

“*Must God Go Fascist?*”:  
*English Catholic Opinion and the  
Spanish Civil War*

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Those individuals who seek to apply moral principles to their consideration of the affairs of nations of which they lack direct knowledge may expect to encounter certain difficulties. They may have no means of obtaining indisputable answers to questions even of a factual nature, and they may find it impossible adequately to weigh the contradictory claims of various factions. Moreover, if a religious or other close bond exists with one of the parties to a conflict, it might be tempting to subscribe to the justice of that group's struggle. The risk in such a case is that of turning a blind eye to other moral factors, perhaps compelling ones. The sort of dilemma to which such circumstances may lead is illustrated by the divergent reactions of English Catholics to the Spanish Civil War.

Spain's prolonged and bloody agony aroused a rare intensity of feeling in many lands, not least in Great Britain. It was not uncommon at the time to believe that the armed struggle between democracy and fascism at long last had begun, nor in the years since to interpret the events in Spain as the prelude to the greater European conflagration which followed so nearly upon its conclusion. A fledgling democracy—so ran the popular understanding—had been assaulted by a sinister coalition of reactionaries and fascists, and if Europe's democracies allowed Spain to fall, they would be guilty not only of abandoning the Spanish people to a cruel fate, but also of encouraging the dark forces in Rome and Berlin to plot further adventures against the peace of Europe.

Not all onlookers in Great Britain (or elsewhere) shared this view. The governments led by Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain doubted that the Spanish Republic was worth saving; in any case, they were unwilling to see Spain's troubles drag all Europe into war.<sup>1</sup> The agreement of non-

1. A recent study of Republican Spain's relations with Great Britain and the United States has suggested that the “malevolent neutrality” of the two great powers during the Civil War was the result not of any wish to appease Italy and Germany, but simply of disillusionment with the Spanish Republic itself. By mid-1936, the political instability and unfriendly economic policies of Spain had so exasperated the Foreign Office and State Department that both were willing to countenance an alternative to the Republic, which seemed otherwise likely to fall into Communist hands. Douglas Little, *Malevolent Neutrality: The United States, Great Britain and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985).

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intervention did not prevent the opposing sides in Spain from receiving assistance from their respective friends, but it at least did provide a means by which nations such as Great Britain could avoid involvement with a relatively clear conscience. Those who looked upon the Republic as a legitimate government battling an armed rebellion argued that this manner of neutrality worked unfairly in favor of the insurgents, but the British government was content to stand aside and let matters in Spain take their course. Government policy, therefore, suited those in England who favored the Spanish Nationalist forces commanded by General Francisco Franco. Pro-Nationalist sentiment, fairly strong among Conservatives and within the upper classes, was perhaps most prominently displayed by many (though, as shall be seen, not by all) of the leading representatives of one of England's more articulate minorities, the Roman Catholics.

Catholics had not always been hostile to the Spanish Republic. Following the lead of the Vatican, most of the English Catholic press had adopted a cautious but friendly attitude towards the Republic in the first years after the 1931 overthrow of the monarchy. The anticlerical tendencies of many Republican leaders were noted and deplored, but the presence of a strong Catholic political movement gave reason to hope that in time the rights and freedom of the church would be fully protected.<sup>2</sup>

This guarded approval for the Spanish Republic was in consonance with the general Catholic approach to civil governments worked out in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whatever in the abstract might be desirable as regards the relations of church and state, the vicissitudes of the century following the French Revolution had diminished what the church's leaders believed they could expect or hope for from the state. The Vatican had come to the conclusion that if nothing more could be obtained, it would be content if the local church were free to dispense the sacraments and provide for the religious education of the Catholic population. This policy, already adumbrated in Pope Pius VII's Concordat with Napoleon of 1801, was developed by Pope Leo XIII to deal with the Third French Republic and was maintained by Leo's successors. It permitted Pope Pius XI to write in 1933 (in reference to Spain): "Universally known is the fact that the Catholic Church is never bound to one form of government more than another, provided the Divine rights of God and of Christian consciences are safe. She does not find any difficulty in adapting herself to various civil institutions, be they monarchic or republican, aristocratic or democratic."<sup>3</sup> Thus Catholics

2. See José M. Sánchez, "The Second Spanish Republic and the Holy See: 1931-1936," *Catholic Historical Review* 49 (1963): 47-68; and Thomas R. Greene, "The English Catholic Press and the Second Spanish Republic, 1931-1936," *Church History* 45 (1976): 70-84.
3. Pius XI, "Siempre Nos fué" (3 June 1933), in *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed. Claudia Carlen, 5 vols. (Wilmington, N.C., 1981), 3:491-492. The Spanish original can be found in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 25 (1933): 276.

should be able to live in peace under almost any sort of government, and, as an *English Catholic* journalist defending Vatican policy explained, no automatic preference was to be accorded regimes calling themselves democratic: "It is not hard to envisage States in which the very defence of exaggerated or immorally grounded civil and political liberties constitutes a threat to spiritual liberties, and others where their strict control or even suppression favours those same spiritual liberties."<sup>4</sup> The ability of the church to carry out its work and the right of individual Catholics to practice their religion became the primary criteria by which a society was to be judged.

The use of these criteria, however, could well create the appearance, if not the reality, of a narrow, even blind, policy of self-interest. "Too often," complained Donald Attwater, an English liturgical scholar, "the Pope's utterances are reported as if he were concerned for the Roman Catholic Church but not at all for anything or anybody else."<sup>5</sup> It should not be forgotten that societies could be fundamentally unjust for reasons quite removed from the question of religious freedom for Catholics. In fact, Pius XI's critique of capitalism in his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* had been directed not at any tendencies towards persecution but at the propensity of unrestrained economic liberalism to violate the human dignity of workers and their rights within the social order. Papal teaching did recognize other rights, then, besides those connected with the freedom of the church, rights held by all persons irrespective of religion (and which might be grouped under the heading "social justice"). The problem which troubled some Catholics during the Spanish Civil War was how to deal with a situation in which these two sets of rights—the freedom of the church on one hand and social justice on the other—were, at least arguably, in conflict.

The victory of the Spanish Left in the February 1936 elections set the stage for months of political turmoil and violence, often of the blatantly anticlerical sort certain to alarm Catholic opinion abroad. The threat of a takeover by extreme socialists or communists was not one which Catholics would take lightly: they remembered well the cruel thoroughness with which the Catholic church in Russia had been suppressed and nearly destroyed in 1922–1923.<sup>6</sup> The English Catholic press had responded with horror to the sufferings of their co-religionists and had judged the Bolsheviks accordingly. An assessment not uncommon was that found in the *Dublin Review*: "It is in its deadly hatred of all creeds, and not only creeds, but of all things, good, clean, and positive, that Bolshevism comes out in its horrible reality. . . . It would be little use concealing the fact that for all we know there may be

4. Michael de la Bedoyere, "Rome and Reaction," *Dublin Review* 200 (1937): 251. De la Bedoyere was editor of the weekly *Catholic Herald* from 1934 until 1962.

5. Donald Attwater, "Passing the Buck," *Commonweal* 24 (1936): 517.

6. The best account of this matter in English is James J. Zatko, *Descent into Darkness: The Destruction of the Roman Catholic Church in Russia, 1917–1923* (Notre Dame, 1965).

diabolical forces hidden behind every display of the Soviet ingenuity in their anti-religious policy.<sup>77</sup> Communists had done little since that time to improve their image in the eyes of English Catholics, who consequently would have every reason to desire that a system they saw as incredibly malignant would not be further extended.

Therefore, as the Spanish Republic floundered towards the fateful summer of 1936, many Catholics felt they had good cause to be concerned about the future of the church in that land. When a military uprising, which could not have been surprising to informed individuals anywhere, broke out in the middle of July, the question Catholics had to face was whether a revolt against an established government could be justified—even a revolt undertaken in the name of Catholicism.

In line with the policy of seeking accommodation on the best possible terms with existing governments, the Vatican discouraged armed rebellion. Even if a revolt were undertaken with the best of motives, it nonetheless could lead to a civil war which would make matters worse and create widespread suffering. Yet extenuating circumstances might arise. What should be advised in a case in which the established government, a communist or near-communist government, for example, was so debased and vicious, so actively inimical to the common good, that it could not possibly be regarded as carrying out its proper duties? Might not rebellion in such conditions be no more than a people's right to legitimate self-defense? It has been claimed that by this reasoning Pius XI had approved quietly the 1926 Christero rebellion against the brutally anticlerical Mexican government.<sup>8</sup> The point remained somewhat unsettled, however, and the pope would have occasion to return to this delicate problem during the Spanish Civil War.

Meanwhile, could Catholics justify the revolt in Spain on the grounds of the violence and instability which had preceded it? The editors of the *Tablet*, the most prominent organ of English Catholic opinion, experienced some initial uncertainty.<sup>9</sup> They remarked that the army leaders, in a desperate attempt to purge their land of communism, had had recourse to a remedy which would bring misery to untold thousands of Spaniards. Yet the true culprits, they thought, were to be found among those members of the Spanish government whose policies had rendered civil war inevitable. Now that the issue had been joined, the choice for Spaniards seemed to be between a military dictatorship and a Soviet Republic.<sup>10</sup> But whatever doubts may have existed about the beginnings of the civil war were soon rendered almost

7. *Dublin Review* 175 (1924): 130–131.

8. Guenter Lewy, *Religion and Rebellion* (New York, 1974), pp. 401–402.

9. Since April 1936 the *Tablet* had been managed by Douglas Woodruff, who attracted to the journal the contributions of a number of conservative Catholic intellectuals, including Christopher Dawson, Arnold Lunn, and Christopher Hollis.

10. *Tablet* 168 (25 July 1936): 101–102.

academic for many Catholics, in England and elsewhere, by the explosion of anticlerical rage which the revolt had triggered.<sup>11</sup> The extraordinary sufferings of Spanish Catholics quickly hardened Catholic opinion abroad, and the *Tablet* came very soon to the conclusion that “all those Spaniards who wish to see the Church survive in Spain will have had to side with the insurgents.”<sup>12</sup> The increasing prominence of communist elements within the Republican government and the aid given the Republic by Soviet Russia further clarified the situation for the *Tablet*, which by December viewed the conflict as “the struggle between Communism and anti-Communism, the latter representing every class and every interest that is challenged by the doctrinaire aggression of orthodox Marxism.”<sup>13</sup>

For the Jesuits of the *Month*, consistently the most uncompromising of the intellectual Catholic journals towards those deemed enemies of the church, there had never been an instant's doubt: “The issue is primarily moral and religious—whether a godless tyranny inspired by Marx is to prevail in the Peninsula or the Catholicism which is the guardian of civil and political rights as well as the rights of God. If ever revolt against existing authority was justified it is so here, when the Government is so notoriously abusing its powers in the endeavour to deprive a large section of the population, almost certainly the majority, of its power to fulfill its duties towards God and the responsibilities He has entrusted to them.”<sup>14</sup>

Most of the English Catholic press took a stand similar to that of the *Tablet* and the *Month*; the three popular Catholic weeklies (the *Universe*, the *Catholic Herald*, and the *Catholic Times*) fervently backed Franco and filled their columns with lurid accounts of Republican atrocities.<sup>15</sup> Given the savagery of the attacks on the Spanish church, such a response was only natural, as the publisher Frank Sheed explained much later: “Like the majority of Catholics of the English tongue I wanted Franco to win. We did not know much about conditions in Spain, but as between people who murdered priests and nuns and people who didn't, we preferred those who didn't. It was practically a reflex reaction.”<sup>16</sup>

English Catholics favoring the Nationalists also could claim at least the implicit support of the church's hierarchy. Despite protests to the Republican government over the anticlerical violence, the Vatican long preserved a careful official neutrality. But its sympathies were clear enough. In Septem-

11. See Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1961), pp. 171–175, for a description of these events. The number of deaths resulting from Republican atrocities is given there as 12 bishops, 5,255 priests, 2,492 monks, 283 nuns, and 249 novices (p. 173).

12. *Tablet* 168 (1 Aug. 1936): 133.

13. *Tablet* 168 (5 Dec. 1936): 765.

14. *Month* 168 (Aug. 1936): 106.

15. Thomas Moloney, *Westminster, Whitehall and the Vatican: The Role of Cardinal Hinsley, 1935–1943* (Tunbridge Wells, 1985), p. 70.

16. Frank Sheed, *The Church and I* (Garden City, N.Y., 1974), p. 199.

ber 1936 Pius XI told a group of Spanish refugees: "Above and beyond every worldly and political consideration, our blessing descends in a special way on those who have assumed the difficult and dangerous task of defending and restoring the rights and honor of God and of Religion."<sup>17</sup> In his 1937 encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*, the pope drew attention to the atrocities in Spain as the natural fruit of communism.<sup>18</sup> About the same time, he wrote the Mexican hierarchy in terms which could have been addressed just as well to the church in Spain: "You have more than once recalled to your Faithful that the Church protects peace and order, even at the cost of great sacrifices, and that it condemns every unjust insurrection or violence against constituted powers. On the other hand, among you it has been said that, whenever those powers arise against justice and truth even to destroying the very foundations of authority, it is not to be seen how those citizens are to be condemned who united to defend themselves and the nation, by licit and appropriate means, against those who make use of the public power to bring it to ruin."<sup>19</sup> The *Month* was quick to point out that the pope's language, while cautious, indicated that Christians under attack by their own governments were not obliged passively to submit.<sup>20</sup>

Most of the members of the Spanish hierarchy, feeling less need of diplomatic reticence than did the Vatican, joined in July 1937 to issue a pastoral letter in which they concluded: "Today in Spain there is no hope for the reconquest of peace and justice except the triumph of the National Movement."<sup>21</sup> While the hierarchy of England and Wales made some effort to avoid partisanship and confined its joint activity to the establishment of a Committee for the Relief of Spanish Distress, the pro-Nationalist views of almost all the bishops were never in doubt.<sup>22</sup> When the artist and pacifist Eric Gill, one of the few prominent English Catholics openly to back the Republicans, asked the Archbishop of Westminster, Arthur Hinsley, to condemn alleged Nationalist atrocities, the archbishop refused. Gill was not correct, wrote Hinsley, in asserting that the church in Great Britain had

17. "Al di sopra di ogni considerazione politica e mondana, la Nostra benedizione si volge in modo speciale a quanti si sono assunto il difficile e pericoloso compito di difendere e restaurare i diritti e l'onore di Dio e della Religione"; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 28 (1936): 380.

18. *Papal Encyclicals*, 3: 541. Latin original: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 29 (1937): 114–115.

19. Pius XI, "Nos Es Muy Conocida" (28 March 1937), in *Papal Encyclicals*, 3: 560. Spanish original: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 29 (1937): 208. It has been suggested that, considering the relatively peaceful conditions in Mexico at this time, the pope had intended from the first that his words apply to Spain. Lewy, *Religion and Rebellion*, pp. 411, 438–439.

20. *Month* 169 (May 1937): 387. For a more circumspect contemporary analysis of the Pope's statements, see Luigi Sturzo, "The Right to Rebel," *Dublin Review* 201 (Oct. 1937): 24–39.

21. *Tablet* 170 (14 Aug. 1937): 221. The complete pastoral, in English translation, may be found in *ibid.*, pp. 219–222.

22. Moloney, *Westminster, Whitehall and the Vatican*, p. 64. See also a letter of Michael de la Bedoyere in *Blackfriars* 18 (April 1937): 304.

identified itself with the Nationalists, but “the comparison of the conditions prevailing in Government and Nationalist Spain is more than sufficient excuse for the present attitude of many Catholics in this country.”<sup>23</sup>

Although vocal pro-Republican opinions were confined to Gill and a very few others, a fair number of English Catholics held that the vile deeds attributed to the Republicans were not sufficient cause to grant Franco an absolute and unquestioning endorsement. Like their counterparts in France (notably Jacques Maritain and the Dominican journal, *Sept*) and the United States (most prominently, *Commonweal* and Dorothy Day’s *Catholic Worker*), these Catholics were convinced that the struggle in Spain could not be seen in terms of black and white. Other factors, they believed, had to be considered besides the undeniable and tragic sufferings of the Spanish church.

A neutralist point of view emerged early among the Dominicans of the monthly journal, *Blackfriars*. Though the persecuted church in Spain obviously deserved every sympathy, it did not follow that Catholics must back the Nationalists without a second thought: “That a Catholic *esprit de corps* should on that account [the Republican atrocities] induce us to side with the insurgents and have no sympathy whatever with the ‘rabble’ in their resistance to what they believe (and their opponents seem to give them plenty of reason to believe) to be the threat of an oppressive, murderous and reactionary tyranny, not only does not follow, but is fundamentally un-Christian.”<sup>24</sup> The violence in the peninsula could be interpreted as the result of long-standing injustices, and *Blackfriars* suggested that had the papal social encyclicals been applied in Spain, that nation would not be experiencing such bloodshed.<sup>25</sup> By 1938 *Blackfriars* was ready to concede that the circumstances of 1936 probably had justified revolt by Spain’s Catholics, despite its conviction that the Left had not been solely to blame for the failure of the Republic. Nevertheless, *Blackfriars* argued that the theoretical justice of the rebellion did not justify the way the Nationalists had conducted the civil war or the allies with whom they had chosen to fight it.<sup>26</sup>

The English Catholics who supported Franco tended rather to brush aside charges of Nationalist atrocities. Few perhaps were so supremely confident on the subject as the right-wing publisher Douglas Jerrold, who wrote, “It is not true that there have been fewer atrocities on one side than on the other.

23. Hinsley to Gill, 29 August 1936, in Rober Speaight, *The Life of Eric Gill* (New York, 1966), p. 274.

24. *Blackfriars* 17 (Sept. 1936): 704–705.

25. *Blackfriars* 17 (Oct. 1936): 726–727. Writing in the American Catholic journal *Commonweal*, Donald Attwater criticized the Spanish right for seeking “to save ‘our unhappy country’ by means of machine-guns, bombs and terrorism. No country, nothing, can be ‘saved’ in that way; Christianity converted the Roman Empire by martyrdom, not by murder.” Attwater, “Passing the Buck,” p. 518.

26. *Blackfriars* 19 (Aug. 1938): 611–612.

There have been no atrocities on the Nationalist side.”<sup>27</sup> Yet there was within the Catholic community a strong predisposition to disbelieve charges emanating from Republican sources and a corresponding willingness to give the benefit of the doubt in every case to the side which was at least respecting the Christian religion. And the aid rendered Nationalist Spain by Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany did not prove unduly alarming to those who regarded Franco’s cause as tantamount to a crusade. Late in the war the editors of the *Month* reflected: “And so it happens that, of the four great European Powers, only Germany and Italy have taken the menace of atheist Communism seriously, realizing that if it gets further foothold in Europe it will make an end of law and order and of civilized life. It is undoubtedly a pity that these two States are Totalitarian, and themselves interfere unduly with the natural liberties of their subjects, but in opposing Communism they are fighting the battle of the democracies as well.”<sup>28</sup>

This manner of reasoning, along with the more general sympathy for fascism often found in the *Tablet*, greatly upset some English Catholics.<sup>29</sup> It would not do, warned *Blackfriars* under the heading “Must God Go Fascist?”, for Catholics to counter the United Fronts of the Left with dubious alliances on the Right.<sup>30</sup> The *Sower*, a Catholic journal devoted to education and popular among Catholic trade-unionists, grew increasingly incensed at what it viewed as the irresponsible activity of the Catholic press, which the *Sower* declared was regarded by English workers as given over to fascist propaganda.<sup>31</sup> The *Sower* finally denounced those it called “our Fascist journalists,” who brought the Catholic press into disrepute by constantly attacking democracy as a fraud while trying to justify fascist aims and positions.<sup>32</sup> *Blackfriars* too heard reports from industrial districts which were “anything but reassuring” about the “repercussions on English Catholicism of the more fanatical forms of the Franco-ophile campaign in our press and

27. Douglas Jerrold, *Georgian Adventure* (New York, 1938), p. 397.

28. *Month* 171 (June 1938): 483. See *Tablet* 170 (20 Nov. 1937): 678, for similar remarks.

29. For example, in February 1937 the *Tablet* stated, “There is no doubt that the Fascist and Nazi movements ought basically to be recognized as defensive.” Knowing from experience what Red terror would mean, Germany and Italy had (reasoned the *Tablet*) opted instead for strong national governments. Furthermore, “Neither regime is a regime of privilege, and each is led by a man of the people”; *Tablet* 169 (6 Feb. 1937): 181. Later that year, in a leader entitled “The Church and Fascism,” it was argued that just as nineteenth-century liberal democracy had often proved unfriendly to the church but tolerable, so would it be with fascism, which was quite possibly the wave of the future; *Tablet* 170 (20 Nov. 1937): 680–681. These sentiments arose from the conviction, hardly uncommon in the 1930s, that the liberal capitalist state was passing away and English people might as well get used to the fact that the effects of democracy were, quite rightly, not universally admired. The *Tablet*, along with most of the English Catholic press, faithfully backed the efforts of Chamberlain to improve relations with Germany and Italy.

30. *Blackfriars* 17 (Sept. 1936): 706–708.

31. *Sower* 125 (Oct. 1937): 190–191.

32. *Sower* 126 (Jan. 1938): 5–6.



pulpits,"<sup>33</sup> and it sought to counsel moderation in discussing the Spanish war: "It is one thing to maintain that Spanish Catholics, as *Spanish* Catholics, have been bound by a tragic necessity to wage a *just* war for the preservation of their religion and their nation; it is quite another thing to maintain that their war is a *holy* war which involves the Church at large and the Catholics of all nations."<sup>34</sup>

That position, however, was precisely what many English Catholics were maintaining, and they felt little sympathy with Catholics holding a different opinion. The *Tablet* dismissed the *Sower's* charges with the suggestion that the postulation of an either/or choice on democracy and fascism revealed unhealthy influences at work. They charged that sympathy for fascism had "now been revived in a Catholic journal of education, whose editor is chronically worried because the Catholic Press, on whatever else it differs, is at one in refusing to mouth the shibboleths of the hour, or to seek an ephemeral popularity by adopting the anti-Fascist slogans which are being worked overtime in destruction of the peace of Europe. What is surprising, particularly in a journal devoted to education, is this simple acceptance of the antithesis offered by the Communists, as though the Church cannot have, as it plainly does have, sympathy and goodwill both for Fascism and for Democracy."<sup>35</sup> The Catholics of England avoided the bitterness over Spain which sharply divided French Catholics, who had not escaped the spirit of acrimony affecting all French society at the time of the Popular Front. But they did take notice (not always friendly) of the arguments of Jacques Maritain and others against those in Spain who claimed the right to use force to defend the faith. One writer charged that some French Catholics were slipping into "a species of tolstoyism" not far removed from material heresy.<sup>36</sup> The *Month* carried the remark that the French Catholics who were attempting to maintain neutrality on the subject of Spain "seem to us to escape the charge of unCatholicity only through their being so incredibly ignorant and misinformed."<sup>37</sup> When the American Catholic journal *Commonweal* called in June 1938 for Catholics to maintain an impartial attitude towards the two sides in Spain, the *Month* restated its position with devastating finality. It indeed might be true that political and religious factors were intertwined in Spain, "but a religious issue is most certainly there, namely, whether Christian Faith and practice are to be defended or destroyed. With this issue at stake, impartiality is a politer word for indifference or betrayal."<sup>38</sup>

There the matter stood until the victory of the Nationalist armies in the

33. *Blackfriars* 18 (July 1937): 529.

34. *Blackfriars* 19 (Aug. 1938): 612.

35. *Tablet* 171 (22 Jan. 1938): 100.

36. Reginald J. Dingle, "French Catholics and Politics," *Month* 171 (Feb. 1938): 134-141.

37. *Month* 171 (June 1938): 486.

38. *Month* 172 (Aug. 1938): 104.

first months of 1939 rendered further debate pointless. The *Month* rejoiced that the last hours of Pius XI (who died 10 February 1939) had been gladdened by the tidings that “for once truth has prevailed and a Crusade has brought about the triumph of the Cross.”<sup>39</sup> The *Tablet* printed an article by Hilaire Belloc comparing Franco, with whom he had obtained an interview, with the Crusaders of old and praising the Spanish man-at-arms for having once again been the “Salvation of Europe.”<sup>40</sup> For the most part, however, the conclusion of the prolonged and intense struggle drew less attention than might have been expected, for the simple reason that the eyes of England were by early 1939 increasingly focused on the looming crisis in central Europe.

In the last days of the Spanish Civil War, Cardinal Hinsley of Westminster wrote General Franco: “I look upon you as the great defender of the true Spain, the country of Catholic principles where Catholic social justice and charity will be applied for the common good under a firm peace-loving government.”<sup>41</sup> The British government, most eager to preserve the Caudillo’s love of peace in the early years of the Second World War yet unable for domestic political reasons to make overt overtures to Madrid, took advantage of the friendly relations existing between the English Catholic leadership and the Nationalist government. Under the auspices of the bishops’ committee for Spanish relief and with the approval of the British government (which quietly contributed 500 pounds), Hinsley launched an appeal in the Catholic press for funds and material to help refurbish Spain’s devastated churches. The gift was brought to Spain during the critical summer of 1940.<sup>42</sup>

Save perhaps for this postscript, English Catholics cannot be said to have had a major impact on English policy in regard to Spain. Even when united, the Catholic body had little political power; and in the case of Spain, working-class Catholics often held views quite different from those of the hierarchy and the weekly papers. The greater significance of the English Catholic response to Spain’s civil war lies in the sharp divergence manifested between two strains of Catholic thought.

On the one hand, there was the school represented by the *Tablet* and the *Month*, which insisted that the fundamental criteria to be applied to the events in Spain were those dealing with the freedom of the church: would the opposing sides allow Catholics to practice their religion without interference? From this starting point, it was a simple matter to arrive at the conclusion that given the Republican persecution of the church, Catholics had no alternative but to support the Nationalists. Though much of the Catholic press in fact did come to present the Nationalist cause in a rosy light,

39. *Month* 173 (March 1939): 195.

40. Hilaire Belloc, “The Salvation of Spain,” *Tablet* 173 (25 Feb. 1939): 245–246.

41. Moloney, *Westminster, Whitehall and the Vatican*, p. 71.

42. Stuart Mews, “The Sword of the Spirit: A Catholic Cultural Crusade,” in *The Church and War*, ed. W.J. Sheils (Oxford, 1983), pp. 415–416.

intellectually this view was not necessary, as the Jesuits of the *Month* had maintained from the very first: if the Nationalists were defending the faith, all else was beside the point.<sup>43</sup>

The Dominicans of *Blackfriars*, on the other hand, did not agree. While they readily conceded that terrible deeds were being performed by some of those fighting for the Republic, they held that the situation in Spain reflected centuries of injustice and therefore that it was at least possible that some of those opposing Franco were doing so for good reason. To try to balance the rights and wrongs of the contenders could be wearying and could give rise to misunderstandings (*Blackfriars* was not pleased to discover that it had been quoted by the Communist *Daily Worker* in favor of the Republicans<sup>44</sup>). But they insisted that the attempt did help them avoid unfair partisanship and fanaticism.<sup>45</sup> Both *Blackfriars* and the *Sower*, the latter in particular, voiced concern that the enthusiasm for Franco so evident in most of the Catholic press was rendering the church suspect in the eyes of the numerous English people, including many Catholics, who regarded the Republican cause as essentially a democratic movement seeking to build a more just Spain.

The differences between the two approaches outlined above were real and, potentially at least, quite divisive. A community of any sort may be expected to feel sympathy for those of its members suffering persecution. Given the reliance of the Catholic church on certain institutional structures through which it claims to dispense the means of salvation, Catholics naturally will desire that the church not be impeded in doing its work. Yet in the course of the past century issues of social and economic justice have become ever more salient in Catholic thought. What is to be done when these values—freedom for the church and the need for social justice—seem to conflict? What should be done in a situation in which the church, for reasons perhaps beyond its control, finds itself allied with or dependent on parties or factions whose ultimate goals are at variance with Christian principles of justice? Questions of this sort troubled some of the English Catholics attempting to form a moral judgment on the Spanish Civil War. Contemporary Catholics suffering perplexity and perhaps division in similar circumstances might find instructive, if not necessarily consoling, the experience of their predecessors.

43. *Month* 168 (Sept. and Dec. 1936): 193, 482–483.

44. *Blackfriars* 17 (Oct. 1936): 781–782.

45. *Blackfriars* 19 (June 1938): 440–442.