has been making himself ridiculous by protesting against the immodesty of art. This time the objection is to Rodin's "Eternal Spring," which, according to this worthy, will cause the local lads and lassies to "snigger." The tragedy is, of course, that he is so terribly right; and he has made sure of being right by publishing his views, for now all the salacious-minded who would not otherwise set foot in the local art-gallery will go to see what there is to snigger at. But it is a bitter commentary on sixty years of public education that a piece of statuary cannot be exposed to public view without provoking sniggers. This is the fine result we get from an education directed by Nonconformists, industrialists and secularists. Between them they have managed, not only to destroy what is beautiful and holy in art, but also the feeling for beauty and sanctity in the beholder. To puritanism we owe the sniggerer. We congratulate the alderman on his choice of the word "snigger." It exactly describes the reaction of our half-educated people to the artistic representation of the divine command to increase and multiply.

But what of the undoubted obscenity in contemporary art and literature? *THE COMMONWEAL* had a good editorial on the subject in the issue for February 21:

Slushy weather in a big city means little tempests in human breasts. Jumping from one clean place to another, or tripping warily along on tiptoe, the working girl has worries as diversified as muddy stockings and a bad cold. There are people who can plow ahead regardless—people whose clothes and constitutions are impervious to all dame nature offers in the form of hazards—but they are like the heroes of myths, and may be reserved for epic poetry. It is too often forgotten that the psychical existence of man must fend with the elements, too. There is no mire, no morass, no accumulation of cold and snow, which does not have its counterpart in the swamps which human imagination can create. Monstrous energies weird as storms arise on the plains of our desire; and there is no havoc so great as that which can be wrought by thought.

It is some such analogy as this which ought, we believe, to serve as the background for any discussion of the unclean in art and literature. These phenomena are worth talking about because

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they are important. The average man or woman has a certain natural animality, which may be crude and gross but which seldom does tremendous harm. Quite probably the dirty jokes of the immemorial male, which one can hear on Iowa farms as well as on the Shakespearean stage, are designed primarily to remind us that we are dust and not first-class dust at that. But the artist is a person of exceptional talent. Concerning him humanist and theologian agree in part, when each says that the creative faculty has in it something Divine. And when this greatness, of all created energies the supreme one, is debased and suffered to batten on lusts, darkness and ruin fall also upon the multitude.

Therewith the most important point to be made in the whole discussion is reached. Times and places which do not recognize the significance of the artist are those which are most likely to suffer from debased art. Whenever the hierarchy of values is ignored, wherever people suppose that imagination is primarily a source from which to derive "entertainment" or profit, something fundamental has gone wrong. It is almost more evil to define imagination that way than it is to cherish uncleanness. For if the angel is to be made a clown, he cannot much be blamed for crossing the slight distance that separates clown from cad. And so the unwillingness of Christian society to honour the artist decently must be set down as that sin against the spirit which must be overcome before there can be any really fruitful discussion of other things.

The writer concludes with a plea for "a 'missionary attitude' towards art and literature—for an effort to win individual creative talent for the good causes, which is by no means a prim or narrowly conceived cause." He stresses finally the need for personal contact: "Were every priest to make a companion of one literary or artistic worker in the neighbourhood—whether big or little, whether Christian or Jew—the great beauty of spiritual purpose would at least become a temptation." As an excellent example of patient dispassionate diagnosis of the principles of disease in the more extreme "immoralist" literature of to-day, we would recommend the study on *L'esprit d'expérience erotique* by Père Papillon, S. J., in the March number of LA NOUVELLE REVUE THEOLOGIQUE. Criticism of this type is all the more trenchant for being coldly analytic, carefully documented and entirely unemotional.

THE CATHOLIC WORKERS. The belief that the rejuvenation of the Christian life will come from the working-classes is

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encouraged by the new vitality which they are already giving to Catholic journalism. In English-speaking countries alone we now have the original CATHOLIC WORKER of New York, the CATHOLIC WORKER of London, and now comes to us the CATHOLIC WORKER of Melbourne accompanied by the following letter:

Dear Mr. or Fr. Editor,—This is the first time I have written to Oxford. If I were a fresher of eighteen going up to my own university for the first time, the thrill of sending a note from Australia to the city of cars and epigram and BLACKFRIARS would have given me great joy. As it is, I have more justification now for any pleasure you or I may experience. Outside my room the turquoise sunlight of my own country bakes aspiring nudists as they flirt. Inside, I sit and type through my lunch-hour letters to the men and the magazines who for five years now have inspired the Catholic Discussion Groups of Melbourne. BLACKFRIARS, Dorothy Day, the Jocistes, *Colosseum*, Frank Sheed and a host of others have stimulated in us a desire to expand—perhaps expire—in a realm of literature, or perhaps just print.

I enclose a copy of the first issue of the *Catholic Worker*, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Intending to print only four thousand copies, we brought out a first edition of 6,000, encouraged by the enthusiasm of friends. We had to borrow the money to pay the printer. . . . At the early Masses last Sunday the first issue was sold out. This week we have printed another 4,000 copies. That brings the circulation of No. 1 to 10,000. We hope to continue coming out monthly. . . .

Let me be formal. The *Catholic Worker* group thank you for everything you have written. Don't hesitate to criticize Issue No. 1. Formality, you see, is right out of fashion.

Vive la pénétration catholique!

We must decline to criticize—or patronize. It is enough that the Australian CATHOLIC WORKER is saturated with the same courageous spirit as its namesakes.

CONTEMPORANEA. BEDA REVIEW (March): *The Theory of Catholic Action* by Herbert Keldany: an excellent summary.

CHRISTUS REX (Lady-Day): The first issue of the organ of the Servants of Christ the King (Frensham, Surrey) since their reconciliation with the Church.

CITE CHRETIENNE (March 20): *Tendances oecumeniques* by A. de Lillienfeld: the reawakening of Protestants to a sense of corporate unity through liturgical revival.

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- DOWNSIDE REVIEW (April): Dom Christopher Butler stresses the point that although Catholic Action in England "in the narrower technical sense of the phrase is still almost non-existent . . . Catholic Action in the wider sense need not wait for the launching of a great national scheme before becoming actual."
- DUBLIN REVIEW (April): This important "Centenary Number" will receive detailed notice next month.
- HOCHLAND (March): *Begegnung der Konfessionen?* by Alois Dempf: how the liturgical movement on one side and the "crisis" theology and piety of Kierkegaard and Barth on the other may foster mutual understanding among Catholics and Protestants.
- LAMP (March): Further account of the enthusiastic celebration of the Unity Octave this year in some Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican churches.
- MAGNIFICAT (Easter): *The Doctrinal Value of the Liturgy* by J. Geraerts.
- NEW GREEN QUARTERLY (Spring): *The Benedictine Liturgical Movement*: An Anglican's appreciation.
- SOWER (April): An important article by the Archbishop of Birmingham on the pros and cons of the new Education Bill: "This Bill is an honest attempt to help our schools to take their proper place in the national system of education, and though it does not give us all we ask for, anything which helps a Catholic school to overcome its difficulties is worthy of our grateful acceptance."
- THE TABLET takes on a new lease of life under a distinguished board of directors and bids fair to take its rightful place among sixpenny weeklies.
- VIE INTELLECTUELLE (March 10): *La civilisation de l'Occident* by J. du Plessis: Is God an Englishman—or a Graeco-Roman?
- VIE SPIRITUELLE (March): An excellent number includes: *Pour une théologie du vêtement* by Erik Peterson on the theology and metaphysic, as distinct from the ethics, of wearing clothes; Père Congar's own précis of his Montmartre addresses on Christian unity (reported last month); and a hitherto unpublished *Theological Memorandum* on the relationship between the Papacy and the Episcopate prepared by the late Père Lemonnier, O.P., for Cardinal Mercier in view of the Malines Conversations.

PENGUIN.