

“MR COUNCILLOR”

IT is true that the Christmas message of Pope Pius XII was directed to international affairs but much that he had to say has a direct application to lower forms of government.

Division, insincerity, discord and mistrust are not faults that are confined to those politicians who parade on the international field but are to be found, perhaps to an even greater extent, among minor politicians. One may hope that the better men rise to the top and that among Members of Parliament there is a greater moral sense than is to be found in the general public.

In this country there must be nearly 64,000 councillors serving a wide range of authorities from the Parish Council to the glorious heights of the County Council.

A democracy depends on such people. They can be a defence against the abuse of power on the part of the central government. Governments do tend, as Pius XII points out, ‘once they have won power and feel the reins securely in their hands . . . (to) . . . gradually drop the veil and pass by successive stages from oppression of the dignity and liberty of man to the abolition of all authentic and independent religious life.’ This exaggerates the dangers present in our country, but no one, irrespective of his politics, who thinks about fundamentals, can deny that there are dangers. It can be argued that the present generation of political leaders will not abuse their power. Yet the power is there and can be abused, if not today then in a few years’ time. The supporters of Labour can argue that the power is demanded by present day circumstances but it is there and care is needed in its use. Part of the danger is the general low level of morality in the country. The divorce rate, the vast extent of venereal disease in the forces, the illegitimate births, the abortions, are aspects of this immorality that make the headlines. More widespread and far less spectacular is the general insincerity and dishonesty.

On international levels the Pope points out that it is raised to the ‘distinction of a strategy, in which the lie, the garbled word or fact, and trickery have come to be accepted weapons of offence’. In its extreme form it produces the misuse of such words as ‘democracy’, ‘freedom of the press’. The Pope’s words are addressed mainly to the representatives of that Eastern European bloc who have made ‘democracy’ their war cry. Yet dare we say that the West is completely free? To preserve good relations Mr Bevin insists that there are no tags on the Marshall Plan. Yet he must wonder if the suggested inclusion of tobacco is for the reconstruction

of Europe or for the well-being of American tobacco growers; and the trouble about American bases in Panama infringing on the dignity and freedom of the Panama Republic lends an air of veracity to some of the claims of the Communists.

Has everyone been completely honest and sincere in the Marshall discussions, in the debate between the Minister of Health and the B.M.A., in the many large and small political questions that keep politicians busy?

As we come down the scale to the county councils, the borough councils and right down to the parish councils we find the same problems. It is not fears about Marshall Plans but suggestions of self-interest that we meet. Often the points raised are very small but added together they affect the whole system of local government. If that system is healthy it is a great check on Parliament. If that system is unhealthy it may either hinder Parliament or even allow an evil Parliament to do what it will.

On the whole the system is good. Mr Councillor is generally an honest man. One type, decreasing in numbers and mainly to be found in the county councils, still has an old tradition of service and its members give of their best to help their neighbours. A very large number, mainly in the towns, are chapel trained and often with the experience of being local preachers. They too have a tradition, that of the nonconformist social service, of a religion that does good to one's fellow man.

These two groups (and here we are not concerned with their political views) have rendered a great service to this country. They have, for different motives, placed themselves without reservation at the service of the people. But both these groups are dying. The remnants of the aristocrat and the country squire can no longer expect their position to give them office or their investments to secure them the time required by that office. The local preachers are suffering with the general decline of church-going.

If they go will the quality of our local government suffer? I think it will. It is possible to quote many examples of office-seekers, of the vain-glorious and such types entering politics.

The two vanishing types already mentioned are often in opposing political camps. Yet between them existed a real unity. In local government purely political questions are of a minor importance and there can exist a real unity on very many questions. When a real desire to serve exists unity is easily achieved.

But when other motives dominate, that unity is hard to achieve and in its place is to be found 'insincerity', 'dishonesty' and 'discord'. The Pope traces them on the world scale; we can find them

round the parish pump.

Is there any hope or have we to accept the gradual deterioration of local government standards? The answer depends on the people. Two things are needed to save us from falling any lower. One is the right type of education and the second is the right motive.

Once men at one end of the social scale were forced into local government because it affected their lives so obviously. Housing meant much when the central government did little to encourage it and so much depended on local authorities. Healthy conditions could be enforced if sanitary inspectors were adequately backed by their authorities. Pure food was possible, clean water and proper sewage obtainable. They all depended to a large extent on the local authorities. So the men who suffered from the want of these things went into local politics and sought to be elected to the councils because on the councils they could do so much. Today the tempo of such activities comes to some extent from Whitehall. The tradition has been built and these amenities are regarded as essentials in any community. The urge of suffering does not drive men on to the Councils today.

Where schoolchildren in their last year are taken to council meetings, escorted round the sewage works, the gas works, and other departments of the local authority there is hope that a new understanding can be cultivated. These children may begin to realise the importance in their lives of the local authorities. They begin to understand the complex nature of our local democracy. The technical knowledge, the keen scrutiny to save any waste and the general desire to serve become real to them. With such material it is possible to commence a real education in citizenship.

From such children one may hope for a new generation of councillors. This new generation will come with difficulty unless we begin to educate the youth. If we can picture to the youth the work of local government and can grip their imaginations with the idea of serving their neighbour then we will solve the problem of the next generation of our local rulers.

The supply of potential councillors is only part of the problem. It is far more important to be sure that they are inspired with the right motive.

It is insufficient to like committee work, to glory in debate, to love an argument. It is insufficient to wish for glory and publicity.

Such motives if they ever become the major motive force in local government work will kill our local democracy. In killing the local democracy we go one further stage towards totalitarianism, one stage

further towards an unbridgable gulf between the people and the rulers.

Many of our councillors are inspired with a genuine desire to serve, rather on the Rotary principle. Let us not dismiss that motive too hastily. It is a lot and it does avoid many of the evils of the world. It lacks the most important element, God, but as far as one can go without God, it goes. It certainly is much better than the lower motives, of greed and selfish ambition.

It fails because it is not real enough. It is all rather abstract and soon develops into the 'case-book' mentality. Here men and women become numbers and in the dealing with their problems their material surroundings become of more importance than themselves. It develops the old fallacy that if you provide good houses you produce *good men*.

What else can one expect without God? Based on the love of God the love that a councillor needs must have for his neighbour becomes real. It becomes a case of brother helping brother, a real relationship because God is the Father of us all. If the housing committee is concerned with brothers and sisters living in foul conditions or overcrowded then the problem is more urgent. As long as it is only bricks and plans and government returns the whole problem is rather abstract.

There is the basis for real local government. In the area covered by the authority there is one family. Some members are comfortable, others are not. It is the duty of all, especially those with any special gifts from God, to help the whole family. The lack of a family sense is a real drawback in our towns and it prevents local democracy growing and prevents local government being as effective as it is.

The whole Catholic tradition is behind such a view as this. St Martin meeting a beggar on a cold day gave him half his cloak; on looking back he saw no beggar—he saw Christ. Mr X, a councillor, taking a full personal interest in rehousing a 'bad case', is not rehousing human beings—but Christ. St Christopher carrying the little boy across the stream found that his load became heavier and heavier and on reaching the far bank found that he had been taking Christ across. The councillor making certain that some nuisance which is producing ill-health in a family is remedied is not helping a family of mortals but is helping Christ.

Viewed from that angle, and surely that fits with the Christian tradition, Mr Councillor has a responsibility and an unique advantage. He has a chance of serving Christ all the time. Much of his work is humdrum and routine. Yet that routine is helping children of God, members or potential members of the Body of Christ, it is

helping Christ. It is remarkable that far more Catholics do not come forward to seek this unique opportunity. It is the lack of people with this viewpoint that endangers local government.

The responsibility is also there. To run the human race God has distributed many gifts. It would be a sad day for humanity if we were all first-class opera singers. Such a day will never come because God has not bestowed his gifts in that haphazard way. To some he has given one gift; to others the gift of leadership; to more the gift of music, or organisation, of writing. These gifts perhaps form a scale in human values, but for the running of society the shoemaker, the crossing-sweeper, the baker are all as important as the prime minister.

The running of the local community demands certain gifts. Those that have these gifts have a duty to use them. They will be asked, when the Master returns, to account for their use of the talents. Woe betide them if they produce excuses, for what they have will be taken away from them.

We have among our Catholic body many men and women with these gifts. It may be difficult to use them. It will probably be hard. But used they must be or we will face our Maker knowing that we could have served him in serving our neighbour for his sake and that we were too cowardly, too lazy, too spineless to seize the opportunity.

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AN OLD CONTROVERSY RECALLED

IN her admirable biography, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, Maisie Ward dwelt at some length on a notable controversy in which her hero was engaged at the beginning of the present century.¹ 'He was still', she says, 'writing every Saturday in the *Daily News*. Publishers were disputing for each of his books. Yet he rushed into every religious controversy that was going on, because thereby he could clarify and develop his ideas. The most important of all these was the controversy with Blatchford, Editor of *The Clarion*, who had written a rationalist Credo, entitled *God and My Neighbour*. In 1903-4, he had the generosity and the wisdom to throw open *The Clarion* to the freest possible discussion of his views. The Christian attack was made by a group of which Chesterton was the outstanding figure, and was afterwards gathered into a paper volume called *The Doubts of Democracy*'.

The writer of the present article read these sections of Miss Ward's book with special interest, for he remembers vividly the controversy

¹ Sheed & Ward, 1945. pp. 140, 172-7, 180, 505.