

## CATHOLICS AND THE OPEN ROAD

THE movement from the town back to the country is typical of to-day, and the call of 'the open road' was never so much heeded in England since the days when pilgrimages were a part of our national life. While twenty years ago only a very few enthusiasts went into camp or took to tramping for the duration of their holidays, to-day these pastimes are rapidly becoming universal. In America and on the Continent—especially in Germany—this movement has become an established part of the national life, and here in England it is on the brink of assuming like proportions. For this reason alone it is at least a matter of interest to Catholics.

Even the staid Nonconformist *News-Chronicle* has become its sponsor, and there are several magazines, including a new monthly, devoted entirely to the joys and advantages of an informal holiday in the open air. In addition, there are many clubs and similar organisations—both local and national—which have for their end the popularisation of the open road. What is more significant is that the first of a chain of youth hostels—where a night's lodging can be had for a shilling—was opened at Winchester only a few weeks ago.

It is all so natural and at bottom so right; it is part of that revolution—or revulsion—against the drab gloom of the city that has been steadily growing in intensity for the last two or three decades and has produced, among other things, the Garden City Movement and Mr. Chesterton's Distributism.

There is no need to commend the open road to Catholics. Mr. Belloc has done so already; and his book, *The Old Road*, has so inspired the leaders of this movement that they have determined to establish

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the first chain of Youth Hostels on the Pilgrim's Way that Mr. Belloc has made famous again. We must, however, remember that England is not yet Catholic, and that only one Englishman in twenty holds the Faith of his fathers. Thus, the Catholic youth or maiden who joins a camping or cycling group, or who wanders as a 'hiker' over the most beautiful countryside in the world—which is our England—will often find himself or herself in strange company. There are many things and people to be cautious about; and in addition the Catholic has many duties to perform that are plain foolishness to his companions. There is Mass on Sundays—but what if he is the only Catholic in a party of twenty or so, who wish to start walking at sunrise? Or, it may be, that on Saturday night camp has been pitched too far from a Catholic Church to permit him to get there in time for Mass on the morrow. Perhaps when Friday comes there is no fish—or the camp cook has no wish to cook it. What then? Moreover, what of night and morning prayers in a tent or hostel full of non-Catholics? These are problems enough, but the situation is even further complicated. What of his (or her) companions on the open road? Non-Catholics all, most probably, but what if they be neo-pagans, devotees of Marie Stopes and admirers of Judge Ben Lindsay? Two or three weeks in such company would provide considerable intellectual exercise—and amusement—for an experienced C.E.G. lecturer; but might prove disastrous to an inexperienced Catholic youth or maiden. It will bear some emphasis that the camping and tramping movements—and the Youth Movement to which they are allied—is well stocked with such individuals. The organisations are comparatively new to England, and in consequence owe much to foreign influences, including such things as the nudity-cult so prevalent in Germany and France. For this reason, certain of

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these organisation are definitely suspect from the Catholic viewpoint. For instance, although we can have nothing but praise for the Camping Club of Great Britain and Ireland, we would not advise Catholics to join the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry.

Yet the road is ours by right. Apart from the fact that our forefathers made it, we are Englishmen, and as Catholics we are Englishmen in a far truer sense than all the neo-pagans and back-to-Nature cranks. Must, then, such difficulties banish us from our inheritance. Shall we not claim our own? We must: else our sheep will stray to other shepherds. If the open road is not made safe for Catholics, then we must expect to see our youths and maidens fall among the thieves who haunt the wayside. This is not so formidable a task as it may seem at first sight. Few people—even Catholics—realise how deeply the Faith has rooted in our native land since the emancipation of a century ago. How many of us know that there are more monks and nuns in England to-day than there were before the Reformation? It may be said that they are everywhere; perhaps somewhat unnoticed in our cities, but very conspicuous indeed on our countryside. To-day, if we ask who it is that lives in the large mansion on the hill that overlooks an outlying village or that nestles in the very heart of a quiet hamlet in a hollow, the chances are that we shall be told that a religious community—of which we may have never heard—is established there. Here, perhaps, is our opportunity. Cannot a corner of the often extensive parklands be put at the disposal of campers? Are there no unused outbuildings that can be transformed at little cost into Catholic Youth Hostels—or, to retain the old phrase, guest-houses? It is more than likely. So many of the large mansions of bygone days are equipped with extensive store-rooms, harness-rooms, victuals-houses, and brew-

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houses, since these were necessary adjuncts to country life in the days when refrigerators and tinned foods were yet to be invented. Thus, it seems quite possible to establish a chain of guest-houses throughout the whole of England's countryside where Catholic 'hikers' and campers would be assured of meeting the proper friends and living in the proper atmosphere during their holidays. It would revive again the old tradition of monastic hospitality, and be a potent influence in the conversion of England to the Faith. Pilgrimages might be revived, and our neglected British shrine of Holywell might at last receive the attention it deserves.

Even before such a delightful prospect becomes a reality, there is something that can be done at once. There are Catholic Rambling Clubs in many parts of the country, there is the Catholic Association, the Knights of St. Columba, the Catholic Woman's League, and many more associations which could help to make the open road safe for Catholics. All that is needed is to be able to organise—and this should be easy in large towns—one or two Catholic parties of ramblers and campers, with a priest in charge of each party. It would be good to see the black, white and brown habits in our country lanes again. Moreover, there would be the particular pleasure of combining God's business with our own pleasure; for such parties would probably contain one or two C.E.G. and C.S.G. lecturers, and would really be itinerant missions. There would be Mass every morning on the village green or under a hedgerow oak, to the great interest and amazement of the villagers. On Sundays there would be besides, Benediction with a sermon, delivered in the open air to people who have never seen a monk and have only heard of Catholics through Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*! Then, we can imagine the glorious times the C.E.G. and C.S.G. lecturers and

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the Distributists would have in the local inn parlour or in the village stores or at the corner of the village green, where everybody assembles in the evening. There would be argument, counter-argument, and explanation by the hour—real missionary work, and the most powerful demonstration we could make of the fact that Catholicism is really alive!

There is something else we can do at once; some of us can do it this very minute, in fact! If we live in a rural district, we can watch out for the 'hiker' and camper. We can fix a notice on to our door or our garden rails, giving directions for finding the nearest Catholic Church, together with the times when Masses are said. It would be as well to add to this the address of the nearest doctor and, if possible, the times of Masses in any churches in neighbouring villages. If we happen to live where a youth-hostel has been opened, we can see that a similar notice is exhibited there, with a plan (if possible) showing the hostel and the Catholic church. It will take but little time, and may make all the difference to someone. For, even if no Catholic happens to see our notices, yet they will serve a useful purpose in proclaiming that throughout the whole of this our England, in its remotest hamlet as in its largest town, the Faith of our fathers still lives!

THOMAS FOSTER.