

## 'HARBOUR HEAD' AND CATHOLIC ACTION

IN Mr. Peter Anson's pleasant book of reminiscences<sup>1</sup> there are occasional passages about Catholic Action in Britain, usually with special reference to the Apostleship of the Sea, which he helped to found in 1921. In these passages there appears distinctly an uneasiness about the adequacy of the latter's work in this country, a feeling that it tackles the symptoms of spiritual sickness and not its roots, and the suggestion, by implication at least, that it is in some ways too remote from the people and conditions which it hopes to affect. Mr. Anson himself has changed his mind as to the lines on which the Apostleship of the Sea could best develop; a change illustrated by his withdrawal from all organizing committee work to his present life in the cottage called 'Harbour Head,' which has become a flourishing House of Hospitality, for seamen primarily, but also for any service men or local fishers who care to drop in. In his memoirs little is told us about the last five years at 'Harbour Head'; enough to give a rough idea of what is attempted there but, naturally enough, nothing to show how much it has meant to large numbers of men, Catholics and Protestants, British and foreign, brought by war to a north-east Scottish fishing town with only a minute Catholic population, and little to offer in the way of comfort or entertainment to men in port. 'Harbour Head' has become a centre of the Apostleship of the Sea, of a kind which is strikingly kin to Friendship Houses and to the Houses of Hospitality established by the Apostolate of Christ the Worker.

In each of these cases the building is the home of the apostles. It is typical of the neighbourhood in which they have come to work; a fisherman's cottage with three rooms and a loft, a New York tenement, a shabby narrow house in a decayed street. It is supported by no more secure economy than its neighbours, being dependent not on investments, or subsidies or guaranteed salaries, but on day to day earnings of its inhabitants and on chance gifts. There is no storing of goods for the future. Instead there is an open-handed generosity which generally keeps well ahead of immediate resources. Peter Anson can write from his own experience: 'After more than five years of practical experience in this small port, where as I have already stated, all types of seamen are to be found, I have satisfied myself that it is quite easy to keep open house to sailors without any financial help from parochial, diocesan or other sources. Even

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<sup>1</sup> *Harbour Head*, by Peter F. Anson. (John Gifford; 7s. 6d.).

in wartime when there are problems of how to make rations go round, it is safe to follow the advice of the writer of Ecclesiastes : " Cast thy bread upon the waters for thou shalt find it after many days." The seamen take good care that one does not run short of anything. In fact it really pays to be hospitable. Again, how easy it is to provide sleeping accommodation, if only for a couple of men who may wish to spend a night ashore.'

In all these centres of unhesitating hospitality two kinds of work go on. One is typical of the neighbourhood. In New York Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, and their companions, have first-hand experience of the life of their neighbours ; casual labour, strikes, bread-lines, and prison. In the Scottish harbour Peter Anson is accepted as a sailor with wide knowledge and experience, one who owns and handles his own fishing-boat, and who has written strongly and authoritatively on the depressed condition of Scottish fishing. Because of this community of work and experience, relations with neighbours are easy and familiar. As Mr. Anson has found, formality goes as the community accepts the house and its people as part of itself.

Alongside the shared work of the neighbourhood another activity goes on, openly and no less vigorously. It can be loosely labelled intellectual ; study of Christian teaching, of economic and social difficulties of the community, writing, lecturing, discussion—all that is covered by Peter Maurin's favourite term 'indoctrination.' In such activity the place of the house in the special work of Catholic Action of which it is part, its function as a centre of an apostolate, is shown plainly. In this direction 'Harbour Head' is less developed than its counterparts working among negroes or the white proletariat in New York or London ; partly, perhaps, because it has grown from no set plan. Also, local circumstances make greater reticence necessary. But, 'just inside the door at "Harbour Head," nailed to the wall, is an iron plaque. It shows—on a white ground—an anchor, lifebelt with the words APOSTOLATUS MARIS, within its circle a red Heart with rays. Visitors often ask what is the meaning of this badge. I explain that it hangs there because Harbour Head is a "centre" of the "Apostleship of the Sea," for which reason any seafarer is welcome beneath my roof, no matter whether he belong to "Peter's Crew" or not.' There is also the chapel in the loft, although no mention is made of this in the book under review. Now there is this book itself—with its history of the Apostleship of the Sea mingled with much interesting anecdote—written partly to satisfy visitors who were curious to know something of their host's previous life. In all this there is much to

rouse questions. There is no proselytising, but there is no camouflaging of Catholicism.

Most important of all, in every one of the houses which have been mentioned, is the fact that the continuous study, expert knowledge, hospitality and daily work, is set in prayer and a rule of life. Peter Anson, like the foundress of Friendship House, is a Franciscan Tertiary. It is probably true to say that all the work which has been referred to is carried on, if not always by tertiaries or oblates of great religious orders, at least by men and women in close touch with one or other of them and following some form of religious rule in their own daily life. This is in keeping with Pius XI.'s ideas for the co-operation of Third Orders in Catholic Action, and with the fundamental principles which he laid down for all Catholic Action. Prayer first, constant turning to God, direct giving of oneself to him and then for his sake to one's neighbour. It is only by trying to live in Christ, to become another Christ, that the apostle can hope to reveal him to his fellow-men. He must be conformed to Christ. Then he must be identified with the community in which he is to work as an apostle. That is one reason for emphasising study, which is largely concerned with promoting that identification. The universal importance of the latter has been again stressed, this time in connection with Jocism, in a recent French book.<sup>2</sup> 'The militants of Catholic Action must be completely representative of their milieu.' Their conformity to Christ must be accompanied by conformity to their neighbours, sailors, factory workers, negroes—whatever they may be. Then action can follow to complete the pattern: Prayer, Study, Action.

Catholic Action, as practised in all these centres, requires no elaborate organisation or drive for funds in order to start. It is something which begins in a very small way and grows organically, cell by cell. Apostles are formed first. As cells multiply there is built a union of experienced, formed apostles able to co-operate in joint effort when necessary, but primarily occupied in a daily round of prayer, study and apostolic action in their immediate circle. Their activity is not dependent on centralised direction, on national committees and their secretaries. Everyone is in close contact with the souls he is hoping to bring to the knowledge of Christ, sharing their life, helping them in any way he can. Although he nowhere formulates it explicitly, something like this would seem to be Mr. Anson's present conception of Catholic Action. It is very different from his earlier dream of a world-wide, centralised organisation, the dream

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<sup>2</sup> *La France, Pays de Mission?* See 'Blackfriars,' May, 1945: Editorial.

which has been to a great extent splendidly realised, chiefly through the untiring work of Mr. Arthur Gannon, in that very organisation of the Apostleship of the Sea about which Mr. Anson now shows misgivings. Not that he doubts the necessity and excellence of the work which is done for sailors by the Sea Apostolate in Britain; but, if this collation and interpretation of his scattered passages is substantially correct, he is convinced that something more is needed in the present state of religion and morals. It is not enough to provide social facilities for sailors, to tell them where they will find a church when in port, to see that they have Catholic books and papers. Nor is it enough to be concerned, in the words of the Liverpool Archdiocesan Council, 'to encourage seafarers while on shore to be self-respecting, to observe law and order, to save their money, to contribute to their dependents, and to avoid the temptations of a great city.' There is need, if the papal ideal of Catholic Action is to be fully adopted, of men on fire with love, who will show the world that Christianity means an inner revolution. The aim of militant action among sailors should be to train 'not just pious men in each ship, but a Catholic body, an *ecclesiola*, a miniature Church, knowing what it is, and proud of being a member, nay, a limb of the Body of Christ.' The words quoted were spoken by Fr. Reinhold to Mr. Anson. It seems probable that he shares their thought, which would be one reason for his strong admiration for the Jeunesse Maritime Chrétienne, the French maritime branch of the Young Christian Workers, which has shown how that thought can be translated into practice.

It is to achieve this vigorous integral Catholic Action that he urges strongly and repeatedly the need 'for a trained body of priests and laymen who will consecrate their lives to seafarers as such,' a body of missionaries of the sea, identified with seafaring life, going to sea themselves, and not looking on seamen, as existing organisations perhaps tend to do, as being objects of preventive care. Mr. Anson's urgency in this matter is not unsupported, as is shown by quotations from several notable French seamen's chaplains. A similar idea is pressed not only in connection with the Apostolate of the Sea. The two Jocist chaplains who wrote *La France, Pays de Mission?* ask with even greater earnestness for missionaries of the proletariat. In their remarks on existing forms of Catholic Action they make many points which find an echo in '*Harbour Head.*' They too wish to see the existing forms continue and grow, but supplemented by the new forms which they suggest.

Reading these two books can hardly fail to raise seriously questions about the situation in Britain. The Apostolate of the Sea as

it is now constituted does fine work, but is it on the whole, in spite of all the kindness involved and the heavy and devoted work of such men as Mr. Arthur Gannon, able to effect anything **more than a slight amelioration** of the country's religious sickness? **Apart from that particular question**, there appears to be generally in this country a tendency to confuse activity by Catholics with Catholic Action. The title is given to campaigns for schools, to newspaper controversy. There is an eagerness to show material results, to build clubs, start Press campaigns, committees, national councils. In short space such things appear, and reports of speeches at banquets and conferences in big hotels. There is an 'apostolate.' Are there apostles? Is there, behind the mass movement, **the steady work of small groups with the programme of Prayer, Study, Action as a means to winning souls?**

Mr. Anson gives no judgment. *Harbour Head* states no precise thesis; but a putting together of the passages on Catholic Action gives much food for thought. And it seems, to some readers at least, that Mr. Anson, far from ceasing to be an apostle by his withdrawal to the shores of the Moray Firth, has indicated a way in which his own appeal for missionaries of the sea might begin to be met; a way too by which, with small resources, other people might devote themselves to Catholic Action and make cells of Christian living in the world.

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## IN PRAISE OF GENERALISATIONS

It is possible, in the daily intercourse of living, to be familiar with every detail of a man's behaviour and habits, and yet to understand nothing of the man himself; or in history, to wade through volumes about some figure or movement, and yet not to be any closer to the reality. Then, suddenly, one chances upon a formula, a character-equation, which explains all, which renders coherent and intelligible what had before been isolated and inexplicable problems of history or of personal acquaintance.

Let me illustrate. For years I had known a certain man of my own age and profession, conversed with him, studied with him, idled with him. Now, after all this I never became intimate with him, as it is a commonplace that knowledge may never ripen into friendship.