

an Anglican theologian has said, complacent optimism, no less than pessimism, is treason against hope. But hope, rooted in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the faith that moves mountains, is a Christian duty. And Fr St John has given us in this book the most valuable incentive to hope.



## CHRISTIANITY IN ENGLAND

NEVILLE BRAYBROOKE

**A**S the liturgical cycle of the Church renews itself, Good Friday and Easter pass in much the same way as they have since the time of Calvary and the finding of the stone rolled back. Seed-time is so perennial that it unites centuries, making little difference between 1620 and 1720, or dates such as 1870 or 1955. The methods of sowing alter as little as those of harvesting: two thousand years bring small change to the shape of cross or sickle. The apparent relationship between religious and agricultural rites might therefore suggest that the Church is as immutable in her outward life as she is in her doctrines. This is not so. *The Church is the people*; her bishops are their leaders, and in a healthy society the two must work and pray in union. Yet between the people and the bishops stand the priests; beneath the soutane and habit (which have remained the same through the ages) there are men who differ from each other, who grow and develop all the time. A modern sermon preached on the Passion in Westminster Cathedral will be less flowery than it was thirty years ago; histrionics do not win converts today. Nor will a sermon preached today be effective if it is delivered in the style of Newman, Faber or Manning. This is something that English Catholics have had to learn by the hard way of experience; this is why—perhaps more than elsewhere—the Lay Apostolate is left with a particularly vital role to play in the conversion of England.

Good Friday this year in London was as I had met it before in Shrewsbury during the war as a soldier, and in Yorkshire as a schoolboy. The morning came into its stride to the accompaniment of somebody practising the scales; the notes tinkled over the small Hampstead back gardens, but became lost and separated

from each other; they struggled for a uniformity, a belief, and it was with a certain irony that I realized that their intended tune was *I believe*—a current song hit. Eventually, however, their notes became drowned amid the more sonorous, full-throated singing of the Bach *St Matthew Passion*. Several wirelesses were tuned in to the same programme, linking the street.

In the *cul de sac* in which I live a man was polishing his car; her wing-plates gleamed in the sun; she would fly the corners all the faster when in the afternoon he took the road for the coast. From the heath there floated down the hill and between the rows of houses the sounds of the roundabouts being assembled; the fair would begin at three o'clock. Some children came to the door. The ward-maid (who has the rooms above) let them in. I heard them ask if she would take them to the fair. 'Not today', she answered, 'Not Jesus's day—any other holiday. 'Oliday Monday but not today.' She was quite vehement. I remembered that in her room was a pre-Raphaelite print of the Good Shepherd. I have heard her speaking to other tenants, 'We get good voices when we go up there', and as she speaks so her own voice rises and you sense an inflexion of the wrists heavenwards. She is forty-three; devout Church of England; and on Good Friday she did not sing. Before the clock tower had struck five she had been up, scrubbing the floor.

Yet now that all this is past, it is the voices of those children that beat with my typewriter; imprisoned like birds in the keys, they twitter their questioning Lenten litany. 'But why can't we go?' *Because Jesus died*. 'But why did he die? Why won't he let us go?' *Because Jesus died to save you*. 'But he died a long time ago, when he was King of London, and now we have a Queen . . .' The story of explanation begins. Over a hundred years ago it was the same story. In *The Conditions of the Working Classes in 1844* Frederick Engels noted how some children thought that Christ was Adam and others that Christ was 'a king in London long ago'. This social study was published a year later—the year of Newman's conversion. Has there then been no advance? Has universal suffrage and elementary education proved a farce? In a century's turning what has been the gain and loss? These are not begged questions; they are perennial—as relevant in 1955 as they were in 1945 or 1845.

London is probably the most sophisticated capital in Europe; it

is the centre of all important English publishing, and because the press that is read abroad is so widely written by men living in London who see their capital as the largest in the world, there is a great danger in believing that all England, let alone London, is as progressive, atheist and pagan as the English press would sometimes suggest. Half an hour's bus ride from Fleet Street to Whitechapel or Hampstead will soon dispel the notion. For the small number of progressives and atheists is quite out of proportion with the enormous amount that they write. The Public Libraries, for instance, are hesitant to stock work by avowed atheists and the B.B.C. allows few talks to go through on their networks that are openly anti-Christian. Toleration for them means at the most a debate such as that held several years ago on 'the existence of God' between Bertrand Russell and Fr F. C. Coplestone, the Jesuit. Accordingly when one speaks of freedom of religious opinion in England one must always be sure of one's terms: there is, for example, no freedom granted publicly to worship the Devil. Black Masses, as in medieval jurisdiction, are still against the law. Again, atheists do not easily come by headmasterships. For around London the population is homogeneously Christian. This does not mean that people necessarily go to church—except for weddings and funerals—but it does mean that nearly all their children are sent regularly to some form of Sunday school. There they sing the rousing hymns of Izaak Watts and Charles Wesley, and as long as this tradition continues poets will remain the legislators of England; for the best hymns are stirring poems, and none but a bigot can deny that these hymns are anything other—especially when young voices a thousand strong proclaim them. I put the mental date of these children and their parents at about that of 1870—the date when compulsory education was first introduced.

Away from London in the smaller towns such as Shrewsbury or Coventry or along the Pennines the mental age is nearer 1720, the year when the witch-cult finally died. As they walk along streets shadowed by massive red-brick smoking towers, factory girls going to their looms and typists to their jobs may read the news printed in London the night before, but on passing a clergyman they will still often touch iron for luck—as their ancestors did when meeting a Druid. Atom or hydrogen bomb, headless horseman and mermaids continue to remain a part of their living liturgy. In Lancashire, the last stronghold of the Faith after Elizabethan

times, it is considered unlucky for a girl to wear green; if she defies the convention, she may be shouted at.

Yet farther away in the more rural districts the mental climate is nearer 1620. I remember meeting a colonel and his wife who were running a small guest-house. One night they were awoken by a neighbour asking for beetroot. The colonel replied by saying that he had none left in his garden, but that he had some tinned—would that do? The other answered, 'We have just heard by telephone that our daughter's labour pains have come on. We know that if we eat this, she will be all right.' Notice the 1952 incongruities—the telephone and the tinned vegetable allied with the superstitious belief in the properties of beetroot for a safe delivery. England is full of such incongruities and it is only by making a survey of the country as a whole that one realizes quite how few the moderns are, quite how remote progressive thought is from everyday reality. The conclusion of both Spengler and Jung (so different in their approach!) aptly returns: *the number of people in touch with contemporary civilization is always minute.*

Universal suffrage and elementary education, one would suppose, might have brought up a generation of children who would know the difference between Christ and Adam and their present Queen. Yet it would be a mistake to see this lack of common knowledge as due to any lack of attendance at the Sunday schools; rather it forms part of a more general problem—resistance to Christianity because of the manner in which it is presented. The trouble at one remove is that, although you can see that children answer a roll call, this does not ensure that they will listen. Nor does it mean that the children are not bright nor eager for knowledge, because they will be able to tell you quickly enough about Dick Turpin, Don Quixote or a movie star. (The commissioners who followed Engels in his survey testified that children knew more about Dick Turpin than Adam.) The real trouble today—at two removes as it were—is that with the pre-Raphaelite movement there came a sentimentalization into English portraiture; the figure of Christ appeared no longer manly, but effeminate; and this pre-Raphaelitism has affected the whole of religious teaching, especially that of the Church of England (Millais, Holman Hunt and Burne-Jones were all Protestants). Remember too that it is against this pre-Raphaelite background that modern Catholicism has come into being.

In 1829 the Penal Laws were repealed. Yet the restrictive life under these laws bequeathed to Catholics a siege mentality. At the Council of Trent the bishops had decided that rigid definition and the concentration of the Church's forces were the only course to be adopted if vital principles were to be effectively defended. The Church became deliberately militant. Organized zeal and skilful debate were at a premium and the intellectual element was inevitably sacrificed for the more controversial and devotional. Intense and unified *esprit de corps*, preparation for possible martyrdom and above all absolute military obedience were imperatives if attack and persecution were to be resisted. For siege intensifies defence; the walls must be manned that the city shall be preserved—and the arts of peace suffer a corresponding eclipse. Those who endure remember past glories and a past culture, so that when hostilities end there is much leeway to be made up. In England Catholics had lost touch with Catholics abroad, and active as the Church had been there—remember the impact of Ignatius Loyola, Charles Borromeo and Philip Neri—she had at home no fresh native spiritual literature to fall back upon; and a great many of the foreign spiritual manuals circulating were tainted with Jansenism. For want of a better art, she was forced to absorb pre-Raphaelite painting.

'We are living on the intellect of a former age', Newman had written in the mid-century. For it was Newman who was later to speak of England's second Catholic spring, so that as one looks back over a century one sees that Catholic gains have often been Protestant losses. One is forced to look directly at the present.

Exact figures are always hard to provide, but a conservative estimate is that there are now three million Catholics in England. This includes neither the floating population of foreign emigrés nor commercial travellers. Roughly, too, there are 11,000 converts a year. In fact the figures for converts over the last two decades make a rising graph.

Up to about 1930 the aim of English Catholics was to consolidate. They were still to some extent living on the intellect and art of a former age—a state which lessened as Belloc and Chesterton became more prolific. The idea of the Church being 'the scarlet woman of Rome' and of every Jesuit being a spy were giving place to a new kind of rationalism—logical argument. If in country districts the more irrational attitudes still prevailed, there

were some new London publishers who were bringing out reasoned and clear attacks on Catholicism. In place of abuse and blind prejudice, it was being argued that Catholics were not Liberal, that if Catholics gained control in England there would follow a regime as illiberal as that in Mussolini's Italy. Unfortunately this belief was fostered because many Catholics identified the tyrannical corporate state that Mussolini was building with the teachings of *Rerum Novarum* on Corporatism. The back numbers of *The Tablet* during the 'thirties' tell this sad tale. Which brings me to the Catholic press.

The English Catholic press is almost exclusively Conservative (there is no Catholic daily). There is nothing wrong with this because a Catholic may vote either Conservative, Labour or Liberal. A Catholic editor will naturally have his own political views. The views of the editors of *The Tablet*, *Catholic Times* and *The Universe* are all right-wing: *The Catholic Herald* is a Liberal exception; and the temptation from a survey of the Catholic weekly press might be to suppose that all English Catholic opinion is one hundred per cent Conservative. In actual fact it is nearer forty per cent. At the Election in 1955 more Catholics voted Labour than Conservative. Again, most English Catholic writers tend to be either Conservative or Liberal: this may also tempt some to believe that all Catholic thought is Conservative—a line which opponents are quick to exploit. Yet a visit to any provincial university such as Leeds, Southampton or Reading will soon dispel this illusion. For what has happened is that professors and dons (nearly all of whom are converts) have brought to their exposition of the old theology new methods, and because as converts few of them have written more than one book, their work is mainly known only to readers of specialized reviews. Yet they have a waiting public, as time will prove. . . .

In the last century Wilfrid Ward records that during his seminary days 'those students were best thought of who learnt best by heart. Genuine philosophic thought annoyed our Professors.' Yet when one admits that this is no longer the case one has a suspicion that this is at least partly because laymen such as novelists and poets have brought matters to a head. Until recently theologians refrained from making sufficiently public their views on the new problems, especially in science and medicine—their siege mentality encouraging excessive caution in these realms. It would seem

that much of recent apologetic—particularly on sex and psychology—has received prominence because these sexual and psychological problems have already been aired in the poems and novels of writers who are converts.

Monsignor Ronald Knox, at a centenary meeting held to celebrate Newman's entry into the Church, said that he believed that there were three main obstacles to conversion. Englishmen did not like the idea of owing spiritual sovereignty to a foreign pope, but even more important they disliked the Church's teaching on sex—in particular with regard to contraception and divorce; and indeed through the 'thirties' and early 'forties' not much had been done to put before the public in clear language what the exact sexual ethic of the Church was. The two or three Catholic publishers that existed seemed wary of bringing out straightforward manuals, and the language was so veiled in the few books which they did issue that often the meaning was obscured. Children were expected 'to learn the catechism by heart', while with regard to the sixth commandment the phrase 'irregular motions of the flesh' continued and continues to appear in edition after edition to mystify more and more growing boys and girls. However, the novels of Graham Greene—notably *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) and *The End of the Affair* (1951)—and Evelyn Waugh's books—notably *Brideshead Revisited* (1945)—have brought a spotlight to some of these matters. The problems these authors state (even if a little crudely) can no longer be ignored. The atmosphere was much more broadminded by 1950 than it had been in 1930. There had been an opening of barriers. Consider for instance Cardinal Wiseman's *Fabiola* and put it beside Archbishop David Mathew's novel, *The Prince of Wales' Feathers* (1953). The historical 'catacomb' novel contrasts oddly with the study of a modern dock-town's human driftwood—its coloured peoples, half-castes, spiv-adventurers and bawds. For here is the flotsam and jetsam background that Englishmen have seen in their own dock towns. Here is something much more easily comprehended than a pre-Raphaelite picture of the Good Shepherd because this is the world of present reality. Here is something known and experienced at first hand. Primitive feelings are examined and produce a response in the reader. This is no piece of hagiographical fustian.

The recent success of Mr Billy Graham, the American evangelist, was due principally to the fact that he spoke a language that all

could understand. In his way he stood for a 'positive theology'. Moreover, because he held his meetings in an arena that was normally associated with sport, he was able to draw thousands of Londoners who had never heard the Bible read nor commented upon since they had left their Sunday schools. Indeed, what was conspicuous about his audiences were the bright colours that they wore: this was goodbye to nonconformity and a re-awakening of Elizabethan England. Moreover, the preponderance of his audiences were under thirty-five and over sixty per cent were men. Yet his success was met coldly, if a little enviously, in most of the Catholic press.

One of Mr Graham's points was that he foresaw in Europe a great religious revival, with London acting as a kind of pivot centre. Simultaneously it seems English Catholics have had the same idea. For there was launched a drive 'to bring the Truth about Christ and his Church to millions in Britain'. This campaign, still running successfully, features a trend that was discerned by many chaplains during the war who came back to civilian life with the belief that there was a vast public waiting for news of 'Christ and his Church' if only such news could be presented intelligently and in contemporary language. Remember that both rationalism of 'the scarlet woman of Rome' kind and of the type that finds a spy in every Jesuit is now a thing of the past. For what is wanted to counter the modern rationalism is a clear logical presentation of facts, with a religious accent showing what the Church *is* and *means*; the emphasis nowadays falls on *being* rather than *proving*, because what arouses people from apathy is not the trotting out of proofs, but the evidence that facts add up to truths which are both realities and matters that affect them. Here are examples from some of the advertisements which have appeared:

You take your solemn oath on the Bible. Are you sincere? What do you really think about the Bible? Is it the Word of God? Or is it out-of-date, unscientific, a lot of fairy tales? Catholics hold that the Bible is the Word of God and, when properly understood, conflicts neither with the truths of history nor of science. The Catholic Church staunchly upholds the Bible. Does that surprise you? Perhaps other things about the Catholic Church would surprise you too. Why not find out?



I'm not odd. I catch the 8.30—or just miss it—the same as you do every morning. But not on Saturday. Then I have a lie in. On Saturday afternoon I go to a football match. Saturday evening I take the wife to the pictures. On Sunday I go with the family to Mass.

Yet chaps say I'm odd! Why? They say it about me and thousands like me. I'll tell you why. Because I am a Catholic. They think I believe all kinds of nonsense—like paying to have my sins forgiven, praying to images, saying that the Pope can't get a sum wrong. But I'm not odd. I can tell you what I really believe.

This is perhaps part of a conscious movement towards the vernacular. The criticism that such a presentation is vulgar and cheap has already been made and must be met. That the press is all-powerful is a commonplace: that it does more harm than good is another general catch-phrase. Yet the latter hides a distinctly defeatist attitude, the kind of attitude that accepts the ruling that this is also 'a post-Christian age'.

The newspaper is potentially one of the strongest means of communication between men. It has mass circulations denied to other publications, and it carries, set out on the same page, news from all over the globe. A provincial paper like the *Sheffield Star* or *Liverpool Echo*, as well as providing an index to local activities at the same time (in a way denied a national paper), can link local celebrities whom everybody knows with events taking place in Egypt. A photograph of John Bull in khaki replaces the familiar pin-striped suit that he wore when a cashier at the bank. Quite suddenly on the printed page Liverpool Docks have a bearing on the Suez Canal; men are seen less as islands, and more as part of a huge linking mainland. For newspapers emphasize that when a Polar bear coughs at the North Pole he may trouble the sands of the Sahara, just as a series of lies told in Sheffield one night may have their repercussion in Los Angeles a year later. Unconsciously perhaps newspapers are providing what might be described as an indirect form of Christian Humanism, a leavening. For paradoxically in building up national barriers (remember Hearst's boast that he could start a war) they have become less national, as with the development of radio-photography they have taken to profusely illustrating their texts. The language of the eye is uni-

versal—so universal that the visual liturgy which it provides might be called the extension of a 'positive theology'. 'We are all brothers in Christ.' John Bull's photograph can give the well-worn text a fresh meaning. For these advertisements capped with illustrated prints of John Bull as a cashier, a soldier, a family man emphasize that Catholicism is no exclusive Italian mission, but a religion that is catholic in the widest sense.

The need for English Catholicism today then is to be full-blooded. The influence of the pre-Raphaelites has long been a-dying. Too much stress on Mariology has led to a lack of virility in the Englishman's conception of Christ's mother. Admittedly England was once called Mary's dowry, but it was at a time when Mariology was something basic, something connected with the soil, fertility and the cycle of life. Yet, like Christ's image, our Lady also has become a spirit without a body. In these canvases and statues lives neither the man who could drive money lenders from the Temple nor the woman who could endure the hardships of a winter stable. Too many folds in our Lady's gown have left her with a body that is hard to recognize as a woman's—and one has only to think of medieval stained glass to realize how far this disembodiment has gone. So what is needed for a second spring, as it were, is another re-incarnation. The Scriptures are full of descriptions of men as strong as oxen, and perhaps it was no mere chance that put an ass and an ox in Christ's stable at Bethlehem. On Palm Sunday he rode through the streets on an ass and a week later he showed the strength of an ox in his Passion. Yet use such parables and they will be found shocking in many Catholic circles. The pre-Raphaelite influence has been so strong in conservative religious interpretation that the beef and lustiness which exists in the New Testament has been almost forgotten. Which sounds laughable of a country whose national figure is called John Bull.

For instance, one will hear Catholics speaking of the mockery of fairs opening on great feast days. Remember the ward-maid who lives above me was not willing to take the children who asked her, but nor did she condemn them for the suggestion. I recall this particularly because before the war I heard a sermon strong in the denunciation of the law that allowed such fairs to open. In fact this puritan-nonconformist attitude of contempt—mild or hot or tinged with Jansenism—arises from a total mis-

understanding of a Church whose holy days have always been holidays and whose feasts have always been associated with fairs—as indeed in Europe they still are. Even a Good Friday fair ironically might still bear witness to Easter. I should like therefore to suggest here along what grounds it seems to me that a ‘positive English theology’ can develop.

A child when he is small will whirl round and round for the sheer joy of it. Again adults, like children, love roundabouts. The simple desire to spin round and round until you fall is a desire that is with men until they die; in fact they live in a whirling world in which everything is circular—the rotation of the crops, their position in the womb, their whole day. This is something literal and basic—an experience common to all men. It is as common now as it was in 1870, 1720, 1620 or Christ’s own day. It was something that both Christ and his mother experienced, since his birth was a natural though miraculous birth with no hint of unnatural deity as, for example, in the case of Jove when he sprang full-grown from Minerva. That is why at the beginning of this survey I spoke of the vital role that the lay apostolate has to play in the conversion of a slowly dying nonconformist England. There is a big temptation to think that because Christ was born into a Mediterranean culture, then Christian and Western values can be equated. This is a line exploited by politicians, and now that Catholic emancipation is so well established there is the added danger that Catholic votes may be canvassed for causes that are no more than good old die-hard nineteenth-century materialism wrapped up under fresh labels. Even in literature where religion (in the face of Communism’s eclipse in the West) is becoming fashionable, there is a big temptation to herald a Christian literary revival simply because writers employ so many words like ‘incense’ and ‘rosaries’. That is why in the English lay apostolate, the Young Christian Workers act as an anchor to sense—manual and literal. They remind one that the figure is three million Catholics and the number of converts is something like 11,000 a year. They remind one that every day a large body of the Catholic franchise is facing the developments of a new technology within whose science there resides a truth to be found and a theology to be worked out. They remind one that there can be no retreat to the last century. Basic words must be found to incorporate these new techniques and yet still bear wit-

ness to the meaning of the Word. For this is the dual task facing Catholics as they enter into the second half of the twentieth century, and at such a time for English Catholics there can be nothing better than to remember Newman's prophetic words: 'We act according to our name: Catholics are at home in every time and place, in every state of society, in every class of the community, in every stage of cultivation.'



## A LITTLE-KNOWN BENEDICTINE MYSTIC

**Domna Maria Caecilia Baij**

S.M.J., O.S.B.

**M**ONTEFIASCONA is a charming and very ancient city of Latium; so ancient that its origins are shrouded in the mist that envelops the strange race of the Etruscans. It crowns the mass dominating one end of the Lago di Bolsena, and its hillsides are famous for their excellent wine. Erected into an episcopal see in 1369, it has numbered in its long line of titulars several conspicuous personalities; amongst others Alessandro Farnese, later Pope Paul III, and, during Maria Caecilia's own lifetime, Cardinal Pompeo Aldobrandini.

Elected abbess of the Benedictine monastery of San Pietro, Montefiascone, for the first time in 1743, Domna Maria Caecilia Baij was re-elected six years later, and subsequently retained the office until her death in January 1766, at the age of seventy-one. During the course of her religious life, she had exercised a number of responsible offices in the monastery—portress, infirmarian, sacristan and mistress of novices. Throughout her entire existence she was dogged by persistent ill-health, to which was added the heavy trial of bitter opposition on the part of her community, the