

CATHOLICS, CRIME AND THE COMMUNITY

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THE spectacular increase in recent years of serious crime, especially among young men, has created an inevitable reaction of disquiet, indeed of anger. The need, it is suggested (and not only by reactionary opinion), is for severe punishment, exemplary in its unpleasantness, which will dissuade the gangster and the man with the gun. And even lesser crimes of violence must be sharply punished: the restoration of the birch and the cat, it is argued, will achieve far more than the assumptions of a remedial penalty—whether it be probation or Borstal training.

Much of the propaganda for such measures is intelligible enough as a reflection of public indignation. But it is often irresponsibly expressed, as in a petition for the return to corporal punishment which was displayed in many Glasgow shops recently and immediately received hundreds of enthusiastic signatures. The case for such a grave step was not stated; no argument was offered but that of instinctive aggression. The Home Secretary has on several occasions resisted such proposals, and has pointed out that, even at the statistical level, there is no evidence that offences previously allowing for a sentence of corporal punishment have in fact increased since such punishment was abolished.

The Home Secretary, instead of giving way to the storm (which, it must be admitted, is by no means as spontaneous as some newspapers make it seem to be), has urged the need for much greater research into the causes of crime, and to that end the Cambridge Institute of Criminal Science is to have more substantial help for its work. At the same time, of course, such institutions as the Detention Centres envisaged by the 1948 Act are to be extended, for their whole purpose is to deal with the young offender, for whom a sharp reminder that punishment must be deterrent as well as remedial in its aims is very necessary.

Research into the causes and incidence of crime must seem an abstract study, little likely to produce the quick results that the present situation demands. There can be no doubt about the difficulty of such an undertaking, and such a book as Lord Pakenham's *Causes of Crime*, although of course it made no claim to be

other than a provisional statement of some of the problems to be considered, is depressingly inconclusive. But it may well be that a long-term view, in this as in so many other matters that affect social behaviour, will achieve much more valuable results than panic legislation to deal with an emergency.

Catholics will, it may be hoped, support any proposal that is concerned to foster the rule of law in society, and especially when it is realized that the present increase of crime (whatever else may be said of it) reflects accurately enough the decaying moral standards of society as a whole. It is easy to concentrate one's anger on the alarming and the outrageous, as though they existed in a world apart from that of usual living. Crime is, after all, human behaviour: lamentable, deplorable, certainly, but not necessarily, and certainly not nearly as often as some suppose, the result of psychological disturbance or mental unbalance. If it were, the whole problem could be handed over to the psychiatrists and the mental hospitals. Undoubtedly a large number of criminals do reveal factors of behaviour that are abnormal, but the abnormality itself only too often is an intensification of tendencies that have become endemic in a society which has become increasingly cut off from the roots that moral sanctions provide. The gap between bank robbery and petty pilfering is indeed large, but the widespread acceptance of lesser dishonesty makes the greater crime inevitable.

Catholics living in a mixed society such as our own, in which they are constantly made aware of the conflict between the moral standards they profess and the accepted disregard of them by much of the population, have a special difficulty and a special responsibility. The difficulty scarcely needs to be emphasized, and the failure to meet it makes ready ammunition for those who care not at all for the assumptions of the Catholic religion. The responsibility is perhaps less often realized. It means an honest enquiry into the factors that influence the social behaviour of Catholics. Research in this field, allied to that now being undertaken on behalf of the Home Office, should not of course be limited to trying to discover the reason for the alleged high figures of delinquency among Catholics. It would soon be realized that to isolate this statistical question is to misunderstand the true dimensions of a problem which extends to areas far vaster than the proportions of the prison population. In other words, the

particular criminological enquiry necessarily involves the whole question of Christian life in an industrialized society. The breakdown which criminal behaviour reveals is, once more, symptomatic of a disease much more universal than that of the crime with which the law is concerned.

The research necessary, then, might indeed begin with the particular question of the incidence and causes of crime among Catholics in this country. It would very soon be discovered that the relevant factors would be those which affect the Catholic population as a whole. They would include, first of all, that of nationality. The preponderating Irish origin of the majority of Catholics in this country is not of course a cause of crime, or as such of anything else. But it is a social factor of the highest importance in estimating the social behaviour of a minority. Present resentments and a sense of past injustice are not mathematically valid as causes, but they are powerfully effective as (often unconscious) determinants of particular attitudes. A second factor would be that which has concerned the Newman Demographic Survey, namely the basis of Catholic identity. The mere fact of baptism, without subsequent Catholic allegiance, itself accounts for swollen figures which bear no relation to the effective Catholic population. Again, and most important, the pattern of social life in large towns, which is the lot of the vast majority of Catholics, is at many points organized to make the harmonious practice of the Catholic religion quite tragically difficult. Such general trends as the acceptance and comparative ease of divorce, the fact of married women going out to work, housing difficulties, especially for a young married couple with children; these, and many more, do not necessarily create delinquency, but they certainly create the atmosphere in which delinquency flourishes.

There is scarcely need to insist on the crucial factor of education. Here it might be asked, while recognizing the difficulties under which so many Catholic teachers have to work, whether religious, and especially moral, teaching sufficiently acknowledges the dilemma of training children for life in a profoundly secularized society. It is sometimes argued, and perhaps with some justice, that Protestantism has concentrated overmuch on social ethics at the expense of personal religious belief. It may be that their conviction of the need for an informed personal faith has sometimes led Catholic teachers to give too little attention to a sense of

obligation towards the community. It is undoubtedly true, as the Bishop of Menevia recently pointed out in a forceful speech, that Catholics are lamentably wanting in the desire to serve on public bodies and are in consequence grievously unrepresented, not only in Parliament but at every level of the national life.

It may be asked what research of this sort could be expected to achieve. It would at least make possible what—to borrow the terminology of another science—might be called an exact composition of place. We should have a better idea of where we stand, not only to answer the specific charge of the Catholic disregard for social values, but, more important, to discover what, in terms of social behaviour, happens to the Catholic population. One might hope that a Catholic sociologist, looking for a valuable subject for research, would undertake such a study. Better still, a group, which would include a statistician and a psychologist as well as social scientists, might prepare a survey, based on accurate samples, which perhaps would answer no questions but would assuredly tell no lies. It is not suggested that such an undertaking should have any other purpose than to provide facts and indicate the means of assessing their worth. The material exists, hidden away in countless parochial registers, case histories, school statistics and prison records. In the meantime, plenty of parish priests and Catholic social workers must have a shrewd idea, based on their own observation and experience, of what the picture might prove to be.