

## PERPLEXITY AND PASSION

THE EDITOR

ONE or two of the articles in this issue of *THE LIFE* are concerned with the application of some of the traditional aspects of the Church to the modern scene. The Passion of our Lord has been described in the form of a novel; the essential Christian way described by St Benedict has been transposed into an oriental setting. There is no end to the questions that might be raised in this matter of application. How far are these beliefs and practices of the Church unalterable, how far do they demand a withdrawal from the contemporary scene and a retirement into an 'other-worldly' setting, how far can the work of application and transposition go without endangering the essential purity, the uncontaminated perfection of the Christian life?

These questions have been to the fore in the minds of many on account of the recent events in France. The priest-workers' claim was that the purity of the faith must be brought to the proletariat by sharing in the 'Passion' of the proletariat. The life of the Church, they maintained, was not a high and remote reservoir which was simply to be poured out upon the people. It was the life of the people themselves, changed and transformed; as the life of the Word emptying himself and in his death becoming identified in some way with sin. The authority of the Church regarded the attempted identification, while excellent in itself, as taking the wrong means and thus endangering the purity and perfection of the true Christian life. But such problems do not belong to these nation-wide movements of adaptation alone. They present themselves to every Christian who desires to live according to Christ's way. In a world largely pagan, run on competitive lines where every man with initiative and 'go' is out to reach the top of his profession, how is one to preserve the integrity of Christian justice and Christian truth? For success a degree of discreet lying and cheating goes hand in hand with the necessity of getting

the better of one's fellow competitor. To adhere purely to truth and justice in the order of charity seems often to leave the family man a long way behind in the race for subsistence; and often too he has a fair family to think of, while the successful man may be concerned for himself alone. Charity, says St Paul, is not 'ambitious'; this principle seems to some to require a retirement from the world, a trek towards some unrealizable and historical 'age of faith' when every man was content with the sufficient.

In these problems, whether personal or communal, the Christian turns to authority for guidance. What does the Church teach and direct in all these matters to do with Christian life? Yet even here the Christian often finds little satisfaction. The gospels are clear and simple, but they belong to the eternal. Moreover, they often appear to contain confusing paradoxes. To turn the other cheek, indeed, is simple enough in theory; but then the Christian must also resist evil. So the perplexed Christian turns to the officials of the Church to guide him in his task of applying the general Christian theme to his daily contemporary existence.

But here again he may find further perplexity. True enough, the highest authority on the rare occasions when it is fully exercised in matters of faith and morals speaks with a divine assurance. But God uses weak and fallible instruments in his work of sanctification. It would be imprudent to regard the word of every spiritual director or every parish priest as infallible. The human element inevitably, indeed necessarily, enters into such guiding judgments as are given by God's ministers. Only too easily may the perplexed layman conclude that the authority to whom he has turned is either too remote from the contemporary scene to provide any effective rules of application or that he is swayed by all manner of purely human influences, by politics or nationality, by temperament or the need for hard cash. It would be denying the true nature of the Church to try to maintain that the admonition of every Church authority was a direct and unmediated utterance of God himself. The mystery of the Church lies in the fact that the divine authority resides in human beings who are yet themselves subject to the effects of original sin; and in the exer-

cise of that authority they call forth in their fellow members the corresponding exercise of supernatural obedience. God does not speak through dead instruments but through living human persons.

To return to the example of the French events, the priest-workers and their supporters might suspect that human element in the form of politics and parties had influenced the judgment of the authority that ordered them to retreat, indeed to lay down their arms. Their authorised superiors told them that the form of application they were attempting was not to be. And the perplexity of these apostles was obvious in what they said and wrote at the time.

But it is just at this point that perplexity for the Christian ceases, and for the non-Christian begins. The spirit of submission revealed by the majority of these French Catholics, the calm manner in which the Dominicans, with the spotlight of the world press focussed upon them, accepted the changes and removals imposed on them by Rome, leaves the outsider amazed and incredulous. He may be excused for confusing the exercise of authority with authoritarianism because the usual form of obedience of which he is aware today is the obedience of the party-line. His perplexity may lead him to suppose this submission to be another form of the abject self-accusation of the victim of the party trials. But if he does so judge he will be entirely wrong.

Within the Church perplexity ceases at this point because it is the point of the Passion, and it is only through the Passion that the eternal principles are applied to the contemporary scene and bring forth the triumphant life of the risen Christ. It was no abject submission to 'the party line' of the Father that led our Lord to abandon the success he was achieving with the people for the desolation of the Cross. It was a virile and tremendous act of his human will that accepted obedience to his Father's decree. Similarly the obedience of these priests and religious is the fulfilment of the same Christian vitality. In the Passion the decree of death came not only through the internal knowledge of a divinely illumined mind, but through the exercise of an external authority mingled, apparently inextricably, with

human frailty. The High Priest of the day decreed that it was expedient that one man should die for the people; and even Pilate was reminded that whatever authority he exercised to be effective must be from God. Not that the Passion of the present day is brought about by a divine religion corrupted by human weakness; Calvary was the source of the streams of blood and water that were to preserve the life of the Church from any repetition of that type of corruption. It is only the perplexed outsider, again, who tries to draw a parallel between the Sanhedrin and the present structure of the Holy Office.

Remembering that it was, on the last analysis, the Father who delivered up his Son, we can discover this same pattern in the great spiritual works which continue the redemption and apply the eternal principles to contemporary life. We may take the simple example of the apparitions of our Lady which have done so much to bring the life of her Son into the lives of modern men. Bernadette or the Portuguese peasant children are met at first by the incredulity and even opposition of the authorities to whom they go for direction. The visionary finds a cold welcome awaiting him at the presbytery. But when it is a case of the divine working of redemption the effect of that work is achieved as soon as perplexity gives place to the simple obedience of the Cross. The 'party line' knows no divine authority mysteriously revealed in ministers who may be in themselves weak and fallible. But all the saints have reached the heights of spiritual effectiveness not only through a vivid devotion to the historic record of the Passion at Jerusalem but also through misunderstandings, opposition and even persecution from the good people constituted by divine Providence and authority to be their superiors. Even the 'little way' of the Saint of Lisieux reveals this fact. It is the Father who delivers up his Son to death; and when we find today perplexity giving place to simple obedience within the Church we know that the redemption of Calvary is still working like a leaven, and we look forward to yet greater spiritual life in the Church. It is in this way that the eternal and the traditional seeds of the Christian life come to germinate, grow and bear fruit in the world today.