

“I AM SADLY THEORETICAL”:

“It Is The Effect Of Being At Oxford”¹

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Born: 1919.

Educated: Sydenham High School for Girls.

Converted in 1935; recently received into the Church.²

Went up to Oxford (St. Hugh’s) in 1937 to Read Greats.

Recreations: Talking, reading, walking, bathing³, riding.

Oxford is so full of people who know what is going to happen to population and trade, and whether war will break out, and whose fault it will be, and what will happen after that, that I feel it necessary to apologize for not issuing judgments on such things, when I set out to write in this series.

I know nothing about them, and in my ignorance I must suppose that the gloomiest forecasts of the experts who surround me may be true – in which case it will not be very necessary to plan one’s future in detail – but here I can only make a guess at life supposing that things will go on much as they are.

I am to consider how far it is possible for me to express my Catholic views, in religion, philosophy, sociology, and the like, in the kind of life I am likely to lead. In looking at this question it is plain that one’s secular life might be quite untouched by Catholic activities. I suppose that my prospects are much the same as those of anyone up at Oxford or at any university, who means to earn his or her own living on going down: some have jobs waiting for them, but the rest are harassed by the necessity of doing well in schools – on that depends whether one gets a well-paid and secure job or not.

But it is obvious that one could work out one’s career without being at all affected by Catholic activity – it is much the same whether one is Catholic or not, except that in a few spheres – teaching, for example – it slightly prejudices one’s chances to be one.

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² [Ed. Anscombe reveals here (and nowhere else in her writings) that she considered herself to have already been Catholic for three years when she was received into the Catholic Church.]

³ [Ed. In British English ‘bathing’ refers to swimming, not to taking a bath.]

Being a Catholic is a Worldly Affair

Nevertheless, being a Catholic is in a sense as much a worldly, social, political, affair as it is a supernatural one. If one were living a full Catholic life in the world, one's job, though purely secular, would fit into a Catholic social scheme.

Society consists of a hierarchy of groups and smaller societies – each of these ought *corporately* to confess the Christian faith, so that religion is not merely one item of social life but the very framework of society.

To use the words of a young Catholic in Oxford, one should not speak like a university preacher of “Religion in Life” but of “Life in Religion.”

But this is a prospect fairly remote from the position of most Catholics living in the world. Yet there is nothing much else worth ambition: to sum it up in the tritest and most obvious way, one chiefly wants all who are outside the Church to become Catholics, and all Catholics, saints. Of course, the most important part of this falls quite outside the scope of this article: but it is at the same time a secular ambition: for secular affairs can only find their fulfillment in this. And lay-people can work to effect these objects in two ways, closely connected – *first*, we ought ourselves to realize the implications in corporate life of Christian faith and morals, and *second*, we ought to be taking part in a new attack on non-Catholics: for the time has surely come for turning outward, an aggression, a separation, a proclamation of the church not as one of a row of candidates for the chooser's approval, but as utterly distinct from all else: so that every man and woman in England should be conscious of the one significant choice: to be, or not to be, Catholic.

Deeds Speak Louder

These two activities are connected because we can do less to convert people now than at any time by merely talking and writing. The great mass of the people have not heard of our religion but they have heard its names and are inoculated against them. It is by seeing the Church in action and her social doctrine and its effects that the people will be converted.

Both in order to be more fully Catholic, then, and in order to convert the world we must set our secular house in order. We must be the first to accept the natural moral law, to deal justly, suppress usury, underselling, unjust prices and wages, to respect and increase the human dignity of the poor by restoring to them greater control over their own lives. All this is taught, but is it enforced and practised? To quote Fr. O'Hea, S.J.:

“It wouldn’t occur to an employer to mention wages in the confessional – he’d talk of distraction in his prayers rather, for wages go by the market price of labour.”⁴

Keeping Harems, and Sweating⁵

A man who kept a harem would be excommunicated: what about a man who practices usury or sweating? Yet we suffer here rather from ignorance and indifference than from malice. It is not enough to be told that it is a good idea to be just, we need particular pronouncements. “The just man justices,” yes, but what is justice in this thing or that?⁶ We are not merely told to be chaste, we are told that contraception is unchaste, and left in little doubt of what may and may not be done. And the world knows it, too. “He” they say, “is a Roman Catholic. You know he wouldn’t approve.” There is no such recognition of Catholic social doctrine, though there is just as much need of it.

These articles are meant to be practical; what have we done and what are we to do? We have the Catholic Social Guild – it is our duty to use it both to find out and to propagate the exact implications in detailed practice of papal social doctrine. In this we must avoid two things: mere vaguely theorising benevolence, and the claim that some private theory is papal doctrine, and that the church is committed to some particular political system. But once the truth is discovered it must be so loudly proclaimed, enforced, and practiced, that the outside world is left in

⁴ [Ed. Anscombe is referring to Fr. Leo O’Hea, the Director of the Catholic Social Guild and Principal of the Catholic Worker’s College, both located in Oxford. The Catholic Social Guild (CSG) was both the main educator of working-class Catholics on the social teachings of the Catholic Church (e.g. its teachings on work and labour, and on economics and politics more generally), and the main publisher of such teachings. Since O’Hea published very little, Anscombe is almost surely recalling something she heard O’Hea say. Conversation between O’Hea and Anscombe was manageable, because the Catholic Workers College was located at 3 Walton Well Road, Oxford, a few blocks from Anscombe’s college. The Catholic Workers College had opened in 1922, and in 1954 would move just outside Oxford to Boars Hill, and in 1965 be renamed Plater College. For details, see J. M. Cleary, *Catholic social action in Britain 1909-1959: a history of the Catholic Social Guild*. (Oxford: Catholic Social Guild, 1961); Fr. C. Pridgeon, *Fr. Leo O’Hea, S. J.: A Memoir* (Glasgow, 1976).]

⁵ [Ed. Sweating: “To employ in hard or excessive work at very low wages, esp. under a system of subcontract.” (OED – 1887 19th Cent. Oct. 489 “They declared that they were being ‘sweated’—that the hunger for work induced men to accept starvation rates.”)]

⁶ [Ed. Here Anscombe alludes to the second stanza of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*.

I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is —
Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.

Thanks to Professor Benjamin Lipscomb for alerting me to this allusion.]

no doubt that there is a concrete Christian claim and practice of social justice.⁷

That is the conclusion: that an ordinary secular⁸ life will not of itself involve Catholic activities but that ideally it ought *itself to be* inextricably one of a whole system of Catholic activities, and that to make it so, and to convert the English, we must first train ourselves, and then go out and *seek* battle, and in the course of life always be turning outwards so that no one is left in England who does not have to reckon with the Faith, for acceptance or rejection.

Not a mere Sop to Communists⁹

I have spoken of lay activities and the lives of lay-people, but must end by saying that in this we need the lead of the clergy and the hierarchy. If the people are not to think that general to exhortation justice are a mere sop to would-be Communists, we need as plain a voice in these matters as we have heard on euthanasia, state education, or contraception, and the findings of those who are trying to work out the implications of the encyclicals will be useless if they are not authoritatively sanctioned and enforced, or denied and corrected.

Sadly Theoretical

I have been sadly theoretical: it is the effect of being up at Oxford which is a mere talking-shop. Our experience here is only of trying to work things out among ourselves, and of arguing with our non-Catholic acquaintances, and frequenting non-Catholic meetings and trying – not always cautiously – to maintain the Catholic view.

I have lived all my life among non-Catholics and anti-Catholics, and still do so to a great extent: I have little experience except of argument to report, and now long for something more decisive. I do not know how much scope there is, but at least there is enormous scope for activity in the future, and my chief ambition is to be doing something, or to be seeing something done, about it.

⁷ [Ed. Here we see Anscombe is already keenly aware of the need for thick description when articulating the demands and ideals of a moral life. What would not do was some “vaguely theorizing benevolence.” The originality of Anscombe’s moral philosophy lay in part in its emphasis on the centrality of careful moral description. Even recovering the language of justice and the other virtues was insufficient. Justice could only be adequately understood if it included a series of particular pronouncements that functioned as a series of exemplifications of a rich conception of justice.]

⁸ [Ed. Anscombe is using ‘secular’ as a synonym for ‘lay Catholic’ as opposed to someone who is a cleric or in religious life.]

⁹ [Ed. According to the OED, a ‘sop’ is “something given to appease or pacify the recipient; a bribe.” It is an allusion to the honeycake (a sop) which Prince Aeneas uses to distract (the three-headed dog) Cerberus, who was guarding the entrance to the underworld.]