THE SOCIOLOGY OF CATHOLICISM

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IN the whole vast field of the social sciences, there can hardly be a more neglected subject than the sociology of Catholicism, that is to say, the study of the structure and of the life-processes of the Catholic Church, with the means and methods usually applied by sociologists to other societies or associations. The reasons for this are not far to seek. The Catholic Church is an organization to which it seems well-nigh impossible to assume an objective and unprejudiced attitude. To the classical Protestant she is the scarlet woman of the Apocalypse, the devil's most dangerous death-trap; to the atheist, whether liberal or communist, she is the main bar to progress, a hateful anachronism; to the Catholic she is a dear mother, and indeed the very Body of Christ. In so far as sociology is a scientific pursuit, a pursuit of the truth without favour or disfavour, the Church of Rome must be one of the most difficult objects to handle. Nevertheless, it is and remains surprising that she has never been properly studied by sociologists. After all, even the Protestant and the atheist cannot close their eyes to the fact that she is in all probability both the oldest and the most numerous social body in our western civilization, and even the Catholic cannot gainsay the fact that if she is the Gate of Heaven, she is necessarily at the same time a human society, showing human, even secular, aspects besides her religious and transcendent traits—aspects which are no less worthy of attention than the others. Certainly, such official pronouncements as the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* are binding on the Catholic but they obviously do not exhaust the subject: there is room, beside the theology of the Church, for a sociology also, and perhaps Catholics are even more to blame for not providing it than are Protestants and atheists.

It goes without saying that a vast subject such as this cannot be adequately treated in a short essay such as the present is bound to be. All I can do here is to enumerate the topics which, in my opinion, a book on the sociology of the Catholic Church should

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have to cover. There are, I believe, three such topics: firstly, the inner life of the Church, the methods and techniques by which she has managed, over the centuries, to preserve her unity against often enormous pressures, and by which she has achieved those adjustments to external circumstances without which she would have perished in this changing world; secondly, the outer effects of the Church, her contribution to the life of the wider society in which she is placed, a subject which calls for some comparison with the effects of her competitors, especially the Calvinist groupings; and, thirdly, her relationships to other social organizations, especially purely secular ones such as the State and political parties. Of course, there is plenty of literature on the cruder political aspects of this question, but there is, as far as I am aware, none that deals with the finer, as it were underground, facets of these relationships which are in point of fact very different from what they appear at a first superficial glance. The states and the parties which have hated the Catholic Church most and which have pretended to despise and to abominate her, have usually in reality admired and emulated her: indeed, they have often modelled themselves on her, and it makes little difference if this emulation of her was subconscious and semi-conscious rather than fully conscious or consciously willed.

Perhaps we can best penetrate to the core of the first problem, to what one might call the life-principle of Catholicism, if we consider for a moment a concrete phase of Church history, a concrete crisis, and see how it was handled. In the seventeenth century began the great work that is still going on, the publication of the *Acta Sanctorum* by the body of scholars now known as the *Bollandists*, and the appearance of the first volume of April precipitated a conflict within the Church which threatened to destroy her inner peace. April 8 is the day of St Albert, the Patriarch of Jerusalem who was the author of the Carmelite Rule, and in discussing him the writer, Father Papebroch, dealt with the old Carmelite tradition according to which the Carmelite Order is pre-Christian in origin, and was in fact founded by the prophet Elias. This legend was very dear to the Carmelites, and it is not difficult to see why. The other two great Mendicant Orders had gained influence and prestige through their founders, the great Saints Francis and Dominic, but the Carmelites had no figure of comparable renown. It is true that they had Saint Theresa of

Avila, but she only lived in the sixteenth century, and for several hundred years the Carmelites had had to manage without such an outstanding representative. So there was something of an inferiority complex about the Carmelites and they clung with understandable passion to the tradition which I have mentioned, and which gave them strength and standing, namely, that they were the oldest Mendicant Order, and indeed the oldest of all orders, older even than that of Saint Benedict, older even than the Desert Fathers of Saint Anthony's day. Now, Fr Papebroch was a historian, and he subjected the Carmelite legend to a strict critical test. The result was that he found it wanting. There was no proof, he found, that the Carmelites were any older than the Franciscans and Dominicans; the belief in Elias the prophet was a pleasant pious story but not a factual account of factual happenings; and so Fr Papebroch demolished the legend. Little did he know what a storm he was letting loose! Between 1681 and 1693 between twenty and thirty pamphlets were written against him, culminating in 1693 with Father Sebastian of St Paul's booklet, the *Exhibitio Errorum quos P. Daniel Papebrochius . . . suis in notis ad Acta Sanctorum commisit*, and this last publication raised the quarrel to a new and higher level. Fr Sebastian was the provincial of the Flemish-Belgian province of the Carmelites, and so what he said was official. But Fr Papebroch did not stand alone, either. He was a Jesuit, and his brethren rallied around him. The discussion took an ugly turn, and it looked as if a veritable war between the two great religious communities would break out. In this crisis the Holy See intervened, and what it did is thoroughly characteristic. It did not decide; it did not adjudicate; it did not lay down the law: it merely told the parties that they must keep their peace. The papal brief of November 25, 1698, is simply an injunction to silence, and no more. What the Curia implied was that both parties had now had their say: both had put forward their case, and it was not profitable to take the matter any further because no new arguments were likely to be forthcoming.

This intervention of the Pope's has apparently a completely negative character: it forbids, it does not command; it pushes the quarrel aside, but it does not resolve it. And yet it is this very negativity of the act of authority which guaranteed its ultimate success and which, rightly understood, reveals the whole secret of the success of the Catholic Church in the nearly two thousand years

of her history. It proves (what non-Catholics find it so very difficult to understand) that the Catholic Church is in the last analysis a strictly democratic organization. Why did the Pope not decide, why did he not magisterially pronounce that Fr Daniel was right and Fr Sebastian wrong, or *vice versa*? Because he wanted to leave the decision to the public opinion of the Church as a whole, because he did not presume to speak before the voice of the community had spoken. But public opinion, as everybody knows, is a very slow and sluggish agent: the community will ultimately make up its mind, but it takes it a very long time to come to a decision, and so time is needed, plenty of time. That is the reason why the discussion must be kept going without being allowed to degenerate into a quarrel: that is the reason why the Curia brought about a state of suspended animation as it were by its edict of November 1698. And that is what has always happened in the moments of crisis through which the Catholic Church has lived, and there were many: the policy followed in the conflict between Carmelites and Jesuits in the seventeenth century is the settled social policy of Rome in general.

We see this policy on the grand scale when we investigate the formation of new religious orders inside the Church, for instance the first inception of the Franciscans. Practically every great founder-saint has been a revolutionary, and St Francis, with his adulation of Lady Poverty, more than any other. What had happened in the course of the Middle Ages was that the Church, especially the hierarchy, had become thoroughly identified with the feudal order—so much so that in the end it appeared almost as one side of the feudal hierarchy, as one aspect of the feudal apparatus so to speak. This was bound to lead to protests on the part of all those who were hostile to, or at any rate outside of, the feudal set-up, especially the townspeople. Discontent was brewing for a long time, and in the great figure of St Francis it came to a head. St Francis is a typical town saint—the field which he ploughed was the ground of the city. There was unavoidably a serious tension between him and the established powers—a tension potentially strong enough to break the framework of the Church. If this tension evaporated in the end, and if the Franciscans found ultimately a place within the framework, this was (under Providence) due to the fact that the problem of Franciscanism was kept for a while in the state which I have called suspended animation.

During those years, which were difficult years for all concerned, the conservatives in the hierarchy learned to see the great promise that was contained in the Franciscan movement, the positive mission, the historical mission that was entrusted to it. With every day that passed the first negative reaction gave place to a more positive one: St Francis was less and less regarded as a dangerous and destructive firebrand and more and more as a kindly and constructive Catholic; and with every day that passed, St Francis himself became more inclined to see what was grand and vital in the established order of the Church, what was justified and indispensable even in the things which he had at first disliked most. In a word, there was at work an unperceived yet effective process of mutual accommodation, and it was that process of mutual accommodation which not only saved the unity of the Church but even increased her unity in diversity, which enabled her to emerge strengthened rather than weakened from the testing time of the early thirteenth century. It is interesting to compare with this happy issue of the conflict the unhappy result of the Methodist movement inside the Church of England. John Wesley was the spokesman of an external and unhappy class of men just as St Francis had been: the spokesman of the Welsh miner, the Lancashire weaver and the London proletariat. And he had any amount of good will towards the Anglican Church. Indeed, he said on one occasion that he who breaks with the Church of England breaks with God. But there was no room for him in that house. He had to go, and he did. And now the prelates of that Church desperately try to heal the breach which occurred at the end of the eighteenth century—but in the meantime the dividing lines have hardened and set and now it is not so easy to wipe them away. The Church of Rome has always known how to prevent that hardening and setting of the dividing lines, and that is why she is still one—why she is still a unity in spite of all her diversity.

But we can observe the working of the life-principle of Catholicism on an even grander scale when we look at Church history as a whole. Every social formation is faced with one inescapable decision, the decision between centralization and decentralization in her organization, and the Roman Church had to solve it like every other society. It is true that the final monarchical solution was foreshadowed by the primacy of St Peter among the Apostles, but the argument that St Peter was only *primus inter pares*, the first

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among equals, and that consequently the Bishop of Rome is only one of the bishops and not above them, ran for a very long time side by side with it and made for a republican church-constitution. If this matter had ever been openly, consciously, fought out, there is no saying what would have happened. The French bishops were for a long, long time Gallicans almost in the sense in which the English bishops were Anglicans. They were touchy and suspicious to the last degree and quite unwilling to budge an inch. It is not an exaggeration to say that this problem was kept in suspended animation for 1,500 years or more. It was all the time around the threshold of consciousness, yet it was never allowed to be either forgotten or to rise into prominence. In the end, an agreed solution emerged out of the depths of the collective consciousness of the Church—the solution openly proclaimed at the Vatican Council of 1871. Since the end of the Middle Ages, public opinion had more and more come round to the centralistic position, to the conviction that the world-Church is a unity under one head, the Bishop of Rome, not a collection of units—not a collection of independent dioceses under independent bishops. And once this conviction had gained the upper hand, it rapidly proceeded to become the universally accepted solution. By 1850 all Catholics in the world, with very few and insignificant exceptions, were centralists and the Vatican decrees were passed practically *nemine contradicente*, practically by acclamation, in spite of everything that Lord Acton may say to the contrary. The most remarkable thing was, of course, the conversion of the French bishops—a conversion without difficulties and without reservations, a conversion to the very heart. But it is certain that the public opinion among the vast masses of the laity was even more decisively pro-papal and anti-Gallican than even the public opinion among the bishops. When the Old Catholics broke away in protest against the proclamation of the dogma of Papal Infallibility, they carried with them no more than perhaps 150,000 souls. 150,000 against 350 millions: no secular society has ever settled its constitutional problems more democratically than the supposedly undemocratic and antidemocratic Catholic Church. Such is the power of time in the social affairs of men, such are the blessings of that slow process of mental digestion, of mutual accommodation, on which Catholicism has ever relied for the solution of its vital problems.

If there is any social body in the world which has relied on the

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same processes and techniques, it is, of course, the English State, and that is one of the reasons why London and Rome have never been able to get along with each other. The postponement of a decision on the thorny problem of electoral reform from about 1770 until 1832, and the surprising unanimity with which it was accepted by all classes and parties when it did come in the end, is a case in point. I cannot speak about it here; but perhaps I can summarize my discussion of this first aspect of the sociology of Catholicism by a quotation from an English writer who had come out of a Catholic tradition and who was a great social philosopher as well—by a quotation from Edmund Burke which seems to me to sum up the life-principle on which the Catholic Church, just like the English State, has always based herself. 'Political arrangement', he writes, 'as it is a work for social ends, is to be only wrought by social means. There mind must conspire with mind. Time is required to produce that union of minds which alone can produce all the good we aim at. . . . The individual is foolish, but the species is wise, and when time is given to it, as a species it always acts right.'

The second of the topics which I propose to discuss, the influence of the Catholic Church on the wider culture within which she is established, is somewhat easier to handle, because the matter is much nearer the surface and even, to some extent, one of general observation. Everybody knows that the Catholic countries of Europe are the countries of song and dance and lightheartedness, and that the Protestant countries are the countries of a serious and even depressing mood, the countries in which there seems to be much work and little play. The tenor of life is very different in Paris and Vienna from what it is in Rotterdam, in Berlin and in London or Edinburgh. Whence this difference? The root of the difference lies mainly in the different methods of social control, in the different methods of moralization which the two divisions of Christianity respectively apply in the countries where they are established. The Catholic Church relies very largely on the sacrament of Confession, and the other techniques used, such as pulpit preaching, are only secondary. Now, in the confessional, a man learns to open up and to reveal even the innermost recesses of his heart. He must, it is his bounden duty. So the Catholic learns from the earliest years of his life to take others into confidence, to speak out when he is in perplexity, in other words, to be social in a full

and live sense of the word. That is not so in the case of the Protestant. Protestantism, as even its friends cannot deny, is apt to be a cold religion. It makes strong personalities but lonely ones. When a Protestant is in moral difficulty, there is no counsellor provided with whom he can talk the trouble over. Of course, he can go to a friend, to anybody, if he wants to. But the friend, whoever he may be, if he is a Protestant at all, will have established in his mind the great dogma of the supremacy of private judgment, and so he will probably tell his neighbour that he must come to a decision himself, that he must make up his own mind and that nobody can do it for him. In so far as Protestantism has ever had a technique of moral guidance, its prime principle has been to throw the self back upon the self—a practice which can be observed, for instance, in the classical public schools of England. It is not surprising then that Catholicism makes for an extrovert type and Protestantism for an introvert one—that it is much easier to get into a conversation with a Frenchman and an Austrian than with a Dutchman or a Scot.

But with the statement of the contrast between extroversion and introversion we have not yet exhausted the influence of the typical Catholic guidance of the soul on the cultural life of the community. There is a further important facet to it. The Catholic, when he has confessed and made a good act of contrition and has fulfilled the penance laid upon him, can be reasonably certain that he has paid his debt, and if any doubt remains, he can avail himself of a plenary indulgence. Thus, after having been oppressed by a sense of sin, he can enjoy a feeling of release. This alone will bring a good deal of variety into his life. He does not always live the same life, he swings to and fro between oppression and exaltation, and so his existence will be likely to be varied, stimulating, colourful. But the main thing is that, in the moment of forgiveness, *joy* will pervade his being. And even when he reaches the depth of depression, he always knows that forgiveness is waiting for him. The God of Catholicism is a God who does not wish the death of the sinner, nor even his misery. The great composer Haydn was once asked why he made the *Kyrie* in his masses into such joyful tunes, seeing that the *Kyrie* is a cry of the anguished soul for mercy. His answer was revealing. Why should I not use joyful tunes? he said. He that cries for mercy is always heard: he that asks for mercy is always given it. Knock and it will be opened

unto you. How different Protestantism is in all this! The Protestant never knows how he stands. If you read the intimate life stories of great and believing Protestants, say John Buchan's book on Cromwell or the diaries of Kierkegaard, you are appalled and dismayed at the suffering they had to endure. Cromwell never knew whether he was accepted or rejected; one moment he would feel secure, but the next he was sure he was abandoned, and so he was for ever worried and depressed, a man who could never laugh, a soul that could never spread its wings. Kierkegaard again never overcame the thought of one sin he had committed in his youth. Even after he had made his way to the conviction that God had forgiven, he continued to suffer because he feared that God had not forgotten. In this way Protestantism inspires not an easy and confident mood, but a sombre and brooding one, and this fact goes a very long way in explaining the cultural differences between the Catholic culture-areas and the Protestant ones. It even explains the good French cuisine and the not-so-good English food. Nobody will deny that the greatest figures of Catholicism include St Benedict, St Francis, St Ignatius and St Vincent de Paul. But I should like to add to this list, without a trace of facetiousness, another one with the names of Palestrina, Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, Beethoven and César Franck. They, too, show forth what Catholicism is and means. It may seem a very far cry from the darkness of the confessional chair to the light of Beethoven's symphony in F major, but the sociologist will be inclined to insist that the latter would not have come into being without the former, and that the two are two aspects of one culture that belong together like the two sides of a coin.

My last topic is the influence of the Catholic Church on non-Catholic societies, and here my main submission is that this influence is very much greater than is usually admitted or even realized. There is, as far as I can see, only one great social body in the Western world which has escaped that influence, namely the Calvinist communion. The Calvinist communion is the main antagonist of the Roman, and stands to it in the relation of fire to water. These two can never meet. But where a state religion has reigned supreme since the end of the Middle Ages, as in England and in Russia, there the Church of Rome has remained influential, even though her influence is only implicit and subconscious. She has remained influential as an unadmitted object of emulation.

The Catholic Church defines herself as an institution for the salvation of the human race, and it is interesting to see that both the British and the Russian States have had a tendency to model themselves on this definition and to assume the burden of that mission. Both the King of England and the Tsar-Autocrat of the pre-revolutionary times had themselves declared Vicars of Christ on earth, and the word *Caesaropapism* has been coined to characterize their office. The coronation ceremonials have great significance in this connection. There is in them a strong element reminiscent of the Catholic rite for the consecration of a bishop, and, indeed, both the King of England and the Tsar-Autocrat habitually carried out papal functions—for instance, the appointment of successive holders of episcopal sees, and many more besides. In fact, one of the Tsars, I think it was the madman Paul I, once arrived at the Cathedral of St Petersburg with the intention of celebrating the Liturgy, and it was very difficult for the Metropolitan to talk him out of the idea. No wonder! According to the law of the land, the Tsar was within his rights. The whole matter is most revealingly discussed at the end of the first part of Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. The Priest Paissy there contrasts the Roman Church with the Russian State, and what he contends is that whereas the Roman Church sinks progressively down into a secular state, the Russian State rises progressively up into the position of a sacred Church. In Russia, Paissy says, 'it is not the Church which transforms itself into the State. . . . On the contrary, it is the State which transforms itself into the Church, and becomes the universal Church.' This, Paissy concludes, 'is the great predestination of Orthodoxy upon this earth'. And Paissy says another significant thing. He says, 'it was in the *East* that the star appeared'. What he means is that the salvation of the world will come, not from Rome, but from Moscow. The State-Church of which he dreams is to be apostolic as well as catholic, and so he wants to give it all the notes and marks which Roman Catholicism has always claimed and always had. In England, this same conviction has worked itself out in practice rather than in theory: it has expressed itself in empire-building which has, of course, many causes and many characteristics, but among whose causes and characteristics a missionary purpose must also find a place. Here, too, it is a novelist rather than a scholar who has seen the matter in its true colours. The

great importance of E. M. Forster's incomparable novel, *A Passage to India*, consists in this, that he understands—not only exposes, but also understands—the feeling of superiority which the English have always shown in their relation to the subject races. It rests in the last analysis on the conviction that the English are called to bring light to the benighted, that they are God's special tool for this great work. There is, behind much that the English have tried and done and achieved in history, the ideal of a *pax britannica*, and that *pax britannica* is essentially the *pax romana* in a new guise.

Latterly, as we all know, a new claimant has appeared on the scene for the honour of being, or becoming, the saviour of the world, and that new claimant is the proletariat, the proletarian class. If you study the writings of the prophet Marx you will see that there is, behind all his economics, a definite religious vision —the vision of a world cleansed of evil and suffering, and it is the promise of this transfigured world, a promise which substantially coincides with the promise of the kingdom of God, which has appealed to the masses—at any rate where the practical programme of Communism has not yet been tried out. This is the reason why Marxism has so readily been absorbed by the Russians. In Lenin's mind the messianism of Dostoevsky and the messianism of Karl Marx flowed into one, and it is not surprising that they did. After all, they were kindred ideologies, and both of them have grown out of an envious study of the divine mission of the Catholic Church.

Fr Victor White writes: 'I much regret that in reviewing Professor Zaehner's *Foolishness to the Greeks* (BLACKFRIARS, July, p. 332), I implied that he regards the *philosophia perennis* as a "manifest error". This is inaccurate and unjust. The view he pronounced to be a "manifest error" was that "all mystical experiences *must* be identical, and that mysticism *must* therefore be a *philosophia perennis* transcending all the so-called revealed creeds". With this judgment I, of course, heartily concur.'

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