

DEMOCRACY AND THE PARISH IN IRELAND

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THERE are people with a bent for sacramental philosophy and theology who are always awestruck by the amount of earth that mixes with heaven in the Church of God. Heaven has truly folded all its gifts in tissues of earth, and we naturally marvel that heaven should have used the earth so much. There are even those who are scandalised into heresy by this, and begin to talk of God and the soul and the great alone. Yet, one could marvel just as much to see how earth has used heaven or how much the children of this generation have learned from the children of light.

The Church of God has been a great organisation since it emerged from the underground of pre-Constantine days. Genius such as that of Gregory the Great, Hildebrand, or the Tridentine popes, has contributed to the perfection of this organisation. Yet, remembering the lesser geniuses, one cannot but see that the hand of God was in it all—that wisdom of the most high that sweetly but strongly orders everything, the same wisdom which came to teach us the way of prudence. The very organisation of the Catholic Church has taught us a certain prudence. I do not speak of ordinary prudence, but of regnative prudence. How much of our international law was formed by a consideration of the prudence of that government which by force of its mission must be international and supernatural.

The perfection of the parish-system, as we have it now, is due to the reforms of the Council of Trent. In 1563, at the twenty-fourth session, it was ordained that 'in those cities or places, where parochial churches have not certain limits, nor have their rectors certain groups of people whom they may shepherd, but where the sacraments are administered to those who ask for them generally, the Holy Synod commands the bishops for the safer welfare of the souls committed to them, that they assign to each distinct group of people in their own particular parishes, a perpetual and distinct parish priest, who will be able to make their acquaintance, and from whom alone they may licitly receive the sacraments.' (Sess. XXIV chap. 13). By the erection of well-

defined parishes it was hoped to bring about a Christian people united among themselves and with their pastor. The individual soul does not feel itself alone; it is conscious of its unity with the other members of the Mystical Body of Christ. The danger of spiritual individualism is removed. In the parish system, besides, one can consider the vast delegation of the absolute power of Christ's vicar. The parish priest of the smallest parish is supremely conscious of the loyalty he owes to the See of Peter; and yet he does not feel any sense of powerlessness. For all the normal needs of ruling his parish he has all the powers necessary. His bishop has other and larger ones. The Pope reserves to himself the supreme powers. Thus the parish-system invigorates the life of the Church and organises its members.

Have we strayed so far from what this essay promises to consider? Father J. M. Hayes, the founder of *Muintir na Tire* (Ireland's leading rural movement) is a parish priest; he has been always engaged in parochial work, whether in Liverpool or in Tipperary. This experience has taught him the value of the parish. In the organisation which he founded in 1937 for the benefit of rural Ireland, the stress is always on the parish—parish-guilds, parish-councils, parish-halls, parish-credit unions, and now, the famous parish-plan. He has standardised the value of the parish as a unit, not merely ecclesiastical, but social, economic and cultural.

In an article such as this one can only stir up the readers' curiosity. *Muintir na Tire* is not Boerenbond Irlandais, nor Ireland's NCRM or NCRLC, nor even Sir Horace Plunkett's co-operative movement re-invigorated. The men of furrowed scientific brows would like one to fit it into a scientific groove and make it stale enough to be understood by them. That I shall not do here. *Muintir na Tire* is a rural movement, not a land movement. Broadcasting from Radio Eireann in 1945, Fr Hayes told his listeners the history of the movement—'we realised', he said, 'that the land problem was not merely economic; . . . the merely economic solves no problem. It is more than economic. It was the whole life of the people that needed stimulus.' The use of a unit which has stimulated Christian life throughout the world would be as likely to stimulate that ordinary life which is a basis for good Christian life. *Muintir na Tire* began with the parish unit.

The problem which Fr Hayes and his colleagues set about solving was vast—as vast as life is. Rural life was verily dying out.

It was unproductive, since marriages were few and much too late; it was suicidal, because such as survived emigrated in large numbers; the living standard was low, initiative was weak, culture undeveloped, and sociability was inhuman. These weaknesses had induced the ruling power to over-dominate agriculture, and the ruled were glad of so much government interest. This was the state of the life in rural Ireland to which *Muintir na Tire* offered a stimulus.

We have seen that it was the whole life of a rural people that needed this stimulus. *Muintir na Tire* would have to influence the whole people. Faced with the same difficulty at the Council of Trent, the Conciliar Fathers reformed and stabilised the parish system. Fr Hayes knew that he would have to choose definite areas. In 1934, he says, 'the obvious method of organisation struck us, that is the parish. Rural Ireland is composed of parishes—parishes with years of tradition behind their formation. The parish was the ideal unit of organisation, economically and socially. It was a ready-made unit. It was a manageable unit. It was a unit with bonds no other could have.'

From 1934 to 1937, Fr Hayes aroused the interest of the thinking men in his plan—'We were feeling our way. We were getting some of the best brains of the country interested', he writes. At the rural week-ends Fr Hayes and his friends sat beside great fires and chatted long into the night. Only the dry old logic-choppers would think it waste of time. Interest and ideas gradually sprang up. In 1937 Fr Hayes started the first parish guild. This guild had five sections—farmers, rural labourers, trade-unions, business and professional people, and the unemployed. The arrangement of sections would differ according to the different class-divisions of parishes. The section exists within the guild, has its own regular meetings, and is the channel through which men and ideas reach the parish council. In most guilds there is a special section for rural women.

An equal number of representatives taken from each section of the guild forms the parish council. Without this council, which is the ruling body, a parish guild and its sections would be involved in endless discussions, decisions would never be reached, and all the clumsiness of big numbers would make for slow and indecisive action. The parish council is a miniature parliament; nevertheless it has all the might of littleness. Groups of parish

councils are formed into regional councils, and over all there is the National Executive, which makes for greater unity and inter-parish co-operation. It also constitutes a supervisory body which may correct or stimulate unprogressive parish councils.

Considered theoretically, this form of organisation is capable of stirring up the stagnancy of rural life. What is more, that stir comes from within; it is truly democratic. The difference between a rural parish where *Muintir na Tire* is alive and one where there is no such organisation is like the difference between democracy true and false as Pope Pius XII defined them in 1944. 'The state', he said, 'is not an amorphous conglomeration of individuals within certain territorial bounds; it is, and in reality must be, the organic and organising unity of a true people. A people, and an amorphous crowd or mass, are two different things; a people moves and lives by its own life, a mass is inert in itself and cannot be moved except from outside. A people lives by the fulness of the lives of the men who are part of it, each of whom in his own place and way is a person conscious of his own responsibilities and convictions. The mass, on the contrary, awaits a stimulus from outside—an easy plaything in the hands of anyone who may exploit its instincts or sensations, ready to follow this flag today and another tomorrow. From the exuberance of life in a true people, life spreads abundant and rich into a state and all its organs, infusing it with constantly renewed vigour, with the consciousness of its own responsibilities and the true sense of the common good.'

The parish-plan which *Muintir na Tire* has worked out can create a people 'each of whom in his own place and way is a person conscious of his own responsibilities and convictions.' The editor of the *Landmark* (monthly organ of *M. na T.*) writes—'The parish-plan is the people's plan; it was the outcome of serious thought and careful consideration by members of *Muintir na Tire* themselves who realise that there are in every parish problems needing attention, which would forever be left to generation after generation as an evil legacy unless united effort were made to remove them.' (Aug. 1949).

The parish-plan is simply an effort towards solving the more obvious problems from within the parish. It is not that the parish claims self-sufficiency or isolation; *Muintir na Tire* submitted the plan to the Minister of Agriculture, who arranged an elaborate

scheme of government co-operation. Nevertheless the reform is still coming from within the parish, and the parish-plan is succeeding, not by virtue of government aid, but by self-help.

The problems are different in each parish—'the whole life of rural people needed a stimulus'. Most parishes have to find ways of providing credit, of improving farm-premises, of building-up some local industry or skill, of increasing rural electrification, of planting waste lands, of improving stock and increasing crops; in another sphere parish-life has to be brightened up according to the sober needs of rural people. The parish builds its own hall, and this hall takes on an infinitude of functions. It is a social and a cultural centre. There, youth has its fling; there also, lectures are given on scientific farming, evening classes are provided as well as library facilities. Some halls have their own film-projectors, so that the parish has some chance of choosing its own films. It is interesting that where the parish-plan is in full swing, certain other tantalising problems are solving themselves; in Bansha, where Fr Hayes is parish priest, marriages and births are on the up-grade, emigration figures have fallen, and the spirit of true democracy is showing itself.

It may appear strange that all this utility of the parish unit and particularly its lesson of true democracy could be learned from the organisations of a Church which has seemed to some so autocratic and totalitarian. The Church wherein God dwells with man will always seem autocratic and totalitarian if viewed from the Godward side alone. In that light it cannot seem otherwise. But, as the world, so the Church, can be seen from another side, and we can see how much God has made us to feel like himself. So much has he given us in power and determinative vigour that there are some who think that they are gods. They are the real totalitarians. But the truer lesson is this; as creatures, as parishioners, as Christians, we all have certain powers with which to rule our lives. We are not mere chess-men; we are democrats in the sense that we are fit and able to rule and help ourselves in many ways. I think *Muintir na Tire*, by stressing parish-consciousness and life, is bringing home that lesson to Rural Ireland.