

PRAYER AND POLITICS (II) <sup>1</sup>

For some people the worlds of prayer and politics stand in direct opposition ; there can be no question of passing from one world to the other ; prayer means a flight from activity, and if it attempts to pass over into the world of activity it destroys itself. Now this is the typical Eastern view of prayer ; it is not the Christian view. Indeed in Christian eyes it is *the* great mistake of the East, just as a zest for action without prayer is the mistake of the West. The Christian ideal is neither action without prayer nor prayer without action, but prayer overflowing *into* action. And the reason why is not difficult to see. Let me put it in three points. First, the Christian holds that the world about him is a world of real things and real persons, made by God and loved by God, but fallen upon evil days. Then secondly, he believes that God so loved the world that He took upon Himself our humanity to heal it, so that all men should be won back to sanity and peace in Him. And thirdly, the prayerful Christian not only knows about God, he knows God : he has the knowledge that begets love and is begotten by love ; and because love means union of will—we *want* to do the will of those we love—he is driven to work for the fulfilment of God's desire, he cannot but try to help and serve the world ; and the more he is filled with God, the more he will love the world and spend himself serving it.

We may well be tempted to run away from a world that is blind and insane ; but if we do, we may be running away from our duty. Our zest for doing is diseased because it is not founded on vision ; yet something of greatness still clings to it, for there still clings to it something of love. But if you separate one law from another law on which it depends, the first will go awry. We have tried to separate the love of man from the love of God ; and so the love of man goes weak or sour in us, and becomes an ineffective sentiment or simply the love of self.

The Christian men of prayer tell us that the first thing is to find God and to cleave to Him ; but they tell us, too, that when we find Him we shall find a boundless power and energy, the power and the energy of God Himself. That is why these men of prayer are usually

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something more than hard-headed realists : they are severely practical people. They found hospitals and schools, and run them with homely efficiency ; they sweep away social abuses ; they carry out vast schemes of social reform. And there is one thing especially in which they differ from those uncomfortable people who are reformers without being men of prayer : not only is there nothing about these men of prayer of the coldness and condescension which make social service an insult, but much more than that, they change not merely the outward shape of things but the inward lives and hearts of men and women as well. Elizabeth Fry did not only reform the prison system ; she restored hope and joy and love to the brutalised people in the prisons. That is why we need the men of prayer. We need them because they can show us what is true ; but we need them, too, because they can win us over to what is good. It is worth noting that a taste for discussing life and death problems as though they had no bearing on our own lives is one of the signs that a society is dying. Another sign is the pursuit of action without vision. We have no time to lose if we work for the recovery of the West. It may be that envy and jealousy and vanity and suspicion, individual or national, break up what might have been a united effort and reduce the rising building to a heap of rubble. The men of prayer shed these ugly things ; their whole desire is to be instruments not for their own purposes, but for God's ; and so they go gently and firmly on, unworried about what the result may be, leaving that to God—and the work gets done. Or it may be that we give up and abandon the struggle, in cynical despair of ever storming the citadels of entrenched privilege—and indeed that is a task which demands a divine persistence. But the men of prayer have a faith and a perseverance which have been known to move even these human mountains. Again, it may be simply that sloth and self-interest make us deaf to the cry of the world. When Leo XIII drew up what is called in English the Workers' Charter, denouncing the social evils of the times and sketching the outline of a just order, his call for action produced little effect even among those who acknowledged his authority. In a society of prayerful Christians, to tolerate such evils would be just unthinkable.

The truth is, we always tend to take on the temper of mind of the world we live in. Sloth and selfishness are part of our human nature as we know it ; but, since the days when Europe began to reject the Christian faith, people have tended more and more to assume that selfishness is the right and proper thing for the individual. We have forgotten more and more that we are a family ; only a major crisis

can avail to remind us of it. A man-centred world very quickly becomes a self-centred world ; but if we decide that this is as it should be, then we are doomed indeed. And Christians may unconsciously absorb this temper of mind ; we may so easily enact a sort of spiritual version of it, seeking to obey God outwardly indeed, but in a wholly self-centred and self-interested way, embarking on a career of spiritual money-making, and, as St. John says, closing the bowels of our compassion to our brethren. If we do, then we deny our faith in the very act of righteously affirming it ; for God is love, and only he who abides in love abides in God. It is a terrible thing to betray Christ ; but the most terrible thing in the world is to betray Christ with a kiss.

Now if it is true that prayer, so far from being the denial of action, urges us to action, is the same true of prayer and politics ? Politics can be a sordid and inhuman business. But politics are not *necessarily* power politics ; statesmen have not *always* acted on the principle that might is right ; and even if they had, there would still be a possible alternative : there would still be the possibility of a political system built on the ideas of right and wrong, and obedience to the voice of religion. That was, indeed, the ideal painted for us many centuries ago by one of the greatest of the Greeks : the ideal of the king who should have both wisdom and power. Being wise he should know the true and the good : and being king he should be able to shape the life of society accordingly. If what I have said of prayer and action in general is true, then there is no reason why the man of prayer should not enter a political world that obeys religious truth ; there is no reason either why he should not seek to influence a world of power politics from outside it, to combat it and if possible to transform it. Whether he may ever enter the world of power politics itself and play his part in it, with the idea of transforming it from within, is hard to answer : it depends so much on the individual and on the degree to which evil is entrenched. But there are two lines of thought which may help us to decide such questions. On the one hand, the prayerful Christian relies on God's power, not his own : love is his motive, and love knows no fear ; he is in the world to serve the world, and you do not serve the world by running away from it. On the other hand, we do not serve God, but rather betray Him, if we attempt to achieve His purpose by the use of evil means.

Democracy, we know, lays a heavy burden on the shoulders of the individual. For if we translate the Greek ideal of the king who is both seer and ruler into democratic terms, it means that *all* must be wise since all have power. The Christian who believes that Christ

is with His Church until the end, believes that in the Church he can find truth ; but this fact does not mean that we are forbidden to think for ourselves, it means that we are commanded to do so : it is our duty to try to discover how this truth is to be applied to our own particular circumstances. That is why political changes will be of little avail unless many people set out to change themselves, by the method of the men of prayer. If that is not done, we are as the blind leading the blind. Pius XI once said he thanked God he had been born in these days, since in these days it was impossible to be mediocre: We cannot just sit back and watch ; by the very fact of how we live, we help either to save or to destroy. The men of prayer are the ones who help to save. If we fail to be like them, or at least to be taught and energised by them, then it looks as though we must count ourselves among the destroyers.

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What are the main lines of reconstruction as they appear to Christian men of prayer ? And what do they mean to us, as individuals ? The point I have already made is this : that we *need* to be men of prayer : first, in order to know on what lines we should rebuild our world, and secondly, in order to have the strength and tenacity to put our thought into effect. We might say that there are two main lines, two principles on which the whole structure of social order must be based. First : it is the human person that is of supreme value on earth, because the human person alone has a divine destiny. And every man and woman has this destiny, so that in this respect all are equally important. There are no class distinctions in the Kingdom of God. Secondly, the human person is made perfect through love of God, and therefore through service of the human family. So, as one great man of prayer has put it, all our life should be work, and all our work should be work for others.

Now at first sight these two things may seem contradictory. According to the first, society is for the individual ; according to the second, the individual is for society. And if you think of the two things as separate, they *are* contradictory. We have seen a social order based simply on the principle that society is for man : and it is simply ordered selfishness. We have seen a social order based simply on the principle that man is for society, for the state : and that is ordered tyranny. But if you put the two things together you get neither selfishness nor tyranny : you get a family. The happy family is one in which everything is so arranged that the children may become good, wise, mature men and women. But they will only

become such if, all the time, they work for one another, help one another, love and reverence one another—in a word, serve the family. 'Let charity make thee a slave', said Augustine, 'since truth has made thee free'. We become fully men through loving service. It is the same when we think of men and women in the national family ; or of nations in the human family. If we think only of the rights of men or nations we get selfishness, and therefore chaos ; if we think only of duties, we get tyranny. If we put them together we get fullness of life in the unity and peace of the family.

Look first of all at the rights. There are some things which belong to man by the very fact that he is a human being. Every man has a right to live ; and a social order which reduces some of its members to starvation is an unjust social order. He has a right to think his own thoughts, to obey his conscience, to worship God ; otherwise he would be living not a human but a sub-human life. He has a right to marry and found a family, because this again is part of human life as such ; and a social order in which people find that through no fault of theirs they just have not enough money to marry or have children is an unjust social order. He has a right to provide for the future and his family's future ; for he cannot live a dignified human life, free, stable, assured, if he lives in constant insecurity. He has a right, too, to the dignity and happiness of creative and responsible work ; it has been wisely said that 'an artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist' ; if we are prevented from devoting our lives to some form of making we are not living a full human life, and a social order which so prevents us is an unjust social order. Now we could sum up all these rights by saying that every man has a right to make his own life ; to be a complete person ; and the reason is, he is destined to love God, and only a complete person, free and responsible, can love God without hindrance. The whole purpose of a social order, then, is to preserve and foster a man's enjoyment of these rights, to help him to make his own life for God.

But every right implies a corresponding duty. The rights we claim from others we must acknowledge in others : the help we claim from others we must give to others. We must serve the common good ; and be ready if need be to sacrifice our own interests for it. And as the needs of society may grow greater, even perhaps to the point of having to meet a threat to its very existence, so its claims upon us will be the greater, even perhaps to the point of asking us to sacrifice our very lives. Yet even then, when the principle of man-for-society is at fullest stretch, the principle of society-for-man is at

fullest stretch too ; we become fully men through loving service ; and to lay down one's life for one's friends is a perfect work.

Now we cannot examine here the sort of detailed programme which, in our circumstances, might best fulfil the Christian ideal. But there is one immediate application of the idea of community which it may be well to note. A great deal of harm can be done by talking loosely of the Church condemning communism and upholding private property, without explaining exactly what is meant. In the first place, the Church does not condemn communism : on the contrary, it regards one type of communism—the voluntary communism of monks and nuns—as a counsel of perfection. Secondly, the Church does condemn the evils of marxist communism, as it does those of nazism ; but it does not thereby ally itself with the evils of capitalism. On the contrary, those evils have stood condemned by the Church for a very long time. And one of those evils is a quite un-Christian idea of private property.

The Church upholds the right to ownership, yes ; but not as the term is nowadays understood. No one is absolute owner of anything, except God. We are only stewards. Legally, a man may do what he chooses with his own ; but not morally. He may not use his property against the common good ; he may not waste it ; he may not use it to injure his neighbour ; he must use it to help his neighbour when his neighbour is in need. The miserly and irresponsible ideas we tend to fall into about property : *these* are the direct opposite of the teaching of the Church. Remember the Christian attitude towards material things we have spoken of ; you will find that Christian spirit applied to property, not in those who stand by their rights and hold to what is theirs while the rest of the world may starve, but most perfectly in those early Christians who held all things in common, in St. Paul who speaks of having nothing and possessing all things, in St. Francis who took the lady Poverty for his bride, and in his friend St. Dominic, who on his deathbed left his followers the striking phrase, ' Possess poverty'.

The Church upholds the right to private property, yes ; but again, not as the term is nowadays understood. It affirms that every man has a right to security from penury or want ; a right to possess enough to enable him to live a dignified human life. But nowadays—and it is a striking criticism of our society—nowadays the term ' man of property ' means, not what *all* men are by their common right as men, but what a *few* men are by particular privilege. Nowadays the word ' property ' suggests to us, not the poor man's cottage or plot of land so much as the rich man's rents and dividends. And here

the Church speaks very differently. It speaks not of rights so much as of duties ; its purpose is not to defend, so much as to warn. If we take the Christian assertion of the rights of the poor, and turn it into a defence of riches without responsibility, or of wealth batten- ing upon poverty and powerlessness ; or if we try to make it an argument for leaving undisturbed a grossly unequal distribution of wealth ; then we are just playing on words ; and what we are really upholding is not the Church's teaching at all, but a travesty of it. Indeed, we are turning it completely inside out : we are using it to destroy the very thing the Church sets out to defend : justice ; and to defend the very injustices it sets out to destroy.

So, too, with a system founded purely on the profit-motive and on cut-throat competition. There is nothing wrong necessarily with the profit-motive ; there is everything wrong with a system whose one guiding principle is the profit-motive. It is more than fifty years since Leo XIII spoke in words of fire of the 'greed of unchecked competition', of 'rapacious usury', and of how a very few rich men had been able to lay upon the labouring masses 'a yoke little better than slavery'; and yet the profit system is often regarded as sacred. The alternative, production for use, production for the common good—and this need not exclude a just profit—is simple commonsense ; and it would spare us the tragic insanity of want and unemployment in a world of plenty. It is simple commonsense ; it is also simple Christianity. It was Christ who taught us that if we want to be happy we must serve our fellow men ; and it was not the authors of the Communist Manifesto who first said 'If a man will not work, neither let him eat' ; it was St. Paul.

I have been thinking so far of our national life ; but what I have said applies equally to the life of the world. Nations, like individuals, have rights to be respected ; and each nation has its different contribution to make to the common good. They too must avoid the twin dangers of tyranny over weaker nations and of the selfishness which leads to cut-throat competition, to living solely by the profit-motive, instead of serving the world. If all this is true, then there is one very practical moral we might draw and think about. Love unites ; hatred divides. The one sure way of keeping the world in chaos is to draw up plans for it with hatred in our hearts. These are days when many find it hard not to hate. But there has been only one man who could say with truth, 'I have conquered the world'; He is the God of love ; and He said it on the way to the Cross.

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