

THE PERILS OF REFORM

THE EDITOR

THE technique of the Gospel Enquiry, which has been so important a factor in the providential growth of the Lay Apostolate in recent years, has perhaps a wider application than is usually realised. A knowledge of the facts must go before any judgment upon them, and such a judgment in its turn must precede action. The process is inherent in human affairs, if their direction is to be human at all. And, motivated by grace, it is proving in our own time to be the means by which the redemption of a pagan world may be begun.

The immense interest aroused by the contemporary experiments (for such they are) of the Church in France has not always been matched by an appreciation of the true reason for them. That priests should work in factories seems a startling reversal of the accepted priestly function: the exceptional action is news, whereas the process on which it depends for its validity is less exciting. The latest document to appear in English on the efforts to christianise the French proletariat, *Mission to the Poorest*, is the account of a Dominican priest who has worked as a docker in Marseilles and who is now the leader of a community of priests (secular, Dominican and Jesuit) who look after the spiritual needs of a docker's parish both by their manual work alongside their parishioners and by the normal exercise of their priesthood.

Part of the significance of Père Loew's book is that it is a serious piece of documentation, for he is the author, too, of *Les Dockers de Marseille*, a sociological essay which analyses exactly and impartially the conditions of labour, the problems of race and housing, all the factors, indeed, that affect a community at once complex and traditional, wholly at the mercy of an unstable economy. It was through this careful technical study, fortified by the daily sharing of the people's life, at work on the dockside as well as at home in the tenements, that Père Loew came to his mission: a parish that should be 'proletarianised' in the sense that a Chinese parish should be made Chinese, demanding therefore radical changes in the mode of life of the clergy.

It can easily be assumed that a desperate situation—and it is the present Pope who has said that ‘the Christian life has become practically impossible for the great mass of the people’—calls for desperate remedies. Rather what is needed first of all is an objective scrutiny of the situation itself. And if the most urgent problem of the apostolate is to transform that ‘paganism with Christian superstitions’ which Père Loew describes in an extreme form in the dockland of Marseilles, the need for a Catholic sociology is seen to be a pressing one.

For each country, with its own varieties of social structure and religious life, the problem must be dealt with as a unique one. Much may be learnt from such organisations as *Economie et Humanisme*, of which Père Loew is himself a member and whose methods he so brilliantly exemplifies. But the detailed investigation of a situation, and, even more, of the methods for its redemption, must be worked out in the light of that situation, with a proper understanding of the individuation of personal life and social habit which indeed the whole meaning of the Incarnation itself demands. It sometimes seems that in this country, deprived as it is of the opportunities provided by a Catholic university and professional training within the setting of a Christian philosophy, generalisations take the place of the hard work of finding out the facts. Even the distribution of the Catholic population remains a matter largely of guesswork, and the recent investigation by the Young Christian Workers into the conditions of Irish workers in Birmingham (referred to in *The Furrow* for September) shows how much can be done, even by voluntary workers, to establish the true state of affairs, the actual material with which any attempt at ‘redemption’ must reckon.

The extension of the opportunities for Catholic adult education in England may, one hopes, see a serious effort to develop a true Catholic sociology, making use, as it should, of all that a technical training in economics, social psychology and modern methods of investigation can bring to the resolution of a problem which demands knowledge before judgment, judgment before action. Here, most surely, grace can find its work less impeded if the ‘natural’ work of investigation has gone before.