

A NEW APOSTOLATE?

IT is often dangerous to apply the conduct of the past as a norm to the present. Only too often a facile parallel between days gone by and the present has led to an absurdly literal equation between the two, as we may observe sometimes in the use made of precedent. At the same time fresh light may occasionally be thrown on a situation by indulging in such fancies without intending too rigid an application. It is a fanciful comparison of this sort which we set down here as a feeler, searching out a possible method of regaining the proletariat for Christ, and so of counteracting the powerful appeal which Communism makes to our age.

The facts of St. Dominic's life and vocation are generally known, and here we wish only to draw attention to certain aspects of it. When St. Dominic came to Languedoc, on his way to negotiate a marriage with a foreign princess on behalf of his Sovereign, he found the Church hard pressed by an enemy powerful because popular. One of the causes of the popularity of Albigensianism was the apparently severe interpretation of Christian life by the leaders of the movement, and the people, as always, were profoundly impressed at the sight of rigid austerity linked with a burning zeal. The Church had, of course, attempted to save her people from the ravages of the heresy, and had sent out her emissaries in the sombre yet rich state appropriate to their condition as bishops, abbots and priests. But if such attire and accoutrement was the due of these defenders of the faith, it turned out to be a hindrance to their fight for truth since it contrasted ill, in the minds of the populace, with the ostentatiously ascetic lives of the Albigensian leaders.

St. Dominic soon detected this weakness in the defence and determined to adopt other tactics, to push the fight into the enemy's camp. He would emphasize the true austerity of Christ based on the acknowledgement of the goodness of God's creation together with the necessity of pruning and cutting away the unwanted in order to attain perfection.

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Then, having won the respect of the people, he would preach to them the saving truths of Christianity. St. Dominic's method therefore was based on the adoption of an austerity of life which would vie with that of his opponents; on the establishment of a personal contact with the people, as we see in his winning over of the innkeeper; and on a firm understanding of the truths of Christianity.

Is there no modern parallel to the struggle in Languedoc during St. Dominic's life-time? Surely we are justified in drawing at least a superficial comparison between that and the modern struggle between Communism and the Church? Now as then the Church is being attacked by a growing and popular revolt, one which seems to be daily gaining ground and winning over to its side many who should be Catholics. Communism has some circumstances in common with the old Albigensianism, though its popular appeal certainly consists in its claim to satisfy human needs and appetites rather than in the asceticism of its leaders. Because it is claimed that the evil exploitation of men and the maldistribution of wealth are effectively crushed by Communism, men flock to its standard in ever-increasing numbers. This secession of men who should be Christians to the new faith is to be found in every place, but there are certain areas where the desertion is flagrant and seemingly inevitable. These are the districts where the double-headed monster of poverty and unemployment glowers defiantly at the large houses and luxurious lives of the rich. These places are as sores in the side of the Church. They are the modern Languedocs, for the poor who should be the backbone of the Church follow the red flag, and Communism grows there like some malignant disease.

The distressed areas are therefore the weak points in the defences of the Church, and, as in Languedoc, the Church does not seem easily to be reinforcing these breaches. There are two possible, and indeed true, answers made by the clergy to the question, "Are you making headway among the 'down and out,' the wretchedly poor, and the unemployed?" The first answer, which indeed can be made by many, is in the affirmative, for there are a large number

who have bridged the chasm, which we are about to describe, and are living heroic lives among the poor. But another answer is at least as common and as true: "We have tried our best, but we cannot make contact. They are prejudiced against us; and, what is more, they are almost like beings of another universe whose language and manners it is practically impossible to learn." These unfortunate people cannot listen to or even hear the Church. And why? Because in their eyes the Church stands on the side of riches, on the side of the existing state of capitalism, on the side of money against the poor. Though a large percentage of this prejudice is based on the falsehoods spread by Red propaganda, yet inevitably a residue is based on a half-truth. The Church is—and she must be so—one of the greatest objects of alms and material charity, and she receives the gifts which are her due from high and low alike. From the poor she receives the hard-earned pennies; from the rich she receives a proportionate sum, almost necessarily in the form of stocks and shares. This is just as it should be, and what is over and above from her wisely-governed possessions, the Church naturally gives to Christ's poor.

But if we turn to the den of the destitute is it not possible to see ground for misunderstanding? To the starving man the Church seems to stand for unjust capital. Furthermore, the gospel is preached to him by one who does not know hunger and nakedness as he, one who has a bed to sleep on by night and a fair certitude of meals during the day. The first and foremost preaching of Christianity should be Christ crucified, or in other words sacrifice, but, as St. Dominic found in Languedoc, it must be suited to the ears of its hearers. The soil must be prepared before the pregnant seed, which is the truth of the Cross, can be sown with hope of fruit. However ill-founded may be the prejudices of the destitute they must be removed before the Church can get a hearing, before the Church can heal these sores in her side. A wide and permanent contact is required.

With this vague parallel before our eyes, may we not now ask, still fancifully, what would St. Dominic do in the modern world, if he suddenly found himself in a distressed

area as he formerly found himself in Languedoc? Is there not a parallel plan of action to suit this parallel situation? St. Dominic adopted the mode of life of those among whom he was working. They, or at least their leaders, led a very austere and ascetic existence, and the saint became as they in this exterior form of life. Might it not then be suggested that materially, in externals, he would to-day live the life of those among whom he worked? As they are poor and destitute in the danger zones where the Church needs to be defended, he would become as poor and destitute as they. Such a suggestion is obviously open to the objection that the similarity between the Albigenses and the modern distressed areas is of the vaguest and most superficial kind. The leaders of the former were penitential in their lives, while those in the poor districts also suffer physically. But whereas the Albigenses adopted such a life voluntarily, the present-day worker accepts the situation entirely against his will; in fact he never accepts, bearing with it only as long as there is no way out. In addition, poverty in those days was not without honour, and was respected, now it is regarded as a pure evil and an unmitigated curse.

Nevertheless if we look a little further beneath the surface, we shall find a closer similarity between the two courses of action. One of the chief reasons for the penitential life for St. Dominic as an apostle was to win over the respect of the people, to make a contact with those whom he had to convert, a contact which the former champions of the Church had failed to make because they were content to underline the *dignity* of the priesthood alone. Now a life of extreme poverty and real destitution, undertaken voluntarily from sympathy and love of those who are in that state through hard destiny, would go far towards breaking down the barrier which exists between the clergy and the poverty-stricken through the mistaken idea of the latter as regards the position of the Church in financial and industrial matters. Like knows like. The hound of the Lord—the *Domini canis*—might be recognized by the dogs of Communist breed.

That, however, would only be one half of the programme,

for St. Dominic joined to the material austerities of his opponents a new spirit, the main element of which was a practical and living knowledge of the truth. He was attacking heresy, opposing truth to falsehood and error. And for this campaign he was obliged to possess a very accurate, profound and ready understanding of the truths of the Church and of the nature of the errors of the Albigenses. This, of course, entailed assiduous study, but it needed more than that, for the truths of the faith are not understood by cogitation alone. Before the followers of St. Dominic could preach the truth they had to love the truth as well as study it, they had to pray the Holy Ghost for the gift of Wisdom. In other words the saint's plan was to infuse the exterior mortification with the vivifying spirit of a profoundly supernatural life joined to constant and untiring study. That was the contemplative life essential to a preacher of divine truth.

To-day this contemplative-apostolic spirit is equally necessary, and it would be useless to win the sympathy of those maltreated by industrialism without a clear and unfaltering doctrine to follow it up. The success of the Communists in those areas depends on the vivid manner in which they portray their false, materialistic heaven, so that the poor preacher of Christ must be equally vivid and forceful, with a firm grasp of Christian truth obtained by unceasing study and a superhuman insight into that truth given by the contact of love, the gift of wisdom. The modern defence of the Church among the poor requires the preparation of keen study and deep love as much as did St. Dominic's apostolate in Languedoc.

Now that we have seen the outlines of a tenuous parallel between the state of the Church in St. Dominic's time and in our own days, may we not—still fancifully—ask ourselves whether there is not room for a new organization now as there was then? It will be objected at once that if the two periods are so similar, the Order of St. Dominic should supply the need in the same way as at the time of its foundation. But we must remember that our fancy has seen a parallel and not an identification. The need for the Order

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of Preachers is as urgent to-day as it was at its inception, but it is because the spiritual and intellectual poverty of the world is just as severe now as it was in the early thirteenth century. Therefore, from this point of view an identification exists between the two. We are, however, considering a special manifestation of the poverty of mind and grace surrounded by novel circumstances and entailing a novel danger to the Church. Let us sketch briefly an imaginary society which would meet these special needs.

To begin with, the material of the new apostolate will be literal destitution, at least from the moment when the member finishes his training. He will be ordained, for he must be the minister of grace, but after ordination he will leave behind him for ever the security of a permanent bed, a permanent roof, a permanent board. This vagabond of the Lord will set out lacking purse and scrip, and trudge into the most degraded dens of human misery, ready to starve with the meatless and shiver with the naked. The hedge or the railway bridge may be his cell at night and by day he will walk the endless cloisters of the desolate city streets. He will need a fearless heroism, for instead of seeking the necessaries of life at the doors of the rich and great, he will have to ask the dwellers in the dingy streets and hovels to share with him their dole or their factory pittance. To win this people it is necessary to put oneself entirely in their hands and to be completely at their mercy. It would be useless to go there backed by rich friends or with the certainty that in an extremity there would always be somewhere where one could get a good meal and a comfortable bed. In order to become as one of the destitute, only two alternatives offer themselves to this new apostle; either he must depend for support upon those to whom he preaches, or he must try to earn his keep by some menial task. Both of these means of living were practised and advocated by St. Paul, who insisted that the labourer was worthy of his hire and yet laboured long hours at tent making. Perhaps working for a living, if it allowed sufficient scope for the primary end of the apostolate, would be the more successful means of support since the workers to-day respect

the man who earns his keep, but despise anyone who in their eyes is a type of parasite on society. In this way those to whom the apostle preached could never bring forward the accusation that the preacher of the gospel of the Cross to the downtrodden was himself assured of a sufficiency of all the needs of life and that he scarcely knew the meaning of real suffering. For the downtrodden will see before them a man whose garments are patched as their own for want of a change, whose belly is as empty as their own for want of a meal, whose skin is as thick as their own from constant exposure to the elements by night and by day. And yet he bears not the Red Flag but the Cross.

But if he goes to them entirely deprived of material possessions he must be well stocked with spiritual wealth. He will enter the battle armed with three main weapons, a deep spiritual life of his own, a masterly knowledge of the chief dogmas of the Church, and a thorough grasp of the principles of sociology and the Church's sociological programme. His training will have to supply him with all three. Before he is sent out on his mission this apostle will have to live the religious life under the three vows interpreted in the greatest severity, a life of constant asceticism and striving for supernatural perfection crowned finally by the priesthood which will give him the superhuman powers of conveying grace to others. In this way he will have his own perfection and the perfection of the priesthood to sustain him and to give effect to his words. Then he will have his theology at his finger tips, being able to explain with ease the doctrine of the Church in simple language, and with a specialized knowledge of such doctrines as those of the Incarnation, the meaning of the Cross, the Mass, and the Mystical Body. Finally he will have made an intensive study of the social and economic problems of the day with special insistence on the true social programme of the Church as set forth by the gospels and propounded in the encyclicals of the Popes. Such a study will have been sufficient to obtain the highest university degree in this subject, though in fact he will have taken no degree since that would hinder his work.

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Hence when this priestly tramp drags his half-covered feet into the low drinking den, or into the kitchen-bed-living room of the wretched family, or sometimes on to the soap-box at the street corner, his knowledge and grace will flow easily from him into the minds and hearts of those he has come to convert. The contrast between the materialism of the Communists and his spirituality will be so marked, the Truth will stand out so manifestly that few will be able to resist the call to the standard of the Cross. These people of the slums will hear the truth as from one of themselves, and moreover they will recognize and respect the heroism of this voluntary destitution. With their ears thus attuned to the voice of the speaker, the word will fall into well cultivated soil.

But this apostle cannot hope to conquer all the powers of evil that are set against him without the support of fellow fighters. He would soon be swamped if he set out quite alone. Indeed he would be handicapped by presumption from the start. The community life, which was the principal feature of his life of preparation, must be continued in a manner suited to the new mode of activity. He will remain a member of his Order, meeting his fellow brethren at appointed times and places, but these meeting places will no longer be the solid walls of a handsome priory in a well-appointed Chapter room or calefactory. The gathering of these apostles will take place primarily in the local churches, the common houses of all the faithful. There in some side chapel they will meet to join in common prayer and above all to assist at a community Mass, from which they may derive strength and encouragement for their work among those who blaspheme or do not know the Mass. Their other rendezvous will be some disused shed or empty barn, or perhaps in the open on some waste ground under cover of darkness . . .

Is this an impossible fantasy?

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