

LIGHT—OR OTHERWISE—ON ‘ THE LEAKAGE ’

ONE is somewhat at a loss to know whether the fact that so much is being written on the so-called ‘ leakage ’ question necessitates an apology for adding yet more, or affords an excuse for so doing. Acting on the latter hypothesis, I propose to hazard on paper a few thoughts on the subject, based mainly on experience gathered when giving Missions.

And to begin with I would ask the question : is the leakage—lamentable as all admit it to be—larger than we ought to expect? In this connection we should surely bear in mind two important factors—firstly, the great increase in our numbers during the last hundred years, together with the evident fact that we are no longer a secluded body, but mingle far more freely than of old with our non-Catholic neighbours; and, secondly, that the non-Catholic world round about us has altered almost beyond recognition so as to merit with some show of truth the epithet *pagan* so often applied to it. Not so long ago, in days which men of forty can easily recall, certain accepted Christian standards of morality and church-going were as vigorously maintained outside the Catholic Church as within. This no longer holds good, and the young Catholic, in moving outside his own Catholic circle, almost necessarily mingles with militant irreligion; militant because, though seldom avowedly such, to ignore religion is tantamount to proclaiming its futility. The young Catholic, then, if he would hold his own, in these days, against the prevailing attitude, clearly needs a great deal more of *something*—exactly what may be determined later—than he did in the old days when the body of his co-religionists was a small one, held itself very much aloof from others, and, in so far

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as it did come into contact with its surroundings, found these still permeated with strong religious principles. Given the same standard of Catholic vitality as prevailed before, and we should not be surprised under the altered circumstances to find defections more in evidence. Widen your oasis by reclaiming the surrounding desert, and you must not be surprised to see how quick the desert is to re-assert, as far as possible, her dominion over any part of the now widened area of fertility.

So much to allay astonishment at what is so often looked upon as a new and unaccountable phenomenon.¹

Now let us take a few examples of abandonment of religious practice, in order to furnish material for formulating—if possible—some adequate remedy. To begin with, many cases of ‘leakage’ may be traced to circumstances which, while rendering the practice of religion well nigh impossible, tend, in all but strong souls tempered to sacrifice, necessarily to weaken faith. Modern conditions are responsible for far more cases of this kind than would have been conceivable forty years back. As an example of the sort of difficulties I have in mind, let me give the case of a young Catholic I came across, who, though married to a non-Catholic, had never shown any disinclination to practise his religion. However, a prolonged absence from Mass was noted, and he was marked off for a visit. At the home I met with an unaffected welcome. A few kind words to Baby—present at the interview—smoothed all difficulties away, and it was easy at once to talk. Then it was, in the course of conversation,

¹ It is interesting to read Bishop Bramston’s pastoral letter, with its gloomy forebodings and warnings, issued on New Year’s Day, 1830. It is quoted in Vol. 1, p. 217 of Ward’s *Life and Times of Cardinal Wiseman*.

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that the reason for the husband's absence from Mass transpired, and was seen at once to be of such a kind as to make encouragement to do better quite futile. He was a member of a band playing up in the city every night: 'Oh,' I said jocularly, 'and getting home at two o'clock, I suppose, every morning?'

'Half-past two,' he quietly rejoined. Never home any night of the seven before half-past two! And the scene of this nightly performance, one of the London Night Clubs!

Similar in their depressing influence, though not so extreme in degree, are the cases of those, such as tramway-men, whose work periodically involves early morning duty, say from five onwards, or late night-duty; both equally putting Holy Communion and Mass continually beyond the reach of all but the really generous. Of course, where there's a will there's a way, and many a priest rejoices to number among his people souls so alive to all that the Faith may bring them as to practise it despite great obstacles; but to many, a recurrent impossibility weakens the effort to respond when such response is possible. Often a man cannot come to Mass; then ultimately he will not want to come, even when he can.

Clearly, however, what I may call 'physical' causes are very far from accounting for all cases of desertion. To my own mind the root cause is seldom malice or ignorance; it is simply this: the Faith, known adequately, no matter by what method, is not loved enough for its own sake to make it over-ride other claims. I call to mind at once the thousands of young men who gladly risked and often gave their lives in the War. How many of them had worked out to their own satisfaction the righteousness of the cause, or been inspired to sacrifice by carefully worked-out theses in book or speech? One truth had settled and kept its hold on mind and heart, that here was work

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afoot worth any and every claim it might make upon them; simply that and no more. I shall never believe that the Faith may not present itself to its adherents in just such simple light, and win for itself an equally loyal response. That in many cases it does not do so is evident: that we should even wish it to do so may perhaps be open to question in this so-called thinking age. Not ignorance, then, nor malice, but just lack of the sense of its being 'worth-while,' despite some cost—how often desertion comes creeping up this road. A, a Catholic, does not love his Faith enough to say 'No' when his chum, B, a decent living pagan, says to him as they meet in a Lyons at the lunch-hour on Saturday, '*Come out on the bike with me to-morrow morning, and let's start early*'; or when C, a bad-living pagan, says: '*Come round to my place to-night and we'll go out together and see a bit of life.*' But, and let us be the first to acknowledge it, the saying of that little word 'No' often requires courage of a very real sort indeed. Thus—how often—does the evil start, like some tiny fissure in a seemingly solid dyke.

Now difficulties of this kind are the product of modern times, for, though the temptations, as they stand, might certainly have presented themselves in former times, there would then have been a far more widely acknowledged weight of opinion and practice in a contrary sense to support an inclination to resist. And I would remark, in passing, that I cannot see how—when the visiting priest can be so easily dodged or put off by a backslider—any systematic undertaking of the work in keeping in touch with those who have just left school can be more hopefully performed by any other. Neither would I look upon Boys' Clubs as always affording a remedy. They may accomplish a very great deal, indeed, of good, but their efficacy depends, not on themselves as institutions, but entirely

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on the special qualities of the person who controls and organizes them. Given the right man behind it, and the work of the Club will succeed; but the success depends on the person. The Club is his instrument, which in other hands might not achieve so much; and in any case touches just such a fringe only of those in danger as intellectual efforts do at the other end of the scale.

Thus we have come so far as to be able to suggest that devotion to the Faith would seem to be a more effective remedy for the 'leakage' than any intellectual grasp of it, over and above what is demanded of every Catholic if he would give 'reason for the faith that is in him'; and, moreover, that the *something* mentioned above as desirable now even more than a generation ago is not intellectual appreciation so much as intense love of the Faith.

And now it is imperative to forestall at once and answer a question. Am I to be considered as ignoring altogether those intellectual factors, lack of instruction in religion, the plausible appeal of modern thought, which are continually being pointed to as responsible for so many abandoning their Faith? Far from it; yet would I, in the same breath, qualify this answer. Even amongst that limited number to whom intellectual difficulties may be thought to apply, far fewer—I would urge—are those who abandon their Faith on intellectual grounds, than those who simply drift away through lack of interest and courage. For one who may read and argue himself out of what he once regarded as his Faith, twenty will draw off without at first acknowledging the fact even to themselves: and then there are the crowds with whom intellectual considerations one way or the other have no say in the business at all. That in certain groups intellectual difficulties do count, and that in proportion as the Faith is soundly assimilated in early days, the resul-

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tant grip upon it will be firmer, these are facts patent to all, which it would be foolish to ignore; yet I cannot banish the feeling that we are, for the moment, over-inclined to stress this aspect of the question, to throw forward into a rather precarious salient our intellectual pressure on modern infidelity, and to leave our spiritual forces snugly entrenched in the old lines.

In that excellent book by Père Léonce de Grandmaison, S.J., *La Crise de la foi chez les Jeunes*, though the author is far too wise to ignore the religious aspect of the question, yet the main stress is upon the intellectual dangers and the intellectual safeguards. True, he warns us against treating religion from a standpoint purely intellectual, divorcing it from religious sentiment, as though it were not the affair of the whole man; yet he evidently has in mind the more highly educated classes as a rule. He notes the danger—only real for them—of religion not deepening hand in hand with their other knowledge, and of the gap—when recognized—being filled with a shallow and unwise apologetic. He sees a menace to the Faith in the study of philosophic questions, the nature of certitude, for example, when treated, as they so often are, in a spirit of sheer agnosticism; and, again, a danger equally real, in that tendency to exalt human reason so unduly as to refuse to acknowledge anything that is beyond though not against it. In somewhat similar strain Fr. Martindale, in *The Risen Sun*, if I remember rightly, wisely adverts to the danger of despondency and apostasy from inability on the part of many young men to co-ordinate two inadequate layers of knowledge, that of Faith, learnt, as he puts it, in a Catechism way, and of Modern Thought (in capitals of course) learnt in a text-book way. Yet my contention still is that hardly more than a fringe of the sad army of 'deserters' is to be accounted for by such purely intellectual difficulties; and I should like to see

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Newman's *Grammar of Assent* brought out in a new and cheap edition as the best antidote to so much of the shoddy reasoning which allures them away. It is, of course, true that intellectual difficulties are often alleged in excuse for defection, as it panders to vanity to fancy we have intellectually outgrown what in reality we have simply ceased to love. One source, however, of defection, which does wear some sort of semblance of intellectual garb, is certainly at work—namely, Communistic teaching. This looks askance at almost every type of vested interest, and naturally regards the Church, from the Pope downwards, as a menace to its creed. Many a Catholic is caught, alas! in this net; and little short of a miracle can draw him out from it. Indeed, far from realising that he has been entrapped, he considers he has been emancipated; and, puffed up with the self-conceit which lies latent in everyone, the poor victim hardly recognises himself, and wonders how he can have allowed his intellect to have been enthralled for so long; yet he will condescend grandly—for he is one of the Intellectuals, and can afford to be tolerant—to listen to you as you state your case, and to allow his wife and children to go on in the old way, if they wish.

I said above that the root cause of desertion was seldom malice or ignorance. As for the latter, if by ignorance we mean not positive error held to as truth, but just **lack of adequate** instruction, I should be inclined to substitute *never* for *seldom*; that, at least, is my experience: and, for what it is worth, I should hazard again the suggestion that far from pressing forward on the intellectual salient and concentrating on better methods of instruction, scrapping old, inventing new, etc., we should rather aim at straightening out the line, not by abandoning what is won, but by lateral advance. As for what I call *malice*, it has its place, but a small one, and ground lost in this cause

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is often regained. Almost every parish can show its once Catholic household whose members began by refusing to go to their own Church out of personal pique with the Rector, and very soon abandoned even the pretence of having transferred their allegiance to the Church of some adjoining parish.

But causes such as these account for few. The great bulk of defection comes from those whom intellectual difficulties at the one end and Clubs at the other hardly touch.

Having got so far, readers—if any—may at this stage, and with every reason, protest. ‘You appear,’ they would say, ‘to discourage intellectual equipment as the great weapon; you evidently do not see in Boys’ Clubs and After Care work an adequate solution, you talk of lateral advance without telling us in what, you demand love of the Faith, as though it were not obvious that what is loved is never lost without a struggle, but you have not helped us on one bit by any practical contribution, and there is as yet no sign of your promised remedy.’ I admit the charge: I confess to having done little more than throw up a NO ROAD HERE, and even that with a note of interrogation, without doing much to indicate another; but it is not easy to express—nor wise perhaps—what I have in my mind. *Intensify our spiritual life all round*, is the pale platitude it resolves itself into. The Renaissance and the fifteenth century Church afford a sort of parallel to the Church and world of to-day; and just as that century witnessed a stiffening—neither wide nor deep enough as we know now—of the religious life of the Church to meet the impending menace, so one would like to see the same to-day. But instead there is an uncomfortable feeling that the principle so widely favoured: Hear an early Mass and then make Sunday as enjoyable a holiday as you can: in opposition, as it once was, to the grim Puri-

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tanism which would make of Sunday as dismal a day as it could, will yet end by inducing many to cut the cable altogether, and go with the Sunday stream which turns the whole day, from earliest dawn till after midnight, into an excited search for change and enjoyment : and, remembering the deadening monotony of toil, which is the lot of so many during the six preceding days, one may grieve but not wonder : yet is the danger there.

The danger, indeed, is there ; and intensified, as life advances, by the growing sense of ' unreality ' in so much that we see around us. We are often told that youth is the time of ideals which maturity tends to discredit. I have not found it so. Boyish ideals I find further off from realization than ever, but robed as splendidly as before. What one does find and marvel at is the number of unrealities where in youth one thought all secure. The world is full of pretences. Politics, if not a mere ' business in human flesh,' as Von Bülow grimly called them, are wont to disclose at every turn an unreality growing daily more patent, and—like immorality—unashamed. But perhaps this matters little. Politics are equally degenerating into an expensive and amusing hobby for the rich. Soon, like Italy, we shall find ourselves unable to afford them any longer : then something will happen. Trade, and Big Businesses—what vast accumulations of bluff lie behind so many of these ; and now and again it all swells out beyond control, and the gigantic bubble bursts. Society—one need know but the barest fringes of it to see how brittle it all is, with unmeaning phrases. Education—a veritable hot-house of sonorous catchwords, with half its significance lost sight of beneath them, concentrating on brain, forgetting character, ignoring religion. And Religion? But there is an old ' glass-house ' proverb, which prompts one to look first within. May one never catch a glimpse

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sometimes of a faint shadow of inconsistency—one set of ideals from altar step and pulpit, a modified version for the actualities of life? I recall in this connection the eminently clerical tale, told me, if I remember rightly, by a Redemptorist Father, of the layman who, finding himself seated at table next to ‘ a powerful missionary,’ whom he had last seen in the pulpit, whispered to him, ‘ Father, when I hear you in the pulpit, I despair; but when I meet you at table, I take hope.’ If true at all, it was but a playful shaft, of questionable taste; but it is sad, indeed, to come across those who look upon the clerical state as a profession, to make a good thing of if possible. Not that there is the least ill-will or grudging to the clergy of any of the legitimate ‘ good things ’ they may be thought to enjoy, but the sadness lies in the light such sentiments throw on the ‘ religious sense ’ of such persons. To demand more and not less of her children and ministers is the wisest thing for the Church in the end. The minimum may serve theologically, but is not enough to win love. To walk once a week through the National Gallery is little likely to give me a love of real art; and I shall soon tire of the proceeding and give it up. The Faith has nothing to fear—it is founded on a rock—but my own individual Faith is as a flower resting in a vessel of clay. It needs a constant infusion of strength if it is not to wilt away and die. What was it—we may well ask—that urged forward that grand army of martyrs, noble matrons, and officers of the court, soldiers, uneducated serving-men, boys and girls, whose names are marshalled for us morning by morning in the Martyrology of the Roman Church? What steeled their courage of old was the image and vision within them of the living Christ: and that alone will stem the ‘ leakage ’ of to-day.

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