

NO ESCAPE. (II).

WE began the year by pointing out how we cannot now escape from the times in which we live. The ship of civilization may be sinking, but however rat-like we may feel we are incapable of abandoning her; we are trapped in the hold. Expressed in this form our present plight might seem to be out of our control and therefore involuntary and involving no responsibility. To regard it in this light would be a very grave error, an error into which many seem to fall. The tendency of the average Christian is to shirk or to deny his responsibility for the mess into which the world has sunk. No escape does not mean surrender. All lines of retreat have been cut, we are surrounded; but to surrender would be a treacherous, unreal escape. We cannot go back, so we must go forward; and we have the weapons of the beatitudes and the sacraments in our hands to fight our way to the other side. The way out is the way through.

The position of the Christian in the world today of course increases his responsibility. If he could, *virtuously*, throw in his hand and retire to some remote fortress to look after his own soul in solitude, his responsibility would be less. But he may not, nor can he, so run away. He must stay where he is and see the thing through. He must face up to the moral issues of life as they come to him one after another, all kinds of new issues introduced by every technical "advance" of science and education. There is indeed a subtle form of escapism in the way in which many issues are shirked, the moral sense dulled so that the standards of the world are unconsciously adopted. The Christian has a grave responsibility not to run away from those moral issues, but to face them squarely and solve them according to the principles of the Gospel. If he surrenders to avarice, to injustice, to lust and disobedience, he is increasing the evil in the world, prolonging the death agony of a moribund civilization.

This loophole of seeming escape suggests that we can slip out of situations unobserved; and it thus provides a subtle temptation. Most Catholics are trained to meet the moral issues arising from the modern "scientific" attitude to sex. Many are fired by the standards of the pagan world and go running madly off after the whims of their own lust; but at least they do it more or less consciously. They know they are surrendering, because they have heard often from the pulpit the evils of divorce, birth-prevention, free-love and the like. Their consciences have been kept alive to this issue. Many other issues, however, are glossed over; their

consciences are allowed to develop blind spots; their responsibility for other evils is not met; they are not even allowed to meet it.

A clear example of this lies in matters connected with justice. We live in a Sociological age and we cannot have enough of Social reforms of every sort and size. We are told constantly of the injustice of the industrial system, of the iniquities of "finance" and "slave labour". But the accusations are consistantly impersonal; it is the *system* that is unjust, the organisation of modern life that has gone astray. No individual conscience may be troubled by such responsibilities; it is the fault of no distinct persons that so vast a state of injustice exists. Perhaps we may accuse the un-assailable, or the dead and past, like Thomas Cromwell, Mussolini or Hitler. But has Mr. Jones committed the sin of usury by buying debentures in a firm he knows nothing about? Oh no, he must not be disturbed; it is not Mr. Jones's fault that injustice is abroad. How many priests in their Saturday confessionals have had to absolve the sin of usury or of depriving labourers of their rights? Industry and banks are treated in this respect as almost God made and sacrosanct institutions, and modern warfare may quite easily be a crusade. A man is scarcely allowed to question whether big business, monopolies and mass-producing factories can be run on Christian lines. Ever since the reformation men have tended to explain away the immoralities of finance, money-lending, labour-hiring. The straightforward principles of S. Thomas are applied with laborious intricasy, because, it is argued, modern conditions have changed the whole situation. Why these conditions should have altered the working of justice and not of temperance is not explained.

Some complain that Catholic sociology is vague, that it never issues in any clear cut direction. The beatitudes should break forth in all sorts of personal revolutions. But no, the whole *status quo* is baptised and confirmed by our sociologists. No wonder their teaching is vague and in the air, for though injustice infects the very air we breathe no one man is guilty of an unjust action. A great impersonal incubus of swindle and theft sprawls over the world but no one is to blame for its being there. No one is responsible. The world is to be allowed to escape any personal judgments, any pricks in individual consciences. If any prophet should raise his voice: Woe to ye rich, a deathly hand is clapped to his mouth and he suffocates in the grip of impersonal injustice.

Unless we can explain the evils of to-day in terms of personal sins this great incubus will carry us all down to perdition. Social reform is first and foremost not a matter of altering the organisation of economics and education. Society is not reconstituted by a plan or a report. Social reform must be a moral reform; and

that means, in the first place, a change of the wills of individual men, the change of the vices into virtues. Manners of life must be altered, not systems. We must know and overcome sin, and sin is a matter of personal responsibility. Vagueness and ineffectiveness enter at the point where we shift that responsibility from individuals to a system or a civilization, or even to a class or nation. Particularly productive of ineptitude and vagueness is the habit of one class accusing another of injustice, the workers abusing the owners, the owners the worker, the anti-clericals the churchmen and so on. Each must examine his own conscience to discover his own responsibility, facing up to the moral issues as they come surging up to him like great rollers from the vast ocean of misery and injustice. There is no escape unless we persist in surrendering to the incubus, stilling our consciences with comfortable condemnation of systems.

Paradoxically, the reason why we should not try to escape the responsibility of our own sins lies in the fact that there is no escape from the love of God. Here we may find the centre of the whole thesis: There is no escape, i.e., from the love of God. *Quis separabit?*—S. Paul first pointed to this universal possessiveness of God's charity. So far we have seen the world-view only down in the valley which is our modern world, now we must climb the heights and see the same landscape from the view-point of God's will. For by the omnipotence and ubiquity of God's will there is not a being or a happening that lies beyond the power of his creative activity. All these things and events are the product of his working here and now in the present instant. There is a mysterious sense in which this applies to the starving millions in Europe just as much as to the consecration of the Eucharist or the creation of an individual human soul. All being depends essentially upon God, is made by him. Pestilence has some being, because it is. Similarly, war and atomic bombs, as well as Churchill or the Church.

In the ages before the coming of Christ much of the pain and disaster of men's lives was regarded as the product of God's *just* will; as though his love was only operative when his children were good and obedient. But Christ brought home to us the fact that God is love; that this very will, from which all proceeds and which is changeless and eternally fixed in the *nunc aeternitatis*, is love. The superessential goodness of God thus proceeds out from itself giving being to all things. God never changes his mind. His love of himself and of creatures prompts him to will all these things. He is not just with one and loving with another. His justice is all pervasive as is his charity; but charity reigns the supreme motive of all things.

There are many things which we cannot explain in light of this

mystery, why innocent children should be eaten alive by disease, why evil men should dominate the world, why man is such a beast and suffers such a lot. But the fact of the universality of God's love we know with the certainty of natural reason as well as of faith in the supernatural ordering of things. Evidently then we cannot escape the embrace of God. Our every breath proceeds from his creative affection. The society in which we live is supported by the caress of his hand. Yes, even our beastliness and lust are dependent in some way on the love of his permissive will. Who indeed shall separate us from the love of God?

This will of love is constantly "our sanctification"; and we are asked by our Lord to abide in his love. So that all these beings and events are designed by God to lead to our beatitude, the culmination of his love. This means for one thing that the evil situations in which we find ourselves are permitted by God's love to help us towards heaven. They are not the impatient gestures of a disgruntled God. He has not changed his mind and left us to our own stupid devices, though this might seem to explain the impasse we have reached. He offers a way back to his land of promise, a way along which we can show ourselves worthy of that love. He draws men along that way, but in his affection he respects the nature of the creatures he has made. He will not force the free-will of man, or carry him along in an enclosed prison van. Thus we can refuse his charity and turn to our own condemnation what is presented to us for our justification. A man can refuse to proceed along the way of bitter confusion and international disorder. That is no escape, it is a submission to the forces of evil; it is no way out but a way deeper into the mess. It is thus that even hell is fashioned by God's love; but a love confronted by man's rebellious, hating will. Man makes his own hell out of God's loving actions and dispensations.

The way through, therefore, is necessarily a matter of virtue as opposed to vice. Our responsibility lies precisely in co-operating virtuously with the all embracing love of God. The evil state of affairs is the condemnation which man has brought upon himself by sin, by refusal to co-operate. But the will of God permits the evil state to remain that repenting men may transform it into a penitential return to his embrace. These are deep waters and a treatise on the love of God is required to plumb them even partially. But at least this stands out clearly: the sad condition of the world is the result of sin, the impact of human self-will on the loving will of God. The possibilities of redemption offered by this sad condition are the result of the continued and changeless divine love, but the possibilities of this becoming an ever greater and more permanent condemnation are also placed before the selfish will of man.

Now if we pretend that the questions before us of finance or war, of family disintegration, or slave labour, are not matters of sin and virtue but merely of muddled economics or simply the birth pangs of a new knowledge of the world, science, or whatever it may be, we are shirking responsibility and sinking deeper into condemnation. We are turning from the extended arms of God calling us to repent and to return to the constant lover. A great deal of Catholic social teaching refuses to see it in this light at all; it will not consider it in any but natural terms and those of the least moral significance. Any practical social teaching must begin with the love of God—not taking it for granted and so omitting it altogether. Then it must consider virtue and vice, individual responsibility, or it will get nowhere. As we have said, one aspect alone is regarded in this way—that of sex and the sixth commandment. But justice demands the same treatment.

In other words the only possibility of restoring justice is by way of justification. We must discover the sinfulness of actions concerned with the present social system, and, seeing them in terms of sins against God's love, attempt to bring justice and justification into our lives by means of repentance. So long as we view the evils in terms of "conditions" and the impersonal transgression of natural laws, we shall move no wills to repentance. We must view them in the light of the all-embracing love of God and the possibility he offers for redeeming the times by making use of these self-same evils. We must view them in the light of our challenge to the love of God, a challenge which is defiantly shouted in terms of pounds, shillings and pence, as well as of atom bombs and aeroplanes.

The Lent of 1946 might show the first signs of a heeding of the Queen of Heaven's call to penance. She, at every modern appearance, tells men to do penance. Tell *them*, she says; not just "the world" but individual men. So far no one has heeded her demand. Fasting and abstinence have had to be dispensed during the war and no one seems anxious to supply the greater need for satisfaction for sin. The love of God can only work as love in our souls when the barriers have been removed by penitential practise; otherwise we shall continue to turn that love into bitterness within us. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? . . . Yet in all this we are conquerors, through him who has granted us his love . . . Neither death nor life, no angels or principalities or powers, neither what is present nor what is to come, no force whatever, neither the height above us nor the depth beneath us, nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord." (*Rom.* 8, 35).

Dr. Zacharias, in the last issue of **BLACKFRIARS**, showed how the doctrine of this text was the only answer to internment, the way through; and we may see ourselves as in a vast internment camp guarded by scientists and industrialists. We may not capitulate to them. The surrender to evil by deliberate choice or by this modern impersonalism is no escape. It does not even separate us from the love of God—on his side. But capitulation or surrender does thrust us into the depth of misery, from our side. These persecutions, nakedness, principalities, can only separate us from the love of God by sin, and the separation lies on our side not on his. Penance will make us conquerors again, penance for the injustice in which we are now involved; personal mortification for personal crimes and blindnesses that are now separating us from the love of God. The world to-day is full of unsolicited opportunities of penance, and we cannot get away from it. The way through is the way of penance.

THE EDITOR.

ALCIDE DE GASPERI, PRIME MINISTER

THE nomination of the Christian-Democrat, Alcide De Gasperi, as Prime Minister of Italy, marks the breaking of the Liberal and anti-clerical tradition of Italian politics. It is true that the first to be "President of the Council of Ministers" (the historic Italian title), in March, 1848, was Cesare Balbo, a Catholic belonging to the Neo-Guelf current, but after him came a series of Presidents, Catholic indeed, but known as Liberals because they stood for the abolition of the rights and privileges of the Church. The true founder of Italian Liberalism—of a conservative type both politically and economically—was Camillo Benso di Cavour.

Once relations between State and Church were broken, and Catholics constrained to follow the system of political abstention (the *non expedit*), no more opportunities came for the nomination of a President openly professing himself a Catholic, outside the Democratic-Liberal Italian tradition, till the advent of the Popular Party (1919).

The first case presented itself in April, 1920, when the Popular Party had provoked the crisis of the Nitti Cabinet, but then the King chose Nitti himself to form a new ministry. However, through an imprudent move (his decree on the price of corn on the