

COMMENTARY

CONSCRIPTION. The recent appointment of Archbishop David Mathew as Ordinary to the British Armed Forces emphasizes, one may suppose, the importance attached by the Holy See to the spiritual welfare of men undergoing national service. For peace-time conscription, accepted with so little protest, marks a profound change in the national tradition and its purpose means more than a training in military techniques. It must always seem surprising that Catholic opinion, in particular, has scarcely questioned the principle of conscription, derived as it is from the revolutionary notion of the *levée en masse* and illustrating as it does the omniscient claims of the secular state. 'Compulsory service has been for more than a century the real cause of innumerable evils', wrote Cardinal Gasparri (on behalf of Pope Benedict XV) to Lloyd George in 1917, and not even that accommodating Welshman could for a moment have envisaged the permanent retention of a system so alien to British concepts of personal freedom. In fact conscription is a political issue today, and even the strategic experts, who consider that in a post-atomic era vast armies of unprofessional soldiers would be less effective than a small but permanent highly-trained force of technicians, are unlikely to prevail when the issue is really one of political commitment.

But whatever may be true in the order of principle (and Christian opinion is fully entitled to scrutinize conscription in the light of it), the fact is with us and its significance can scarcely be exaggerated. To begin with, conscription is not to be judged simply in terms of the two years that are spent in the services. Its effect is felt before and after those years. There is a close connection between the grave increase in juvenile crime and the pointless existence led by thousands of boys, especially in large towns, during the three years after leaving school until they are called up for military service. The restless, rootless mood of 'Edwardian' gangs undoubtedly owes much to this vacuum: traditions of apprenticeship have gone, easy money and a good time seem appropriate to this period of waiting and 'discipline' will in any case come later. The actual period of conscription is of course a valuable opportunity

for training, and many ex-servicemen (especially from the Air Force) return to civilian life well equipped for profitable employment. And there need be no doubt that many conscripts benefit physically from their time of military service. The social argument, that it is valuable for all to make equal sacrifices, without distinction of class or privilege, has its validity too, though it by no means follows that conscription is simply for that reason justified.

What matters, at the pragmatic level of redeeming a situation which actually exists, is that the opportunities of a regulated life should be turned to good. Here the function of the military chaplain has its special importance. He is concerned with more than religion as a social utility, one of the sanctions to make conscription acceptable to serious opinion. Using the given framework of a system which brings thousands of young men together for the crucial years of early manhood, he has the chance to bring religious values to bear at a time when they are most easily rejected, and in circumstances in which they can matter most. It seems to be the common opinion of chaplains that the religious illiteracy of many, if not the majority, of the men undergoing national service reflects accurately enough the failure of much religious instruction to command an adult allegiance. Men of twenty remain infantile in their understanding of the faith and practice of religion, and this largely because 'religious knowledge', perhaps inevitably, is associated with the scheduled discipline of school instruction, most often ended at the age of fifteen. They have men's bodies but the minds of children.

It is too much to expect that the years of military service can compensate for the loss of a proper evolution in religious and moral understanding. The opportunities for formal instruction are limited, there is a constant shift in population, the commitments of the forces are world-wide (though surely only the sternest military necessity can justify the sending of boys of nineteen to Malaya or Kenya). Yet one circumstance is of great importance: it is the simple fact of a shared life and a common purpose. Often enough the decay of religious practice goes with a sense of social isolation: 'the others don't go' and it needs a conviction deeper than inherited habit to go on standing out alone. The gang life that is endemic in large towns is in its measure an assertion of a natural solidarity, but rarely is religion seen to mean

a social imperative. The leadership courses which were so successful a feature of the Air Force chaplaincies during the War proved that an imaginative use of the opportunities provided by the simple fact of conscription could stimulate a corporate Catholic life and create a sense of lay responsibility.

The laity of the future are the national servicemen of today, and the years of training can do much to assure an adult and responsible Christian life if religion is allowed to be what it is: not a utility but a first and formal allegiance. That is why we must wish well to the new Ordinary to the Forces, whose work will be of supreme importance for the Church in this country. The experience and trained intelligence which he brings to his office will, we may be sure, ensure the fruitful use of a providential opportunity, which, like any other, must be turned to good.



NOTICE

The next issue of BLACKFRIARS will be the usual enlarged summer number (July-August) and will include 'The Menace of Mescaline' by Professor R. C. Zaehner, 'Anglo-Catholic Sociology' by Sir Henry Slessor and 'On the Italians' by Kenelm Foster, O.P.