

## A CONSCIENCE ABOUT CRIME

THE EDITOR

**T**HE problem of crime, and of juvenile crime in particular, is a human problem: a statement which may be less of a platitude than it seems. The immense increase in indictable offences among young people is so often discussed in terms of statistics, age-groups, environmental factors and psychological types, that the beginning and end of the matter may be forgotten. Crime, delinquency, anti-social conduct: call it what you will, it is always a person who is involved, someone uniquely created, responsible, free, destined for eternal life. Inevitably categories of similar delinquents are created; inevitably, too, an analysis of a general situation must be attempted. But the misfortunes of the condemned are not simply the professional responsibility of those who have to deal with them, whether as magistrates, police officers, prison officials, psychologists or welfare workers. They are the responsibility of the community, and most certainly of the community of Christ, the Church.

To devote a whole number of a review, not specifically concerned with young people or with social ethics, to the contemporary problem of juvenile delinquency might seem excessive if the problem were merely a technical one: a poliomyelitis of conduct which should be left to the expert and about which a lay judgment is of little use. In fact this issue of BLACKFRIARS brings together the evidence of experts of exceptional authority, but the evidence is designed to inform the lay conscience, so that, informed, it may the better arrive at judgment and, if need be, at the action which should implement it.

Anyone who has spent some time in examining the records of boys at a Borstal or in simply talking to them will at once be suspicious of generalisations. There are as many problems as there are boys. Some, a small minority, are properly subjects for psychological treatment. The majority, it may be safely said, are average boys who, for a variety of reasons, have taken to crime. And those reasons are very often to be sought in homes and environments which make dishonesty and contempt for the law inevitable. All the contributors to this number are agreed in

placing a large responsibility for juvenile crime on the breakdown of family life, on the loss of a sense of community which is all too faithfully reflected in the children who are deprived of it.

For Catholics the question has a special importance. It is undoubtedly true that the proportion of Catholics in approved schools, Borstals and prisons is alarmingly high. Dr Fairfield and Mr Owen give reasons which help to explain what is too easily supposed to be a scandal. Catholics are in fact over-represented in industrial areas where crime, or at least the crime the police discover, is most prevalent. To speak with pharisaic disapproval of 'crime' in a Liverpool slum is not enough. One wonders how successfully most people would escape the police-courts if from earliest childhood they had lived six in a room, had found their natural companions among street-gangs and had been pitch-forked at fifteen into a factory where dishonesty and immorality had ceased to have much meaning.

Yet, while the importance of environment must be remembered, it must not dominate judgment to such an extent that only a hopeless determinism is left. There are countless examples of Christian fidelity in unlikely settings, and grace does not wait for material perfection before its work can begin. Yet overcrowding, the lack of the decencies of life, these are not simply political issues: they are moral and religious issues, since they help to create the conditions which make delinquency inevitable. Thus Catholics should be to the fore in demanding the earliest possible ending of the intolerable state of affairs recently revealed in such a survey as *These Our Children*, which only underlines the revelations of the Curtis Report of 1946.

But there is an immediate situation to be redeemed, for even an utopia of material decencies will not eliminate crime. And here Dr Fairfield's valuable suggestion that there should be a detailed enquiry into the special problem of Catholic delinquents may be commended. It will avail nothing to preserve the Catholic schools of this country if every effort is not made to relate education to responsible Catholic life, to that life in fact which Catholic delinquents conspicuously fail to lead. There are, however, existing agencies to be used, and for Catholics the parish and the school themselves provide a primary setting which, ideally, should do much to counteract the materialism of a pagan society. It is with the recovery of the sense of the parish as a living

community that Catholic boys and girls can best be trained in a social conscience. Too often (and the difficulties of crowded classes and indifferent homes make it perhaps unavoidable) the religious instruction of schooldays is in terms of individual morality, isolated from the context of life as it is actually lived; a phase that ends at fifteen. It is not exceptional to find a Borstal boy, returning to the Sacraments after two years or more, who may have a lively conscience about what he calls his 'own' sins, but who has apparently no conscience at all about society, no understanding that he is a member of Christ in his Mystical Body, no sense that he 'belongs'.

There is an immense variety of organisations which exist to deal with young people, whether they are in need of 'care and protection' or are already technically 'delinquents'. Catholics have a great opportunity to bring to this work their own contribution. Their motive must be vocational, a consciousness of their community with their weaker brethren, for the Catholic method, from St Paul in prison to Père Lataste, the founder of the Bethany Sisters, is one of com-*passion*; seeing Christ in the unfortunate, remembering Christ's terrible warning that we shall be judged in our love of God by our love of the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned. Thus, apart from the special work of societies there is the common work of the members of Christ, wherever they are.

The evidence of this number is enough to show how much even 'ordinary' Catholics, untrained in psychology, but trained (as they should be) in the love of God, can do to rebuild the broken lives of their brethren. Its purpose then, is not extraordinary. It is simply to assist in making known a problem, whose solution in the end must be related to the charity of Christ. There are other problems, perhaps more compelling when seen against the tragic background of a civilisation in agony. But large issues can sometimes neutralise the immediate work to be done at home, and, whatever the future holds, the responsibility of the Christian for the brother he sees beside him can never grow less.