

EDITORIAL

THE LAYMAN'S PLACE

IN all times the laity have been the measure of the Catholic spirit; they saved the Irish Church three centuries ago, and they betrayed the Church in England.' Newman's words are a century old, but his appeal for 'a laity not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold, and what they do not, who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it', is more actual today than ever before. Indeed his insistence on the layman's essential function within the economy of the Church's life finds striking confirmation in the development in our own time of what might be called a theology of the laity as such.

'You are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people.' St Peter's celebrated text (I Pct. ii. 9) has been the starting-point of most theological discussion on the 'priesthood of the laity'. Since the Reformation, with its rejection of a sacrificing priesthood, Catholic apologetic has naturally been largely concerned to defend the necessity of the sacrament of Holy Order; and the ambiguity of a 'priesthood of the laity' has seemed to demand merely a metaphorical explanation. Thus St John Fisher was obliged to say of Luther: 'He only raises the laity to the office of priests that he may reduce the priesthood to the office of laymen.' Today the Protestant controversy is less compelling with the general decay of its specific beliefs. And in the end the Church's answer is always to be sought in the truth and unity and holiness that are hers: to be exemplified therefore in her members.

But the contemporary stress on 'Catholic Action' has not always been matched by much precision in the analysis of what exactly is meant by 'the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy' (to quote Pope Pius XI's famous definition). What has been needed in the first place is a full account of the theological tradition of the layman's function, and this has just been made available in *Le Sacerdoce Royal des Fidèles dans la tradition ancienne et moderne* by Père Paul Dabin, s.j. It is a necessary corollary to the

classic *Corps Mystique de Christ* (available in English as *The Whole Christ*) by his fellow Belgian Jesuit, Père Mersch, for the doctrine of the Mystical Body, given magisterial expression in the present Pope's Encyclical on that subject, provides the setting within which the 'royal priesthood' of the laity must be discussed.

For most of the Fathers, a striking sign of the layman's incorporation in the high priesthood of Christ was to be found both in the anointing by chrism (for 'Christ' is the anointed one) that follows the conferring of Baptism, and, more particularly, in the anointing of Confirmation (which is the essential action of that sacrament). The baptised are indeed rendered capable of sharing in the offering of the sacrifice of the Mass only in virtue of the regeneration which Baptism effects. And the Church's former liturgical discipline, with its dismissal of the catechumens at the Offertory (when the sacrifice itself begins), emphasised the real capacity of the members of Christ to participate in the sacrifice offered by the Mystical Body, Head and members. It was St Thomas who was to establish the notion of sacramental *character* as the ground of the laity's share in the priesthood of Christ: 'the sacraments which imprint a character bestow on man a certain consecration, thus deputing him to the divine worship.' Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Order: each is a participation in the priesthood of Christ, though each has its proper degree and formality.

The exact and positive definition of the sense in which the laity may be said to share in Christ's threefold office as Prophet, Priest and King takes on a special importance in relation to the modern apostolate of lay Catholics. The inalienable character of the baptised and confirmed members of Christ provides a title to their active participation in the Church's work. And it is a reminder, as Père Congar, O.P. has remarked, that 'the sacramental consecration of the priesthood itself, with the character it implants and the powers it confers, is a deepening and a development of the consecration, character and title to worship already given to the faithful through Baptism and the imposition of hands (Confirmation). Such is the teaching, so profound and unhappily so little known, of St Thomas, a teaching rooted in his view of the baptismal character, the first participation in the priesthood of Christ.'

It has been said, with greater facetiousness than accuracy, that the Canon Law only envisages the laity as a category of people to

whom things are done. The impression arises because jurisdiction and order (with which the Codex is principally concerned) are properly the sphere of priests. For the 'priesthood' in which the laity share by reason of their Baptism and Confirmation is not a priesthood *manqué*, an honorary membership merely. They have rights, but they are not the rights of those commissioned by Christ's own ordinance to rule the Church in his name; just as they share in the offering of Mass, but not with the specific function of the priest who stands at the altar as alone ordained to consecrate the victim. Thus it is that Newman's appeal for a 'laity who know just where they stand' is a warning alike against the extremes of a false passivity and an equally false confusion of function with that of the priest, who in his Ordination is reminded by the Bishop that he alone is 'to offer Sacrifice, to bless, to preside, to preach and to baptise.'

Here, as in every aspect of the Church's life, contemplation precedes action, and the effective contribution of the laity to 'the restoration of all things in Christ' must spring from their sharing in the worship which all work presupposes and in which it finds its beginning and its end. And the action of Christians will find its context in the action in which their baptised character has made them capable of sharing: the Mass. 'Be mindful, Lord, of thy servants, and of all here present, whose faith and devotion are known to thee, for whom we offer, or who offer up to thee, this sacrifice of praise.'

Le Sacerdoce Royal des Fidèles dans la tradition ancienne et moderne by Paul Dabin, S.J. is published by Desclée de Brouwer, Paris. *The Whole Christ*, the English translation of Père Mersch's *Corps Mystique du Christ*, published by Dennis Dobson, 30s.



THE GLASTONBURY MADONNA

*A late carving in stone by
Eric Gill*