

COMMENTARY

MORALS AND MAN. With this number of BLACKFRIARS we begin the publication of a series of articles on some contemporary moral dilemmas. They relate to personal—as distinct from public—problems, and it might at first seem that generalisation can do little to resolve conflicts which are a matter for the individual conscience. The moral law does not alter, nor does the compassion of Christ. But it grows ever more necessary to insist that the immutability of moral principles, which the Church proclaims, goes with the fullest recognition that men live in a society—indeed are often at its mercy—which makes their Christian obedience hard if not heroic. This is especially true of the fundamental discipline of Christian marriage, for a social sacrament demands a truly social setting to make its function fruitful. This means, for instance, that the provision of adequate housing is a moral and not a merely political matter. It can seem heartless in a professional moralist to reiterate the unchanging law when the structure of society is increasingly organised to make its acceptance, humanly speaking, impossible.

But within the human personality itself, though here the modifying factors of environment must not be exaggerated, there are actual and taxing problems which reflect accurately enough the conflicts of the age in which we live. A simple repetition of traditional Christian maxims is scarcely enough to counteract the erosive effect of a secular world, and a Catholic education which fails to take account of the immense and powerful factors working within the society it seeks to redeem can scarcely hope to achieve its purpose.

Doubtless the presuppositions of a welfare state and the too easily accepted diagnoses of the psychologists have done much to make resistance difficult, but it is only within the boundaries of the world we know—a place on the map and a moment in time—that concrete moral judgment can operate. What is right does not alter, but the capacity to *see* it so, to feel its imperative demand, is constantly affected by the pressure of life within a given and inescapable social order.

Those who believe it is only the Catholic view of man and of his vocation that can bring happiness or hope in the end have a special responsibility in avoiding temerarious and easy judgments. Thus Mr Evelyn Waugh in his *Love Among the Ruins* finds all too ready a prey for his satire in the exaggerations of what he imagines a future welfare state will be like. It is easy to laugh, but is it always profitable? The tragedy in which Catholics as well as everyone else must be increasingly involved is the tragedy of society as such, and a recall to the constants of the moral law cannot exclude sympathy for those—and Catholics are often enough among them—who are pitifully ill-equipped to discern the fallacies of a secular paradise. The diagnosis of our discontents must go deeper than laughter at what is ludicrous, and Pharisees and publicans have a permanent place in the Gospel and in its extension through the centuries of Christian life.

A sense of moral superiority, therefore, can never be a substitute for moral teaching, and teaching in its turn demands a respect for the one who is being taught. That respect means not the condoning of inadequacy or failure, but it must mean an understanding of the social and individual setting in which alone the moral law comes into play.

The need is to see beyond the premisses of a moral syllogism, to penetrate the concrete and human situation in which it must be lived. That does not mean the minimising of the law, the excusing of its betrayal, but it does mean a patience in judgment, a capacity to share another's burdens at least in intention and desire. No doubt the spectacular success of Thomas Merton's books is due to his dramatic presentation of one answer to the terrible conflicts that are driving Western man to a neurotic despair. And those who can make the choice, who can elect for silence, are fortunate indeed. But the millions remain, and their need remains and is not met by satire or by sublimation. Even in their misery, most of all in the misery that inevitably comes with the full knowledge of their failure on their own, separate and beyond the community of grace, they can begin to hope. That is what the Gospel is about and that is the situation the Church exists to serve. But it must be seen to be so, redeeming the times and every man's need.