

'PEOPLE AND FREEDOM'
Christian Democracy in England

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THE words 'People and Freedom' did not sound well to Catholic ears when a small group bearing that name was founded in London in 1936 under the inspiration of Don Luigi Sturzo. 'Sounds to me like Bolshevism', said an old lady to whom the Group's news-sheet was offered outside Westminster Cathedral. And the old lady echoed the feelings of the majority of her co-religionists, who found the title slightly provocative and subversive, not knowing that it had once been the proud old Guelf motto of the City of Florence—the battle-cry of Pope and people.

It would be untrue to describe English Catholics as philo-fascists in the years immediately preceding the war of 1939. There were, of course, the devotees of General Franco and those who—in the words of Professor Brogan—considered Mussolini to be 'a combination of Augustus, Constantine and Justinian', but the majority felt that whilst Democracy worked well enough in England, it was not an article for export, especially to Catholic countries, where authoritarianism was the form of government not only best suited to the temperament of the people, but most in keeping with the 'Catholic tradition'. Those who travelled on the Continent were told by their friends, especially in France, of the existence of a few extremists, best described as 'Black Marxists' or 'Red Christians', who were fortunately unrepresentative and insignificant. No one seemed aware of the existence of a vigorous Christian-Democratic movement with a tradition extending well over one hundred years—soon destined to play a leading part in saving Europe from Communism.

It has been this country's great fortune that the modern state has been created here comparatively peacefully, without violent conflict. It is the great political misfortune of the Continent of Europe that the modern state was created there in a bath of blood by the French Revolution. It is an even greater tragedy, the appalling consequences of which cannot even now be measured, that the Church should have been linked by so many ties to the

old obsolete order, that she should have become associated in the mind of the people with privilege and despotism to such an extent that they could see no longer any difference between the throne and the altar and persecuted both with the same intense, implacable savagery. This persecution, which came near to destroy the Church, created a conflict between Church and State which has lasted to this day. The majority of continental Catholics, horrified by brutal and savage persecutions, sustained by the brilliant thinking of the great counter-revolutionary writers like Bonald, de Maistre and Donoso Cortés, and confirmed in their convictions by the pronouncements of Pius IX, felt that there could be no possible compromise with the liberal democratic state, and that it was the duty of Catholics to boycott democratic institutions which, based upon error, were destined to perish.

All Catholics, however, did not share this point of view. There were those who believed that the revolutionary motto of 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' could be reconciled with the Gospel. They argued that political institutions are not derived from Revelation; that being human they are all imperfect, but that they are all capable of being Christianized and that instead of boycotting modern political institutions, which in any case had come to stay, Catholics should take a full part in political life; and thereby heal the breach between Church and State.

Lamennais, Lacordaire, Montalembert and Ozanam in France, Gioberti, Rosmini and Ventura in Italy, were the pioneers of this early Christian-Democratic movement to reconcile the Church with the modern world. They might possibly have succeeded if the revolutions of 1848 had not revived old fears and hatreds and confirmed Catholics in their distrust of Democracy. The boycott of democratic institutions continued and the conflict between Church and state remained as fierce as ever. But Christian Democrats were not dismayed; small groups continued to work all over Europe and began to acquire some importance towards the beginning of the present century. In Belgium, Holland and Germany, Catholics were participating vigorously in political life; in France, the 'Sillon' movement of Marc Sangnier had led to the creation of two small political parties 'Jeune République' and 'Démocrates Populaires', and in Italy, in the Holy Father's own country, where the boycott of democratic institutions had been more complete and thorough than elsewhere, the lifting of

the ban on participation in politics led to the creation of the vigorous, radical-minded Popular Party under the leadership of Don Luigi Sturzo, which at its first General Election in 1919 collected twenty per cent of all votes. It was however, too young, too inexperienced a movement to prevent seizure of power by Mussolini, and Don Sturzo had to flee for his life to England.

It must have been galling to this great priest, steeped in the traditions of Christian Democracy, to find that English Catholics, kind hospitable folk, democrats and enemies of tyranny, enthused over the merits of continental dictatorial rule, without knowing what tragic consequences this was having for the Church. He communicated his indignation to his English friends, and at his suggestions a small group of Catholics, of whom the most notable were Virginia Crawford, Barbara Barclay-Carter and Conrad Bonacina, founded 'People and Freedom' in 1936, for the purpose of spreading a greater knowledge of Christian Democracy, to promote a sound grasp of political and social problems and to further the application of Christian principles to national and international life.

As Mrs Crawford wrote in the first number of the Group's news-sheet, which appeared at Easter in 1938, 'Catholic opinion as expressed by the Press' had been 'tinged with Fascist sympathies and dazzled by totalitarian achievements'. It is fascinating today to glance through the news-sheet which the Group published regularly for nearly fourteen years and which is a mine of information regarding the Christian Democratic movement. From the very beginning they were in trouble, denouncing Mussolini's conquest of Abyssinia, championing the cause of the Basque people, 'a Christian people fighting for its democratic traditions', and protesting against the bombing of Guernica. In 1939, the Group edited a symposium published by Burns, Oates and Washbourne, called *For Democracy*. Greeted with much sympathetic understanding by the secular press—the *Manchester Guardian* devoted a leading article to the subject—the book attracted little attention in the Catholic press, and—typical of the cloud-cuckoo-land thinking then fashionable—one Catholic reviewer accused the Group of not facing 'squarely the main alternative to Christian Democracy, which is Christian Kingship'.

In 1940, when leading personalities from practically every

Christian Democratic movement in Europe took refuge in London, it was a great comfort for them to find that 'People and Freedom' shared their ideals. It was at the initiative of the Group that the International Christian Democratic Union, comprising statesmen from practically every occupied country, was founded in January 1941—the first international union of Christian Democrats.

The group owed much of its success to the enthusiasm, personality and talent of its Secretary, the late Miss Barbara Barclay-Carter, who had an astonishing gift for interesting others in her work. Her passionate love of the Christian Democratic ideal was an inspiration to those who worked with her, and so too was her championship of the Italian people. Feeling strongly as she did, she tended sometimes to identify too closely the cause of democratic Italy with that of Christian Democracy, and occasionally, during the course of her editorship, *People and Freedom* appeared to be too exclusively concerned with the Italian point of view. Free democratic Italy never had a more passionate, persuasive or enthusiastic champion; Christian Democracy no more faithful or more loyal servant.

When strong Christian Democratic parties emerged in Europe after the Liberation, led by two corresponding members of 'People and Freedom', Alcide de Gasperi and Georges Bidault, the members of the Group, fully aware of the deep historical roots of Christian Democracy in Europe, were not surprised. But this new development greatly puzzled most English Catholics who had been led to believe that Christian Democracy was a small insignificant movement, not in keeping with the 'Catholic tradition'. This explains, no doubt, why a newspaper of the standing of *The Tablet*, rightly renowned for its knowledge of foreign affairs, could describe Signor de Gasperi as late as August 1944, as 'the leader of the Catholic Communists'. Barbara Barclay-Carter noted this 'howler' in *People and Freedom* with triumphant relish!

The end of the war marked the triumph of 'People and Freedom'. It also marked the beginning of its decline. When the European Christian Democratic parties founded a union under the title of 'Nouvelles Equipes Internationales', the Group was asked to form the British delegation. As Christians in this country are not and have not been for a long time in conflict with the

State, and as they are all agreed on the need of supporting democratic institutions, there has not been, there is not, and pray God there will never be, the need of any Christian Democratic party or movement in this country. The British delegation was therefore composed of Conservative and Labour members in equal numbers.

The composition of the British delegation to the 'Nouvelles Equipes' was in itself a challenge to the Christian Democratic parties of the continent. As we have seen, Christian Democracy is a movement which had a definite purpose—to reconcile Catholics with the modern state and this purpose has been triumphantly achieved. We are all Christian Democrats now. Only a handful of romantic dreamers now believe seriously that there is the 'alternative of Christian Kingship', and by a strange irony of history, democracy so authoritatively condemned, so passionately denounced by Catholics, has now become the main bulwark of threatened Christendom.

Now that Catholics have been reconciled to democracy the existence of mammoth Christian Democratic parties constitutes a very serious problem. A common faith does not itself provide an adequate platform for political action, and the French M.R.P. and the old Partito Popolare of Don Sturzo were wise in refusing to borrow the name of Christ. 'I am afraid', wrote the Marquis d'Aragon in *People and Freedom*, 'that, as soon as a political party is reputed to be a "Christian" Party, all its mistakes, all its timidities and all the injustices in which it may be associated or compromised, will take on the guise of blessed mistakes, holy timidities and sacred injustices. The problem of today is not so much one of a Christian Democratic party as one of Christians in Democracy, working with all men of good will to reconcile true justice with true liberty.'