

PAST AND PRESENT

THE present cannot be understood if we do not keep in mind the past, the immediate past at least. Not that the present necessarily should be a continuation of the past, the result of a natural evolution the origin of which is to be found in the immediate past. The present can be a sort of reaction against the past. *Qualis pater, talis filius* does not apply to nations, it does not even apply always to father and son.

Take the present state of things in Europe. Democracy is either dead or questioned in most of the Continental nations; yet President Wilson wanted to "make the world safe for democracy." After-war statesmen felt the acute need for an international economic organization; yet economic nationalism is rampant everywhere; Herr Hitler last month uttered a speech in which he announces his determination of making Germany an entirely self-supporting country. Article 8 of the Covenant of the League of Nations reads as follows: "The Members of the League recognize that the maintenance of peace requires the reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement by common action of international obligations"; yet competition in armaments is active throughout Europe, including Great Britain.

Has the Great War been fought in vain? Have we done away with autocrats, emperors and kings, only to throw ourselves into the arms of dictators? Have we improved in so notable a way all means of transport, making the earth smaller and smaller, in order eventually to pen up all nations within the narrow limits of a sort of economic wall of China? Have millions and millions of young men died so that other millions and millions of young men, who were not born then, should have in their turn an opportunity of perishing in other trenches?

The past can indeed explain the present, in a most simple but inadequate way. "Wars have always been, and always will be," many people say; armaments are indispensable

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therefore, and they only represent a guarantee of national security, collective security being a myth born in Utopia. Production must be organized on a national basis, otherwise the states which are not self-supporting would be doomed to defeat in case of war. Men do not want liberty: they want a leader, a Führer whom they can worship, and who can in his turn assure to one and all a decent and comfortable life. Work, a bathroom, good sewers, good cinemas, that is all they require. Take men as they are and you will not be disappointed. The present situation in Europe bears witness to the soundness of this conception of mankind.

Still, there was a blessed time when everybody thought they were fighting the last war. The hopes of many were placed in the League of Nations, not only by sheer Utopians, but even by statesmen such as General Smuts or M. Léon Bourgeois. President Wilson was welcomed as a prophet, and little children in Austria, in Poland and elsewhere prayed to him. Has this time been just like a sudden flash of lightning which disappears almost as soon as it blazes forth? It seems almost as though mankind felt a sort of remorse for having shown at that time a more generous heart, a more decent attitude.

This pessimistic, and even cynical, view of the past as explaining the present, seems to me utterly inadequate. For a Christian, mankind is not a gang of convicts condemned to that dreadful penal servitude called war, or the preparation for war; it is not a sort of King Midas obliged to starve though commodities are at hand, under the pretence that those commodities were produced beyond artificial lines called frontiers; nor is it, least of all, a horde of slaves ready to worship any master, as long as he is a master. A Christian cannot accept such a debasing conception of himself and his fellow-men, for a Christian believes in liberty. God has granted to mankind this most precious gift: liberty—not in the political sense, but in the philosophical and ethical sense. Men are free to chose between good and evil, between slavery and independence, between war and peace.

Men are free indeed, and they can therefore improve. We

do not believe that men are always the same and always will be; that the post-war men are just as bad as the pre-war men, and that all attempts made in 1919 and after to improve international relations, either political or economic, were *ab ovo* doomed to failure. If such was the case, there would be no history at all, we should still be prehistoric men. But the fact remains that all our post-war ideals have proved inefficient. We are apparently in a worse state than twenty-five years ago. Many of us are led to reconsider those ideals, and to lose all hope of liberty and peace, all trust in disarmament and a League of Nations. Those especially who made a kind of religion of the League are losing their faith, which is a serious blow to them.

There lies the mistake. To many people the new order as issuing from the Peace Treaties, and above all from the Covenant, was a new utterance from Sinai. They placed upon man-made arrangements a confidence which God and His Church alone deserve. This humanitarian faith which is inspired by a most generous goodwill deserves indeed all our respect, but it is a dangerous plague all the same. A Christian knows better. If he does not believe in men being eternally wicked, he does not forget Original Sin either. "L'homme n'est ni ange, ni bête, mais le malheur est que qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête," wrote Pascal; and this holds good in the present circumstances.

The peacemakers of 1919 started from cut and dried ideas: democracy, self-determination, free-trade. They forgot that the world had been shaken by a dreadful nationalistic crisis. Had they not been obliged, in order to extract endless sacrifices from their peoples, to arouse and sharpen national passions? They forgot that men had thus become so used to kill each other that human life, even a fellow-citizen's life, would not count for much in their eyes later on. They forgot that overproduction during the war and after would lead to unemployment as soon as urgent needs should be fulfilled. They forgot that their peoples had become used to strict discipline during the war, and would welcome a Duce or a Führer as long as this Duce or this Führer would enhance national pride and ensure order in the country.

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Last but not least, they forgot that progress must be propped up by ethical values, and not by legal clauses. Freemasonry and protestant humanitarianism are prone to neglect those ethical values, and they both were the real inspirers of the Treaties, of the Covenant, and of all the post-war ideology. The services of the Pope were carefully and politely refused. *Silete theologi!* Apart from the divine value of the advice the Church was ready to give to the various governments, there was also the incomparable experience accumulated by Christianity, indefatigable promoter of peace, in the course of centuries, and by the Church, which was the first international community to be organized.

We Christians need not have an earthly Führer or Duce, seeing that we possess a Divine Leader, Who has appointed on earth a representative to be a leader, and more than a leader—a Common Father. We Christians are essentially internationalists, as a common tie binds us together, a tie stronger than any other, that of a Brotherhood with Christ derived from the same Fatherhood of God. A Catholic is at home with another Catholic in any country. Nay, he is at home with any other man; any man is his brother, or future brother, in Christ; any man can become a Christian, it is our duty to make a Christian of any man, whether his skin is yellow, red or black.

As the Catholic Church is the true international body, even an international family, Christians are real internationalists. They were the ones who could have promoted the cause of international peace; yet their Chief was the only one not to be consulted when peace was established. Mankind is atoning now for this omission.

But now, when the others are disheartened, we must remain full of confidence and hope. We should have a transcendental view of history. We know that a Divine Hand leads us towards a higher destiny. We must accept the present crisis as a test for humanity, with the certitude that, sooner or later, Light will dissipate Darkness, liberty will overcome tyranny, peace will dawn on men in spite of Original Sin, because the Redeemer of mankind has vanquished sin by Love.

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