

IN HOC SIGNO

THE first reactions of a convert are either to shout (forgetting the time it took to unstop his own ears) or to hide in a remote spot (unmindful of the fact that very few people will be aware of his transfiguration). The tone of the Catholic Press and our more prominent Societies suggest that the shouters are in the majority. As one who was vociferous, anxious to proclaim the new experience, may I at once express penitence? I am now silent. Every outward sign of the faith is abolished in places where my non-Catholic friends and acquaintances are likely to penetrate. If they find me in Church or between the honourable covers of this magazine that is another matter, such places are proper to the faith. The dentist's waiting-room, the grocery store, the lawyer's office are not proper to the faith but to their functions; it is in such place that an aspidistra is preferred before a crucifix!

The absence of Catholic tokens does not mean that the Catholic dentist, grocer or lawyer is ashamed of his faith and lukewarm as to its propaganda. It means that his time is so fully occupied in being a Catholic privately and attending to his business publicly that he refrains from advertizing a fact which he might easily fail adequately to prove or practically to achieve.

In this country the Catholic is allowed out on sufferance, our churches are not stoned and our priests are tolerated only because the general public thinks them harmless. The Holy Father appears in the news as a distinguished foreigner with a sufficient number of friends in this country to justify half a column in the Press. Were it thought that Catholicism was more than a picturesque superstition or Catholics were likely to disturb our insular complacency by any act which affected the government of the country, there would be a swift end to such liberty as we now enjoy. In other words we are living potentially in much the same atmosphere as the early Christians who could only enjoy the freedom of their religion in the Catacombs.

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This condition does not raise questions of principle but of tactics. We desire the conversion of our friends, our heart is in the Prayer for England, we know that there can be no peace until all are in the one fold obedient to the one Shepherd—but we tend to work against one another in the furtherance of that desire. The first difficulty is in our natural imperfections. Were we all living the sober, righteous and godly life it could not be hid—but most of us are hardly superior, in that living, to our non-Catholic neighbours. In the circumstances we hesitate to commend the source of such power as we have in keeping the commandments. Another obstacle is in our uncertain attitude with regard to social and economic questions. While we are hazy on the subject of usury it is doubtful whether fulminations against Communism will be taken seriously. There is internal discord at the mere mention of Peace. Most of our practical essays in good works are easily eclipsed by Quakers and Jews. Though we hold the fount of all culture we are, generally speaking, uncultured; though we have a perfect liturgy it is not frequently practised with care and fervour.

It is happily true that Catholics may be found among the most learned, the most cultured, the most holy, the most brave, the most humble (and it is of even greater moment that they may be found in workhouses and gaols), but they are, nevertheless, suspect. Should they, unwisely, talk of religious matters, any truth they utter will be discounted by their hearers as being improperly biased; it is tacitly assumed that our judgment is either not free or warped by sustained clerical pressure.

We need a hiding place where we can become better acquainted with our religion and practise the same without having to think of its effect upon neighbours who are suspicious of it. Such a place is provided in church, where the sacraments may be enjoyed and the essentials of religion taken for granted, where we take no thought for the material morrow and are able "to be as little children." Under the shadow of the Church, within its many groupings and activities—Catholic journals included—we may fall out, argue, teach and be taught to our heart's content. In that pleasant

and restricted area we may be at our ease, as in a family circle unembarrassed by strangers.

I feel that it is of vital import that *all things* within that circle should be implicitly informed by the Catholic ethos. Art and literature, particularly when of non-Catholic origin, should be discussed by Catholic artists and writers *in the terms of their craft*, so that we become acquainted with the work of the outside world through both a technical and Catholic medium; e.g., we should value a Bellocian criticism of the Poet Laureate's verses, though it had no word about the faith, because it came from one who was both a poet and a Catholic. The charmed circle can only be inhabited for a small part of our lives but we should acquire in it the right approach to the ideas which dominate the world outside.

The noisy extroversial show of modern existence is the exact opposite to the hidden and fearful life of the Catacombs . . . as it was also in the beginning. No group of Christians at any time has been more successful in propaganda than those frequenters of the tombs. Sharing that retreat we are hidden *by* as well as *from* the world, because the world insists that we are already invisible and of no importance. The hiding is the more necessary because we are not presentable, we have few garments and they do not fit. Many of us are bad tailors, others spend too long in fitting ready-made suits on out-size figures. I recall a small conference on the subject of Usury in which we aimed at a ready-made definition which should prove a goodly number of our fellow Catholics to be in a state of mortal sin: "Usury is condemned by the Church, usury is . . . , therefore all receiving dividends from So-and-so Ltd. are usurers." This attitude of mind is common among the disaffected. Many of us view the modern structure of Society with serious alarm, we do not feel at all safe, we do not like Industrialism, but just as we "cannot pack and label men for God" neither can we pack and label them for the devil. Individual judgment and responsibility begin and end within the limited range of individual experience and knowledge. My judgment, for instance, upon the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount is of little value to anyone but myself, whereas should

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I exercise that faculty with regard to a Punch and Judy show you might be the wiser for listening to me. Owing to the many columns of printed matter our presses are panting to produce we have the opportunity to pass judgment upon affairs with which we are imperfectly acquainted. This essay is a case in point; the greater part of my life is spent in association with non-Catholics.

Now the religion of non-Catholic Englishmen, as I saw well put by Mr. Gregory recently, is philanthropy. He attributed the popularity of Dickens to that fact—and the same may account for the Dickens vogue in Soviet Russia (very remarkable, but another story). Now there is a considerable amount of philanthropy in the Gospels! Further, a common Christian origin means that there are many points of sympathetic contact between Catholic and non-Catholic. Generally speaking it is not until we reach the Cross that we begin to part company with them. That is my experience, on all the points of difficulty: industrialism, usury, birth-control, divorce, war, communism—there may be much agreement and understanding about conditions and some unity in an ultimate ideal (as people in a valley contemplating a peak of the delectable mountains), but when it comes to decisive action, a decision as to the way, we find ourselves at the Cross-roads.

The Cross is the simplest of all signs, much more significant in itself than the Compasses of the Freemason or any other emblem. It can be made in the air by a child or be carved in stone by a mason; yet we use the sign with freedom only in church or home. It is not jangled on the watch chain or often used to advertize a Catholic business. What we do instinctively in regard to our most potent signal is what I am now pleading for in the matter of less vital activities. It is wise to keep a play in rehearsal until it is of a sufficient perfection to be shown; it is also prudent to have an audience which will understand what it is all about. The Catholic play is, I feel, under-rehearsed and our environment unlikely to produce an audience with ears to hear it.

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