

A STUDENT CRISIS

IN the Church's appeal to common action hardly any sphere of activity has received less attention from either clergy or laity than the universities. This remissness suggests that in the hurried apostolate of our times there is a lack of appreciation of the great importance of university education in the social life of the Church. It cannot therefore be a matter of surprise to those who have had this in mind, to see how in many countries ecclesiastical authorities are now much alarmed by the feelings of distrust and opposition exhibited by the anti-clerical or non-clerical attitude of young intellectuals. As no movement in the Church is more alive to the position of university students than *Pax Romana*, its annual report may be considered a suitable starting point for some observations on this question.

The administrative secretary, M. Rudi Salat, merely hints at this problem when he says 'Car pour le travail international catholique futur, la sympathie et la *collaboration des théologiens* est indispensable.'¹ The question at issue is, therefore, not only the desirability but even the need of the co-operation of priests and students in catholic activity. That this collaboration is of prime importance can be of little doubt, but it seems that the way in which it should be brought about has not yet been sufficiently discussed.

The due position of a priest in students' movements, and for that matter in any Catholic society, may become clearer if we consider that through baptism a Catholic becomes a member of a society, the Catholic Church. This membership not only gives him rights such as the right to receive the Sacraments and instruction, but also involves him in duties, such as, for example, due obedience to the authorities of the Church. Consequently all organisations, that have a specifically Catholic aim, should inevitably fall under the jurisdiction of the Church and the Bishops. The chaplain of a University Society represents this ecclesiastical authority.

¹ *Rapport annuel*. Pax Romana, 1931-1932, p. 22.

This authority, unless very tactfully exercised, will not be appreciated by the students and is sometimes regarded as a tiresome interference rather than a help. It is even the occasion which arouses what might be called 'anti-clerical' or 'non-clerical' feelings in some of them. The chaplain's energy seems to restrict the newly gained freedom of the student. Perhaps these feelings can be partly explained as the effects of the general 'anti-authority' wave, yet they seem chiefly the result of something much deeper, almost of the very make-up of a student.

Generally speaking when students go up to the university they come for the first time into real contact with the world. For some this contact is a clash, for others it is achieved more smoothly. But there must be few students who at this period do not undergo a crisis of some sort or other. They shake off their schoolboy attitude towards life and begin to feel the presence of new needs which they had never experienced before. Their newly-acquired knowledge and experience, seen from close quarters, are often turned into a disproportionate standard by which everything is judged, appreciated or condemned.

While in this phase a student is often anxious to discuss his difficulties which he thinks personal to himself and insuperable, and yet he finds it hard and distasteful to reveal them. He is at once egoistical and shy, yet if his difficulties are not adequately dealt with, the effect of them may be deplorable and have lasting influences for ill on his whole life.

Of course the helps provided by the Church for just this difficult time are essentially the same as those which all its members must use, namely the Sacraments. For this reason it is the custom to have, where possible, a special chapel for members of the university. But apart from his work as minister of the Sacraments, a well-equipped priest can give guidance which is of great value.

For it does happen that students sometimes fall into the mistake of expecting to find the answer to their difficulties in the sermons preached in a local parish church by the parochial clergy. Not unnaturally these sermons, addressed to a very different type of hearer, sometimes merely irritate them in their peculiar frame of mind, with the result that unjustly they regard the clergy as incompetent and

illiterate. We have known anti-clerical feelings to begin in this way. The mistake here lies in the fact that students are apt to forget that the preacher, whose sermons they find so boring, is obliged to address himself to the very different needs of a very different type of mind.

Hence it devolves upon the chaplain of the society to cope with these difficulties and to answer these needs. His task, therefore, is one of great responsibility. He must pilot the students with tact and yet with firmness. To acquit himself well, the chaplain requires two qualifications, both absolutely essential: first a sympathetic understanding of the difficulties of students, and secondly a thorough grounding in theology and a general culture at least equal to that of his flock. With these his own growing experience will enable him to tackle the problems that necessarily arise.

We wish to stress the necessity there is for the university chaplains to have a profound knowledge of theology and philosophy if he is to give *adequate* solution to the intellectual difficulties raised by the students or their non-Catholic fellows. A rational defence of morality is specially needed of priests and students. Here there is ample scope for collaboration.

The medico-ethical problem furnishes an example that will illustrate our argument. It is a fact of experience that medical students in their education and later on in their medical practice are constantly faced with the problem of adjusting medicine to the moral law. These medical students have every right to receive reliable advice and instruction in this matter. But on whom does it devolve to give this instruction if not on the priests? Have theologians in practice fully recognised the right of these students to detailed guidance in the principles of moral law applied to medicine? Here, then, a close collaboration of priests and students is required. Moreover, the official teaching of the Church alone and not only the opinions of individual theologians will prove adequate to cope with these difficulties. Hence *international* co-operation of both theologians and students alike is needed.

We have said little about *Pax Romana*, which is alive to the problems that confront the modern intellectual world and has already done so much to achieve their solution. It is true that *Pax Romana* envisages these questions from

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an international standpoint, but on the other hand it may be argued that few, if any, of these problems are merely national. They concern the Church at large and can only be solved, therefore, by international co-operation. Among the achievements of *Pax Romana* its annual congresses stand out. They are held in different countries to contribute towards the international solution of these problems. In addition we would mention its Commission for Intellectual Co-operation under the presidency of Mgr. Beaupin, the International Secretariat of the Catholic University Press, entrusted to the Abbé R. Prévost, M. Duplex, and M. L. Verschave, and the Commission *Pro reditu in Ecclesiae Unitatem*.² There are many others.

It is gratifying to learn that *Pax Romana* has resolved to include the discussion of the medico-ethical problem in the programme of its next annual congress to be held at Luxemburg. This is one more proof that *Pax Romana* is not a work of mere supererogation, but that it answers a real need of the Catholic Church to-day.

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² cf. E. Bullough. Report presented to the North Group Council meeting of the University Catholic Societies Federation of Great Britain, at Leeds, October 29th, 1932.