

## THE CASE FOR ITALY

AN American newspaper has described the attack on Abyssinia as the wickedest war in history. And indeed few wars have seemed less excusable or aroused more universal disgust. Apart from all questions of British interests involved, and apart from the hypocrisy suggested by such an attitude (for it is undeniable that Britain has repeatedly done much that Italy is doing to-day), nothing could be better calculated to offend the sentimental-sporting instincts of the British public of 1935 than the spectacle of a well-equipped modern army with planes, bombs, tanks and (it seems) poison-gas invading a primitive, independent African state.

But though sentiment may give, up to a point, a trustworthy indication of objective right and wrong, it is in the light of dispassionate reasoning and the unbiassed examination of facts that the ethics of Italy's attack must be scrutinized. What is to be said of it in the light of Catholic teaching? The ethical aspect of the conflict (which the Christian knows to be the most fundamental one) has received insufficient attention.

The problem resolves itself to an examination of the case put forward by Italy. Quite apart from the League's formal designation of Italy as the aggressor, nobody has seriously contested the legitimacy of the part played by Abyssinia in the hostilities.

Italy's case falls under four headings:

(1) Italy's need for and right to colonial expansion in the face of over-population and her insufficiency of material resources.

(2) Italy's invasion is not an offensive war, but a necessary means of defence of her colonial possessions.

(3) Abyssinia is a backward country; Italy will bring her the blessings of enlightenment and civilization. In particular, the slave-traffic, carried on under disgraceful and inhuman conditions, flourishes in Abyssinia; Italy will put a stop to that.

(4) The Italian expedition is a purely colonial affair between herself and Abyssinia, for which Britain and other imperialistic powers have given ample precedent. It is Italy's own business; the other powers will kindly mind their own.

Before examining these points in detail, it will be well to reproduce the Pope's celebrated statement of August 27th which admirably sums up the situation from the moral standpoint:

The very idea of war makes Us shudder. Outside Italy there is already talk of "a war of conquest," an "offensive war." That is an idea which We do not wish even to contemplate. A war which is simply a war of conquest would be unquestionably an unjust war; and that is a thing too terrible to imagine, something indescribably distressing and horrible. . . .

In Italy itself, on the other hand, talk is of a "just war"; "just" because a war of defence to safeguard frontiers against incessant dangers; a war which has been rendered necessary for the expansion of an ever-increasing population; a war undertaken to defend or assure a country's material security—a war which would be justified by that alone.

Nevertheless it is true that, although there may be need for expansion, although there may also be need to safeguard the security of frontiers by defensive measures, it is impossible for Us not to hope that these problems will be solved otherwise than by war. But how? It is certainly not easy to say, but We are convinced that it is not impossible. One thing seems to Us certain: although the need for expansion is a fact which must be recognized, there are limits to the right of self-defence and moderation that must be observed if culpability is to be avoided.<sup>1</sup>

The Holy Father, it will be seen, recognizes, as do all of us, the fact of Italy's need for expansion. But it must not be overlooked that this need is itself being artificially stimulated and intensified by the Fascist Government. Not only are the possibilities of "interior colonization" still far from exhausted, not only is the Italian birth-rate being deliberately forced upwards by the Government, but the rigid restriction on emigration suggests that the need for expansion as understood by Italy is something other than a cure

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<sup>1</sup> The latter part of the address is omitted, not because of its alleged censure on British policy, but because of its irrelevance to the point here at issue.

for unwanted over-population. But when all this has been admitted, it must still be acknowledged that there is a strong case for more Italian colonies.

Nevertheless, it must be insisted that a general and abstract claim for colonial expansion, however justified and urgent, gives no claim to Italy on *Abyssinia* in particular and in the concrete, still less does it justify the use of force against *Abyssinia*. Italy must show, not only her right to more colonial possession, but her right to the possession of *Abyssinia*. She has not done so; and it would seem impossible for her to do so. She could make a better case for invading Tunis, Malta, Corsica or Soho than she could for invading Ethiopia. In those places she has, at least, a considerably larger proportion of resident nationals. When it is seen that Italy's case for expansion is, *de facto*, not merely a case for expansion in general, but a case for the absorption of *Abyssinia*, it can be readily seen that there is a good deal more in the conclusion than is warranted by the premisses.

It is difficult to take the "defence" plea seriously. If Italy is capable of advancing into *Abyssinia* and taking possession of it, *a fortiori* she is capable of defending her own frontiers from nomad tribes. It must not be forgotten that the Wal-Wal incidents, still appealed to by Italy as the chief justification for her "defensive measures," took place some 120 kilometres within Ethiopian territory. Doubtless, Addis Ababa has hitherto shown its impotence to control adequately the frontier marauders nominally subject to it. But the suggestion that these wild nomads cannot be kept within the territory of the Negus and his nominal jurisdiction does less discredit to the Ethiopian government than to the Italian frontier guards on the spot, and bodes ill for the competence of Italian government in Ethiopia. The insubordination of the frontier tribes does not justify hostilities against the central Abyssinian government.

The third point of the case for Italy is more serious. The desirability of the civilization of Ethiopia is acknowledged by all, and by nobody more emphatically than by the Negus. Were Italy to civilize Ethiopia she would be doing a

good work, deserving of the highest praise. But the issue, from the moral standpoint, concerns not the end but the *means*. The Christian conscience cannot allow that the pretext of civilization justifies *war*. And, apart from the ethical issue, it may be seriously doubted whether war of any sort, let alone the barbarity of modern warfare, can bring anything worthy of the name of civilization—even as an after-effect.

The same must be said of slavery-abolition. That slavery in Abyssinia is a fact, that that slavery is widespread and often conducted under the most barbarous conditions, is uncontested. But it does not justify war. Slavery was, if anything, worse in Abyssinia in 1923 when Italy insisted on Abyssinia's admission to the League than it is to-day. There is evidence that Addis Ababa has made considerable effort to stamp it out. But age-long custom on which the whole economic structure of a people is built up cannot be abolished in a hurry without doing untold damage. In Europe it took centuries.

But it is not enough for Italy to tell us that there is slavery in Abyssinia nor that Italian occupation will put an end to it. She must show that the evil can be cured only by another evil—the evil of war—and that the curing is Italy's job and nobody else's. This she has not done, and cannot do.<sup>2</sup>

The "purely colonial expedition" plea—supported by the British isolationist press—does not fit the facts. The circumstances of the Italo-Abyssinian dispute are such that it cannot be, from the very nature of the case, a local affair without international repercussions. It is a world-issue, and its possible repercussions are incalculable. There is no parallel in this respect with previous colonial expeditions on the part of Britain or of other powers. (This is not said to justify them.) Not only are the interests of British and French Somaliland, of the Sudan, of the route to India and especially of Egypt, deeply involved, but much has happened since the pre-War and pre-League enterprises of

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<sup>2</sup> It is beside the point of the present inquiry to discuss whether the lot of a slave in Abyssinia is worse than that of a wage-slave in Italy or of a native working under the hideous conditions of forced labour in the South African mines.

European colonizers. We live in a world that has said good-bye to all that—with the utmost solemnity. Though an immediate European War may be (and in all probability will be) avoided, a precedent will be given by Italy to other nations, and notably to Germany, which can end only one way. There is the still greater danger that the Abyssinian war will be the prelude to a vast inter-racial conflict.<sup>3</sup>

We are not here concerned to show how Italy's just claims can be met without prejudice to the rights of Abyssinia in the spirit of the Holy Father's appeal. It cannot be said that sincere and powerful efforts have not been made to meet them; all to be turned down with scorn by Mussolini and his government. Enough has been said to suggest that—even regardless of Italy's solemn Covenant and Treaty obligations—her case for the invasion of Abyssinia will not stand examination in the light of elementary ethical principles. This is said in no spirit of pharisaical complacency. Britain is in no position to throw stones. But nor do two blacks make a white; but the slaughter involved by modern massacre-warfare and the incalculable international repercussions to be anticipated make Italy's action a matter of universal concern for which there is no parallel in the shady annals of British imperialism. To the Catholic the spectacle of thousands of Catholics carried away by mass-hysteria with enthusiasm for this undertaking is a matter of the gravest anxiety.

The advocate of the case for Italy must face this dilemma. Of two things one: *either* Italy's expedition is a defensive measure *or* an offensive war of conquest. If the latter, it is self-condemned as the Holy Father has said. If the former, then the means are out of all proportion to the end, and adequate pacific means should not have been rejected. Either way, we are faced with a *manifestly unjust war* on the part of Italy. And an unjust war is wholesale organized murder.

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<sup>3</sup> See the authoritative and startling *White against Black in Africa* by the Archbishop of Westminster in the October number of *The Month* (October).

<sup>4</sup> With acknowledgments to M. J. Folliet: *Le conflit italo-éthiopien devant la morale: Vie Intellectuelle*, September 10, 1935.