

## A CENTENARY AND THE FUTURE

THE EDITOR

**A** HUNDRED years in the life of the Church make but a moment, but in the providence of God all moments may be more than they seem. The century that has passed since the re-establishment in this country of a regular Catholic hierarchy has much in it that calls for celebration, for thanksgiving. There is a great deal in the Catholic situation today that must have been beyond the imagination of the faithful who welcomed Wiseman as he returned from Rome to take up his position as Archbishop of the restored hierarchy. Hopes have been realised, and other hopes remain unfulfilled. The exhilarating air of a second Spring made the corporate reconciliation of the Anglican Church seem not impossible. But the Oxford Movement, enriching the Catholic community as it did with such men as Newman, Manning and Ward, yet was to become a dominant force within the National Church. The immense Irish immigration gave promise of a numerical growth which, as the Coadjutor Bishop of Brentwood recently reminded his Irish audience at Maynooth, has not proved as constant as it might have been had the uprooting of a peasant culture and the substitution of the soulless life of English industrial cities been realised for the unnatural process it was—and is.

Statistics have their place, and it is very likely that the Catholic population of England and Wales is far greater than the usual estimates suggest. Despite disappointments and loss, the Catholic Church is today the most effective, as it is certainly the most united, religious body in this country, and increasingly its authority is seen as a constant amidst all the baffling varieties of allegiance and belief. But a centenary, however worthy of celebration, cannot ignore what went before, nor what is yet to come. Pride in any achievement, and not less in the achievements of grace that this month's celebrations recall, must go with some humility. It is easy to underestimate the fidelity of the hidden centuries, with their persecution and pain, which alone made the Catholic revival possible. And that experience of Christian life under an authoritarian state is not without its relevance to the future centuries, whatever they may bring.

Mr Christopher Dawson, writing with his unequalled authority as a historian of culture, has recently reminded us of the 'task of the present time, which is to find the new spiritual weapons and tactics that are appropriate to [a] new situation'. Such a task may not in our country or in our time demand the heroic resistance of Tudor times or of Eastern Europe today. The attack in the West is subtler, but it calls for no less resolute a defence, demands the use of spiritual weapons no less effective. And one lesson of the century that has passed is that the defence of Christianity is the defence of reason itself, of human dignity, of essential rights that were until yesterday regarded as axiomatic in civilised society.

One may hope that in this country, short of revolution, a more resolute and a more informed Christian impact on society may be looked for in the years that are ahead. There is emerging a Catholic professional and middle class (if indeed such a category can continue to have much meaning), an influence in a range of society that has hitherto been too slight. The notable increase of Catholics in the universities, and, even more important, their growing consciousness of their vocation, should mean a representation in affairs, national as well as professional, that should serve more than what is supposed to be a sectarian interest. It is true that the handful of Catholics in Parliament are scarcely discernible as a body, united in their conception of human nature and human destiny. But the emergence of an adult awareness of Christian responsibility will, one hopes, affect Westminster as well as West Ham. And the immense provisions of a Welfare State, however subject to criticism they may be in detail, should provide means of effective action for those (and that includes the vast majority of Catholics) who have no privilege of wealth or influence to assist them.

Much of the organisation of the modern State, with its impious claims, may indeed seem beyond the possibility of baptism. But, granted their liberty to do so, Christians should bring their faith (and that will mean their application of it in the social order) to bear upon the world they find. That will demand a realistic awareness of what that world is like and a consistent, because supernaturally-rooted, interpretation of the Christian duty to redeem it. So it is that a review such as *BLACKFRIARS*, in acknowledging the achievement of the century that is past, need make no apology for insisting on an essential work of the future. The func-

tion of criticism, the surveying of a situation within the Christian sanctions of judgment and charity; that is a need that will not grow less.

Criticism, it is true, is often easier than the action which alone will make it effective. But, just as the re-birth of Catholic life in this country presupposed the humanly hopeless fidelity of the underground years, so, too, the work of the Church in the future will never be measured by the discernible result. In serving Christ and the Church, Catholics serve more than themselves. They have the words of life, and if fear or folly make those words grow silent or uncertain on their lips, the harder must be the judgment that awaits them. It may be that some words of Father Vincent McNabb's are the best commentary on the past and what it has brought, on the future and all it holds of joy. 'Little things are little things, but little beginnings may be great things. Little groups, who have the words of Christ and who have the words of St Thomas Aquinas, will have their effect. This effect will not be seen before I am only a memory. It will be seen. It will be seen.'

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