

INTRODUCTION

WHY THE CROSS?

A EUROPEAN politician once stated that Christianity had failed. It did not seem to him that his assertion needed proof. The actual condition of things in his own country and in other countries appeared to him to be ample justification for what he said. Yet the statement, so far from being indisputable, can be shown, on analysis, to betray a gross confusion of thought.

Christianity has not failed, for the simple reason that it has scarcely been tried. It certainly has not been tried on any extensive scale. It could be branded with failure, if having been guaranteed by its founder to be able to achieve certain definite results, it had been, when put to the test, found wanting. But if Christianity is but imperfectly or incompletely applied to the task of reducing to order the confused issues of human existence, it cannot be blamed for the relative chaos that results. If Christianity in its integrity was accepted by all and its principles were applied in efforts to solve the practical problems of life, peace and comparative happiness would be the result. If Christianity were put in practice for one entire day by all people throughout the whole world, then for that day the woes that afflict mankind would in great part have ceased.

Though all suffering and sorrow would not have ended (Christianity does not guarantee that it will put an end to distresses inherent to mortality and the fallen state of mankind), yet the earth would bear a not-too-remote resemblance to the Garden of Paradise. To dream of bringing about this happy state of affairs without applying the principles of Christianity to the unraveling of the

tangled issues of human existence is to dream a dream that can never be realized. Many world leaders indulge this idle dream. It is not astonishing that the result of the political efforts of such dreamers is but to intensify the existing disorder and to make confusion worse confounded.

As has been said, Christianity cannot be accused of failure: it is mankind that can, with strict justice, be accused of failure, because, on the whole, man has failed to respond to the appeal of Christianity. It is more than doubtful if it can be maintained with any truth that, at any time, since the beginning of the Christian era, any body politic wholeheartedly accepted and applied the full Christian program in the organization and regulation of its life. Doubtless such an application has been made partially and, on occasions, even to some considerable extent. But the Christian philosophy of life, in its political and social aspects, was never given full and unhampered play in molding the public life of modern nations. There was a time when things were shaping toward this, more or less remotely. The condition of public affairs was satisfactory or unsatisfactory according to whether there was an approach to, or a falling short of, the Christian ideal.

What has been said of social groups is not universally true of individuals. There have been individual men and women who have given a wholehearted trial to Christianity and have not found it wanting. In their hands it has been a complete and triumphant success. These persons are known as saints. They have illustrated the annals of the Church in all ages. They understood Christianity to be what it actually is, a divinely fashioned instrument, made for the express purpose of transforming human nature. Christianity guarantees this result—this divine transformation of humanity—if it is applied to the work. It asserts that it is equipped with ample resources to bring this process to a successful issue. It does not guarantee this result if inadequately used, or if ill used; and ill used it must be if it is not wholly accepted or if it is badly understood.

The saints accepted Christianity wholeheartedly. In their case there was no failure. They became exactly what Christianity guaranteed to make them, super-men in the highest sense of the term. They became transfigured with a transfiguration symbolized by that of Christ on the Mount. They became human beings—more human than the others, and yet human beings who diffused rays of the divinity. They are people who have permanently benefited mankind. Their spirit and their works survive them and serve as an enduring leaven in the mass of humanity. The good they did was not interred with their bones. They were eminently great, and Christianity was the source of their greatness. In others, be they individual persons or groups of persons, Christianity succeeds in a measure that corresponds exactly with the degree in which it is accepted. Unfortunately, to subscribe to Christianity is not the same thing as being integrally a Christian. To be this latter, one must accept the Christian standard of values. If this is not done fully, elements of disorder and distress necessarily invade the life of the individual and of society. The failure to achieve an existence that is satisfying must not, in these circumstances, be laid at the door of Christianity, but of those who profess Christianity, while forgetting Christian values in practice. This is not the failure of Christianity, but the failure of men to be Christians.

The life of the follower of Christ is bound to be filled with contradiction and inconsequence, unless he is clearly aware of what Christianity is for, what it guarantees to do, and what promises it holds out. Amid the clamor and tumult arising from social and economic disorders, the real message of the Gospel of Christ can, with difficulty, be heard. The enemies of Christianity—and many of them, very likely, are enemies only of what they conceive Christianity to be—attack it, either as being the cause of evils from which the nations are suffering or, at least, as not playing its due part in striving to remedy these evils. There is a certain amount of tragic irony in seeing Christianity blamed for those evils that have arisen

from the abandonment of Christian principles. For from the corruption of the Christian social structure, resulting in the great schism of the sixteenth century, emerged those germs of economic theory and practice that have been in subsequent times so prolific in fruits of economic evil. Men were not aware at the time that, in replacing the living authority of Christ by private judgment, they were actually abandoning Christianity. They were not aware of the logical implications of their revolt. Retaining much of what materially belonged to Christianity, they believed themselves to be formally Christians. The logical consequences of their premises, derived from their revolt, are becoming perfectly clear now. Their errors in doctrine reacted on the organization of human life in a way they could scarcely have foreseen. The economic, social, and political principles that formed from their dogmatic positions contained, in germ, the social, economic, and political evils that afflict civilization today.

When man has declined in spirituality, it is natural that he should find his material needs to be the most insistent and the most important. People feel far more intensely their economic than their spiritual distress. Aristotle acutely remarks that a person is prone to make happiness consist in a condition of things that is the direct opposite to a misery from which he happens to be, at the moment, suffering. To a man suffering from dire poverty, wealth is happiness.¹ To the dispossessed multitudes cut off from the sources of wealth by the operation of modern industrialism, happiness appears to lie in free access to the world's goods and secure possession of them. They are taught by their guides to believe that Christianity blocks the path to economic security and are roused to fierce anger against it. The folly and injustice of this attitude have just been pointed out. It is the extreme of perversity to blame Christianity for what has followed from the abandonment of Christianity. It is not Christians who are responsible for the

¹ Arist., *Nich. Ethics*, bk. 1, ch. 2.

woes that afflict humanity. It is men, who, whether they call themselves Christians or not, apply to the solution of life's problems and to the regulation of life's conduct principles that deviate from the principles taught by Christ. They are responsible to the exact degree of that deviation.

But this is not the only point to make. The defenders of Christianity in the ardor of their defense are prone to be drawn away into a position dictated by their adversaries. When, for instance, the Church is bitterly assailed for not remedying the economic evils, the Christian apologist hastens to point out all that the Church has done in this sphere of action. What the Church has done and is doing is immense, undoubtedly. But it must not be forgotten that her primary concern is with spiritual and not with temporal values. Very willingly she leaves the sphere of temporal interests to be regulated by man's own thought and by man's own inventions. Social, political, and economic problems can be solved by the exercise of human reason and by the right use of human will. The Church, the living voice of Christianity, does not wish to supersede, but to stimulate, human activity. She contents herself with giving directions that will prevent the activity from taking courses she knows, with her divinely infused wisdom, will ultimately militate against man's good. She desires that man should himself exert his faculties to the full to secure, by human designing, a satisfactory arrangement of human affairs, and such a measure of temporal well-being as is feasible.

This attitude is not one of haughty aloofness from, or cold indifference to, men's earthly cares. It is dictated by a sovereign respect for those inborn possibilities of development, which can be evolved by man's use of his own powers. She has a notable precedent for it in the attitude of her Divine Founder. A contemporary of the Savior urged Him to leave aside for the moment His labors for the establishment of the Kingdom of God, and devote Himself to something more immediately practical, the settlement of an economic dispute.

“Master,” he said, “speak to my brother that he divide the inheritance with me.” Here there is a very characteristic situation. When things go to men’s satisfaction, they are quite willing to dispense with the guidance of God. But when, left to their own resources, they have thoroughly mismanaged their affairs, then they turn to Him, that is, to His living voice on earth, to put order into the confusion they have created. More likely than not, they upbraid the Church and assail her as being responsible for the existing disorder. The Church could reply to the appeal and to the calumny in the words of Jesus: “O man, who hath appointed me judge and divider over you?”²

For men, as a rule, have but shown themselves too eager to manage their own temporal affairs. They resent what they call the Church’s interference. This resentment culminates in a deliberate exclusion of the Church from the councils of peoples. Even at the best of times, when States were not yet professedly secularist, what jealousy was always manifested with regard to the action of the Church in secular matters! How slow men were to take her advice! How her efforts for procuring the temporal welfare of men were hampered, thwarted, and positively resisted!

The gradual silencing of the voice of Christianity in the councils of the nations is the evil cause of the chaotic conditions of modern civilized life. This issue was inevitable. For though the Church’s wisdom is primarily in the domain of things of the world to come, yet she is wise, too, with regard to the things of the world that is. She is not for the world, and yet she is able and even ready to act as if she were equipped specially to procure the temporal good of men.³ She is able and willing to give men directions in temporal matters, which, if followed, will result in temporal prosperity. She is too wise to promise unrealizable Utopias, from which all suffering and toil will be

² Lk 12: 13–14.

³ See Maritain, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 134.

banished. She can give prudent directions how to devise measures for the mitigation of inevitable hardships and the elimination of unnecessary evils. If rulers and ruled alike listened to her voice, the authentic voice of Christianity, what a change would come over the world! It would not cease to be a vale of tears but would cease to be a vale of savage strife. It would not become an earthly Paradise but would become an earth where man's dreams of a satisfying order of things could be realized.

But when all this has been said, it remains true that the sphere of activity in which the Church's efficacy is to be tested is not the sphere of economics. That is not her proper province. There, nothing more than relative success can attend human efforts, whereas, in that work which it properly belongs to Christianity to accomplish, no failure can attend on its efforts. The function of Christianity is not to reform or devise economic or social systems: her function is to reform and to transform the economists themselves. The Church, the organ of Christianity, is well aware that a change in social conditions, unaccompanied by a change in the dispositions of people, will only result in the substitution of one set of wrongdoers for another. "And the last state of men is made worse than the first."⁴ The Church undertakes to change people, not systems. She knows that if individuals become what they ought, systems will become what they ought. The dictum of her Divine Founder remains her own and voices her wisdom as well as her experience. "Seek first the kingdom of God and His justice and all these things shall be added unto you."⁵

There is so much clamorous abuse of the Church for not remedying social evils, that both her friends and her enemies gradually have their minds dulled to the apprehension of what the Church's essential function is in the world. But it must be repeated that the creation of satisfactory social conditions is far from being the primary, much

⁴ Mt 12: 45.

⁵ Mt 6: 33; Lk 12: 31.

less the only, aim of Christianity. What that aim is—what promises Christianity holds out to people—what it guarantees to effect for them—what means and processes it offers for the realization of these hopes—what is the reason that these means and processes take the form that they actually assume—and finally, what a wondrous life, satisfying every desire and aspiration, it infallibly provides for all, if people will only consent to make use of the resources it puts at their disposal. In short, to set forth the real message of Christianity, its promises, its methods, and its guarantees, is the purport of the following pages.

In Christendom today, conflicts regarding particular points of the Christian dispensation have come to an end. The battle in the realm of the spirit is now waged on a narrow front. It is the value itself of the Christian notion of human character and of the Christian ideal of life that is challenged.⁶ The world is dividing itself rapidly into two hostile camps, one combating that ideal *à outrance*, the other defending it with what might be accurately termed a dogged tenacity. The protagonists of the Christian theory of human existence are rapidly shrinking in numbers. They know that they are not fighting a losing battle, but they undergo all the agony of mind of men who feel that they are fighting against overwhelming odds. The fight cannot be lost, but the losses can be very heavy.

In this strife, where all Christian values are called in question, the best vindication of the Christian ideal is its bold, uncompromising expression. Such an expression may not be without its effect on the enemies of Christianity, and may not be without its utility for those who are loyal to Christianity. It is possible that the sincere among the former have but a distorted idea of what they attack, and that many among the latter have an imperfect view of what they defend. Many are the misguided who in their revolt against the Christian ideal of human character and

⁶ See A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist* (Gifford Lectures, 1926–1927), pp. 10–11.

the Christian rule of life are in revolt not against that ideal itself, but against what they conceive it to be. It is hard to say how far Christians themselves are responsible for this state of affairs. Not only inadequacy in the practice of Christianity, but also a faulty presentation of its values, is apt to rouse antagonism in the sincere and the reflective. The Christian theory of life is so coherent, so logical, so simple yet so mysterious, so accommodated to the average person as well as to the most highly gifted, and finally so soul-satisfying that, when adequately presented, it must readily recommend itself to all people of sincerity and good will. It alone among all other theories faces the problems offered by human existence and gives an answer to them. Contrasted with the Christian theory of life and life's experiences, all the theories that conflict with it and set themselves up in opposition to it must appear barren, ignoble, and utterly incapable of satisfying the ineradicable aspirations of the human spirit. On the other hand, for those who rally to the standard of Christ, a clear and explicit notion of what Christianity essentially means must have the effect of strengthening their hands and confirming their resolution in the defense of the values to which they give their allegiance.