

LA BOURGEOISIE CHRETIENNE

THE analysis of the present Catholic position in France, with its hopes and fears for the future, as presented by the Marquis d'Aragon in the January issue of BLACKFRIARS was both interesting and inspiring. On one point however he was rather reticent. Certain it is that in large measure the apostasy of the working class in that country was due to the fact that quite a number of employers were practising Catholics. In their own circles, in their families and in all that concerned the practice of religious duties, they were without reproach. But this did not prevent them, with a few notable exceptions of whom the most glorious example was Léon Harmel, from being "amoral liberalists" in their treatment of the workers. Harmel, writing to a priest friend, described them thus: "They are little Louis XIVs, in their factories and in their towns. Their ideas go no further than the *patronage*, and the publication of new ideas for the education of the people, for popular initiative, and for devotion to the working class, seems monstrous to them." How can one blame the workers for associating Catholicism and wage-slavery? The struggle of the C.F.T.C. (Christian Trade Union) to play its proper part in the relations between Capital and Labour in France is sufficient proof that *Rerum Novarum* found many stony hearts among French employers. The result of this was that apostasy which Pius XI termed the greatest scandal of the twentieth century. In 1928 a long and careful enquiry elicited the disastrous information that the proportion of workers who had remained Catholic or even sympathetic was as low as 5% in Paris and its surroundings, while in the North 80% of the workers in factories owned by Catholics belonged to the two Socialist unions which have since united to form the *Front Populaire*.

It is abundantly clear that the progress of the Church's social teaching will be hampered to a large extent so long as there remain Catholic employers who are not willing to admit the social implications of Catholicism. And this not merely for France, but for England, for America and

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for every country where there are Catholic employers. How often has one heard the reproach! One explains the Christian social teaching, the mutual duties and rights of Capital and Labour, to a well-disposed workingman, Catholic or not. The response as often as not is: "Yes, that's all very well. But look at X who owns the mill where they won't recognize the Union; and Y who sacked two men last week because their families had grown and they asked for a rise; and Z who pays starvation wages to his office staff." And the unfortunate thing is that X and Y and Z are all highly respectable Catholics, occupying the pharisaical seats in their parish church, sitting on committees for Catholic charities, and appearing as representative Catholics. This is true in England, it is true in France, it is true in America. It is therefore one of the most important problems to be faced in all these countries, and there can be but one answer to it: *Catholic Action*.

Undoubtedly, says Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno*, the first and immediate apostles of the working-men must themselves be working-men, and in response to this we have the magnificent example of the J.O.C. This movement is the hope of the Church wherever it exists, and in France and Belgium to-day it is the leaven which will christianize the whole mass of the working class. God grant that it will be so in England, too, with the Young Christian Workers who are as yet at the beginning of their crusade. But the Pope goes on to affirm that the apostles of the industrial and commercial world should themselves be employers and merchants, in other words there must be Catholic Action for businessmen. From this it would appear that friendly societies of Catholic businessmen are not enough, that occasional protestations of their belief in *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* will not do. What is needed is an organised apostolate with all that it implies. We certainly have societies and organisations which bring our Catholic employers together, which form them into distinctive corporative Catholic groups, but at times one feels that perhaps they are not so very different from their neutral counterparts. Their distinctive note is most certainly their Catholic-

ism; but it is no more than a note, it is not an animating principle informing every thought, word and deed. This must not be interpreted as a criticism of these societies, which without doubt have done their best and more than could be expected in the circumstances. But surely these circumstances are such as to rule out the principle which might be cited: *Fas est ab hoste . . .*

That being so, we must learn from inside the camp and not outside it. The J.O.C. started in Belgium according to a system which suited that nation, but it had within it such a large common denominator of essential Catholicism that it soon passed the borders of the country which gave it birth. Now there are but few countries where it does not exist, or is not in preparation, always allowing for the necessary adaptation to suit different mentalities and temperaments. One wonders if there is a similar formula and technique for the class of Catholics at the other end of the scale. It is my purpose here to describe a movement which seems to have within it some of this common denominator, and which at the very least should serve to stimulate thought and discussion, and perhaps even action. The two defects which I would indicate immediately, because they provoke objection, are that the movement is French and that as yet it is in its infancy, having lived for only six years in one particular region, the industrial north of France. In reply I would point out that neither of these defects is inherent in the method or technique and, answering case by case, would cite the J.O.C. which began with a handful of young people in a suburb of Brussels and is now, within fifteen years, *la J.O.C. mondiale*.

This new movement of industrialists is known as *La Bourgeoisie Chrétienne*, a name which calls forth the immediate caveat that 'bourgeoisie' has not acquired in French the same pejorative sense as it has on importation into English. It began with four "DONTs." The first of these was: Don't start on the world of business men brandishing the argument from authority. It is of little use to say we have the authorities on our side, because when authority commands anything, the adhesion to that com-

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mand and the act of obedience which it concerns must be given freely. It is the order which God has established between Himself and us, and it is not for us to upset this order in our relations to others by importing an element of coercion which is foreign to the free nature given to us as a birthright. In a word, nobody whether employer, worker, student or drone should be press-ganged into Catholic Action. Therefore the method of setting up a complete programme on paper and then searching for people who will be forced willy-nilly to supply the human element is as wrong as can be for Catholic Action. Catholic Action is an organism, and as such must grow cell by cell and must not be forced by hot-house methods.

The second of these precautions was: Do not initiate this apostolate in the business world for an object outside it; if the final end of your Catholic Action for employers is, for example, that they may treat their workers better you do not understand Catholic Action. The end of any form of specialised Catholic Action is the good of the class who are taking part in the apostolate. It is true that these exterior objectives may be, and often should be, secondary ends. But the fact remains that if the apostles of the industrial and commercial world are themselves employers and merchants, they must work for the good of their own milieu. Their object is to win *their* milieu for Christ, and to interpose any other object directly is to sabotage the apostolate.

The third precaution flows naturally from the preceding one, namely that the object must not be restricted to social questions, still less to the even more delimited field of the relations between Capital and Labour. This would be an error on many scores, an error of tactics, of proportion, and most certainly a psychological error. It would be an error of tactics because one would be beginning on the problem which is at once the most delicate and the most complex. For in this problem is contained the greatest of all difficulties, that of adapting principles to practice, the ideal to the real. Moreover it is clear that this approach has not the same appeal to a business man as to a working man. To the

latter it is a question of bread and butter, perhaps not even of butter; while to the former it is something rather abstract, rather in the order of the quixotic, as things are. With the worker one finds it easier to make contact on social questions and work back to the principles, and to the Principle, Christ. It is due to a lack of proportion, for it is viewing the whole of life from one angle, an angle which is important but which is not the alpha and omega of Christianity. Added to this it errs psychologically in mistaking the cause for the effect, for the amelioration of our social system depends ultimately, as Pope Pius XI has said, on a reform of self, on the personal Christian revolution. Once this is achieved it spreads its influence through the whole of one's actions, social, family, political, friendly, all of them. We have not to tinker but to set alight the beacon of integral Catholicism.

The fourth "Don't" touches a defect to which we are very prone: Do not let speechmaking form the main part of the work. Do not get people together to harangue them, or even to speak to them sweetly and gently. We are shouted at so much to-day, by the press, by the giants of the screen and by the radio, that one more shout does not make much difference either way. People have become used in this age to imbibe their knowledge in tabloid form. They will not sit and listen to a ready-made programme of what they must and must not do. What they do wish to do is to be able to speak their minds, to open out their thought, and to exchange views with others in positions and situations like or akin to their own. What they do ask for is not information or indoctrination handed out from a platform, but to make contacts, contacts particularly in the realm of ideas.

In brief this was the negative attitude of the handful of people who wished to start Catholic Action in their own social group, that of Catholic employers.¹ One might note too in passing that they did not apply to their Bishop for some ready-made scheme, but set about forming themselves

¹ See in this connection the series of articles which appeared from the pen of Paul McGuire in "The Catholic Herald" during January on *Pre-Catholic Action*.

so that they would be sooner or later fit subjects for formal Catholic Action, providing the matter to which the Bishop could add the form.

The movement began with a small group of five and a priest, and they went to work in the manner recently described by Pius XI in his letter of March 28th, 1937, to the Mexican Bishops (*Nos es muy*): "This work of yours will become profound and strong in so far as it eschews all publicity and clamour and is the enemy of hustling methods, growing actively and silently, even though its flowering and fruit may not come for some time and even then may not be over brilliant, just as the seed which lies hid in the earth in apparent repose is really preparing a new and vigorous plant." First of all, they took the Pope at his word when he called the J.O.C. *ipsa forma germana Actionis Catholicae*, and set to work to transpose and adapt its methods to their own milieux. So that now after seven years of experience and experiment they are able to report that they were not mistaken and that the method of the J.O.C. "is exactly transposable to the adult milieux of the bourgeoisie."

The method may be reduced, in its simplest analysis, to a consideration of three terms: the agents, i.e., those concerned; the end in view; the means to be employed. With regard to the first the movement had to grow out of the milieu itself, it had not to be imposed but grow from inside and from below, being a representative group of the class to which they belonged. Thus immediately the slogan, first of the J.O.C. and then of every other form of specialised Catholic Action, became that of the *Bourgeoisie Chrétienne: Entre eux, avec eux, par eux, pour eux.*

The end in view, the goal to which they were striving, was the good of their milieu. Simply and yet comprehensively it was the complete rechristianisation of the whole of their class. Simple because of its single-mindedness, yet comprehensive because in this plenary object no partial objects were omitted or suppressed. All had their place: family life, social life and professional life. By this it rises superior to all petty differences whether of persons or of parties, and is a fit instrument of the apostolate to penetrate

and to conquer the class of society in which it is born and in which it grows.

This object is an ideal, and we can add to idealism of end realism of means. It is the enquiry method: *enquête pour conquête*. This will immediately give rise to misgivings in the reader's mind, for with the abundance of forms which one is called to fill in at every stage of life the idea of a questionnaire, even more personal than the preliminary to obtaining a passport or a driving licence, is repugnant. But this perhaps will be dissipated by a word of explanation. The enquiry, or questionnaire, is nothing more or less than an aid to discussion; it is a means of directing the discussions held in group meetings and preventing them from wandering off into aimless by-paths. The object of the enquiry is to enable the members of the group, first to know themselves, and then to know, in the sense of viewing objectively, their own surroundings. The value of this lies in the fact that the majority of us are in greater or less degree impregnated with the spirit of the world, and find it very hard to stand aside and look at this world we live in. Until we *know* the enemy we have to conquer, it is but little use planning campaigns of action—therefore we must see, see straight and see clearly. This is the beginning of realism, for we are in direct contact with reality and yet apart from it. The next stage is to infuse our idealism with reality, and this is done by a judgment: the impact of ideas on facts. Here the passage is made from *what is* to *what ought to be*, principles are mingled with life and life with principles. The conclusion to this is inexorable, namely that the task of the apostles who thus form themselves and are formed by this method is to exert the whole of their energies to accomplish this change. They know the reality, they know where and how and why it must be conquered—it is for them to act.

In seven years the five members have grown into two hundred and fifty, their ecclesiastical assistants from one to twelve, and in June 1937 they were officially recognized (consecrated, they say) by their Bishop as the movement of Catholic Action of the *Bourgeoisie Chrétienne*. Perhaps the

best way of appreciating their work is to consider what they have done, what for instance was the subject of their studies, of their enquiries during the year 1936-1937. The general title for the year was "The Christian conception of the business life," a subject of vital and universal importance. This subject was discussed in each of the twenty-three groups, and their findings were combined in two papers read at the annual meeting held a few months ago. The first of these was "The conception of business life" as it exists in our milieu, and divided quite simply into two sections: The natural reasons for our professional activity; and the supernatural reasons.

The first of these begins with rather startling words: Lacordaire once said: *Notre siècle p r it parcequ'il ne r fl chit pas*. What would he say to-day! With this as their watch-word and encouragement they proceed to state the four natural reasons for their avocation: their family, the honour of the firm, the attraction which their particular business has for them, and the idea of profit. It becomes clear that for many their family is really the base of their profession. Once they have married, care of and provision for their children become primary aims of their life, motivating their every action. They wish to pass on to their children what they themselves received from their parents, and more if possible. This is inherent in human nature, but perhaps is often accepted as such without advertence to the dangers which it carries with it. Nevertheless it is comforting as an indication that we are not faced with individual egoism but rather with a great love and charity which, with tact and care, can be turned to the good of the whole of society.

The honour of the firm too is quite laudable, though sometimes it becomes such a blind devotion as to exclude other motives, and grown cold and de-humanised. It can pre-dominate to the detriment particularly of family life which is so essential. Partly connected with this is the natural attraction which certain men feel for the profession they exercise. Many are the cases of men who could retire in comfort but will not and cannot, so enthralled are they by the "mystique" of their business.

Nevertheless the instability of the modern economic regime is tending more and more to subordinate these three motives to the idea of profit. In fact these industrialists affirm that "profit . . . in the modern regime is the primary end of all the activity of the head of any business firm, even though it is not always the consequence." Formerly, under the regime of the corporations of artisans, it was simply the remuneration for services rendered. Nowadays profit is the result of a very complex system of buying, selling and speculating. But the struggle, one might almost say the battle, in which the industrialist must engage earn for him the right to his legitimate profit, and so one cannot condemn the profit-motive; it is inseparably mixed, at present, with the struggle for a market for one's goods. It is its consequences which bring trouble, for "we are in a vicious circle: the money which we earn creates needs, and these needs in their turn demand ever-increasing earnings." Worst of all, the mentality which judges the value of a man by his bank balance is very widespread and helps to keep alive and stimulate the profit-motive.²

Touching the supernatural motives for their professional activity, the members consider the idea of God in business life, and the idea of one's neighbour. With sorrow they have to admit that at present there is no place for God and that the only rules of natural morality observed are negative ones. The conclusion is that *dans les affaires les plus honnêtement gérées, tout n'est pas beau, tout n'est pas pur*. Is it all astonishing then that, forgetting Christ, many Catholic business men are also tempted to forget His members? Their great defect is individualism, legacy of the economic liberalism of the last century, which blinds them to the demands of the Common Good. This has been shown quite clearly by their incomprehension of the Trades Unions and their unwillingness to co-operate, despite the many papal directives and appeals. Yet in summing up there is a strong note of optimism. All of these defects can be changed into virtues, for Catholic Action wishes to elevate not to destroy:

² Cf., at the other end of the scale, the protest of Isabelle Rivière in "*Sur le devoir de l'imprévoyance*."

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non solvere sed adimplere. The horizon of the spirit which works for family alone can be widened to include the whole of society. Pride in one's firm can often be changed into or joined to the ambition to serve. The attraction of work, of order and of method, can find plenty to occupy it in the organisation of the profession. Profit can become what it was once before—the just remuneration for services rendered. Again, on the supernatural plane, God is often given first place in personal and family life, and this can be enlarged to include professional life too. Finally, the doctrine of the Mystical Body, known and lived, will go far to make each regard the other, not as competitor, rival or servant, but as brother in the one Christ. Such is the inspiring conclusion of the first half of the report on the year's work.

The second deals with "The discoveries we have made in the course of our enquiries, 1936-1937," and deals with three spheres of action: social, economic and supernatural. In the social sphere, it was discovered, the idea of the Common Good was either not known or in practice ignored. Therefore this question was studied, and in particular its consequence of *service*: How it alone, from a human point of view, legitimised the authority exercised by an employer, and how unless service of others is at the base of his philosophy an employer can have no pride in his position. In the economic order too the new idea, which many only understood for the first time, was that of service. Till then, dominated by the false economic theories of the liberals, they had only envisaged two kinds of association, and both for defence. The one was an association of employers to combat the pretensions of their workers, the other for regulating one or other branch of production against competitors. After this enquiry, as a result of it, they have realised that for a Christian social order collaboration must take the place of defence, and service be substituted for domination. In respect of the supernatural order it is observed that an atheist searching for natural means of bettering human conditions could eventually discover this idea of service; but he could never discover that which would complete his pro-

gramme, and which these industrialists affirmed was their greatest discovery: that in giving man the opportunity of work God wished to associate him with His work of creation, and to associate him with the work of Redemption. All men being associated with the work of God, they are joined together among themselves, given a corporate unity in the Mystical Body of Christ. They conclude by recalling the words of the Pope on the application of this sublime doctrine to the social question: "If then the members of the social body be thus restored, and if a true directive principle of social and economic activity be re-established, it will be possible to say, in a sense, of this body what the Apostle said of the Mystical Body of Christ: 'From him the whole body, welded and compacted together throughout every joint of the system, part working in harmony with part—(from him) the body deriveth its increase, unto the building up of itself in charity.' "

The foregoing brief summary of the work of *la Bourgeoisie Chrétienne* may be sufficient to show the spirit that animates it, sufficient too to show that it is not without interest for English-speaking countries. It is not a model, for it is still evolving towards a more perfect technique, but it is a brave experiment which commands our interest and respect. Moreover, it demonstrates a spirit which working on similar lines to the J.O.C. and with a similar end in view will eventually conquer the disruptive forces which at present threaten every phase of social life in France.

T.O.S.D.

I am deeply indebted to M. Pierre Bayart for both the matter and inspiration of this attempt to describe a movement of which he is at once the inspirer and the guiding spirit.—Author.