Christian Democracy in Pre-Reformation Times

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We are all of us, I take it, interested in the social questions which nowadays are clamouring for consideration. In all parts of the civilized globe the voice of democracy has made itself heard; it has arrested the attention of rulers and statesmen, and has proved that the day when popular aspirations received sufficient answer in the *sic volo sic jubeo* of the autocrat is past, and, moreover, that the "masses" have at least as much right to be considered as the "classes." Perhaps fortunately for myself, I am not directly concerned to explain, much less to defend, the principles of what is broadly known as "Christian democracy." About all this matter opinions differ very widely indeed; and although, I suppose, we may all of us, in these days, claim to be socialists of some kind of type, there is obviously, even amongst us Catholics, such divergence of opinion that any preliminary attempt to clear the ground with a view to agreement even on first principles is not uncommonly productive of no small amount of heat and temper. My concern is happily with facts not with theories, with the past not with the present. I confess that personally, I like to feel my feet upon the ground, and facts furnish undoubtedly the best corrective for mere theorizing which, at times, is apt to run away with all of us, and to give rise either to unwarranted hopes or unnecessary fears. In the belief that even "the dark ages" have their useful lessons for us whose lot has been cast in these times, I propose to lay before you briefly the teaching of the Church of England in pre-Reformation days, as to the relations which should exist between the classes of every Christian community, and to illustrate by a few examples the way in which the teaching was translated into practice by our Catholic ancestors.

The Relation Between Rich and Poor

There can be no doubt as to the nature of the teaching of the English Church in regard to the relation which, according to true Christian principles, should exist between the rich and the poor. The evidence appears clear and unmistakable enough in pre-Reformation popular sermons and instructions, in formal pronouncements of Bishops and Synods, and in books intended for the particular teaching of clergy and laity in the necessary duties of the Christian man. Whilst fully recognizing as a fact that "the poor must always be with us" — that in the very nature of things there must ever be the class of those who "have" and the class of those who "have not" — our Catholic forefathers knew no such division and distinction between the rich and the poor man as obtained later on, when Protestant principles had asserted their supremacy, and pauperism, as distinct from poverty, had come to be recognized as an inevitable consequence of the policy introduced with the new era. To the Christian moralist, and even to the Catholic Englishman, whether secular or lay, in the fifteenth century, those who had been blessed by God's providence with worldly wealth were regarded as not so much the fortunate possessors of personal riches, their own to do with what they listed and upon which none but they had right or claim, as in the light of

trusted stewards of God's good gifts to mankind at large, for the right use and ministration of which they were accountable to Him who gave them.

Thus, to take one instance: the proceeds of ecclesiastical benefices were recognized in the Constitutions of Legates and Archbishops as being in fact as well as in theory the *eleemosynae*, the *spes pauperum* — the alms and the hope of the poor. Those ecclesiastics who consumed the revenues of their cures on other than necessary and fitting purposes were declared to be "defrauders of the rights of God's poor" and "thieves of Christian alms intended for them;" whilst the English canonists and legal professors who glossed these provisions of the Church law gravely discussed the ways in which the poor of a parish could vindicate their right — right, mind — to a share in the ecclesiastical revenues of their Church.

This *jus pauperum*, which is set forth in such a text-book of English law as Lyndwood's *Provinciale*, is naturally put forth more clearly and forcibly in a work intended for popular instruction, such as *Dives et Pauper*. "To them that have the benefices and goods of Holy Church," writes the author, "it belonged principally to give alms and to have the cure of poor people." To him who squanders the alms of the altar on luxury and useless show the poor man may justly point and say: "It is ours that you so spend in pomp and vanity! That thou keepest for thyself of the altar passing the honest needful living, it is raveny, it is theft, it is sacrilege." From the earliest days of English Christianity the care of the helpless poor was regarded as an obligation incumbent on all: and in 1342 Archbishop Stratford, dealing with appropriations, or the assignment of ecclesiastical revenue to the support of some religious house or college, ordered that a portion of the tithe should always be set apart for the relief of the poor, because, as Bishop Stubbs has pointed out, in England from the days of King Ethelred "a third part of the tithe" which belonged to the Church was the acknowledged birthright of the poorer members of Christ's flock.

That there was social inequality goes without saying, for that is in the very constitution of human society, and may indeed be said to be a very law of human nature. In feudal times this obvious truth passed unquestioned as the divine law of the universe, and with the overthrow of the system in the thirteenth century there was created a chasm between the upper and lower classes which it was the interest of popular agitators and demagogues to widen and deepen. But even then, in theory at least, the claims of poverty were as fully recognized as the duty of riches. The verses of Piers Ploughman and the Canterbury Tales, and even the words of "the mad preacher," John Ball, are not more clear as to the existence of the social difficulties of those days and the claims put forward in the name of justice to common humanity, than the language of the great and fearless orator, Bishop Brunton, as to the religious obligations of Christian riches. Again and again, in his sermons, this great preacher reminds his hearers of the fact that poor and rich have alike descended from a common stock, and that no matter what their condition of life may be, all Christians are members of one body and are bound one to the other by the duties of a common brotherhood.

Still more definite is the author of the book of popular instruction, *Dives et Pauper*, above referred to. The sympathy of the writer is with the poor, as indeed is that of every ecclesiastical writer of the period. In fact it is abundantly clear that the Church in England in Catholic days, as a *pia mater*, was ever ready to open wide her heart to aid and protect the poorer members of Christ's mystical body. This is how Pauper, in the tract in question, states the Christian teaching as to the duty of riches, and impresses upon his readers the view that the owners of worldly wealth are but stewards of the Lord: "All that the rich man hath, passing his honest living after the degree of his dispensation, it is other men's, not his, and he shall give full hard reckoning thereof at the day of

doom, when God shall say to him: 'Yield account of your bailiwick.' For rich men and lords in this world are God's bailiffs and God's reeves, to ordain for the poor folk and to sustain them." Most strongly does the same writer insist that no property gives any one the right to say "this is mine" and that is thine; for property so far as it is of God is of the nature of governance and dispensation," by which those who by God's Providence "have," act as His stewards and as the dispensers of His gifts to such as "have not."

The words of Pope Leo XIII. as to the Catholic teaching, most accurately describe the practical doctrine of the English pre-Reformation Church on this matter: "The chiefest and most excellent rule for the right use of money," he says, "rests on the principle that it is one thing to have a right to the possession of money and another to have the right to use money as one pleases... If the question be asked, How must one's possessions be used? the Church replies without hesitation in the words of the same holy Doctor (St. Thomas): Man should not consider his outward possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without difficulty when others are in need. When necessity has been supplied and one's position fairly considered, it is a duty to give to the indigent out of that which is over. It is a duty, not of justice (except in extreme cases), but of Christian charity... (and) to sum up what has been said: Whoever has received from the Divine bounty a large share of blessings... has received them for the purpose of using them for the perfecting of his own nature, and, at the same time, that he may employ them, as the minister of God's Providence, for the benefit of others."

The Condition of the Poor

There is no need to dwell upon this point, as there can be no doubt as to the practical teaching of the Church in Catholic England on the subject of the duties of the "classes" to the "masses." I pass at once to the actual state of the poor in the times which preceded what a modern writer has fitly called "the Great Pillage." It would be, of course, absurd, to suggest that poverty and much hardness of life did not exist in pre-Reformation days; but what did not exist in Catholic times was that peculiar product which sprung up so plentifully amid the ruins of Catholic institutions overthrown by Tudor sovereigns, pauperism. Bishop Stubbs, speaking of the condition of the poor in the Middle Ages, declares that "there is very little evidence to show that our forefathers in the middle ranks of life desired to set any impassable boundary between class and class... Even the villein by learning a craft might set his foot on the ladder of promotion. The most certain way to rise was furnished by education and by the law of the land. 'Every man or woman, of what state or condition that he be, shall be free to set their son or daughter to take learning at any school that pleaseth him within the realm.'"

Mr. Thorold Rogers, than whom no one has ever worked more fully at the economic history of England, and whom none can suspect of undue admiration of the Catholic Church, has left it on record that during the century and a half which preceded the era of the Reformation the mass of English labourers were thriving under their guilds and trade unions, the peasants were gradually acquiring their lands and becoming small freeholders, the artisans rising to the position of small contractors and working with their own hands at structures which their native genius and experience had planned. In a word, according to this high authority, the last years of undivided Catholic England formed "the golden age" of the Englishman who was ready and willing to work.

"In the age which I have attempted to describe," writes the same authority, "and in describing which I have accumulated and condensed a vast amount of unquestionable facts, the rate of production

was small, the conditions of health unsatisfactory, and the duration of life short. But, on the whole, there were none of those extremes of poverty and wealth which have excited the astonishment of philanthropists, and are now exciting the indignation of workmen. The age, it is true, had its discontents, and these discontents were expressed forcibly and in a startling manner. But of poverty, which perishes unheeded, of a willingness to do honest work and a lack of opportunity, there was little or none. The essence of life in England during the days of the Plantagenets and Tudors was that every one knew his neighbour, and that every one was his brother's keeper."

The Reformation and the Poor

This period was put an end to, in Mr. Rogers' opinion, by the confusion and social disorder consequent upon the introduction of the new principles of the Reformers, and the uprooting of the old Catholic institutions.

To relieve the Reformation from the odious charge that it was responsible for the poor laws, many authors have declared that not only did poverty largely exist before, say, the dissolution of the monastic houses, but that it would not long have been possible for the ancient methods of relieving the distressed to cope with the increase in their numbers under the changed circumstances of the sixteenth century. It is, of course, possible to deal with broad assertions only by the production of a mass of details, which is, under the present circumstances, out of the question, or by assertions equally broad: and I remark that there is no evidence of any change of circumstances, so far as such changes appear in history, which could not have been fully met by the application of the old principles, and met in a way which would never have induced the degree of distressing pauperism, which in fact was produced by the application of the social principles adopted by the Reformers. The underlying idea of these latter was property in the sense of absolute ownership, in place of the older and more Christian idea of property in the sense of stewardship. In a word the Reformation substituted the idea of individualism as the basis of property for the idea of Christian collectivism.

Most certainly the result was not calculated to improve the condition of the poorer members of the community. It was they who were made to pay for the Reformation, whilst their betters pocketed the price. The well-to-do classes in the process became richer and more prosperous, whilst the "masses" became, as an old writer has it, "mere stark beggars." As a fact, moreover, poverty became rampant, as we should have expected, immediately upon the great confiscations of land and other property at the dissolution of the religious houses. To take one example: Dr. Sharpe's knowledge of the records of the city of London enables him to say that: "the sudden closing of these institutions caused the streets to be thronged with the sick and poor, and the small parish churches to be so crowded with those who had been accustomed to frequent the larger and more commodious churches of the friars that there was scarce room left for the parishioners themselves."

"The Devil," exclaims a preacher who lived through all these troublous times — "the Devil cunningly turneth things to his own way." "Examples of this we have seen in our time more than I can have leisure to express or to rehearse. In the Acts of Parliament that we have had made in our days what godly preambles have gone afore the same, even *quasi oraculum Apollinis*, as though the things that follow had come from the counsel of the highest in Heaven; and yet the end hath been either to destroy abbeys or chauntries or colleges, or such like, by the which some have gotten much land, and have been made men of great possessions. But many an honest poor man hath been undone by it, and an innumerable multitude hath perished for default and lack of substance. And this misery hath long continued, and hath not yet [1556] an end." Moreover, "all this commotion

and fray was made under pretence of a common profit and common defence, but in very deed it was for private and proper lucre."

In the sixty years which followed the overthrow of the old system, it was necessary for Parliament to pass no fewer than twelve Acts dealing with the relief of distress, the necessity for which, Thorold Rogers says, "can be traced distinctly back to the crimes of rulers and agents." I need not characterize the spirit which is manifested in these Acts, where poverty and crime are treated as indistinguishable; it was not the spirit of old Catholic days, but it was the spirit of "Protestant individualism" carried into the sphere of social economy.

Not the Good but the Goods of the Church

The fact is, as we are now beginning to find out, the change of religion in England was not effected so much by those who hungered and thirsted after purity of doctrine and simplicity of worship, who hated iniquity and what they held to be superstition, as by those who were on the look-out to better their own interests in a worldly point of view, and who saw in the overthrow of the old ecclesiastical system their golden opportunity. These "new men" looked not so much to the "good" as to the "goods" of the Church, and desired more the *conversio rerum* than any *conversio morum*. What Jansens long ago showed to be the case in Germany, and what Mr. Phillipson and M. Hanotaux declare to be certainly true of France, is hardly less clear in regard to England, when the matter is gone into, namely, that the Reformation was primarily a social and economic revolution, the true meaning of which was in the event successfully disguised under the cloak of religion with the assistance of a few earnest and possibly honest fanatics.

It is, to say the least, strange that the religious innovations synchronized so exactly with ruthless and wholesale confiscations of the old Catholic benefactions for the poor, and with the appropriation of funds intended by the donors for their benefit, to purposes other than the relief of distress. Putting aside the dissolution of the religious corporations, the destruction of the chantries, the wholly unjustifiable confiscation of the property of the guilds, the heartless seizure of hospitals and almshouses, the substitution of the well-to-do for the poor as the recipients of the benefits coming from the foundation funds of schools and colleges, even the introduction of married clergy whose wives and children had to be supported on the portion of the ecclesiastical benefices intended for the relief of poverty, and much more of the same kind, are all so many indications of the new spirit of Individualism, which produced the great social revolution commonly known as the Protestant Reformation. It was a revolution indeed, but a revolution not in the ordinary sense. It was a rising, not of people against their rulers, nor of those in hunger and distress against the well-to-do, but it was in truth the rising of the rich against the poor, the violent seizure by the new men in power of the funds and property which generations of benefactors had intended for the relief of the needy, or by educational and other endowments to assist the poor man to rise in the social scale.

Confiscation of Guilds

It is, of course, impossible, within the narrow limits of this brief paper to go as deeply into the subject as it deserves. Fortunately the facts lie on the surface of the history of the 16th century, and whatever desire may have existed to cover them up, now that the sources of authentic information are open to all, they can no longer be denied. I will content myself here with a brief reference to the confiscation of the chantries and guilds which took place, as all know, in the first year of King

Edward VI., and I shall endeavour to illustrate what I have to say by examples taken mainly from this county of Nottingham.

It may at first sight, perhaps, not appear very obvious what the question of the chantries has to do with the present subject. But this is simply because the purpose for which these adjuncts to parish churches existed has not been understood. We have been taught to believe that a "chantry" only meant a place (chapel or other locality) where Masses were offered for the repose of the soul of the donor, and other specified benefactors. No doubt there were such chantries existing, but to imagine that they were the rule is wholly to mistake the purpose of such foundations. Speaking broadly, the chantry priest was the assistant priest, or, as we should nowadays say, curate of the parish, who was supported by the foundation funds of the benefactors for that purpose, and even not infrequently by the contributions of the inhabitants. For the most part their *raison d'être* was to look after the poor of the parish, to visit the sick, and to assist in the functions of the parish church. Moreover, connected with these chantries were very commonly what were called "obits," which were not, as we have been asked to believe, mere money payments to the priest for anniversary services; but were for the most part money left quite as much for annual alms to the poor as for the celebration of the anniversary services.

Let us take a few examples. In this city of Nottingham there were two chantries connected with the parish church of St. Mary, that of Our Lady and that called Amyas Chantry. The former, we are told, was founded "to maintain the services and to be an aid to the vicar, and partly to succour the poor," the latter to assist in "God's service," and to pray for William Amyas, the founder. When the commissioners in the first year of Edward VI. came to inquire into the possession of these chantries, they were asked to note that in this parish there were "1,400 houseling people, and that the vicar there had no other priests to help but the above two chantry priests." I need not say that they were not spared on this account, for within two years we find the property upon which these two priests were supported had been sold to two speculators in such parcels of land — John Howe and John Broxholme.

Then again, in the parish of St. Nicholas, we find from the returns that the members of the Guild of the Virgin contributed to the support of a priest. In the parish there were more than 200 houseling people, and as the parish living was very poor, there was no other priest to look after them but this one, John Chester, who was paid by the Guild. The King's officials, however, did not hesitate to confiscate the property on this account. It is useless to multiply instances of this kind, some hundreds of which might be given in the county of Nottingham alone.

I will, however, take one or two examples of "obits" in this part of the world: In the parish of South Wheatley there were parish lands let out to farm which produced eighteenpence a year, say from £1 to £1 4s. of our money. Of this sum one shilling was for the poor and sixpence for church lights, that is two-thirds or, say, 16s. of our money was for the relief of the distressed. So in the parish of Tuxford the church "obit" lands produced £1 5s. 4d., or more than £16 a year, of which 16s. 4d. was for the poor and 9s. for the church expenses. It is almost unnecessary to add that the Crown took the whole sum intended for the poor, as well as that for the support of the ecclesiastical services. Neither can we hold, I fear, that the robbery of the poor was accidental and unpremeditated. I know that it has been frequently asserted that although grave injury was undoubtedly done to the poor and needy in this way, it was altogether inevitable, since the money thus intended for them was so inextricably bound up with property to which religious obligations (now declared to be superstitious and illegal) were attached, that the whole passed together into the royal exchequer. I confess that I

should like to consider that this spoliation of the sick and needy by the Crown of England was accidental and unpremeditated, but there are the hard facts which cannot be got over. The documents prove unmistakably that the attention of the officials was drawn to the claims of the poor, and that in every such case these claims were disregarded, and a plain intimation is given that the Crown intended to take even the pittance of the poor.

The Guilds

I pass to the question of the Guilds. They were the benefit societies and provident associations of the Middle Ages. They undertook towards their members the duties now frequently performed by burial clubs, by hospitals, by almshouses, and by guardians of the poor. "It is quite certain that town and country guilds obviated pauperism in the Middle Ages," writes Mr. Thorold Rogers. "They assisted in steadying the price of labour, and formed a permanent centre for those associations which fulfilled the function that in more recent times trade unions have striven to satisfy." In these days, I fancy, no one would care to defend the abolition of these friendly and charitable societies and to justify the confiscation of their corporate property, which may be taken as for the most part representing the accumulated savings of the working classes. Moreover, in putting an end to the Guild system, the Reformers did a far greater injury than can be gauged by the amount of the money seized. A large proportion of the revenues of these societies was derived from the entrance fees and annual subscriptions of the existing members, and in dissolving them the State swept away the organisation by which these voluntary subscriptions were raised. In this way far more harm was done to the interests of the poor, sick, and aged, and in fact to the body politic at large, than was caused by the mere loss of their hard-earned savings.

I have here merely indicated some lines of inquiry, especially on the ecclesiastical side, into matters of fact which, if followed out, may help us to come to some sound knowledge of the principles which guided our Catholic forefathers in these matters, and which I think may be safely called the principles of Christian Democracy, or Christian Collectivism. That Christian Democracy was, I think, manifested before the Reformation in this — that the community, parishes, trades, &c., did in fact show full appreciation of the principles of self-help and mutual assistance. Self-help and self-government showed themselves in popular efforts to carry out common objects as far as possible, and to secure the common good. The community possessed common interests in numberless things, had common lands, common cattle, and other stock: and in a word the tendency was to create a system of common property which owed its existence largely to the people themselves. Since the Reformation we need only look at the principles demonstrated by the laws: we see for generations that the bent of legislation was to do away with what was common — the principle of Tudor enclosure carried out to the fullest extent. It is evident that the idea of the "common" is opposed utterly to the idea of absolute property, whilst the root idea of Christian Democracy is that the social order is founded upon the principle, which is also the Christian idea, that property is of the nature of a trust and stewardship, rather than that of absolute, individual possession. I need not point out how the firm apprehension of this principle must influence our judgment on many of the schemes and practical proposals of the day.