

The Spirited Nucleus

Looking out over the whole world, it is afflicting to see the flight which religion and truth have to make to survive, while on the other hand evil flourishes as it were naturally. Cardinal Newman investigates this phenomenon and draws from it a couple of his remarkable arguments. With the first of these we must find ourselves in agreement because it is just a statement of the Christian position. It is that this universal strength and prevalence of evil is the visible proof of the existence of Original Sin. This adequately explains why the very atmosphere of the world seems to be one of evil; why wrong is so much in the ascendancy. If we deny Original Sin, says the great cardinal, then let us be told whence comes that strange potency of evil. How is it to be explained? He judged this to be an unanswerable argument, so much so as to form the basis of the Christian position.

With regard to his second argument, I do not feel so comfortable. He discusses the ever present weakness of the Church, always ailing, failing and falling in the flesh of its members. Its moments of weakness are many,

indeed unceasing. Its moments of triumph are few. The struggling along in that constant misery seems to be the pattern of its life. It will only be at the end of the world that the time of victory will begin.

I hope I am not exaggerating his contention a little, but I must say that I am not captivated by that idea of his. On the other hand I am not to be understood as suggesting that all should be success and triumph. The evil principle is too assertive for that and our human weakness is too considerable to allow a total triumph. But that the Church should present little else than feebleness and pain, and that survival is its big achievement, I rebel against that idea.

Yet that is what seems to be going on. As we cast back our eyes over the past we see all the venerable Christian nations weaken in their course and then fall away from the Faith which they had helped to build up. As soon as a Christian community appears to be successfully launched on a career of increase and conquest, those weaknesses step in and take charge. The struggle becomes one for that mere survival and the Christian programme becomes an affair of lip service only. It is as if the building of the nations and communities has invariably omitted vital elements. As if, for instance, they were building in wood where ants destroy that material. Or as if they were constructing in iron without protecting it against rust. Immediately those industrious enemies begin to eat away what has been built and someday the structure will come tumbling down. Or else it is only going to stand by being ignominiously propped up.

Watch every Christian community today and you will find it fighting that losing battle, not able to maintain itself as a Christian achievement. Look at them writhing in the convulsions of a veritable anarchy.

But instead of soothing ourselves with the argument that such is the inevitable sequel to Original Sin, let us consider for a moment if we Christians are really playing our parts. Perhaps we may find that in those situations evil has been doing its duty truly and well, but that good has not. In other words, that we may be blaming off on some supernatural or psychological complex what is simply due to defect on our own part. What may be basically wrong are our Catholic standards.

Now I recede from that wider prospect and I place before you something in the handbook which may have vital bearing. The full force of its message is perhaps obscured because it is set out in the form of an anecdote. It is that conversation between St Pius X and a group of cardinals. He asked them to state their opinions as to what was most necessary to save society. In turn each of the cardinals gave his own answer to that question. All were different. One said build Catholic schools; another multiply churches; another recruit more clergy; another help the Catholic press. No, said the Pope to each successive suggestion. Then when all had spoken he declared: 'What is most necessary, is to have in each place a group of lay people; virtuous, enlightened, determined and really apostolic.'

Here we must ask why, according to the judgement of that saintly Pope, the churches and the schools and the clergy and the press should thus be secondary. It is because the Pope is formulating a religious principle of the first magnitude. He is laying down a law for the influencing of collections of men. Nothing could be more important than this, so let us study it.

Actually the Legion is an embodiment of that very principle. Much of the success of the Legion flows from the force of that principle. We must examine it to see why.

All populations, whether as big as the nation or as small as a parish or a village, are essentially passive in their nature. They are prey to the active elements which exist among them. Because those active elements are many and different, and their interaction in the community a very complicated process, I cannot attempt an analysis. Moreover, many of those influences are lesser ones and cancel each other out. So I am going to reduce all that intricacy to the simple contest between evil and good.

In every community, no matter how good, there will be an evil element, but by an extraordinary feature contrasting with what obtains in regard to good, that evil element will be intensely active, very convinced and going about its business with fervour. Sometimes in the case of a good community that evil body may be relatively small and may have to operate under false colours. That smallness and hiddenness must not deceive us into thinking that its influence is negligible. No, it is great, because mere numbers compared with intensity are like matter compared with mind. That little group will distil poison and keep it trickling destructively through the community. Wrong motives will be imputed to everyone. All authority or any canon of decency, are declared to be a transgression against the freedom of the individual. Anything rising above the materialistic conceptions is the butt for effective jeering, so that it becomes impossible to talk in accents of idealism. Especially religion will be the target. Believers are labelled priest-ridden, narrow minded, in the grip of superstition. Religion is a money making business. Moreover, science has disproved religion; one would have to be a lunatic or a fool to be religious in the face of that judgement of science! And so on.

In places which are still fairly good the temptation is to disregard that propaganda as trivial in size and in effect. That could be a costly error because that campaign is not ineffective; it is so effective that it is almost certain to prevail.

But why should it? What about the good nucleus which will no doubt be found side-by-side with the evil one, opposing it? Unfortunately the good one will usually be missing. There will be nothing which can be described as an equivalent nucleus to the one which we have been considering. There may be good influences. I make a distinction between a good influence and the potent nucleus because there is a radical difference. In practice there will be nothing meriting the name of a force except the evil one. The field will be left to it and in the end it will have its way. In the absence of a real counter force in the community, that devil's potion will quietly leak home into minds, cool loyalties, awaken prejudice, sow doubts, poison the minds of the community, usher in an anti-Christian order.

All that will be a simple operation in the absence of the spirited nucleus. Now perhaps we will see the reason for the high precedence given by Pius X to that devoted group; why he should put it before clergy, churches, schools and press. If not held in check by a good nucleus, that evil one is going to neutralise everything that the agencies of good are working for.

That much said no doubt all will acknowledge the need for the devoted nucleus in each community. But it is more easily proposed than set up. Everybody will agree in principle, but when it comes down to the 'how' and the 'what', that is the difficulty.

Why should such a difficulty exist, considering that the evil nucleus arises almost spontaneously and may be

said to spread itself? Yes, that is so because it functions on natural ideas. It is more certain of itself. The evil thought possesses an attractiveness that the spiritual one has not got, so that belief is vulnerable to unbelief.

The creation of the good nucleus is a problem because it is not enough to be merely good. There are many good societies and groups. But there are few that can be called forces.

And here I come to my point. I believe that the praesidium is readymade material for that nucleus. It seems to have a universal application. It can safely attend to the humbler occupations which go towards the pastoral care of souls. It can enter into an economically devastated and dispirited countryside, and quickly produce amelioration. It can help to evangelise nations and one of its ambitions is to play a part in giving religion back to Russia! It does not do these things out of any native virtue of its own, but because it knows how to put the Christian doctrine of the Mystical Body into detailed and determined action.

But the present intention is not that of discussing the praesidium as a solver of problems or as a converting agency, or as an apostolic mechanism, but in its special aspect of spirited nucleus; that is as the counter agency in the community to the subversive, anarchical evil nucleus. In order to illustrate this prospect I have to take some very big situations, which indeed could hardly be greater. Incidentally, I remark that the greater will presumably contain the less. If the Legion is able to work on those gigantic problems, presumably it could work with equal success on simpler ones. I take the cases of China, Kerala, Ceylon [Sri Lanka] and the Congo. In each of these places the Legion began its career, which was destined to be so dynamic, with a single inconspicuous praesidium, not

worth a second glance from worldly eyes. Yet in a few years it found itself in the position of being that spirited nucleus, confronting mighty forces. These latter had also started off as spirited nuclei, and had grown to the point of seizing power and were dominating their respective situations.

In one of those cases, China, the Legion was battered to death. But the victory was only won because the government was untrue to its principles. The point merits closest attention because it is of major importance. For how can any organisation, even a nation, claim to have succeeded if that success has been secured in defiance of its main principles? Such a body cannot claim respect. It is obviously unfit to have responsibility. It can but demoralise those over whom it has authority.

When the Civil War ended, Communism saw itself unchallenged with total control over the people. So it judged that it could act in terms of freedom and toleration. Into the Constitution went the declaration of religious liberty. That meant that the missionaries and the Legion were left free to work. This they did with such effectiveness that conversions became numerous, attracting the anxious attention of the government.

But we may ask ourselves: Why should they be disturbed because some thousands were becoming Christians? Had they not the uncountable millions in their own hands, as well as all the machinery of indoctrination and influence? But worried they were, and I propose the reason. The government did not weigh the multitude against the conversions, but the legionaries against their own inner circle of convinced adherents. They understood the principle of the devoted nucleus, for it is on that principle that Communism works. They saw that in the Legion of probably 40,000 members they faced a force like unto

themselves. Against it they felt themselves to be unsafe. They reasoned: 'We are losing the battle of ideas.' They lost their nerve. They betrayed their professions of religious and common liberty. The mask of fair dealing was taken off. They had recourse to wholesale murder. That beginning with the legionaries led them on to the slippery slope and they ended with the biggest human holocaust in all history.

It is vital to drive home the lesson of this. Communism is found declaring that its ideas are so good, so necessary to mankind that they have only to be proposed and they will prevail. But when they found that another idealism was not only able to hold out against theirs, but to make headway, they were no longer prepared to rely on their boasted dialectic and on peaceful methods. Inconsistently they invoked the full physical power of the state.

But they declared that the legionaries were not crushed on religious grounds, but because they were guilty of high treason. In what way?

Some years ago a Communist sympathiser sought out the Chinese delegation at an International Congress and reproached them for the incorrectness of their behaviour in regard to the Legion. He argued that the whole world looked on that as an attack on religion, contrary to their Constitution. This had done the cause of Communism incalculable harm. The angry defence of the delegation was that it had been necessary to deal drastically with the Legion because it was guilty of high treason.

His retort was: 'The Legion of Mary could not have been offending against the Constitution, because you had to pass a special edict declaring Legion membership to be high treason, punishable by death. You made the Legion high treason because it was making headway against you.'

I present you with that page of history to prove what I have been contending, namely that it is not numbers which count but the devoted nuclei which may be in the multitude. The evil nucleus will win against inertia, even against a virtuous inertia. But a good nucleus will prevail against an evil nucleus.

In that case they did gain a doubtful victory, though it was by uncivilised methods. Now I go on to some other instances where Communism did not emerge victorious, although they possessed authority and used it cruelly. I refer to Kerala and Ceylon. In those countries Communism seized power so that all seemed lost. For once in power it seems impossible to dislodge them. But in each of those countries the Legion was present on a far larger scale than in China. It provided that potent leaven of firm spirit which eventually communicated itself to the whole population. Persecution and force were inadequate to quench the spirit and out went those governments into exile. It was the first time that such had happened to reigning Communist regimes.

Another instance. When the insurrection took place in the Congo, the anti-religious elements proceeded to exploit that slogan: 'Along with the colonials get rid of the colonial religion.' Normally this would have appealed to the minds of the people inflamed by the crisis and Catholicism would have been driven out. But the principle of the devoted nucleus had borne its due fruit. The 4,000 Congolese praesidia laughed at the idea that their beloved Catholicism was colonialism and so the Church stayed on stronger than before.

I offer the following intriguing speculation. If we had 20 years extra organising time in China, as we would have had but for one unfortunate circumstance, we would have

been as big as the inner ring of Communism when it came into power. In that case I think it would be reasonable to suppose that what took place in Kerala and Ceylon could also have happened in China. That is, the government might have been expelled and the history of the world might have been altered.

Does not this story of the spirited nucleus amply justify that assertion of Pius X? So that the place without a devoted Catholic body of the kind is in the greatest danger. Because the force of evil will unquestionably be at work there and will prevail if unopposed by something more potent than itself.