

PRELIMINARIES TO CATHOLIC ACTION

anxiety and bother about the prospects of bringing Church principles into practice comes not from virtue but from a lack of faith. The Little Flower converted the heathen by making acts of loving sacrifice within her convent-walls. We should remember that in the Divine economy indirect methods are not always the least efficient.

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CATHOLIC ACTION AND NATIONAL LIFE

ONE day near the beginning of June Mr. Shane Leslie, in a letter to *The Times*, compared the Irish to the English as professional politicians to amateurs. It is a pleasing conception, the Mother of Parliaments retaining her amateur status, bringing with it a vision of a leisured and stately autonomy. At the same time there is something very admirable and winning about the continuous enthusiasm for politics that certain peoples display. But the admiration we English accord them seems to me to be that which we give to a child who is clever at his play. For a whole people to be politically effective, that was possible in the city-states of Hellas, it was the ideal of Rousseau, but, so we are told, it is out of the question in the modern nation State. We mark our ballot papers, having for the most part but the vaguest ideas of the particular issues at stake, and thus is the voice of the people heard; then and only then. But can this be really all? Are those only to be reckoned politicians who sit at Westminster or nurse constituencies? I do not believe it for a moment. The more benefits are conferred on us by the legislature, the more will our interests lie with it; and the more closely we seem to be entwined in the net of economic circumstance, the more we shall look to it for help and guidance. In these days, when the work, some would call it the interference, of Parliament has become so enormous, and when we are all increasingly aware of the influence and complexity of economics, one would expect that the voice of the people

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would be lifted up more often and more resolutely. There are some who lament the passing of the guilds, others agitate for vocational groups, others still for corporations; human nature will have its way and all these things are daily more and more present with us. Chambers of Commerce, Trade Unions, Leagues and Societies for this and that, in these and similar ways the public is organizing itself willy-nilly and finding means to make itself heard. Strong public opinion usually makes itself felt; by degrees it is finding a voice. With the greater realization of the interdependence of every part of society we are all politicians, all that is to say, responsible in some degree for the affairs of the State.

Few of us, however, are born politicians in the narrower sense, and being indeed amateurs, we are slow to become fully conscious of our increasing opportunities and of our duties in this respect. There is a great number of people who never take the trouble to learn to the best of their ability and as far as their opportunities allow, the facts about the obligations and commitments of the nation, yet it is only by having a well-informed public, critically appreciative, that these dry bones can live. There is the feeling perhaps that others can take care of these matters as well as we; that politics has often been shown up as a dirty game; that (it is the cry of the rich man who has forgotten the greater facilities accorded to camels) when all is said and done, 'Heaven is the goal.' This indifference is wrong and likewise dangerous, for by adopting such an attitude one places oneself in an unreal world. We are all intimately concerned with political questions, and to pretend to ourselves that we are not, is to court both psychological and political disaster. Over and above this, we have a duty to ourselves and our fellows to take an interest in such things, and to see to the best of our ability that they are justly conceived and justly executed. The social charity to which the Pope refers in *Quadragesimo Anno* includes our public as well as our private relations with others. The conditions of life which masters

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are bound to ensure as far as possible to their employees depend to a great extent on political events as well as on private management, and in so far as that is increasingly the case in practice, we are all of us increasingly responsible for what is done, and even more for what is left undone.

There is another danger besides that of a slothful and selfish indifference, a danger which these words of Hume will at once make clear. 'Though virtue and honour be allowed their proper weight and authority, that perfect disinterestedness, so often pretended to, is never expected in multitudes and parties; seldom in their leaders; and scarcely even in individuals of any rank or station.' This is hardly less true of the twentieth century than of the eighteenth; at all events it is not so false that we do not need to be vigilant as much over our public as our private morals. It is a short stage from private business to the business of the State, and the conduct of the latter can hardly be expected to be better and more justly dealt with than that of the former. In this way too we may all regard ourselves as responsible politicians. The life of the State is only the life of the individual writ large, as Plato insisted; there can be no one held exempt from the responsibility of seeing that the letters are penned in a fair hand. Here again indifference on the part of those who fancy they are not direct participants in political life is founded on an erroneous notion of the true state of affairs, and such members of the community, if members they can be called, are nigh as responsible for failures of morality in political practice as any giver or taker of bribes.

But what, we may ask, has Catholic Action to do with all this? Has it not been stated in the Bishops' Pastoral Letter (a statement explicitly based on pronouncements of the Pope himself) that Catholic Action is above and beyond all politics, whether national or international? that abstention from every form of political activity is a fundamental law of this world-wide movement? However we estimate the individual citizen's importance on

those to whom he entrusts his destiny in this world, this Letter emphasizes that Catholic Action and politics are as widely sundered as the poles. The one seeks to bring about *Pax Christi in Regno Christi*, the other is of the earth, earthy. This distinction is indeed a necessary one; it is right that it should be made. But we should again be false to the facts if we did not recognize that the possibility of its consistent application as a principle of conduct is bound to be limited. To maintain it under all circumstances would be to disassociate nature and grace, soul and body even. Private and public life, as we have been insisting, are likewise indissolubly conjoined. Nor is there any *mirabilis connexio* here; their unity should be obvious enough, though it is often ignored, and as often openly denied by the world of to-day. To spread Catholic faith and morality, and to safeguard Catholic rights does not sound like a political aim, but we know from experience how easily the pursuit of these objects may have political implications. And further there is that grave, pernicious, and utterly heretical doctrine to be guarded against, that the following after things eternal can leave us as indifferent to the right ordering of things temporal as any Miller of Dee. The passage referred to above in the Letter of the Hierarchy was actually quoting a letter from the Sovereign Pontiff to the Cardinal Patriarch of Lisbon. The relevant extracts published by the French *Action Catholique* (*Fiche Documentaire* 215. 12) are worth careful study. Germane to the purpose of this article are some further remarks from the same source: 'Without itself entering on political life, in the strict sense of the words, Catholic Action must prepare its militant members to create a good political life, that is to say one which is wholly inspired by Christian principles, which alone can bring to the nations prosperity and peace.' The paragraph continues: 'Thus it will eliminate the fact, monstrous in itself, yet by no means rare—that men who call themselves Catholics have one conscience in their private and another in their public life.' We cannot escape from

the fact that we are by nature social beings, and it is at least to our interest to be fully conscious of it. Nor is it enough to be conscious, if we are not at the same time, and for that very reason, active. If we do not, each in his measure, do what we can to further the good of the community, and take an active interest in the life of the State—and what else, after all, is this but politics?—we are so much the less fully human.

To recapitulate, we have seen that each one of us does contribute to the formation of public opinion, that each one of us does help to set the standard of public morality; that it is, therefore, a duty incumbent on every individual, as well as being to the nation's advantage, that he should make this contribution to the common good, deliberately and of set Christian purpose. We cannot escape the conviction that a man can reach his own final end only by the mediate stage of fulfilling his function in society, which for us is political society. It is not, for instance, an improper question to ask of what use is the life of a hermit or contemplative, and it is right that it should be justified with reference to the community. To believe then that the spiritual can be satisfactorily dealt with apart from the temporal, or the individual without society, is to make a fundamental mistake. Nor is it possible to separate society in its non-political form from a fully organized political community. That it is possible is a common misconception which underlies many of our social and political difficulties at the present time. The State can usurp more than its share of private initiative, but ultimately it is impossible for the common good to be opposed to the private good of the citizen. As a man he is ordered to the common good of the natural society, which in our case has been organized politically, in which he lives. This in its turn is ordered to the good of the individual regarded as a member of a higher community still, a supernatural one. It is for this reason that the Church can never keep entirely clear from politics. Although a great part of the field of political activity is best left to be arranged by the

temporal power, there is a not inconsiderable residue which must always be common ground, and it is as great a mistake to imagine that human activities can advantageously be completely secularized as it is to think that they can all be solely spiritual. If it is easier to entertain the former notion, that is because the things of sense are more immediately evident to us than those of the spirit, and so we may fancy that these last can be ignored and neglected. But since a man's soul has its needs as well as his body, sooner or later it will cry out for and lay hold on them. That is the tragedy of such neglect and denial; after doing immense harm it must always be ultimately fruitless and self-destructive.

Crisis-minded Catholics are continually dinning into our ears the need for general recognition of our Catholic foundations, if European culture is to be preserved; I believe that the re-discovery of this fourfold synthesis of what is spiritual, private, public and temporal is an essential pre-condition of that recognition. Nothing else can give us the true perspective in which to set the history of the past and the toil and moil of the present, and only so can we with full confidence build anew for the future. There are many facts which the world will not take the trouble to appreciate for what they are; to none is its blindness more serious than to this.

Wrapped as we are in this closely woven web, it remains to be seen what our attitude should be to that public or political strand which is under discussion, recognizing all the time that only to a very limited extent can it be separated from the rest. We hardly know in England the meaning of anti-clericalism, but none the less there can be very few who would like to see the clergy taking part in official politics, or Catholic Action giving birth to a Catholic party. The inevitable result of official participation in politics is that Catholics *qua* Catholics have to take up a stand on matters which have no interest or importance for them in that capacity, with the result that an odium which is quite irrelevant gets attached to the Church of which

they are members. But there is another and an opposite danger of which we must beware, namely the possibility of grave political dissension in the ranks of Catholic Action. The aim may be 'to unite the Catholics of the country of every political shade of opinion and of every social grade . . . in common action for the common cause of Catholic faith and morals,' but that great cause would be hindered if its members were ever to become seriously divided on political issues. I have been pleading for greater political sense and consciousness, and it may seem that the actualization of these would be likely to result in putting us in either of these dangerous situations. That may be so, but I am equally sure that it will be still less to our advantage to avoid the dangers at the cost of ignoring the facts. If we keep the end always clearly before us, however, we shall be safe. This end is spiritual, and the condition of attaining it is a life that is rooted in prayer and the frequentation of the Sacraments. The life of Catholic Action should not depend on evanescent enthusiasms and passing fashions; these should indeed be accepted and made use of, but as tools only, which can be laid aside when they are worn out. The spirit of recollection, secured by the enjoyment of the peace which is not that of this world, but which from the nature of things has to operate in this world, that which is permanent and timeless working with sure purpose and unflagging patience in and on the mutable and the temporary—that should be our method. Thus and thus alone shall we be enabled to lay hold on all the sides of the problems before us, to make allowances for and take account of all the sides of human nature that we have been discussing. Prudence may make us cautious about occupying ourselves in spheres which in normal times only concern us accidentally, but fortitude must be there at call when we are forced to invade them. Then we shall act with full confidence and sure trust, in the knowledge that it is no selfish goal that we aim at, but the faithful imitation, so far as is possible, of the *city* laid up as a pattern for us, whither we hope to come.

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