

'It is by piety that we do our duty towards our kindred and well-wishers of our country and render them faithful service. . . . Man becomes a debtor to other men in various ways, according to their various excellence and the various benefits received from them. On both counts God holds first place, for he is supremely excellent, and is for us the first principle of being and government. In the second place, the principles of our being and government are our parents and our country that have given us birth and nourishment. Consequently man is debtor chiefly to his parents and his country after God. Wherefore just as it belongs to religion to give worship to God, so does it belong to piety, in the second place, to give worship to one's parents and one's country. The worship due to our parents includes the worship given to all our kindred, since our kinsfolk are those who descend from the same parents, according to the Philosopher (*Ethic.* viii, 12). The worship given to our country includes homage to all our fellow-citizens and to all the friends of our country. Therefore piety extends chiefly to these'. (II-II, 101, 1). St Thomas goes on to say that this virtue must be subordinated to general justice which presents the common good to us. Evidently piety and general justice must grow hand in hand, as they are both lacking in modern society. Such virtues of course require divine grace to carry them through. It is grace which shows that the Good is ultimately God, and that sacrifice is more than stoicism. If this be true, then the people to arrest the crisis would be apostles who had the vision of the Good and lived the life of the Cross.

THE EDITOR

OUR LADY OF WALSINGHAM

EARLY in August this year a party of 24 men set out from Bishop's Stortford carrying a great wooden cross to Walsingham. The distance to be covered was a little more than a hundred miles; the return journey by another route was another hundred. The country between is not very populous; Catholics are extremely few, living scattered in isolated parishes. This was the first fulfilment of a hope expressed in these pages a year ago in an article¹ describing a similar pilgrimage to Vézelay. On that occasion a British party, widely representative, carried a cross from Dieppe, one of fourteen to be set up at Vézelay in an international congress of peace. The congress itself was disappointing, but on the road there was born in the hearts of the pilgrims a new inspiration; they discovered in the

¹ *Blackfriars*, September, 1946.

following of the cross such an enrichment of life in Christ, such possibilities of apostolate, that they determined to do all they could to introduce the idea into their own country. The pilgrimage was the thing. They set up a committee to pursue this ideal.

Such an undertaking obviously lends itself to misconception. It might be taken to be, it might become, a stunt. More easily still, it might be mistaken for a romantic, rather futile gesture, the nostalgic revival of an old Christian practice. Why, after all, in these days of modern transport, walk to your shrines? Is it not medieval mummery, escaping the hard actualities of the present? And does not going to Walsingham underline this—a shrine once populous, but revived now only artificially . . . ?

These objections are easily made and very wide of the mark in actual fact. The pilgrimage inaugurated a form of Catholic action capable, if once its nature is grasped, of tremendous development. By taking these objections one by one I may make clear what I mean.

The thing was a stunt? If anyone had lived, as we lived, around that visible symbol of sacrifice and redemption for two weeks together, he would not make such a charge. Only consider: two dozen Catholics, sincere in their faith, come together around a great rough-hewn cross; mostly strangers to one another, from different parts of the country and of different classes and callings, their one reason for joining together is to carry the cross. For two weeks without a day's break they live together around this symbol of union and sacrifice, its lesson enforced by a hard life, a shared burden, pains and fatigue in common. Christians, they know each other from the beginning by their christian names, they elect their own lay leader, grow united in prayer, united around the altar at the Mass offered by the priest, their fellow-pilgrim. The wooden symbol of the cross is their persistent burden. They carry it three at a time, and when it weighs heavily on their tired shoulders, they think of Christ's passion and their too little generosity in sharing it in their own lives. Behind them, always moving up towards the cross to carry it, come the others, three reciting the rosary with its mysteries of the Incarnation, three silent, the rest content to follow the cross mile after mile, talking, laughing, or perching with only the energy to plod on painfully keeping up.

Each hour they halt for a rest, but first make a station of the cross: *We adore thee, O Christ, and we bless thee, because by thy holy cross thou hast redeemed the world*, and then, when the priest has spoken for a moment about the station, applying it to their lives or the pilgrimage, and they have knelt in silence in the roadway round the cross, they say, weighing the meaning: *O Lord Jesus, may it be our*

privilege to bear thy cross. May we glory in nothing else. By it may the world be crucified unto us and we unto the world. May we never shrink from sufferings, but rather rejoice to be counted worthy to be suffering members of thy mystical body. O Christ, live and suffer in each of us.

Seeking out the Catholic churches wherever they are, they enter them with the *Credo* that proclaims their unity with all other churches of Christendom, and there plant their cross before the altar. There the chaplain preaches, there at night they sing Compline round the cross, there in the morning they offer together, pilgrims and parishioners, the sacrifice of the cross. But this, the Mass, they know and understand increasingly to be something quite different from anything else in the day. For this real sacrifice of Calvary is that of which the rest is reminder and commemoration. How convey the sense of unity and purpose at those Masses? Around their brother the priest (in his ministry, *alter (Christus)*), on the rock of the altar which symbolizes Christ, themselves by baptism members of Christ, they offer the veritable Body and Blood of Christ to the one Father. And then communion. 'The chalice of benediction which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? And the bread which we break, is it not the partaking of the body of the Lord? For we being many are one bread, one body, all that partake of one bread'. (1 Cor. 10, 16-17.) So they express, and have expressed in them, the unity of Christ's mystical body (theme of conferences and discussions on the way) and a new day begins with its constant burden of the cross, its stations, hymns, sermons, rosaries. Pilgrims and parishioners must part, but the consciousness has been awoken of a deeper communion that spreads from parish to parish and expresses itself in the gathering prayers that are carried to Walsingham; for the communion is the communion of saints. No wonder that one of the pilgrims wrote afterwards: 'My mind is still full of the pilgrimage . . . my new surroundings cannot efface or diminish the deep impression of the cross. How can I describe to you what was perhaps the greatest experience of my life? I am helped by the fact that you have shared that experience. . . . I have never experienced such charity in my life and I know that those who came into contact with us must have felt the warmth of affection that reigned amongst us. I can truly say with you that I loved every single one of the pilgrims'. If this is a stunt, then Christianity itself is a stunt.

But why pilgrimage on foot? Why not go to shrines in the way one would go anywhere else, by coach or train? And if the walking, like the carrying of the cross, is penitential, who does not know that penance in public has more dangers than advantages? Penance af

home can be all the more penitential for being in obscurity.

The charge is firstly one of anachronism. I must here digress. There is no more pressing problem today than the very old one of might and right, in a word, of power. At every level we capitulate today to the arbitration of force, between nations, between classes, even between men. Where power is in dispute there is conflict, insecurity, human misery; where it is consolidated, there is brutal repression, bad faith, human degradation. It is an old story, new only in the immensely increased scope of power and its concentration in the hands of so few. The common man's ability to intervene has never been less; in the hideous strength of the contending powers he is crushed.

Against this Christ unfurled the standard of the cross. Against the cynical realism of the world, he set the idealism of sacrifice, of that divine love that gives without getting, having its all-sufficiency in itself. Against force he opposed the spirit of the martyrs, giving them the law, but also the grace, to die in their thousands. By their foolish assertion, their desperate stand, they vindicated those human rights and dignity upon which Christian order subsequently stood; adopted into the divine life, they found there the power also to be at last human. 'Faithful custodian of eternal truth and loving mother of all, the Church', as the Pope recently said, 'from her foundation almost two thousand years ago has championed the individual against despotic rule, the labouring man against oppression, religion against persecution. Her divinely given mission brings her often into conflict with the powers of evil whose sole strength is in their physical force and brutalised spirit, and her leaders are sent into exile, or cast into prison, or die under torture. . . . But the Church is unafraid'.² This it is that has always preserved civilisation—the spirit of sacrifice pitted against the calculations of political half-sense, the life of grace welling in men's hearts against the exterior violence of force; the civilisation we know and take for granted is built around the cross, symbol of sacrifice, instrument of grace; and the evidence of it is in the villages and towns and cities built around the churches, and on the churches the cross, and in the churches the altar of the sacrifice of the cross. We therefore preach civilisation when we preach Christ crucified. But the cross being banished from hearts, there are now the disintegration and hatreds, the terrible cynicism and frustration of the times. In England a tradition survives; but for how long against the 'brutalised spirit' when the principle is gone?

² Letter to the President of U.S.A., August 26th, 1947 (reported in the *Catholic Herald*, September 5th).

Therefore to carry the cross in the striking way of our pilgrimage, to preach the civilisation of Christ crucified, was to meet the crying need of our time. This was not mere revival, but a new activity founded in tradition. By walking we brought the cross intimately amongst the people. To preach to them was seldom possible; they were too shy to congregate and it was only where they were already gathered for marketing that that was possible. But when a party slowly traverses the countryside as ours did, rumour and gossip announce its coming; questions fly from mouth to mouth, 'Who are they?' 'What are they at?'; and some are wiser than others, and some are even Catholics who heard the chaplains explain in the church. The message goes round, ideas stir. Perhaps they hear the priest himself, or talk to the pilgrims. We on our side heard comments which encouraged us, as well as others which made us realise the need of our apostolate. For there can be no complacency; the ignorance, the unmeaning of the cross to most of our people amounts to national apostasy. No—to preach Christ crucified, to preach sacrifice, to preach the essential foundations of Christian order—none of this is out of season; and one way of preaching it is by the example of ordinary men evidently loving one another, evidently unafraid to kneel publicly and pray by the cross, evidently glad to welcome tiredness and pains for love of Christ. And there is danger in publicity? But what apostolate is not touched by such danger? And where is the danger so minimal as in the shadow of the cross itself?

We were not simply 'treading in ancient paths'. Why then Walsingham? I confess that I too once thought of it as artificially revived.

That we went to Walsingham at all was accidental, the result of a chain of disappointments. Accidental too that we arrived on the 50th anniversary of the shrine's restoration at King's Lynn, and on the day that the Bishop of Northampton officially confirmed the shrine of the Slipper Chapel; accidental that our pilgrimage ended on the feast of the Assumption. Accidental, indeed, the whole development from Vézelay. So inevitably, and independently of human plans, did our Lady draw us to the shrine of her choice. I have no doubt, and the pilgrims have no doubt of this, that our Lady intends to restore Walsingham and that one manner of its restoration is by pilgrimages of this kind.

We came there by evening; at the Slipper Chapel we put off our shoes; without the tramp of boots, silencing even the rosary that we had constantly recited, we went more like mourners than pilgrims; for the shrine is desolate.

Levell, levell with the ground
the towres doe lye

which with their golden, glitt'ring tops
 pearsed out to the skye.
 Oules do srike where the sweetest himmes
 lately wear songe,
 toades and serpents hold their demmes
 where the palmers did throng.³

But already the Queen of Walsingham begins to hold sway again. Nowhere on the way was the cross received as in her village. Certainly the Catholics had everywhere honoured it, but here the whole population pressed to the pavements of the narrow, close-built streets; they watched silently, enthralled as we followed the cross, barefoot, to the entrance of the old Abbey. There we broke the silence, singing the Litany of Loretto, and each invocation hammered at the great oaken door. And then that 'sweetest himme' the *Salve* as we went to the market place where the sermon was.

Back in the Slipper Chapel that night, as we kept vigil, the cross stood over against the statue of the mother. And it was surely no idle fancy that saw, in the strangely serene gaze of her eyes, the mother looking out, far-seeing, beyond the cross which she had welcomed, over the land, inviting other men to bear other crosses, to knit parish with parish in a great slow pilgrimage of return, preaching everywhere Christ crucified, drawing England, her dowry, back to her whom we received at the foot of the cross. Her hands once supported the murdered body of her Son; they cherish his wounded body in the world today, hands of gentleness and strength and tender love. To us, before the storm breaks in our land, they stretch out, welcoming, inviting.

It is our hope that next year fourteen crosses may be carried to Walsingham, to arrive together on the feast of the Assumption (which falls on a Sunday). After what has been written, I need scarcely add anything here. For the present prayer and the spreading of the idea is needed.⁴ Later definite plans will be announced. 'When England goes back to Walsingham, Our Lady will come back to England'. A way full of promise is opened.

O.P.

³ Elizabethan Ballad attributed sometimes to the English martyr, Philip, Earl of Arundel.

⁴ It might be possible to put groups wishing for some first-hand account of this year's pilgrimage and future prospects in touch with one of the pilgrims in their neighbourhood. Applications should be made to Rev. C. P. Ryan, Hawkesyard Priory, Rugeley, Staffs.