

THE ROOT OF OUR DIFFERENCES

AS articles and comments in BLACKFRIARS have testified from time to time, Catholic opinion has in some ways become considerably divided. Nevertheless, it seems true to say that there is but one fundamental divergence, of which various controversies are the manifestations. We can group them under three convenient heads: Contemplation v. Activity; Retreat v. Penetration; Authority v. Lay Initiative and Freedom.

We suggest that these difficulties might never have arisen or might more easily be solved, if Catholics were to consider in the first place the practical nature of Truth. It is possible to discover a direction for right action even before considering the circumstances of the particular problem. It seems clear, from historical examination, that in nine cases out of ten an outright opinion or answer cannot be other than suspect. The practical characteristics of Truth are detachment, balance, and synthesis, together with a certain bias towards one aspect. Thus, the Church combines in herself the ideas both of authority and liberty, but with a bias towards authority as the basis and preserver of freedom. This description of the practical nature of Truth is validated in the Orders of Nature and Art. The river is stemmed and its vital movement formed by its banks. In Music, as enclosing the sweep and swing of emotional play, we have the bar and the sonata-form. If, beside the idea of Authority, we place the analogues of Form, Institution, Dogma, and beside the idea of Freedom the analogues of Spirit, Vitality, Creativeness, we can see how Order depends on the latter being conserved and made effective by the former. It is the rules which give zest and meaning to the game. Order is Truth.

Speculatively, it is possible to go behind all this. With regard to the river, we can say that the spring and the banks co-operate in the creation of fluency. So can we say that Papal Infallibility and Conscience are both supreme. We can go further and say that the spring is the real creative

impulse behind the river. So Newman can drink to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards. But we are not here concerned with a speculative problem of initiation. The spring and the banks already exist, and we are well down the stream. Conscience is supreme, but it cannot function properly without an informative authority. So, for us, the practical primacy must be given to the banks.

Regarding the first type of divergence, we conveniently mean by Contemplation that mode of life which is more concerned with prayer and personal virtue than with external good works, and by Activity a life in which more time is given to apostolic labours than to merely personal religion. We know, indeed, which in itself is "the better part." Contemplation, says St. Thomas, is naturally superior to activity. In practice, however, so far as the vast majority of cases are concerned, we cannot admit any arbitrary, *doctrinaire* distinction between the two. It does not always follow that we are achieving a perfection by doing that which is more perfect in itself. The fundamental yard-stick is the Will of God. And the Will of God, besides being made known to us by the natural law and revealed religion, can in individual cases be made known by circumstances. Therefore, though there is an intrinsic superiority of excellence in Contemplation, we must turn to Activity when necessity and obedience command. "A good man is a good prayer," replied St. Catherine of Siena to a busy priest who complained that he got little time to pray. In such circumstances and over a limited period of time, Activity seems to become quasi-contemplative in its value. Nevertheless, the superiority of Contemplation remains. So, for this particular divergence, Truth would say that Contemplation must be the basis of every kind of life, but that Activity must not be spurned where it is required. Truth would include both, but would give the primacy to the former as the condition and the cause of the latter. We have seen in the magazine of a foreign Catholic Youth organization the preference expressed for St. Ignatius rather than St. Bruno, for the man who went out and "did things" rather than the man who remained secluded in his monastery. This is dangerously

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near to misunderstanding the Jesuit inspiration. The Cave of Manresa came before the European penetration; and the Society has ever taken care that its contemplative impulse be not overborne by the press of exterior labour. First came the absolute self-surrender to the Will of God together with the desire for a contemplative life; then obedience to the word of authority and the external work of the Counter-Reform.

A variety of differences can be catalogued under the convenient title: Retreat v. Penetration. The issue is not altogether so simple as it sounds. It can be argued that most humanist movements start with reconcilable premises, but are carried on by an inherent excess or over-emphasis which in time leads to an intolerable exaltation. All human activities can be reconciled at some stage of their growth with the Christian requirement, but in periods of excess synthesis becomes a virtual impossibility. Hence arises the argument of Mr. Gill, Mr. Thistlethwaite and others that we are passing from the stage at which it is *probable* that a man will save his soul to the stage at which it is *possible* that he will; according to this theory, Urban life has become almost a proximate occasion of sin, and, if Catholics are to live the good life, they must in some way depart from the land of Egypt. Other alternatives can also be drawn. The common factor in all of them, however, is the preoccupation with some exterior, economic change. When Fr. Drinkwater cries that nothing can be done until the economic obstacle is removed, he is tracing the shape of things to come by the pattern of the past. The future action of Grace is quite imponderable. In the past, Grace does seem to have followed conditions, but it is not bound by them as by laws. The essential question here is the ultimate moral freedom of man; whether he is or is not dependent on material circumstance for preserving the state of grace and advancing in holiness. Framed thus, there can only be one answer. Man is not so dependent, save by his own fault. The point is that, whether he remain in this sinful civilization or fly to an earthly paradise, he has still to face the demands of sanctity. If he be not poor in fact, he must become poor in spirit; surely an

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achievement at least as difficult? It must be concluded that whether penetration, retreat or any variant or combination of these be the policy followed, there is one thing that must be an invariable factor, namely spiritual renewal. Following our formula of a biased synthesis, this dispute is solved by approving efforts to Christianize our civilization or to create a Christian standard of living within it or to ease (by land cultivation) the economic tension in the towns, and by giving the primacy to personal spiritual regeneration and detachment.

Our final mode of divergence is simply called Authority v. Lay Initiative and Freedom. This discussion is frequently centred on Catholic Action, but we must here consider it in its essential features. Perhaps more than any other influence of the past hundred years, liberal democracy has worked itself into the mind of the common man. Before stating a synthesis between ecclesiastical authority and lay freedom, we must clear the ground. It is not our intention to fire shots into a sufficiently riddled hulk. Let it be sufficient to say that the idea of freedom which the majority of Catholics have received from liberalism is not the Christian idea. In the minds of those considerable bodies of Catholics, hitherto untouched or unaffected by Catholic publicity, the Church is to be obeyed within a nebulous sphere known as "faith and morals." Outside this sphere, men are free in the sense that they can do as they wish. Not merely liberal tradition, but a lack of clarity on the part of those interpreting the Catholic view, have helped to popularize this false view of liberty. We must affirm that Man is at all times subject to authority. He has been given free-will in order that he may obey. There exists a primacy of the spiritual, of the Divine Will. In the first place it is made known to us by the rude intuition of the natural law; then we find it enshrined in the Church in varying degrees of imperativeness, from the infallible decrees of the Pontiff to the commonly accepted opinions of the theologians. Beyond this lies a sphere where truth is not wholly clear or where it is more properly interpreted by secular authorities; the explicit authority of the Church stops short at a certain point. But

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—the primacy of the spiritual still remains. From this on, Man is released from external compelling force. Freedom is simply the chance to follow one's own conscience. *In dubiis libertas* cannot imply "do as we like": Man always errs when he is guided by whim, irresponsibility or self-will. So, though ecclesiastical authority as such enters only a short way into the secular sphere, the spiritual rule which it represents is co-terminous with Man's whole activity. Church and State are both supreme, but both are subject to the same Law. Freedom, said Lord Acton, implies diversity; and this diversity arises from obscurity of Law. Ten conscientious men can follow ten separate paths. All this leads to the statement that the synthesis between authority and lay freedom contains a bias towards authority. In the specific case of Catholic Action, the *supreme* direction (chiefly general guidance and the laying down of principles) belongs to the ecclesiastical authority, and the *immediate* direction (actualization and attention to details) belongs to the laity.

In conclusion we would again suggest that many problems of policy arise from an anarchic conception of the practical nature of Truth; which we would call *the* fundamental divergence, of which the actual problems are the manifestation. And we would also suggest that many problems would more easily be solved if, apart from the details of the case, the disputants were deeply to consider the nature of practical Truth, whose organism precludes any facile Yea or Nay.

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