

THE CHURCH IN ENGLAND AND THE SOCIAL QUESTION

HAS the Catholic Church in England any message save to the individual soul? Has she a real and constructive contribution to make to the social problem of this country? It is no doubt a dreadful thing that I should even ask such a question, but it is high time that the question were asked.

That the Church has solicitude for the material needs for her children is an article of Faith, but whether that solicitude moves the hearts of the Faithful in this country to such a degree that it will be of any practical effect is another matter. Yet if it goes no further than pious aspiration and is not likely to go further, if it does no more than proclaim ends on the majority of which all men are to-day in agreement and fails wholly to regard the problem of means, it would be better for us to confess failure and retire into the desert to pray. To proclaim that we have a body of social teaching and then declare ourselves bankrupt when it comes to seeking ways of applying it or even of showing how it might be applied is to court ridicule. The multitude is hungry. We have no right to give them generalities instead of food. I say in all seriousness that if we cannot do better than that, it would be far better to do nothing at all.

True, we have consolidated certain defensive positions. We have asserted the priority of the family over the State, the natural authority of parents over children, the right of free association and the dignity of human personality. But simply to sit down in these positions gets nobody anywhere. Proclamation of principles will not solve the problems of unemployment, overcrowding, malnutrition, and insufficient credit.

How are these problems to be solved? Surely by the same methods that are necessary for the solution of any problem. Namely, by thinking about them, by activity of the intellect and by a thorough acquaintance of the data. It is the electorate that must possess the solution to these matters, for only then will it be able to judge whether its government is seriously endeavouring to apply it.

Yet it is in intellectual activity in this department that we Catholics are proving ourselves deplorably deficient. I say without hesitation that Catholic preoccupation with these matters is not only not above the average, but quite definitely below it. The test is a simple one. *There is no specifically Catholic public for economics, at least not one that is large enough to amount to anything.* There is a very large and voracious public for that kind of thing among the Socialists and the ranks of organised labour, but not among the Catholics.¹

A possible explanation is that Catholics who are interested in such matters get their instruction where other people get it, from the publication of ordinary secular publishers, and, in particular, from the publications of Mr. Gollancz. I daresay they do, and more's the pity. They do not read books on economics written from a specifically Catholic standpoint. Indeed, no such books are published, since there is no public for them.

A very common objection to the plea for a keener and more widespread interest in these matters is that there are supposed to be so many different economic theories and so many different plans for putting society to rights. Such a judgement shows singularly little acquaintance with the truth of the matter. There are, it is true, a host of very ill-informed people running about with quack remedies,

¹ I am aware of the invaluable work done by the Catholic Social Guild, but, as the Guild will be the first to admit, it is hopelessly handicapped by insufficient support and must thus work on an impossibly restricted field.

and there are differences of opinion among economists precisely as there are differences of opinion among doctors. But men with a good working knowledge of economics are in a position to judge the effects of certain courses of action precisely as men schooled in medicine are able with tolerable accuracy to judge the effects of certain kinds of treatment. In the economic sphere it is broadly speaking possible for an instructed person to say by what means certain ends can be attained. The nature of the means is a matter of fact very rarely in doubt. The real problem is whether the application of those means would not have off-setting disadvantages which would outweigh the advantages of attaining the ends. This latter question is a matter for the ordinary man to decide, and not for the economist. But the ordinary man will never be able to decide it until he has sufficient economic knowledge to know the nature of the means and the probable effects of applying them.

For instance, there can be no possible doubt that if we were determined at all costs to solve the problem of unemployment we could solve it, and in a comparatively short space of time. The means of solving it would, however, entail far more drastic fiscal action than we are used to, a certain amount of invasion of the freedom of contract, and possibly certain changes in our habits of living. To determine whether the means in this case are justified by the end is a matter for the ordinary layman. It is a question of values, but the layman cannot get an intelligent picture of the problem if he is too lazy to instruct himself, if he has not got the energy to do some quite reasonably difficult reading. I maintain that if he really *cares*, he will find the requisite energy, and from the fact that Catholics so rarely show that particular form of energy I draw the inference that Catholics as a body do not really care.

I say again that the standard of instruction in these matters even among Catholics who have the leisure to read and who certainly could have access to any books they wanted is quite appallingly low. I should like to know what per-

centage of the Catholic body in England could master even so elementary a book as J. M. Keynes' *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. I should like to know what proportion of Catholics ever bother to read *The Economic Journal*, or even *The Financial News*, though that, of course, may be read by a few wealthy individuals who are fortunate enough to have money to invest and who buy it for its market reports. How on earth do Catholics suppose they can make an intelligent contribution to the great problems of the day if they do not concern themselves with these matters?

In most Catholic discussions, even in public discussions, I am struck by the fact that not only have Catholics no solution to any of these problems, but they do not even know what the problems are. Their mental picture seems to be confined to some mythical conflict between wicked employers and down-trodden workers against which they set up some equally unreal abstraction called a 'good' employer, who pays his work-people something called a living wage, whatever that may be. The joke of this is that all these people have adopted the Marxian formula. They cannot think except in terms of the class war, and the conflict between employers and employed is, for them, the essence of the whole social problem.

I had occasion recently in *The Dublin Review* to call attention to the appallingly unrealistic character of this conception and to point out that bickering over wages was to-day a matter of minor importance. The employer who lives in luxury through the sweating of his work-people is to-day quite a rare phenomenon. I am not now speaking of the employer who secures a large turnover by catering for a depressed market, for in that case it is not the employer who sweats, but the consumer. I am speaking of the employer who could pay good wages but doesn't, and he is no longer a major problem at all. The real problem to-day is the problem of credit and of the wasteful and insufficient use of means,

I do wish our would-be Catholic sociologists would wake up to this fact. At present they are most of them living in the land of myths. I call to mind a most admirable example of this lack of accurate apprehension. It was a cartoon in a Catholic paper illustrating the passage from *Quadragesimo Anno*: 'For dead matter leaves the factory ennobled and transformed where men are corrupted and degraded.' Certainly there was never anything so degraded as those men. There was never anything so abject and so miserable. They dragged their feet along as they came out of that factory, and their shoulders were bowed as though all the cares of the ages rested upon them. Where the artist had seen such creatures coming out of any factory I cannot imagine, nor, I should think, could the Board of Trade. I need hardly point out that apart from going about with his eyes shut and his senses corked the artist had completely missed the point of the encyclical. The passage has nothing whatever to do with bad wages, bad working conditions, or anything of the kind. It deals with *the spiritual evils that derive from economic insecurity*, which is a very real matter indeed.

Another instance of this complete failure among large sections of Catholics to realise what it is all about can often be observed in any discussion on the relation between rich and poor. Like many another, I have from time to time expressed my irritation at certain types of unearned increment. Almost invariably I am countered by the remark that if this or that particular bit of unearned income were distributed, it would only be a drop in the ocean, which of course is true but utterly beside the point. Nobody who knows anything supposes that the spending incomes of the rich are in any real sense a burden on the community. The harm lies not in the volume of such incomes, but in the fact that production is arrested until a favoured few can secure a high return, and that there is thus a constant under-employment of means. This is a fact which the ordinary Catholic seems to lack the intellectual equip-

ment to grasp. Quite recently Mr. Keynes has been telling us that the National Income could be raised by 15 to 20 per cent., if we really wanted to raise it, without apparently seriously affecting the balance of trade—which is tantamount to saying that pretty well all grave involuntary poverty is avoidable. Yet the only people who show any disposition to break windows are the Socialists.

It is this lack of intellectual equipment and the lack of any real desire to acquire it that hopelessly circumscribes the activities of Catholic publishers and of the Catholic Social Guild. Study circles are all very well, but knowledge that really amounts to anything is to-day acquired by the printed word, which in its turn is something that involves a modest capital outlay. But you cannot expect people to put down money if they see no chance of recovering their costs, nor is there any earthly reason why they should. If the Catholic public is unwilling to pay across the counter the modest sums of money necessary for the publication of the kind of books that in my submission *ought* to be published, then they would not read them even if they could get them for nothing. The commercial test is here a perfectly sound one, and I know for a fact that it is this consideration and no other that prevents Catholic publishers from undertaking this kind of venture. I know for a fact (that is to say, from actual discussions that I have had) that they would otherwise very gladly engage in it.

It may be asked at this stage what kind of a book it is that I have in mind. Well, I cannot do better than point to one of the latest publications of the Left Book Club, to Mr. John Strachey's *Programme for Progress*. This is a book with many of the conclusions of which I am naturally enough in strong disagreement, but it is a book that *does cover ground*. A man reading such a book will really have some notion of the type of problem we have got to solve. I should like to see a book of that sort written from the Catholic angle. Mr. Gollancz's vast circulation makes it possible for him to publish this book at 2/6. Even in

the best of circumstances, of course, we could not give such value for such a price, but it would have been possible, at any rate before the war, to give at least something approximating to that value for 3/6. Mr. Gollancz's fifty thousand readers are out of the question for us, but even if we could count on one twentieth of that—say, two thousand readers—the thing would have been commercially possible, but that is just the point, and every Catholic published knows it. *There are not two thousand Catholics in England sufficiently interested in such a publication to pay 3/6 for it, and there you have the whole thing in a nutshell.*

It may now be asked what the study of such a book is to lead to and whether I am advocating a specifically Catholic programme. I am not. What I am aiming at is the creation of an informed opinion and, based on that, a reasoned and informed demand. Such a demand would not necessarily be entirely uniform. There would be various alternative demands, but all fundamentally aiming at the same thing, namely the disappearance of unemployment and the raising of the standard of life and the effect of such demands would be in the course of time that the politicians would gradually come to identify themselves with at least one of them. There would come sooner or later, thanks to such pressure, a serious attempt to get down to fundamental problems in a big and constructive way. You cannot go on fooling a really instructed electorate all the time, but while that electorate is uninstructed it will continue to be fooled. There are too many people who have a vested interest in the fooling.

I must return, before concluding, to the objection which I have already noticed that there are differences of opinion—and even of informed opinion—as to the best method of dealing with the hideous effects of our economic system. Now, in the first place there is a tendency to exaggerate those differences, but even admitting that differences exist, this does not mean that each of two alternative methods

may not in itself be good, although one of them will probably be the better of the two. Thus it is quite possible that over a period in the last ten years we could have alleviated much suffering by the issue of long-term Government loans at low interest rates. The loans, which would have had to be accompanied by vigorous anti-profit-eering measures, could have been used for housing schemes, for the subsidising of small holders, and so on. An alternative policy would, however, have been to raise this money directly by a higher taxation of profits. The point is that both these policies would have meant the enabling of real productive work to be done instead of taking refuge in the dole. Even if both these policies had been pressed on the politicians you might ultimately have got something resembling one of them adopted. Somebody somewhere would have got on with the job. You would have had the beginnings of an amelioration.

Our present attitude resembles that of a party of people who want to go from London to Oxford. They find that there are various ways of going there. You can go by motor coach, or from Paddington or, I believe, from King's Cross. They thereupon say: 'Oh, there are so many different ways of getting there that we really cannot make up our minds, so we had better not go there at all.' Yet any one of these ways would ultimately have got them from London to Oxford. I claim that people who adopt such an attitude have no right to set up as guides to the prospective tourist.

J. L. BENVENISTI.