

Peace and the Clergy

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Fifty years ago Sheed and Ward published a book called *Peace and the Clergy*. It was attributed anonymously to 'a German priest' because its author, Fr. Francis Stratmann OP, a Dominican, was the persecuted leader of the German Catholic peace movement, *Friedensbund Deutscher Katholiken*. With about 40,000 members, this was one of the first organisations to suffer the full force of Nazi oppression. It had been dissolved by the Nazis on 1 July, 1933.

Stratmann was born in 1883 and ordained in 1912. After the First World War he had become a university chaplain in Berlin, and it was there that he had begun his struggle against National Socialism and for peace. His book, *The Church and War*, published in 1924, drew on Scripture, Catholic moral theology and papal pronouncements to challenge the justification of war. When, in 1936, *Peace and the Clergy* appeared, it was in its English translation. 'A work of this kind cannot be published in Germany today', the preface explained. Temporarily arrested by the Gestapo after the *Friedensbund* was banned, Stratmann survived the war by going into exile, first in Rome, and then to Venlo, in Holland, where he was working as chaplain to Jewish converts in the Sluis refugee camp when the Nazis invaded. Going into hiding, he was sheltered in the Flemish Dominican convent at Lint, in Belgium. In exile he kept a diary, later published, and, in addition to other books, wrote a five-volume work on *The Saints and the State*. He tried to start a congregation of Dominican Sisters whose purpose would be to live the spirit of 'Pax Christi'. Returning to Germany in 1947, he took up again his life's work of speaking out and writing on the issue of war and peace. *War and Christianity Today* appeared in 1950. He died in 1971, an old man, but, according to his fellow Dominicans, to the end 'open to the questions of the time'.

Peace and the Clergy was, then, the product of a man with a remarkably alert mind. Long out of print and not easy to obtain, it will be quoted here fairly extensively, in the belief that its author's unfulfilled vision is not one that should have ended with the outbreak of the Second World War. For it is a forthright and very original book, written in the early days of the Third Reich, in an urgent and appealing tone. Stratmann believes that 'Europe is never safe for two weeks together

from the outbreak of another great war' and this because 'in the feverish establishments built up by the accumulation of the material and spiritual energies of war, there indwells the almost uncontrollable dynamic to fulfil in due course the one specific function for which alone they have been set up'.

Discounting the small minority of passive pacifists who would rule out any and every use of force, even to the point of submitting to evil without a fight, Stratmann's vision was of an entirely new kind of peace movement such as would occur if the Church, and Christianity in general, placed itself wholly at its service. There was no incompatibility between the elementary principles of the Catholic religion and his own definition of pacifism: 'The attempt to establish and to organise peace on a systematic basis, in the same way as war has been systematised, is the aim of *Pacifism*. It is the antithesis of Militarism'. In fact, this was central to the Christian aspiration to establish '*Pax Christi in Regno Christi*', exemplified by Pope Pius XI taking this intention as the motto of his pontificate.

Despite repeated appeals and encyclicals since the First World War by Pius XI and by his predecessor, Benedict XV, the groups of Catholic peace workers, such as the *Friedensbund*, had remained small. 'That they have not made more headway is, over and above their own inadequacy and the political opposition they have had to contend with, also to be ascribed to the fact that *their flag has not been carried right into the middle of the Catholic camp*, has not been raised as high, say, as the flag of the home and foreign missions, or as that of the work of social charity.'

Writing in the particular circumstances he did, Stratmann had no doubts about the limits to State power: 'For the State no more than for the Church can there be question of an *absolute* sovereignty which ... owes obedience to no higher power ... The whole of mankind is subject to the power of Jesus Christ ... This means that the *unlimited* authority of "Caesar" is now finished and done with. The consequences of Christ's dominion over foreign as well as internal politics had been neglected by clergy and laity alike: 'what avails it that "Church matters" are fairly satisfactory in the internal affairs of a State, what avails a Crucifix in all schools and public offices, what avails the "Hosanna to the Son of David" in domestic politics, if He is crucified in foreign politics?'

It was not just a question of the individual's relationship with God, but of creating a new 'world-condition born of God'. The role of the Catholic peace movement was to 'build a line of communication between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world' which, though practical and rooted in national life, would have a supra-national spirit. 'In so far as it is a "peace movement" it has to fight day in and day out

for peace and against war; in so far as it is a “Catholic” peace movement, it has to carry on this struggle entirely in the spirit of Christ and of the Church.’

Fr. Stratmann’s particular concern was for the pastoral role of the clergy in promoting this Catholic peace movement, and he posed some searching questions as to their share of responsibility for the discrepancy between the state of the world and the spirit of Christ. ‘Which of us has earnestly put the weight of his priestly office on the side of those who have endeavoured to replace the system of “armed peace”, i.e., of perpetual military intimidation, by a better one?’ Though the minister of religion usually has nothing directly to do with the conflicts menacing to peace, ‘his share of the guilt begins when he tries to explain these proceedings in almost fatalistic fashion—as somehow the unavoidable “consequences of original sin”—when he lets them take their course and dismisses the peace movement with a smile of ignorance and a shrug of the shoulders as Utopian. This is still the normal attitude among the clergy, in spite of the totally different spirit that has inspired the utterances of recent Popes’.

The priest who might think ‘he is merely a pastor of souls, not of bodies, and that consequently the physical misery of war does not directly concern him ... had better let himself be taught differently by Christ ... His cure of souls began as a rule with a benefit for the body ... By no one, not by the Quakers and still less by unbelieving Socialists, ought we priests to allow ourselves to be surpassed in the fierce struggle against inhuman social conditions; and the same with the fight against the homicidal monster of war which adds so immeasurably to the sufferings of this world; rather ought we to take our place in the front rank of the opponents of war.’

The sinful gravity of unchecked nationalism needed, in Stratmann’s opinion, to be given much more pastoral attention than the clergy normally did. ‘The offences against the sixth and ninth commandments ... are those to which spiritual directors usually pay most attention ... But it is not the most important matter. A right understanding of moral and pastoral theology demands that we take *the fifth commandment even more seriously than the sixth*. For both logically and ethically the fifth ranks above the sixth. Its objects stand higher: life and love ... Nationalist fever threatens to separate *more deeply* from Christ those whom it seizes than does the sexual. Sexual sin proceeds from human weakness ... From such a person, who feels himself “a poor sinner”, Jesus will hardly become estranged. The sinful nationalist on the other hand does not regard himself as weak, but as strong, he is *essentially self-righteous* and presumptuous.

Exaggerated nationalism was particularly scandalous when it was espoused by priests themselves: ‘There must be something not quite in

order, when on the basis of a strange belief in their own press and government, practically the whole German clergy are convinced of the justice of the German case, and the whole French clergy of that of the French.'

To counteract these attitudes, Stratmann advocated the renewal and development of a number of religious concepts and practices. The idea of the supra-national dominion of Christ should be stimulated by full celebration of the new feast of Christ the King. Much more time should be spent in teaching the dogma of the Mystical Body of Christ, which was travestied whenever Christians who shared the Eucharist put their national allegiance first by fighting against one another. He suggested that 'a "pacifist line" does in fact exist, and that no one is a complete Christian until he has crossed it (repudiate though he may the word "pacifist"), until, that is to say, he thinks and feels about the use of violence, and about nation, fatherland, "enemy aliens", exactly like Christ. "Feeling" here is more important than "thinking".'

Although it was difficult to expect people to go against the prevailing tide of nationalism, Stratmann was confident that people would respond to a positive approach. His experience had shown that, once challenged, young people took up the cause of peace enthusiastically and 'these young people are not only in no way inferior to their comrades in the corresponding militarist clubs and organisations, but surpass them... Nothing of what is naturally attractive to youth needs to be sacrificed, least of all the quite indispensable *heroic ideal* ... Pacifism exhibits the heroism of the Cross ...

'To illustrate this truth by word and deed is one of the most important tasks of the Christian Peace Movement and of the clergy. Let us begin by educating the *children* for peace.'

At all times the international and independent stance of the Church was vital to the formation of attitudes which would serve peace. 'Every Catholic house of God should strictly preserve its character as a place of worship of the supra-national universal Church', and should not offend by displaying national banners of victory. Every bishop and priest 'ought to keep his distance from his State and his nation', and clergy in mixed language and border regions where antagonism was often artificially fuelled by the press, had a heavy responsibility to unify people. 'It would be a veritable redemption if, for example, all priests on the German-Polish frontier declared that they regarded themselves not as pioneers of German or Polish culture, but of Christianity alone, and declined every participation in purely national strivings, including the membership of the organisations connected therewith.'

The failure of Catholics to confront the excesses of inflated national pride was sometimes the result of a strange sense of inferiority to other citizens. 'Where Catholics are in the minority ... there frequently prevails

a positively unworthy, almost pusillanimous fear of being regarded as insufficiently “national”. The English and Americans tell us that this is the main reason why the Catholics of Anglo-Saxon countries give such feeble support to the strong Peace Movement in those countries.’

And so, despite the mighty force of the Church’s potential for peace, Catholics of all countries had not yet started to act on the papal peace encyclicals with their encouragement, among other things, to support international institutions such as the League of Nations, thereby making them an effective power over international conflict. Catholics had missed great opportunities. *‘No leader was found on the Catholic side of sufficient stature and international prestige to convert by propaganda and organisation the Pope’s exhortations into practice ... Instead of putting themselves, after the war, at the head of the Peace Movement, and bringing their influence to bear in that direction, they allowed humanity to march calmly towards the disaster by which it is today almost everywhere threatened.’*

Resolute action on issues of life and death, not more pious words, was the only way the Church might regain the confidence of the working classes who ‘feel their existence threatened by the sacrifices which capitalism and militarism impose upon them, and what embitters them more than anything is the idea they have that the Church is in league with these powers’. There were plenty of objections to priests getting involved in peace efforts from ‘those who raise their voice against dragging the Church into military-political interests’, but ‘the voices that clamour for a resolute peace activity on the part of the clergy, argue from the Kingdom of God, the dissentient voices from the kingdom of the world’, and the clergy needed to be aware that true national interest was not prejudiced by the peace movement.

The involvement of Church people was absolutely crucial, because Stratmann’s ‘sober evaluation’ was that, despite the growth of the peace movement, ‘because material forces work more quickly (if less durably) than moral, the war that has been duly prepared by these forces, with potentialities of destruction that have increased out of all knowledge since the last war, has far better prospects of remaining master of the field than the predominantly moral forces opposed to it’. He was anxious that the Church should be saved ‘from moral entanglement in the dark powers of war’. ‘If it comes to the worst and the insane massacre begins, then everyone who is jealous of his reason, honour and conscience, should be able to confess before God and the world: I had no hand in this...’

And so Stratmann ends with three lines of action for the Church to adopt. ‘In the first place moral theologians could oppose modern war far more sharply than they have hitherto done.’ In 1932 Cardinal Faulhaber had said: *“Even the teaching of moral theology in regard to war will*

speaking a new language. It will remain true to its old principles, but in regard to the permissibility of war, it will take account of the *new facts!*” One of these new facts was that ‘it is absolutely certain that actual war today is directed consciously ... against the civil population. Is it therefore unreasonable and the mark of “extreme pacifism” to demand that moral theology should turn its attention not to an abstract war of theoretical possibility and pious wishes ... which today no longer occurs, but to the modern war of reality, and to declare that what is being prepared today is according to all the rules of morality a “*bellum unjustum*”?’ ‘Why this fear of declaring the murder of millions to be forbidden, when no moral theologian will hesitate to condemn as “murder” under pain of mortal sin and excommunication, the destruction of a single living creature that exists in “embryo”?’ The second line of action was that ‘the clergy should also make it their business to establish or encourage Catholic Peace groups’. Thirdly, ‘Of all possible ways of serving Peace, the most important finally is prayer’.

In these ways might be fulfilled the hopes of Benedict XV and Pius XI, who had demanded ‘with quite inescapable plainness the turning away in principle from the autocratic Power-state, from its presumptuous arrogation of absolute sovereignty, from its false theories of armed defence, from everything in fact that is commonly understood by “Nationalism” and “Militarism”, and a return to the Kingship of Christ, which can only be served by the fostering of supra-national justice, amity and love.’

All this was written fifty years ago. The world has been in a state of almost unbroken war since then, and today lives with the possibility of a world war of a kind undreamed of in 1936. Were the things Francis Stratmann said utterly futile? Or can it possibly be that one of the reasons for our failure to win genuine peace has been our reluctance as Christians to adopt a stance on the peace question quite as radical as his? Almost every page of *Peace and the Clergy* is a fresh and direct challenge to Catholics about the peace movement of 1986.