

THE PROBLEM OF THE GREAT CITY

It is not easy to express adequately in a single English word the concept implied in the German *Grossstadt*. It does not mean only metropolis or great city, not necessarily city at all; even a town may have the qualities of a *Grossstadt*. But if we have not the word we certainly have the reality. All the great centres of industry, where men are gathered together in masses in order to provide for their livelihood and to keep going the great machine of modern civilisation can be described as *Grossstädten*. In the concrete it is London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and Newcastle; and even the smaller towns in the industrialised areas share in its spirit, the mining centres of South Yorkshire, the cotton towns of Lancashire, and the dirty villages of County Durham (one of which was described by Edward VIII, then Prince of Wales, as the worst in England).

These centres are either sprung out of a transformed countryside or men have come to them from quiet, orderly lives in the country. In either case they present a peculiar problem, which is part of the greater problem of man in the present age. The man of the great city (using this as the nearest equivalent of the German word) is a definite type, quite distinct from the countryman, and requires a distinctive approach on the part of those who are interested in his soul's welfare.

How to make that approach has been the subject of a number of German brochures and even large books which have appeared in recent years. Now we have it presented in an attractive form by Wilhelm Umbricht, whose novel, *Raymund findet den Teufel*, describes the experiences of a young priest in his attempts to deal with modern industrialised man.¹ Though the story is set against an obvi-

¹ Benziger Verlag, Einsiedeln, Switzerland. Sw. Fr. 5.90.

ously German background, where certain features are more sharply accentuated than in England, the essential atmosphere is not different from that of any of the above-named cities and most of the action might easily take place there. The leading characters, too, are not un-English, for it is characteristic of these conditions that the individual is reduced to the mass which is much the same in all countries. Perhaps the greatest value of the book lies in the fact that it presents the story quite simply in such a way as to prove beyond all doubt the author's knowledge of the background and his sincere Catholic spirit, without attempting to moralise or outline a detailed solution of the problem.

Before further indicating the value of the book it is necessary to look briefly into the problem of man in the great city. It is, before everything else, a human problem. What is the man of the great city like?

There are not a few who differ little from the people of the country. There are many who are faithful, convinced and practical Christians and who possess all the natural human instincts, fully developed and perennially attractive. What is said, therefore, of industrialised man cannot be applied to them. But it can be applied to the type. For the tragedy of our times is that the generality of men in the great city have so far lost the ordinary religious inclinations and even the natural human qualities that they must be studied anew and lifted up by means that have scarcely yet been tried.

The older generation, composed of those who were at least born in a more leisurely age, have retained better than the rest the common outlook. If they do not attend Church, they have a certain respect for religion and a more or less strict code of morality. On the 'great occasions' of birth, marriage and death they instinctively look for the intervention of some Christian minister and they reject the neo-pagan practices of contraception, civil marriage and cremation. But city-life has weakened the faith of many of these. Those who are Catholics usually succeed in turn-

ing to the priest for the Last Sacraments, but these have often been preceded by a lifetime of neglect and ignorance of spiritual things.

Their children have known nothing but city life. They have learned to live in artificial surroundings, the school has taken the place of the home in guiding their character, and a professional teacher has been expected to influence their morals—a task which even the most ardent cannot accomplish with half the ease of the parent, the natural teacher. They have learned to read and write, but have had no real cultural training—for culture must be rooted in life; the cleverest have become the intelligentsia of today, with no fixed standards and no really productive ability, and the less clever have been enabled to read unintelligently their daily or, which is worse, Sunday newspaper and to take in the inane efforts of certain film-stars to amuse. The latter have been exploited by the former and under the direction of the intellectual élite the unthinking but literate masses have been organised into the great secular movements of the time, Communism, Fascism and National Socialism.

Where the masses have not yet been entirely won over to such revolutionary movements, they have at least remained largely indifferent to religion. They have never known it, never realised the need of it and, seeing it apparently allied with injustice, exploitation and out-of-date political systems, have been positively turned against it.

They present a peculiar problem for the priest and the social worker in their amazing stolidness in the presence of religion. Their fathers turned away from the Church and insulted the priest; they simply do not understand him. The things of which he speaks are meaningless to them. Experience of some of these cases might lead one to urge that a special course in the interpretation of the meaning of religious truth in the idiom of the great city should be established in the seminaries. Those who take up this attitude are not so much the very young, the 'under

twenty-fives' or the 'under-thirties,' as the people who grew up from youth to manhood and womanhood during the Great War—those who might be called the 'about forties.' Hitler, for instance, is not yet fifty, and his associates are, on the whole, slightly younger. Others, less well known, share if not his fanaticism at least his incomprehension of religious values.

The younger generation, that which was born in or just before the War, is in this country at least bewildered. It has no affection for the pre-war standards maintained by the older people, it has the vaguest ideas of a progressive plan and it is to a large extent deeply pessimistic. In Germany it is being temporarily carried away by the older leaders, but in distracted France it presents perhaps the most hopeful sign for the future. There (and in Belgium) the Catholic working youth—the youth, that is, of the great city—is consciously striving to appreciate the deeper implications of religion and apply them to the problems of modern industrial life. It does not reject the great city but joyously accepts and seeks to interpret and elevate its culture. This movement happily is spreading and may well be the basis for a general revival.

In face of these city-dwellers the task of the priest is comparatively simple, at least to describe. In spite of all the inhumanity of their lives they are human and, therefore, fundamentally and naturally good. They are not so tainted by vice that they cannot appreciate goodness and devotion in others. Those who are validly baptised are possessed of the supernatural virtues, and therefore are assisted still more to see and pursue holiness. But they are nearly all, on account of the atmosphere of the great city, amoral and amazingly ignorant.

It is, therefore, of little use merely to condemn or to assume that they know as clearly as their fathers knew the truths of religion. Appreciating their ignorance, understanding their temptations, the priest or lay-apostle can only appeal to their inner goodness, natural or super-

natural. This he can do through his own deep devotion to their welfare, by his blazing sanctity if possible but at least by his transparent goodness.

That is the solution which Raymund finds alone possible in the book under consideration. Straight from a retreat he comes with enthusiasm and high hope to the work of a city parish, only to be deeply disappointed by the lack of response to his efforts and by the sight of vice around him. The character of a former Church-student and friend of Raymund is particularly finely delineated. He is scarcely practising his religion, he has had an illegitimate child and tries to protect it even though he is unwilling to marry the mother. His own parents are typical of the older generation. His mother forgiving but deeply shocked, the father both unforgiving and gravely offended. He himself without much apparent affection for either. There is a scene of Raymund offering to help a girl with a heavy trunk: she indignantly refuses, and when he explains that he means no harm for he is a Catholic priest, he is told: 'Then more than ever, NO.' That is the result of a past scandal in the parish, indicating the harm a bad priest can do and inversely the good to be achieved by a holy one.

Another former Church-student has turned agitator and atheist. He works up the mob against Raymund only, in the end, to find the fickle but fundamentally honest crowd on Raymund's side. The figure of a Carthusian monk who has to come to the city for attention to his eyes is used to indicate at once the over-heated unnatural atmosphere and the way to approach the souls who live in it. It is he who teaches both Raymund and his wayward friend, Leo, the way to God and to men's souls. On his death they realise the struggle which life imposes upon them, for one the fearless effort to defend and further the rights of God and for the other to serve Him loyally and devotedly. In the great city this means one thing, and one thing only—the unending, unlimited abandonment of self in the service of mankind. That the city dweller understands—even if

he is not yet capable of understanding the fullness of his human value nor the glory which the grace of Baptism has bestowed upon him.

EDWARD QUINN.