

BLACKFRIARS

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THRASHING TIME

THE autumn is the time for thrashing. The corn is harvested and the good grain is beaten out from the chaff, the straw, the tares. As the summer began we had occasion, with the end of the war in Germany, to point to the Christian Crisis made acute by that event. The sickle was then already laid to the stems of the corn; the season for gathering the fruits of the earth had begun. The season has now closed and the harvest is being gathered. Thrashing time is upon us.

This October brings the actual centenary of John Henry Newman's conversion to the Catholic Church. The main celebrations of this important anniversary have already taken place and a great deal has appeared, or is appearing, regarding the event in all its aspects. During the celebrations of an earlier centenary, that of the Oxford Movement in 1934, BLACKFRIARS devoted a whole issue (July) to Cardinal Newman, containing several articles to which readers should, if possible, now turn back: *Newman's Approach to the Church*, by Luke Walker, O.P., *Early Religious Stages*, by Henry Tristram, *Newman and the Fathers*, by Abbot Chapman, *Newman and the National Church*, by Ælwin Tindal-Atkinson, O.P. For these reasons we do not intend to add much to the extensive centenary literature, except in the Supplement of THE LIFE AND THE SPIRIT, which has been deflected from its primary purpose to give room for some notable articles on Newman. But here we would wish to draw one parallel of special value between the private

step which Newman felt called to take and the general call which now should present itself to all Christian men. It was a time of harvesting and winnowing for Newman at Littlemore; so it is for the world of Christian men to-day.

Our Lord's parables about harvesting insist that the cockle and tares should be allowed to grow up with the corn lest the wheat be destroyed with the weed. But there comes a time eventually when the tares must be separated from the good grain and cast aside. In the growth of an individual soul that point is reached at the moment when one creed must be set aside for the true creed, error relinquished for the true faith. At first the green shoots of truth are hardly distinguished from those of error; the time of mature conviction is still remote. There may be much good, particularly in the Christian behaviour of the growing soul, and much truth in what it believes. But argument and any attempt to force the issue from outside will prove fruitless if not harmful; and it is only as God leads the soul gradually to a fuller consciousness of the relation of his Christian behaviour to the errors which now begin to stand out in contrast that the time of separation approaches. Or it may be that the various articles of his creed are compared more closely and found to be incompatible that the truth begins to stand out, or, to return to our simile, the wheat harvested. God's ways are manifold, but in some such way he will lead the soul to a final choice which demands a sacrifice, perhaps of heroic dimensions when compromise is no longer possible.

Such a separation we celebrate this month on the part of Newman. He has himself left us a clear picture of the development of the true and false, and of the final separation of the two. The great tradition which he inherited in the Church of England drew greatly from the Fathers and no one can deny the fund of truth and goodness which was preserved in that heritage. But this fund of truth and goodness contained the seeds of discrepancies and differences that would not finally produce the same wholesome grain. It was when these discrepancies became apparent that Newman was compelled to take the step that separated him from the source of his earliest knowledge of truths of Christian faith. A hard step, indeed, comparable to the cutting of the wheat and tares from the roots and soil whence they had sprung, and the beating of the grain itself; but an inevitable step if *the* Truth was to be preserved from decay amid the many errors that surrounded it.

A hundred years later it is not a single, noble soul which is presented with an heroic choice, but the whole of the Christian world. The allegiance to Christ and the allegiance to the powers of this world were more easily combined when the seeds of Christian cul-

ture were growing. But as the world's power increases and begins to threaten the Christian conscience and Christian practice the time of separation approaches offering a choice of heroic sacrifice or spiritual destruction. Outside Germany a great number of people felt that the time of separation had arrived in that country at the beginning of the war. There seemed little doubt that the totalitarian war could not be undertaken by a sincere Christian, and there was much 'scandal' concerning the part Catholics played in fighting for Hitler. For the most part the Germans considered that they were fighting for the preservation of their homes and could therefore combine, however insecurely, the two allegiances. They may have been right, but those who criticised them then must now reflect on their own position: the parting of the ways has surely come as close to us as it had to the Germans in 1939. Indeed the time of conversion and sacrifice would seem to be very near not merely to one nation but to every Christian, and the sacrifice will be even more bitter than would have been that of the German Catholics had they refused to serve under the Führer.

There are many evils in our own industrial system which require not only reforming, but eradicating. So far these evils have been combined with a form of Christian living, a combination which has become increasingly unhappy and insecure. Big business and the modern conception of absolute ownership do not fit easily with our Lord's teaching on the spirit of poverty; the man-centred humanism fed and puffed out by the modern advance in science has little in common with the call to penance uttered first by St. John the Baptist and continued by Our Lady in her appearances at Lourdes and Fatima; the common attitude to marriage has become estranged from the Christian blessing for an abundant family; employment has become serfdom instead of the freedom of the children of God; the State takes more and more responsibility where the directive of the Church should be sufficient. These and many other effects of secularism have made it increasingly difficult for an eager Christian to live as he would wish to live. Here and there men have tried to escape to some form of simpler life, alone or in community. Escape has, however, proved impossible in a society which spreads itself everywhere and which encroaches on every part of man's life; and these attempts at an individual conversion away from the common run of life have in the end been choked before they could bear fruit, as the young wheat is choked by cockle.

Until recently it was possible to live the "normal" life in society without compromising too seriously one's Christian principles. It was as negative as that; no encouragement or support was given to the Christian to live as a Christian, but it was seemingly possible

to carry on without offending God. Now, however, we seem to have come very close to the thrasher which will beat out the compromises. If, for example, we become engaged in another war, shall we be able any longer to combine the two allegiances, fighting even for "liberty and democracy"? During the war, which has at last come to an end, we were first asked to support aerial bombing of military objectives behind the lines; but this soon became area-bombing of civilians, and finally we found ourselves fighting in a war in which we sickly annihilated tens of thousands of men, women and children without warning by a single and small weapon of war. The first action seemed defensible in a just war—and the bombs were brought back when the objectives could not be seen. But the next steps were increasingly criminal, the cockle revealed itself and harvest time came sooner than men had anticipated. We had in fact been fighting on the principle that in order to gain the victory any means is justifiable in war. There is no sign that a future war would be fought on any other principle; a secular state cannot trouble about Christian principles of morality. A conversion on the scale of Newman's would therefore seem to call a great mass of men.

The separating of the good from the bad grain is only effected by the flail, and the thrashing of the Christian folk will be severe and bitter. It occurred at various harvest seasons in the early Church, and it often meant the choice between martyrdom and apostasy. Modern methods of thrashing may differ from those of earlier Christian times, but the flail is always fierce and the true Christian is asked for heroic sacrifice to avoid virtual apostasy. If the rapidly increasing totalitarianism of the Left in this country reaches the dimensions of Nazism, Fascism or Communism, the true Christian with the Russian, Italian and German examples before him, will no longer have an excuse for compromise. Standing outside a country one may easily discern, or have the impression of discerning, the light from the shade. The Englishman thinks he can see what choice the German Catholic should have made, but if he were presented with the same choice at home he would not be so decided. There is so much that is good in this English secular society, so many good things preserved for centuries by the typical sense of "fair play", honour and decency. Since 1940 the country has come in for considerable praise and even emulation from many countries for the still virile and sturdy nature of its culture; and there is some justification for this praise. The culture which has nurtured us, though full of compromise, has given Englishmen a balance which at least preserves them from the excesses of some more southerly nations. To be compelled to stand out against this,

to appear to men to deny the good things of our society, to be condemned as unpatriotic and ungrateful for what we have received from our home and country, all this will be as difficult and fraught with as much pain as Newman's own break from the Church which reared him. And it will mean, too, attack from one's countrymen, persecution and perhaps the ultimate price paid by the few who stood out against Nazi compulsion. Only the few will survive this winnowing. It is a prospect of terror, of desertion on a large scale. It is always so: heroism is never common.

The number of those who remain faithful, however, may be increased if the time of thrashing is anticipated. Preparation is required. As long as we shut our eyes to the direction in which our own society is now travelling, and as long as we believe that we can muddle through with compromises to the end, we shall be caught unawares when the decision, the 'conversion', has to be made. The need of preparation is urgent, and the ways and means of preparation are manifold. We should clarify the issues in our own minds to see exactly where the Christian should stand in his attitude in the moral problems of the day, war and peace, industrialism, 'Left' and Right' . . . Again Catholics should make great efforts to co-operate with each other across the frontiers of race and nationality. The old Protestant fear of a Roman Catholic international power has been no more than a ludicrous dream ever since, at the rise of modern nationalism, the English Catholic fought under Drake against the Spanish invaders. The faith does not make international blocks in the sphere of politics. But it should provide a centre for all Catholic movements that are designed to link men in peace and friendship. The recent conference of Pax Romana has shown how powerful this fellowship can be among a certain section of Catholics throughout the world. The Conference was, in fact, one of the few hopeful meetings that the end of the war has brought with it. Catholic students and graduates from all over the world met together to express their common faith and their common purpose, and, considering the importance of the University in the modern world, this gathering might be regarded as a key to all future Catholic work for peace. But the movement must be extended beyond the walls of Universities and Colleges to every single Catholic from China to Chile, from Iceland to the Cape. They must all be brought face to face with the modern challenge of pagan chaos, assisted to cease from compromise and live in accordance with their redeemed human nature. If there were a single Catholic attitude to the Atomic Bomb, to Industrialism, to the Cinema, to Family Life, and an attitude which would be sufficiently defined to lead to action, then the flail when it descended would thrash out a great harvest of good grain.

THE EDITOR.