

THE DUTY OF THE VOTER

IN view of the General Election, promised for the early summer, political organisations of every colour are girding their loins for the contest and striving to stir up enthusiasm in the electorate. So far, however, it would seem that enthusiasm and even bare interest are lacking among the people in general. Even the possibilities of the increased feminine vote—that uncertain factor which may play such a decisive part in turning the political scales—fail to arouse interest. Nobody seems to care very much what will happen.

Is it possible that this is due, even here in England, to the growth of that contempt of modern parliamentary government which has led several of our Latin neighbours to throw parliaments aside and to set up temporary dictatorships? A very dangerous experiment, fraught with great risks! For, as St. Thomas¹ says, 'monarchic government is the best form of government; but on account of the great power entrusted to the monarch (whatever he may be called), monarchy easily degenerates into tyranny, unless the one to whom such power is entrusted be a man of perfect virtue.' However, this is not to say that it is an unjustifiable experiment. Dangerous diseases, whether in the individual or in the body politic, call for drastic remedies; and it is a Gospel principle that 'if thine eye scandalise thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee.' We are of the opinion that, of the two, a military dictatorship is less dangerous than the financial dictatorship with which we are threatened.

But in spite of the political corruption rife in this country it is not anticipated that the phlegmatic

¹ *Ia, IIae, 105, I, am.*

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Englishman will follow in the wake of his more excitable Latin neighbours. We are always told that this violent method of reform does not appeal to the English temperament. But does this mean any more than that the post-Reformation Englishman has been so drilled and bullied that he will patiently endure very much more oppression than his Latin neighbour? He has become so accustomed to bowing meekly before the apparently inevitable that he will probably just shrug his shoulders and neglect to vote at the election. It is always interesting to compare the number of registered votes with the number of those possessing the suffrage.

At the present time, however, there are such important questions to the fore on the subject of Catholic Education that we are urged to examine our consciences again with regard to the duties of the voter. We are told that this attitude of listless indifference will not do. Thus *The Universe* of January 18th bears a headline in heavily-leaded type, which reads: '*Every man and woman bound in duty to vote.*' From its place in the paper, we are to judge that this is not put down as the private opinion of *The Universe*, but as the content of a speech by the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster given *in extenso* beneath the caption. But a reading of that speech shows that the Cardinal said no such thing. What he said, indeed, was something very different, and the difference is of the utmost importance. Basing himself on the principle that the voter governs the country in that his vote or abstention from voting 'has some influence for good or for evil on the political tendencies of this country'; the Cardinal draws the conclusion that 'to vote or not to vote involves the exercise of a duty . . . which has to be exercised according to conscience and in the presence of Almighty God.' Therefore an attitude of careless

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indifference is unjustifiable. Each must conscientiously decide whether to vote or to abstain from voting, and if to vote, which way to vote.

A comparison of this teaching of the Cardinal with the misleading heading will show that *The Universe* has, through carelessness, misinformed its readers. And, as the majority of its readers are trained by the daily press to pick up news without exertion from headlines, the consequences are serious and ought to be remedied.

But let us get our own minds clear on this subject of the vote. As the Cardinal indicates, there are circumstances in which it is lawful to abstain from voting, as many of us do in fact abstain. There are those, for example, (and what a legion!) who confess that they do not understand modern politics. These the Cardinal says, may safely leave the duty to those who do. Many will no doubt call into question the very principle on which His Eminence bases his argument, namely, that 'this country is governed by those who vote.' That is true, they say, only of a democracy in which the electors really govern the country through the medium of freely chosen representatives who are absolutely answerable to the voters who elect them. Only by a perversion of language can our government be called democratic. They will quote you words from the Cardinal's great pastoral of 1918, *The Nation's Crisis*: 'While the Constitution had increasingly taken on democratic forms, the reality underlying those forms had become increasingly plutocratic.' If it was true that High Finance was pulling the governmental strings in 1918, how much more true it is in 1929! It is all a big game of make-believe, they will tell you. The political parties send a gentleman to the constituency of whom the voters have never heard. He makes speeches according to

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the party programme, is perhaps elected and goes to Parliament, where, as the Archbishop of Liverpool so piquantly said the other day, 'he sinks back into the obscurity from which he ought never to have emerged.'

In these circumstances, if we are to be able to make up our minds conscientiously about this matter, we must adopt our usual resource of going back to the principles. Historically, parliamentary elections were designed as a means of producing representative government. The principle lying behind this is that the State or body politic is composed of the members of the community. The very *raison d'être* of the State is—in theory, at least—the common good of the whole people, a thing sometimes lost sight of. Hence all who share in the common good ought also to share in the common burdens and responsibilities of the State; and of these burdens and responsibilities one of the chief is the duty of government. Now government, says Aquinas, is nothing else than the practical direction of things to their proper end. A general governs his army by arranging his troops in accordance with that plan of operations by which he has pre-arranged the defeat of the enemy. Government is, therefore, a department of that virtue of the mind which is called providence. It belongs to providence first to think out beforehand the right order in which things may best be brought to the end which is desired, and then to carry out that order in practice by means of the art of government. Just as Divine Providence preordains all things for the glory of God and governs the world with a view to that end, so it is the part of human providence in civil affairs to preordain all things for the common good of the citizens, and to govern the State with a view to that end alone. There is to be no dispute about the end to be sought. The science of Politics takes that for granted, and is con-

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cerned only with the most suitable way of attaining the common good. Politics deals with the ethically permissible. It corresponds with the office of free-will in the life of the individual. Free-will is not to be defined as the power to do right or wrong; it is the faculty bestowed on an intelligent individual by means of which he is to choose for himself the best way of attaining the end for which he is destined by his Creator.

Now if all are bound in conscience to work for the common good in so far as, according to the words of the philosopher, the common good is a more divine thing than the private advantage of any individual in the community, much more are they so bound to whom is committed the direction of the public affairs of the State. This must be borne in mind by those who in any way are responsible for the appointment of the individuals who direct the public affairs. And in so far as the exercise of the vote is considered to be an exercise of the art of government, then the voter must exercise his duty by means of that virtue of providence which is concerned with the good direction of public affairs for the common advantage of the whole community. In other words, the voter must vote with the aid of reason and intelligence under the guidance of the moral virtues. For unless he use his reason he will not see what is best for the common good; unless he use the moral virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance he will not desire what is best for the common good, even though he should see it. Many will find this irksome; but the fact remains that, in those States where representative government is a reality, this is the serious duty of the citizen who possesses the right and the responsibility of voting. It is founded, as we have said, on the principle that those who share in the public benefits of the community are bound to share in the public burdens also.

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In our opinion, the best preparation for the election would be to broadcast a few lines from the *Summa* of S. Thomas, which might well be entitled 'Practical Directions for the Voter.' They are to be found in his treatise on Law, in that part where he justifies the reasonableness of the judicial precepts of the Mosaic Law. In the first article of the one hundred and fifth question of the *Prima Secundae* he puts the question: Did the Law arrange for the government of the people in a suitable manner? His reply is as follows:—

'Two things call for consideration with regard to the good appointment of rulers in any state or nation.

The first is this, that everyone ought to have some share in the government; for in this way peace is preserved among the people, because such an arrangement will be pleasing to all, and therefore they will keep to it, as Aristotle says in the second book of Politics.

The second has to do with the manner of government or division of the chief offices. Now there are various forms of government which the Philosopher enumerates in the third book of Politics, but the chief among them are these:

(1) *Monarchy* or *kingdom* in which the government is vested in one of moral worth.

(2) *Aristocracy*, or government by the best men, in which the government is vested in a certain few (chosen) according to their moral worth.

(3) Therefore, the best form of government in any state or kingdom is that in which one is chosen as chief ruler of all on account of his moral worth, and under him are placed in authority certain others also chosen for their moral worth; in which, further, the work of government is made the business of everyone in the state in so far as, first, the rulers can be chosen from the mass

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of the people, and, secondly, all have a voice in the elections.

This is the best form of government, being partly a monarchy because there is one chief ruler; partly an aristocracy, as government is committed to several men of moral worth; and partly a democracy, that is power of the people, because the rulers can be chosen from the people at large, and to the populace belongs the duty of electing the rulers. Such was the form of government established by Divine Law.'

In commenting on these words of Aquinas, there is surely no need to call attention to the insistence laid on the one qualification which he demands for election to the office of government. Five times there appears a phrase which we have rendered by 'moral worth,' though it is impossible to express in two words the meaning hidden beneath that Latin phrase *secundum virtutem*, which in its turn stands for the *κατ' ἀρετήν* of Aristotle. The one to whom this qualification applies, he who is, lives, and acts *secundum virtutem*, is the man who regulates himself and his relations with others according to the virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance. Its connotation is wider still, including not merely the moral, but also the intellectual virtues which may be necessary for good government; but of the two the moral virtues are the more indispensable in the one charged with the government. For, as St. Thomas² says: 'It is impossible that the common good of the State should be in a good condition unless the citizens are virtuous, at least those of them who are charged with the government.' But of course, in principle, no sane person doubts this. The business is to put the principle into practice when the opportunity arises. It will be objected that it is

² Ia, IIae, 92, I, 3m.

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utopian, but the ideal is always utopian in a world corrupted by moral evil. As Aquinas says, perfect virtue is found in but few. But in default of the absolute best, common-sense dictates the choice of the relative best.

In this connection it is worthy of note that St. Thomas speaks not merely from theory, but from experience. In his analysis of the principles of good government he uses the *Politics* of Aristotle, as we have seen. But his description of the ideal State is simply a picture of that form of government under which he lived as a member of the Dominican Order. According to the Constitution of that Order, the supreme executive power of government is committed to a Master-General, under whom Provincials of countries or provinces and Priors of separate priories exercise authority as local and subordinate rulers. It satisfies, therefore, the conditions of a monarchy and an aristocracy, granted that office be given to men chosen for moral worth. But it is also the ideal form of democracy in that, true to the principles of Aquinas, any member of sufficient years' standing in the Order is eligible for office, and every office is filled by popular election. Thus, the members of the priory elect their priors, the priors in company with another elected delegate from each priory elect the provincials, while the provincials together with an elected delegate from each province elect the master-general. Each of these offices is temporary, varying from a period of three to twelve years. Further, the legislative power is committed to representative councils composed of superiors and delegates as in the case of elections, general chapters legislating for the whole Order, provincial chapters for each particular province.

In the year 1265 St. Thomas began to write his *Summa* from which we have quoted above. In the same year Simon de Montfort, son of that Simon who

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was the friend of St. Dominic, called together the first representative Parliament this country had known, containing one hundred and twenty churchmen, twenty-three lay barons, two knights from every shire and two citizens from every borough. Was it a mere coincidence?

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