

The Spanish Civil War 1936—9 : Catholicism's minority voice

Donald MacKinnon

July 18th 1986 saw the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, and the event has been widely commemorated both in writing and in exhibitions, both alike often focussing on the heroism of the men of the International Brigade who made the cause of the Spanish Republic their own. Less attention has been paid to the fact summarized by Professor Adrian Hastings in his recent *History of English Christianity 1920—1985*¹ that 'probably at no other moment in 20th-century history has the English Catholic community, as such, taken up so strongly a political position, and to such effect' (p. 325). The largely uncritical endorsement of the rebels' claim to be engaged in the defence of the Catholic Church in Spain against a threat vaguely and frighteningly characterized as a 'Communist-anarchist dictatorship' was powerfully and passionately sustained, and the nationalists' atrocities, for instance at Badajoz on August 15th 1936 or (at the hands of their German supporters) at Guernica² in April 1937, either brushed aside or denied.

Of course, the cause of this enthusiasm lay in the appalling actions that accompanied the revolutionary situation of July 1936. The lapse into chaos defined for the nationalists by the murder of the right-wing deputy Calvo Sotelo on July 13th inevitably increased the readiness to welcome the military *pronunciamento* long in preparation, by social groups feeling their future threatened by the quickening pace of social change. The moderate socialism of Prieto was rapidly being taken over by the radicalism of Largo Caballero, and the fundamental, seemingly intractable issue of agrarian reform tackled no longer by legislation but by spontaneous occupation of land long denied to the landless. But of course it was the decision to resist the *pronunciamento* in spite of the hesitations of President Azaña, and to do that by distribution of arms to the population at large, that triggered the civil war and the horrors that accompanied its beginning³. A full study of these events and their causes is beyond the writer's capacity, and indeed it is not the purpose of this article even to offer summary comment on them. But the context in which the fury broke upon the Church in Spain must be remembered, and likewise the extent of the losses not only of buildings but of men and women, many of them faithful servants of the Church. The number who died is variously given, but, as a sample of the figures offered, that which

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gives the murder of bishops at 13, of diocesan priests at 4184, of male religious at 2365 and of nuns at 283 may be quoted. The inspiration of Claudel's poem—*Aux martyrs espagnols*—is there in the numbers; so, too, the source of the Catholic self-identification with the cause of the insurgents.

It was encouraged, of course, by the attitude of the Spanish hierarchy, set out in a pastoral letter to the bishops of the whole world, a few weeks after the destruction of Guernica had perhaps suggested that all was not well with the nationalist claim to represent the cause of Christianity. It was the men of the Condor Legion who had first bombed the Basque town, and while Pius XI inveighed against Communism in the pages of *Divini Redemptoris*, he had also made sure that in the same month, the March of 1937, *Mit brennender Sorge* was distributed throughout the land from which the aviators had come allegedly to lend support to the Church's survival in an area of Spain where its influence was not ultimately in question. But Cardinal Goma, Archbishop of Toledo, who in November 1936 had spoken of 'Jews and masons poisoning the national soul with absurd doctrine, with mongol tales converted into political systems and sinister societies manipulated by international Jewry' was adamant in his championship of Franco's cause, and the hierarchy went with him, apart from the very significant exception of the Cardinal Archbishop of Tarragona, Vidal i Barraquer, from 1931 a friend of the Republic and a man of whom more will be said later.

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Writing as an Anglican, I can see the depth of the Catholic provocation; but even fifty years afterwards I can recall the scandal it occasioned, and the gratitude owed across the years to those who, like the Dominicans of *La Vie Intellectuelle* and their English interpreters, such men as Father Victor White OP and Father Gerald Vann OP, relentlessly emphasised the guilt of a Church that had allowed itself to become alienated from the countless men and women exposed to its influence and then, when those same men and women turned upon it in destructive fury, could offer no other remedy than butchery far outdoing in lawless savagery the slaughter that had helped to provoke it. *Blackfriars* in those years made sure that other voices were heard, from Spain itself those of Ossorio Gallardo and Bergamin (the men of the Cruz y Raya group), from France Georges Bernanos, a man of the Right outraged by Rossi's atrocities in Mallorca into writing his unforgettable *Les Grands Cimetières sous la Lune*, and Maritain, liberated in 1926 from his bondage to Charles Maurras and writing as a preface to A. Meudizabal's *La Tragédie d'Espagne* his masterly analysis of the claim of the

nationalists to be waging a 'holy war'. If Maritain is known today as the passionately conservative 'peasant of the Garonne', it should never be forgotten that he broke with his mentor, Père Garrigou-Lagrange OP, over the Spanish issue, and that he tried (in vain) to make contact with Cardinal Vidal (spirited to Italy in an Italian warship, and to the security of a monastery there) to explore the possibilities of reconciliation. This may now seem a utopian dream; but the Church of Christ needs men who dream such dreams, especially when, as in Maritain's case, they were at the same time making the cause of the threatened Jews of Europe their own. Maritain's writings on this subject at this period were collected before his death under the title *Le Mystère d'Israel*,⁴ and remain among his chief glories. They come from a different spiritual world from the febrile anti-Semitic outpourings of Cardinal Goma.

Of course, there were differences among the Catholic champions of General Franco. There were the romantics intoxicated by their vision of the Carlist crusaders of Navarre; there were others who wrote of the superiority of the claims of an ancient culture over political considerations. More worthy of respect were those who followed the argument put forward in a sermon preached on St James's Day 1937 by Mgr. Ronald Knox, quoted extensively in Evelyn Waugh's biography⁵, when he defended Franco's revolt as the only option acceptable in the circumstances, but went on to pray for a peace which, while enabling the Church to do its work, would be a peace without vengeance, one without ill-considered efforts to restore the position of religion by enforcing its observance with the power of the secular arm: 'Such triumphs of Christendom have been short-lived.' We should pray 'not for victory at all costs, but for the return of peace.'

Knox had lost too many beloved friends in the carnage of Gallipoli, the Somme and Passchendaele to have any illusions concerning the creative potential of war. He believed Franco's revolt justified, but he acknowledged, perhaps a little timorously but still clearly, the problem of the means. If Maritain's hopes were utopian, so also, as the Catholic critics of Franco's alleged crusade saw only too clearly, were such prayers as Knox offered. 'Placing a priestly mask over the bloody terror of the hangman' was Bergamin's poignant comment on the anti-republican zeal of the Church.⁶

In such an extreme situation as that of 1936 we see the problem of the means raised in a very acute form. What means is the Church justified in using in order to continue to exist? The question must not be asked in the abstract; it was the achievement of *Blackfriars* in 1936—9 to ensure that it was asked in the context of a concrete agony. Recourse to the files will show no answer given, even much inconsistency; but the question was relentlessly pressed.

In July 1936 there could be no escape from the burden of the

Spanish Church's history, including its tangled unwillingness to accept the Republic from 1931 on, and the particular background of that virtual refusal. And, again, there is no ignoring the special dedication of such groups as the Navarrese Carlists. Can we imagine such a Church saying No to the implied offer of the averred protection and/or restoration of its existing structures? Or are there not structures so woven into the tapestry of Christian imagination that we cannot imagine survival of the Christian way, if they were gone? So Caiaphas, in defence of the Temple, and the cultus of which it was the focus, deemed it expedient that one man should die for the people lest his continued presence threaten destructive disturbance of a hardly-won symbiosis with Rome. The threat was real enough, and Caiaphas could imagine no *other* structure than the Temple, of which 'one stone would not be left standing on another', as the centre of his people's life.

We cannot easily think away inherited patterns of Christian practice, even of Christian existence. The road to the parish church or its temporary alternative is always more easily imaginable than the *via dolorosa*. So perilously we put our survival into the hands of murderous men, having identified that survival with the perpetuation of the Gospel itself. We ignore the ghastly paradox of 'a war to make the world' (or this or that country) 'safe for Christianity'. Knox's hope for the future that would follow a Franco victory disregarded the principle that ends are immanent in the means taken to secure them. But we have gone a little further, and raised the general question what sort of structures a Church that saw itself the servant of the Gospel of God can ask for itself in a society that has claimed (whatever such a claim may mean) to have been Christian. May it not become so identified in its self-conception with those structures it has inherited that it does not see the Gospel as far greater than their survival? It was not the least sin of the champions of Franco's cause that they obscured the evangelical authenticity of Spain's undoubted martyrs.

To say that the writers that this article seeks to commemorate saw these issues is to claim too much for them; they were very different men with very different backgrounds: Dominican priests, Maritain, Bernanos, parish clergy like Father F.H. Drinkwater, who banned the sale of the Catholic weekly newspapers outside his Church for their failure to condemn the destruction of Guernica (one of them—no other than *The Catholic Herald*—had even given space for Belloc's claim that it was the work of Basque arsonists). They were limited in various ways, sometimes uncertain, but steadfast in their sense that issues of theory and practice were being raised here that the Church, as then it was, had not the resources to meet, was indeed by prejudice given every encouragement to avoid, but which were going to be central in the 20th and 21st centuries. What is Christian existence? What can the Church be

justified to do to sustain its structural forms in being? How is alienation become hatred to be overcome, before it is too late (as arguably in Spain in July 1936), and how met, when it is too late?

Such comment is perhaps the most fitting commemoration of brave and faithful beginnings, made in the storm of 1936 in such periodicals as *Blackfriars*.

- 1 Collins, London, 1986.
- 2 On this the late G.L. Steer's *The Tree of Guernica* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1938) is a near-classic.
- 3 After Quiroga's resignation of the premiership, Azaña asked Barrio to negotiate with the rebels. After his failure to come to terms with Mola and the rest, he was replaced by Giral, who authorized the arming of the people's militias.
- 4 Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1965.
- 5 *op. cit.* Chapman & Hall, 1959) pp. 228f.
- 6 Quoted by Dr Frances Lannon in her essay 'The Church's Crusade against the Republic' in Paul Preston, *Revolution and War in Spain, 1931—39* (Methuen 1984, p. 54).

Carol '86

Ian Coleman

Crazy Mary, pregnant as a dumpling
Cries through her NHS frames,
Claiming she hears voices.
Wooden-headed Joe has
Nimble fingers; Mary's breasts
Are small but just enough
To keep the child she fears from bawling.

The world's not cold, fighting off
Snow and slickness; sick at heart,
They wait. The flurid damp apart
It's OK. Out there a wage away
Trains run; later in the oil-watery sun
The saviour of the world will come.