

A TOUCHSTONE FOR DEMOCRACY

THE term 'democracy' as used to-day requires a definition. Originally it was applied to a form of government controlled by the people's voice in a popular Assembly; but with the growth of States and the impossibility of direct expression of the popular will it came to mean representative government; that is to say, government by a parliament consisting of representatives nominally chosen by the people. But for the same reason that ordinary citizens of a modern State were unable to intervene in the processes of legislation and the actions of the executive, it was found to be impossible (or at all events inadvisable) for them to select the men who were to represent them. This was done by the Party caucuses, and all that was left to the citizen was permission to vote for one or other of the caucus nominees. During the last decade or so the term has been so loosely used that its positive content is almost nil, and its main characteristic has come to be a purely negative abhorrence of traditionalism and of certain forms of authoritarian government (though by no means all) confused under the general term 'Fascist.' To make confusion worse confounded a social connotation of the adjective 'democratic' has persisted through all these changes. Because in the democracies of the original City States free men were politically equal, the word 'democratic' is now used as a synonym for 'egalitarian' in a social as well as a political sense, and this extension of meaning is further extended to cover societies in which there is no true egalitarian spirit, but only an aversion to certain kinds of privilege. England, for example, which is riddled with class consciousness at every level of society' is not only called a democracy, but has the term 'democratic' attached to it, by those very people who are doing all in their power to set up a bureaucratic oligarchy in which there will be no sort of social equality.

Perhaps this welter of terms at variance with the things they are supposed to express has become too confused to admit of definition. Perhaps the only thing to be done is to be rid of nomenclature altogether and to concentrate upon realities, discarding the husks of falsehood (by whatever name called) and preserving truth by explaining it rather than by giving it a title.

This is very much what Pope Pius XII has done in his Christmas Eve allocution of last December. It is true that His Holiness uses the term 'democracy,' but only in order to separate the reality from the various types of tyranny that masquerade under that name: to distinguish between what he calls 'true' and 'false' democracy.

If he had done no more than this, the world would have been greatly in his debt. For a fatal weakness of the present generation is to be influenced by names without investigating what lies beneath them. But his allocution has a much wider scope than the differentiation between realities and the labels they bear; it sets out in clear language the requirements of a democratic form of government both as regards the political authority and the general community, and relates these in both instances to the dignity of man created in God's image.

The appositeness of the Pope's discourse both to the season in which it was given and to the political and social shape of the world to-day is strikingly evident; for 'Christmas is the feast of human dignity, the feast of the admirable transformation whereby the Creator of mankind, assuming human shape, deigned to be born of the Virgin, and, through his coming, made us partners in his divinity.' To-day, too, the word 'democracy' is on everyone's lips, but it is rare indeed to find the true democratic spirit operative in the affairs of men. His Holiness points the way—clearly but without minimising the loftiness of the ideals required in order to follow it—to the attainment of real democracy.

He introduces his thesis by looking through the eyes of the 'unquiet multitudes overwhelmed by war,' and discloses a picture of men 'pervaded by the conviction that if they had not lacked all possibility of criticising and amending the activity of the public powers, the world would not have been dragged into the disastrous whirlwind of war' and by the determination in future that 'the people themselves should be provided with effective guarantees.' He goes on to dispose of the idea that democracy, conceived in the broad sense, is confined to a single form of government. It may be achieved by monarchies as well as republics. It depends upon the presence of certain characteristics in the people who live under a democratic regime and in those who are called upon to exercise authority.

The qualifications needed by the former are set out in a notable passage in which the theory that the people of a country are an inert mass that can be moved only from outside is roundly condemned. 'In a people worthy of the name,' says His Holiness, 'the citizen feels within himself the consciousness of his own personality, duties and rights, of his own liberty linked with respect for the liberty and dignity of others. In a people worthy of the name, all inequalities due, not to arbitrary will, but to the very nature of things—inequalities of culture, property, social position, which naturally do not prejudice justice and mutual kindness—are not indeed an obstacle

to the existence and dominance of a true spirit of community and brotherhood. On the contrary, far from harming civilian equality in any way, they give it its proper significance—namely that in the eyes of the State each has the right to live honourably his own life in the place and conditions in which the plans and purposes of Providence have set him.'

This packed passage provides a touchstone upon which may be tested the validity and justice of contemporary legislation, and of the theories of modern social-political reformers. Liberty deteriorating into licence, equality degenerating into mechanical levelling, above all, ambition to obtain a privileged position in the State masquerading as popular leadership—all these perversions of truth, so prevalent in the present generation, are shown up in their true light as subversive of real democracy. The dignity of man, made in his Creator's image and subject to divine law, provides a refutation of them.

The obverse of the duties and rights of the community consists in the responsibilities and qualifications of those in authority. The one cannot exist without the other. The criterion upon which the Pope insists for those called upon to rule is a high one indeed. Men 'chosen for their firm Christian faith and sound and sure judgment . . . of pure and firm principles . . . men above all suitable to muster up the authority that emanates from their untarnished consciences . . . men who in passionate times of transition, confused by contesting political programmes, hold themselves doubly under the obligation to impart to the people and the State the spiritual antidote of pure vision and perfect charity . . . men whose spiritual and moral temperament is sufficiently firm and fecund, who find in themselves and can produce the instruments of democracy, and who know how to put them effectively into practice.'

Can such men be found? In the cataclysm through which the world is passing—a cataclysm that has brought to the surface so much that is directly opposed to these high ideals—it may seem impossible. The Pope himself is far from being blind to the tremendous difficulties of the situation. 'Where such men are lacking,' he warns us, 'others come to take their places, to make politics a testing ground for their ambitions and a race for profit for themselves, their caste or class.' But at the same time he shows where a beginning must be made. The source of democratic government resides in a recognition of the majesty of positive law conforming to that absolute order set up by the Creator; and the first requisite for this obedience is respect for human personality.

Here then is the very core of democracy, for governors and