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THE CHRISTIAN AND THE WORLD¹

BEFORE I begin I have a confession to make: it was not I who chose the subject of this address. It was understood, at first, that I was to speak about Faith, a task quite beyond my power. Then, without asking me, the organiser of this gathering changed from this high theological theme to the simple question: 'Is the Christian of this earth?' At first I was disconcerted by the apparent simplicity of this question which demands the obvious answer: 'Of course the Christian is of this earth. We have only to look at ourselves'. But, this first reaction over, it occurred to me that those who chose the question had not mistaken its importance, and the urgency of an adequate answer which it requires of us. It brings us, in point of fact, into the very heart of our own personal history, and the history of the Church. To have to give my answer to this question in the presence of your Eminence is an honour of which I am well aware, an honour which would certainly alarm me if I did not know that here we are all of one family and that I stand beside the most indulgent and most understanding of fathers.

¹ The following essay is a translation of a lecture delivered by the celebrated member of the French Academy before Cardinal Suhard on the closing day (May 15th) of the *Semaine des Intellectuels Catholiques 1949*. It was published first in *Temoignage Chrétien* and now appears in the collected volume of the lectures of the *Semaine*, entitled *Foi en Jésus Christ et Monde d'aujourd'hui* published by Editions de Flore. The translation is published by the generous permission of the author as well as of the editor of *Temoignage Chrétien* and of the publishers, Editions de Flore.

If I begin by considering myself, and start with my own case, as one always should, then it is only too true that I am of this earth, as also the Académie Française 'is of this earth, the Légion d'Honneur is of this earth, the theatres, the big newspapers, the editors are of this earth, my house, my lands and my loves are of this earth. Assuredly are we of this earth as long as death, which is so near, appears to us as an uprooting, like that of a great oak tree clinging to the kingdom of the dead by a thousand and one roots: roots chiefly of interest, no doubt, but also roots of affection.

We have spent our lives forming attachments, that is the truth of the matter—and there would be nothing extraordinary or scandalous about this if we did not at the same time spend our lives acknowledging a crucified God who asks his disciples to leave everything and take up his cross to follow him. We have settled down under this contradiction and taken it for granted; it has not irked us. More than that: we have taken advantage of it, lived by it—and not only we, the Catholic authors. No doubt we are the first offenders, if not exactly by cashing in on Judas's thirty pieces of silver, at least, perhaps, by selling the fruits of that furtive kiss given to Christ and returned by him at the best moments of our lives. Treason by a kiss, that is the part that Judas played; but to cash in, if I dare say it, on the divine kiss, that is the part we play, that is at least the part played by some of us Catholic authors—and not a pretty part by any means. The writer of fiction has to beware of a particular kind of attachment which deserves special attention; though here I can only mention it, the attachment of an author to his own work. How many of us have loved our own work better than our souls? We all have something of that passion which led Flaubert and Proust literally to devote their lives to their writing. Is there one single poet, or dramatist, or novelist who has sacrificed his work for Jesus Christ? Is there one who has done more than keep silent on finding he has no more to say or, like Racine, on concluding all he has to say?

It is not only we simple layfolk who have to reproach ourselves. There are clerics too who gave up the world in the generous ardour of their youth, thinking that they were sacrificing everything. It sometimes happens that, by the middle of their life, they are as much attached to the world as if they had never left it. Thus a great religious Order, for instance, is at the same time of this earth; and a religious in the modern world can cut a fine figure in Society. He can even become the fashion, and can delight that world for which our Lord refused to pray. Far from being embarrassed by his cloth, he benefits from the attention, respect and confidence nearly

always predisposed in his favour. His slightest remark, such as would pass unheard from a layman, the licences he allows himself, carry weight and value just because he is marked by that sign which sets him apart, and which he employs to advantage. The truth is that Christ's demand that we should leave all comes into conflict with another law—this applies even to those who have answered his call—a law of gravity of almost insuperable heaviness. *Grace and the Law of Gravity* is the title of a fine book which itself serves far better than any commentary to make my meaning clear, and explains the obstacles I have been trying to point out—obstacles which, thank God, are overcome by sanctity in countless souls.

I know that we are not all called to the perfect life, and that 'Leave all and follow me' is meant for those only who aspire to perfection. Yet the distinction has always seemed to me a specious one. I would be almost tempted to judge the life of a Christian as it draws to its close, condemning it on its apparent success and on the way in which it may have shown 'the sweet and criminal experience of the world', to quote a phrase of Pascal's. I would be tempted to be as severe as Bernanos towards those old Christians one sees covered with decorations and honours of every kind (and believe me I include myself), did I not know only too well what these honours usually mean. They are often little more than wind and smoke; and many personal confidences have convinced me that it is rather a matter of hidden crosses, as the triumphs of many men only mask the secret failures, the shipwrecks of which they are the only witnesses, or sometimes even promethean tortures suffered on heights where thunderbolts may fall but the eyes of the world cannot reach. We are incapable of stretching ourselves on the cross, and on the contrary by nature we are disposed to seek out what charms and enchants us; but we are dragged by force to this cross by all the treachery of human loves, by illness, and at last by old age, that slow and inevitable destruction of the body 'already three-quarters rotted', as Bossuet says while the heart remains so indomitably young. 'If God were with his own hands to give us masters', cried Pascal, 'Oh how willingly we would obey them! Necessity and circumstances are infallibly from him'.

Yes, necessity and circumstances are our masters. Seen from this perspective the catastrophes of man's history (and there are a few epochs which are as sinisterly privileged as our own!) are like agents in the job of tearing the christian away from what on his own he has not the strength to renounce. 'Pilgrims on the face of the earth' used to be for most men a mere simile. Today we see great flocks of displaced persons, numberless crowds of poor homeless

creatures thrown out of their houses, their gardens, their country, wandering herds perpetually on the move, herds which any one of us might have to join one day, for who knows what may not be in store for him tomorrow? Circumstance, that God-given master, forces us to heed this terrible lesson.

Doubtless among my hearers there are some who need no reminder to recall this lesson, those of you who have had your houses looted or burnt, and lost your humble treasures which each one inherits from his forbears, of little value perhaps but irreplaceable for the human heart. 'I have lost everything'. How often have I heard this said in the last ten years. Such is the history of man, a history made criminal by human pride, reminding us that we are of this earth only to detach ourselves from it, or to be detached from it in spite of ourselves.

There is only one answer to our initial question: Yes, the Christian is of this earth, and not only through covetousness and sin. He is of this earth literally, as a creature of clay, of that mud on which the Spirit breathed, mud from which sprang the wonder that is man. It is of dust that we are made, and to dust that we must return. It is this same dust that will rise again. We are of this earth, and however short our personal span may be, the human race will live on, and during the short interval in space and time that we are living dust we have to solve all the variety of problems of this world. You must forgive me for returning to these elementary facts, but there is nothing for it! We have our wives and children, we are the sons of our country, we are bound to our friends and to our neighbourhood. Now the accusation brought by the enemies of Christ against his servants from the first day, from the time when they were denounced by their first persecutors as the enemies of the human race, has always been that they refuse to be of this world, that they turn away from it in favour of a projection of their own agony and terror which they call God. You know how often they are reproached for this estrangement. But it is also said that the more subtle among us (this is the Marxist's accusation) only encourage the poor and the unhappy to turn their eyes to heaven in order to establish themselves more securely in peaceful occupation of their possessions. It is only too true that there are Catholics of a certain school who have done all they can to bring people to believe it. But we at least should know that detachment, that the denial which is imposed on us in order to counteract in our personal lives all its covetousness, does but serve to make us more free to devote ourselves personally to our brethren. This is what is meant by corresponding with grace, and why St John of the Cross says that it is

by love we shall be judged on the last day.

The contradiction between civil duty and detachment from the world is only a superficial one. Our God is love. The Christian's share in the life of the City should be nothing less than the expansion of this love, but how seldom is this true fundamentally, how often do we deceive ourselves by making out that our political creeds and sociological ideas are the outcome of our faith. For most of us, the reasons for our political forays come from elsewhere: traditions, prejudices, racial antipathies. These all make for a bias from which the best Christians are not always able to detach themselves, and which they are adept at covering with all sorts of edifying excuses. There is also the trick (less naïve than Bossuet's perhaps) which some Christians have of making politics subscribe to Holy Scripture. As Léon Bloy says, the righteous will find the most ingenious reasons for resigning themselves to the reprobation of three-quarters of the human race. Then there is that kind of idolatry peculiar to left-wing Christians. They tend to identify the fortunes of truth in this world with those of their party; they superimpose in some way upon revealed truth another dogma of the temporal order, the claims of which they take upon themselves, and which, I feel, they would not sacrifice for anything in the world.

Let us admit, whether we are Right or Left, that we are terribly earthbound. We cling too hard to our ideas of Right and Left. When we have been detached from everything else it is too often here that we stick—to these ideas which are really passions, and violent ones, and the most amenable to high-faluting excuses. At other times I have always thought that it was easier for a Right-wing Christian, if he is in good faith and sincere, to recognise the impure origins of his passion, especially when he belongs to the privileged classes. It is not at all uncommon nowadays to find Christians of the Right who have a bad conscience. As a matter of fact they have had a bad conscience for some time: the recent success of 'Maurass-ism' in Christian bourgeois circles was partly due to the need for providing a reasonable foundation, an intellectual justification for the order from which they benefited. The Catholic of the Left or of the ultra-Left, on the contrary, finds it easier to produce edifying motives for his antipathies and his hatreds, and to confuse them with that hunger and thirst for justice which were blessed on the Mount, and which bear the promise of being fulfilled.

However this may be, it is obvious that on neither side in the realm of politics are we capable of practising spiritual detachment. Ideologies are concerned with flesh and blood so that wars have become totalitarian to the extent to which they have become ideological conflicts. Wars of religion have ever been the most violent,

and the one which threatens our lives today is a religious war the size of this planet.

Certainly we reject Nietzsche's accusation and Marx's. The Catholic Church has not turned her back on the world in the way they understand it. No one can deny the value of her social doctrine, her part in the organisation of labour, the enormous work of mercy that she has carried out for centuries in the most god-forsaken parts of the earth, and all this in spite of an apparent compromise with an unjust order. I am afraid of scandalising you, but hasn't our generation perhaps paid too much attention to the social question? To hear some people speak one would gather that they deem the crowds in our churches to be of little value unless they consist of workers. Many Catholics, even the best, are so obsessed by the great misfortune of the Church today, separated as she is from the proletariat, that they tend to forget that God is no respecter of persons, that the great dignity of the poor in the Church and of the workers should not now make the Christians of other classes appear of less value in our eyes. As you know, want and poverty and even destitution are things only too evenly shared out today, and that the poor of Jesus Christ are sometimes to be found wearing gloves, and even fur coats.

We may have a legitimate desire to refute Marx's calumny, and to prove by our own effort in the social field that the Church is not the opium of the people, but need this prevent us from stressing what is, after all, most essential to the message of Christianity, and what, believe me, all men in this year 1949 expect of us? When I hear great voices propounding from the pulpit questions concerning society and confronting the Gospel with the problems of the State, the relations between capital and labour, between the civil power and the Church, I have no doubt of the urgency of coming to grips with such questions. Yet I cannot help suspecting that a great number among that vast congregation—vast since it also includes the unseen radio listeners—must be sharing my feelings, mingled with great admiration, of having been slightly deceived; for surely they ask for one thing alone, and only come crowding round the pulpit to hear one thing—that we have a Father in heaven, that we have been redeemed, that our sins will be forgiven. Do you think that in the secrecy of their hearts they want to hear about syndicates? No, of course they don't. They want to hear about forgiveness and redemption.

I don't want to discourage you. I must beware of the sadness which is common to my age. All the same, weighing my words, I believe that the hope of mankind, at this moment in history, in so far as it concerns this earth, is a maimed thing. There was first of

all that great outburst of hope in 1789 and 1790, the finest period for the human race as many Frenchmen believed in those years; then, a little more than a century later, came the Russian revolution, another terrific flare-up of earthly hope: the October Revolution.

What has come of it all? we may ask ourselves today among the ruins of Europe. Each one of us is in part responsible for the carnage and the crematoriums that are still smouldering. Man has reached the utmost limits of bestiality nineteen hundred years after the death of our Lord and his resurrection. This would not matter so much—but what is really terrifying is his consciousness amid the evil. This apocalyptic vision should be enough to persuade us that human hope, estranged from God, is played out in so far as this earth is concerned. But it is worse than that: the survivors of those four terrifying years have not learnt their lesson. And if their eyes are not opened by that thunder-flash, when will they ever open? Two different kinds of imperialism stand face to face, like pawns on a chess-board ready for the next game—while we work out the possible moves of either side: Asia where communism has the upper hand, and Germany already reviving and becoming a menace. Such is the Machiavellian stupidity of these empires that they cannot see how the arms which they guard so jealousy would completely annihilate the object of their dispute.

What does a political faith, or political hope mean nowadays? Without blinding ourselves to the failure of one party of the Right wing concerned in the national catastrophe of 1940, we can say that no greater hope is to be found in the Left wing since the communist party has become the pole of the working classes, and offers no other opening to a proletarian revolution than the triumph of panslavism. This insatiable Moloch stands at the gates of the tranquil City dreamt of by the young Péguy. The socialist cannot hope to see the dawn of real socialism until the hunger of Soviet Russia has been appeased.

These are self-evident truths which the most humble can understand. In spite of what Christianity has lost in the countries occupied by Soviet Russia, according to the terrifying account we heard yesterday², the unbelievers find themselves in face of such evidence forced to look with new eyes on the mother of men, the Holy Church standing immovable in the midst of such prostrate and desperate countries; because she is of this earth, indeed because she is rooted in this criminal earth, saturated in blood. but also because she

² On the previous day of the *Semaine* Professor Henri Bédarida of the Sorbonne had given some facts of the destruction of Catholicism in Poland, Lithuania, Rumania, etc. (pp. 201-6 of the collected papers).

belongs to heaven. She is heaven come down to earth that the children sing of at their first communion: '*Le Ciel a visité la terre*'.

We mustn't be misled by the idea that we have to fight communism on its own ground, though we should, of course, follow it and dominate it as far as we are able. Now don't misunderstand me and read into my words any kind of criticism of the new methods of the apostolate which are the glory of the Church in France, and especially of the Diocese of Paris and its venerated and beloved leader. We must remember that in this year 1949 men are clamouring for something more than the bread of this earth. If I were asked to choose the passage from the Gospels which I felt was best adapted to the present condition of humanity, I think that I would single out our Lord's tender, almost supplicating question: 'Will you also go away?' and St Peter's answer: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life'.

Yes, the Christian is of the earth, of this earth which will perish, and which is decaying under his very eyes, but he has received the words which will not perish. And his one task in this world is to spread the flames thereof and to make his own life its witness. He is caught, as it were, in between these two promises, one of destruction and one of eternity. Hope, in the temporal sense of the word, is of little use to him in keeping up his courage. I remember how a young priest wrote to me just before he fell in the tragic battle of 1940: 'My hopes are at an end. But Hope is a very different thing from being hopeful'. Even if we had nothing more to hope for, we would still have Hope. Only the Christian is able to understand the profundity of Tacitus's saying: 'There is no need of hope for an undertaking . . .' We can devote ourselves wholeheartedly to the human city, and serve it, without necessarily having to believe in its final stability.

In the Cardinal's slums many churches that were only half-built were bombed during the last war, but this hasn't stopped him; they are being built up again. The Christian social workers, the parish priest in the slums, or the priest-worker, these men know that their work is already a beginning of the kingdom of God and its justice, a testimony to the promise that was made us.

To what kind of destruction will the idolatry of technical science lead us? That is the secret of the laboratories. But we have a secret too, guessed at by other men, and which we have no right to keep to ourselves. It is this: that in spite of all the crimes committed, in spite of all the bloodshed and blinding tears, we are gradually approaching the day of all days when mankind, risen, resuscitated and glorious, will behold the sign of the Son of God.

FRANÇOIS MAURIAC.