

BLACKFRIARS

A MONTHLY REVIEW

Edited by the English Dominicans

Published at Blackfriars, St Giles, Oxford

Vol. XXVII, No. 319

OCTOBER 1946

ONE SHILLING

THE POWER OF GOD	The Editor	361
THE RETURN OF FRANCISCUS DE VITORIA	Richard O'Sullivan, K.C.	365
VITORIA AND INTERNATIONAL LAW TODAY	Professor B. Wortley	368
HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE THOUGHT OF VITORIA	Edward Sarmiento ...	378
OBITER	Aldate	387
BOOK FOR THE MONTH	Professor F. de Zulueta	389
OTHER REVIEWS: Richard O'Sullivan, K.C., Gervase Mathew, O.P., Paul Foster, O.P., J. F. T. Prince, etc.		391

THE POWER OF GOD

THERE has been much opportunity of late for pessimism in world affairs. The present issue of BLACKFRIARS may contribute to this in pointing to the powerful promise and possibility of Francis Vitoria, the Dominican whose centenary is celebrated this year. For the foundation of international law laid by him could, if statesmen would agree to recognise and abide by it, restore the equilibrium so insanely lost today. And yet international law alone could achieve little without the supernatural power of religion in the lives of men of virtue to implement it and carry it through. It is the forsaking of supernatural truth and virtue that we must most lament today. On the one hand there is the most hideous power of evil steadily accumulating energy amidst all the discords and mistrust among nations, and on the other men dally with religion, playing as with a toy.

Some readers of BLACKFRIARS have misunderstood and challenged our August Editorial as though we decried the recognition of the will of God in human affairs or were advocating a return to primitive Jahwe-ism under a thundering God. But we were in fact merely pointing to the superficiality of much of our present religious activity and devout explanation of life. It is a fact that to many outside the Church Catholics appear smug and self-satisfied—even in the midst of their energetic organising of Catholic Action, or during their periods

at Mass and in their use of the Sacraments. This is not merely the common criticism that Catholics with the certainty of the Confessional behind them can behave passionately or selfishly with impunity. It goes deeper: people resent the facility with which the faithful will produce the 'Catholic answer' to every problem of human and divine existence, however profound. They resent the way Catholics regard everything as settled, packed up neatly and tucked away into comfortable compartments where no jolt or rub will disturb.

Well may they condemn some Catholics for this superficiality. The infinite power of God which should work through them for the conversion and transformation of the world often seems turned aside into small, and comparatively unimportant, fields of action. There are good men whose Catholic religion has become the religion of the compost heap, of wholemeal flour, of monetary reform or of youth clubs. They think in terms of these useful but minor adjustments in the social order; the big issues of the world are referred to these attempts to cure a few of the symptoms of the mortal ailments which are destroying us. Even if we do not see all reality in terms of the compost heap or the human treatment of animals, we very easily reduce all our problems to that of laxity in morals, lack of obedience in the young, or the spread of materialism. All this is still futilely superficial and smug, bathing and poulticing a few of the minor wounds while the heart's blood is pouring out of the body of men gathered under the title of modern civilisation. And most superficial of all is the sweeping summary, 'It is the will of God', as though that were a final and conclusive solution to all problems.

The true knowledge of God's will begets an awe at the incomprehensibility of his ways. This is the fear and reverence which, as we have already claimed, is lacking among Catholics today. And this fear of the Lord is only the *beginning* of wisdom. It is not a final summary of the situation to see in it the will of God. We ought not to shelve the question at that point; for just at that point each problem becomes real and concrete. It is the first stage in the realisation of the position of man under the hand of the infinite power of God. Having decided that such things are the will of God, we may ask the question: Why does God permit the war, starvation, the cruel harvest weather? The answer so often glibly given that these misfortunes are for Sin, to bring men back to God and to satisfy for past evils should not dismiss the subject but bring it at last close to each individual. It should be followed by the question: What must I do in face of this mysterious and awe-ful will of God?

In the ages of faith periods of disaster called for the awe inspiring

voice of prophetic men, who declared with inspired accents that the plague, famine, war were because of their *hearers'* sins, their own sins. They echoed the voice crying in the wilderness: 'Ye offspring of vipers, who hath shewed you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of penance'. Men in great numbers heard these words, and like the Jews before them asked what they must do, and were converted. At almost every crisis in the past there were such prophets. But today the Word of God seems almost to be stifled. In the face of one of the greatest evils the world has known, the sixth part of the world organised to suppress human nature in abject slavery to the state, when millions are being of set purpose de-humanised, thousands of others shot or starved without mercy, with this evil creeping steadily across Europe and devouring civilisation, men will shrug their shoulders saying that the sufferings of the times are due to the abandonment of the Church of God at the Reformation. Having neatly disposed of so tremendous a disaster and tucked it away with the atom bomb, they turn to the worship of animal welfare. If men were more humane to animals these evils would not happen, they chant in the commination service of their religion. Or they bow before their compost heaps burning the powdered artificial fertilisers as incense before their saviour.

If we may apply a parable in a new way, Catholics declare that Christian marriage must be restored in order to save society—they have married a wife and therefore they cannot come to the peaceful gathering of the converted; they have bought a yoke of oxen and the land must be ploughed to save the world—so they cannot come. All these solutions to modern evils are good and true in their limited sphere; we are not condemning them except in so far as they are made primary—for they do not reach the fundamental solution. The German bishops may rightly complain that the Allies are quoting humanity to deal blows against humanity in Germany, but that is not the voice of the prophet. Or again, Catholic lovers of peace may promulgate a 'Catholic Voluntary Peace Declaration Act', in which Catholics are encouraged, 'to militate for an individual Catholic Peace Effort'.¹ In view of the sober facts to be read in *The Dark Side of the Moon* or *Beyond the Urals*² and elsewhere such declarations come near to insincerity and are of no greater worth than the impotent struggles of statesmen to treat the threat as though non-existent and to admit the perpetrators of this vast crime into their peace conferences. This worship of minor religions satisfies conscien-

¹This declaration is headed "God Wills It". Will you join the International Peacemaker Army of Christ the King of Kings?"

²*The Dark Side of the Moon* (Faber and Faber; 12s. 6d.) and *Beyond the Urals*, by Elma Dangerfield (*Whitehall News*) will be reviewed later this year.

ces and makes them feel they have nothing to do with the countries beyond the Urals or on the dark side of the moon, except to preach Distributism to the vanguards of this evil.

All these remedies are human. Whereas the evil now abroad—already experienced, but in a lesser degree, in Nazi Germany—is beyond the power of man to redeem, as all real evil has ever been. The only power that can restrain such devilry is the power of God, the omnipotent and complete power of the Most High. When therefore we get a glimpse of the meaning of all this suffering and disaster we should begin to realise that what is demanded of each one is Conversion. For the power of God works normally through subsidiary causes and does not strew its path with direct miracles. We acknowledge with our lips the infinite power of grace to restore the divine life in man, but we know that grace is canalised through the instruments comprised in the mystical Body. The power of God could transform the world in a moment, but he waits upon the cooperation of man. This cooperation spreads the seed of the new life in various ways, through the Sacraments, through the spoken word, through example or simply through the silent intercession of contemplative prayer and ascetic penance.

The pharisee clings to the outward, natural expressions of religion but refuses the change of heart which is needed to give the externals any reality. If we cling to the natural decencies of human nature exclusively we shall never unlock the flood-gates of God's grace to sweep over the face of the earth to renew it. What is asked of each one of us today, in face of this inhuman and ghastly disease, is personal conversion. The fear of the Lord must begin in awe of his omnipotent though paternal power and lead on to complete surrender in the dark, so that we know not whither this power will take us. We do know that if we hand ourselves over in this way to the power of God the living waters of grace will begin to be released and to pour over the land, sweeping away all obstacles. St Thomas says that the omnipotence of God is shown most clearly 'in sparing and having mercy, because in this it is made manifest that God has supreme power that he freely forgives sins. For it is not for one who is bound by laws of a superior to forgive sins of his own free will. Or, because by sparing and having mercy upon men, he leads them on to the participation of an infinite good; which is the ultimate effect of the divine power' (I, 25, 3 ad 3).

If each of us individually approach this omnipotence in the spirit of humble penance, converted to God, not trying vainly to convert God to ourselves, we stand in great hope of the release of the divine power to save us from the present evil. But we need a prophet to urge us to change our hearts.

THE EDITOR.