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THE RENEWAL OF THE  
CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION

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THE RENEWAL OF THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION

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There is a story, probably apocryphal, of George Borrow, that sturdy 19th Century Protestant, sitting on top of a stage coach reading, as it happened, one of the early Tracts for the Times. As he read on, he became more and more irritated until he burst out "Damn that fellow Scott!" Borrow believed that the sort of theology he was reading and which later became associated with the Catholic Revival in the Church of England was just another cultural expression of the passion for the Middle Ages fostered by the novels of Sir Walter Scott. In a sense he was right. For many of the Tractarians, as for the artists, architects and ecclesiologists of the movement, it was a return to the Catholic Middle Ages rather than the Catholicism of contemporary Rome that they sought.

I make this point because, in order to understand the Catholic Revival in the Church of England as a social phenomenon, it is necessary to dig a little more deeply than most popular histories of the Revival have been prepared to dig. The Catholic Movement, especially after its emergence in the parishes as the "Ritualist" movement in the second half of the last century was a product, not of one, but of many influences. In the case of the original Tractarians, as Borrow perceived, it was an amalgam of Catholic doctrine and gothic aestheticism. When the movement reached out into the parishes, there was a third influence to be taken into account. This was the incarnational social philosophy which was a peculiarly Anglican contribution to that particular period of religious history, and is most notably associated with the name of Frederick Denison Maurice. And though Maurice repudiated Tractarianism in his own lifetime, and although the Oxford Fathers were social pessimists, the emphasis of the Catholic Revival on incarnational sacramentalism and the corporate nature of God's self-disclosure through a society, the Church, made the marriage between it and the social tradition of Maurice and his friends inevitable.

A social philosophy worthy of the term must start with a social appraisal and herein lies the most significant difference between the social traditions associated with the Catholic and Evangelical Revivals respectively. By "appraisal" of course I do not mean the scientific appraisal of society which modern sociological study has made possible. There was a time in the 30s when a group of Anglo-Catholic thinkers within the general sphere of influence of the Church Union used to employ the word "sociology" to describe that most people trained in that discipline would term "social philosophy". I was alarmed to discover even a few years ago that there was a so-called Summer School of Sociology being held under the auspices of the Church Union when clearly nothing like the rigorous scientific discipline accurately termed "sociology" was envisaged.

Nevertheless Catholic social thinking in the Church of England did start from a conceptual basis which Evangelical social action (there has been no Evangelical thinking worthy of the word "thinking") did not. Popular histories of Victoria's reign have given the lion's share of public praise to the Evangelicals' share of social achievement, which can be misleading. By the time I was ten I had been shown the Shaftesbury memorial on the walls of Harrow School, urged to admire the effigy of William Booth in Madame Tussaud's Exhibition, and had put my weekly penny into the Dr. Barnardo's collecting box which stood in the corner of my formroom $\frac{1}{2}$ . But I had never heard of F.D. Maurice nor of Stewart Headlam. Yet I now think on the basis of my reading of modern social history that the academic

Maurice did more to reshape society for the better than did the street-corner preacher-turned-philanthropist William Booth, who, incidentally, once stated that it didn't really matter if a man died in a workhouse so long as you saved his soul! I am reminded of a verse in one of those popular Victorian favourites, Sacred Songs and Solos:

"But I've been adopted, my name's written down,  
The heir to a mansion, a robe and a crown;  
A tent or a cottage - why should I care?  
They're building a palace for me over there!"

For all the selfless labours of the Evangelicals among the poor of Victorian England, their social hope never aspired much beyond this level.

The difference between the Catholic and Evangelical attitudes to society was that the former took society seriously because it took the created order seriously. Because the Catholic begins his understanding of God's disclosure of himself to man with the Divine truth of the Incarnation, a Catholic Christian can, or should, be involved in human affairs simply because they are human. Christianity, for him, is the affirmation of the holiness of humanity. To think otherwise is to espouse the heresy of what the late Archbishop Joost de Blank called "partial Christianity". De Blank started his own adult Christian life as a conservative Evangelical. In an autobiographical essay published a few years before his death, he describes his progress to full Catholic Christianity:

"The sacramentalism of the Anglican Church safeguards the totality of Christ's redemption. In my undergraduate days we talked about saving souls - and very little about saving people. But Holy Scripture seldom if ever refers to the salvation of souls for it recognises the temptation to think of the soul as a disembodied entity, as if salvation were limited to the spiritual and non-material part of personality. This is denied by the fact of the Incarnation. Because God became man in Jesus Christ, the whole of life is God's; and our Lord was as obedient to his heavenly Father when he was working as a carpenter as when he was preaching the Sermon on the Mount. God has thus set his seal on the whole of life, and we have no right to make an arbitrary division between the sacred and the secular."

One of the last things that Joost de Blank ever wrote was a small contribution to the rather sterile debate of the 60s about the secularisation of the Gospel, entitled The Return of the Sacred. The debate, to my mind, was especially hung-up by the Protestant theologians who initiated it, and who were still working the dualism and the false spiritualisation of the Gospel that characterises their tradition out of their systems.

Having then established that Catholicism takes the world seriously, are we Catholics by the same token open to the possibilities, to the potentialities of the world? One of the hardest things to explain to the rank-and-file churchman is the difference between the liberal Protestant "social gospel" which received a mortal blow after the First World War and the climate it generated of disenchantment about human progress, and the Catholic social tradition. The difference is in an understanding of the Kingdom and the promise of the Kingdom which is the dominant theme of the Synoptic Gospels. Liberal Christianity saw the Kingdom of God on earth as the culmination of the evolutionary process, the crowning triumph of the world's efforts on behalf of itself. The Kingdom in this tradition is essentially anthropocentric and Pelagian in its achievement. A popular phrase at this moment in time - it was used by a Bishop only the other day - is the reference to the Church as "the servant of the world". There is a real sense in which the Church does serve the world, particularly in its ministry to "the least of these my brethren". Bishop Frank Weston, in his historic address to the Anglo-Catholic Congress of 1923, now happily reprinted by the Church Literature Association, urged

Catholics to "gird yourselves with the towel of Jesus". But this is a different thing from being what is called "the flunkey church", with a waiter's napkin over the arm, pandering to the tastes, the fashions, the prejudices of the world. This is what the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa is doing - giving theological endorsement to the racial intolerance of the Afrikaans people.

For the Catholic, the ultimate importance of the world is in its potential - that the kingdoms of the world shall become the Kingdom of the Lord and his Christ, a conception of the Kingdom which is the only one with its roots in Holy Scripture. It is eschatological, not evolutionary. It requires of man not minor adjustments, but metanoia, rebirth rather than a reformation of manners.

Luther, speaking of the sectarianism of the Anabaptists on the one hand, and the triumphalism of the Papacy on the other, commented that "these two bastard foxes snarl at one another - but their tails are tied together." The tragedy of our time is not that Catholics are getting "unsound" and dropping Benediction, Birettas and Fortescue-O'Connell, nor that there are more Protestants in chasubles than ever before, but that Evangelicals and Catholics are totally ineffective and in some cases downright heretical in their social witness. Although I rejoice in a book like Built as a City by someone so ancestrally a conservative Evangelical as David Sheppard, I believe that his tradition in the Church of England, despite his own and many other distinguished exceptions, is still individualistic, still pietistic, still defective in its doctrine of creation, still inadequate in its understanding of the Incarnation, still adventist in its conception of the Kingdom of God. Its new trendy image and its undoubted success in attracting many young people to its banner makes these defects even more obvious - and dangerous.

Catholicism, on the other hand, at least has not lost its doctrinal basis. We have that reassurance every time the Mass is offered, the Mass that Father Adderley once described as "the weekly meeting of rebels against a mammon-worshipping order". Rather, Catholicism has been placed on the defensive by the defection of the masses from the Church, by the progress of secularism, and has retreated into its own ecclesiastical enclave. Worse than the formal identification of the Church with the Kingdom, - the heresy of ultramontaniam - is the practical identification: the obsession with forms of ecclesiastical government, the addiction to liturgy divorced from life (applicable to liturgical experimentalists as well as liturgical conservatives) and the confusion of mission with the statistical evaluation of attendance at public worship.

There is of course a continuing social tradition in Christianity which is expressed most prominently by the many social utterances of the World Council of Churches. But I do not believe that it is a satisfactory substitute for the renewal of the Catholic social tradition. It is necessary for the Church to do more than seek political allies in the secular field, although the Christian is equally ill-advised to set himself up as the sole repository of social enlightenment in a pluralist society.

I was struck the other day by a letter, in a periodical devoted to Christian social thought, written by the doyen of the Christendom Movement of the 30s, Maurice Reckitt, now in his 80s but happily still with us. He was criticising articles in the journal because of what he called their exclusively mundane character. He goes on:

"The articles are solely political when they should be far more often occupied with the pre-political; all those aspects of man's nature and fate which are concerned with what is by its nature antecedent to - though not unrelated to - what is spoiling men's lives today. This is because they are based on fallacies about what his true nature demands and the ends which in many respects he ought not to be striving for. A sufficient theology should be teleological before it attempts to be ethical".

Mr Reckitt goes on to illustrate his thesis by recalling a meeting he once attended of Industrial Chaplains. He found them sensible, sincere, knowledgeable about industrial relations; but, he continues:

"While good relations are always better than bad relations, this subject does not exhaust all that the Church should be concerned about in the industrial system today. In the first place, it neglects the question of the validity of what these relations actually are. Secondly, they omit all consideration of what our industry is up to: no industrial chaplain rose to tell us that he had ever had occasion to tell a Board of Directors 'In heaven's name, stop making that'. Thirdly, and perhaps most fundamentally, they did not raise any question of what effect our highly mechanised industry was doing to man".

What Mr. Reckitt is calling for is a radical Christian social tradition in the real sense of the word - one that gets down to the roots of the situation. His criticisms have point because the element he finds lacking in the columns of a journal and at a conference is the distinctive element in the Catholic social tradition as exemplified by Maurice (although I know that he is not identified with the Catholic Revival), by Headlam, by Gore, by Widdrington, by Noel, by Groser. This radical critique of society, what is more, inspired the practical pastoral labours of hundreds of selfless and saintly parish priests in the Catholic tradition who worked in the slums of our cities in the early years of this century. It has often been suggested that the latter were merely dedicated paternalists whose relatively short-lived success was wholly pastoral and never political. A sociologist, Robert Bock, who has completed a special study of Anglo-Catholic socialism, comes to a different conclusion:

"In so far as the slum ritualists were ever successful with the working class in the major industrial cities, it was largely due to their ability to sympathise with, and actively support, the working class movement, and to support it theologically in a way often more radical and even revolutionary than the workers' leaders were themselves."

In the same study Mr. Bock suggests that the three basic theological ideas behind the whole Catholic social tradition in the Church of England are the Incarnation, the Kingdom of God, and Community. I personally believe that the recovery of the Catholic social tradition must start with a rigorous theological re-appraisal of these three themes. If you consider their secular equivalents as the exploration of the transcendent dimension of ordinary life, the consideration of the teleology of human existence, and the rediscovery of neighbourhood and community, you realise that this theological exercise is not going to be a strange and rarified one, remote from the concerns of ordinary life, but one which at many points touches the things of most concern to many thoughtful people, especially young people, today.

This then is one growth point for the renewal of the Catholic social witness. Another is greater involvement of Catholics in both the social thinking and the social action of the Church. There has been for some years now an unfortunate tendency for Catholic parishes - especially those that proudly claim when seeking curates through the Church Times "full Catholic privileges" - to contract out of any consideration of social issues, leaving that kind of thing to "social gospel Christians", or reserving specific Catholic comment for topics that evoke predictable Catholic attitudes such as abortion and divorce. This is as much the fruit of sociological ignorance as theological confusion. Catholics all too often react to the social tradition of their ancestors by assuming that, because the conditions of life that prevailed, say, in Father Wainwright's time in London Docks, no longer

obtain today, the Catholic social tradition which had its roots in those conditions is now obsolete. It is as deceptive an argument as that often advanced in the press that the Labour Party is outdated and irrelevant because of its "cloth cap" image. Cloth caps may be out of fashion, but what the cloth cap symbolises, which is as much a condition of powerlessness as of poverty, is still a social reality. The nature of poverty today is less easy to identify than it was. It is concealed but it is no less pernicious than when it flaunted itself in the public eye.

To understand and identify poverty today means being better informed about social conditions. The mistake made by the Catholic "sociologists" of an earlier era is that their approach was a deductive one. They established a general theory of Catholic social ethics and then tried to make the facts of contemporary social life fit them. This I believe was the reason for the rather disastrous association for some years between the Christendom Movement and the economic fallacy of social credit. Today more sophisticated tools in the shape of developed social research techniques make it possible for us to work inductively and with greater accuracy. I should like all Catholic parishes to undertake, as a national programme sponsored perhaps by the Church Union, a systematic study of social problems, relate them to theological and biblical insights, and finally set out some specific guidelines for action at local and national level. A book like Edward Patey's paperback Don't Just Sit There could provide a very useful basis for this enterprise.

I would also like to see Catholic theological colleges give their students a more comprehensive account of the rise of the Catholic social tradition. I myself am indebted to the late Canon Stanley Evans who as principal of my own college not only provided us with such an account but inspired us in the recognition that the social tradition is not peripheral but central to Catholic Christianity.

Finally, let us follow the example of our forebears and lift up our eyes to the hills - the Seven Hills. Inevitably the Catholic movement has looked Romeward from the beginning, sometimes in the spirit of faintly ludicrous imitation, but also in broad recognition of the fact that Catholicism conceived in a narrow national tradition would eventually shrivel and die. Today some of the most adventurous social thinking is coming from Rome, particularly from Roman Catholic groups in the Third World. In those parts of the world where revolution against repression and exploitation is a daily reality, priests and laymen have been trying to work out a theology of liberation which would become the dynamic for non-violent social change. We Anglican Catholics could find that dialogue with these fellow Christians, now so much easier in the new climate of ecumenism, an enriching experience.

Let me end by telling you of a time when Conrad Noel of Thaxted, like so many Catholic incumbents of his time, was in trouble with his Bishop, on that occasion for having a procession of the Blessed Sacrament through the streets of the town on Corpus Christi. His friend and fellow-socialist, Percy Widdrington, wrote to the Bishop in an attempt to intercede and mediate. "You do not understand Noel's position" he wrote, "until you realise that his passionate belief in the establishment of the Kingdom of earth is the master idea of all his teaching. It is this which separates him from the pietists and those who confuse the Catholic Faith with the religion of the sanctuary boy." The Kingdom of God as the vision of a renewed humanity - "the well-ordered society with the vision of God" as Aquinas called it - or the religion of the sanctuary boy? This, I suggest, is the choice before this conference today and before the whole Catholic movement in our Church during the next decade.