

The United States

By WALTER M. ABBOTT

AT the close of their annual meeting in Washington, D.C., in 1954, the Catholic bishops of the United States issued a statement in which they stressed that 'in recent times the drift from God and from the spiritual and supernatural view of life has seriously weakened this country'. Nothing the bishops have said since then has changed what they set forth in that document, which continued with this frank sentence: 'It is true that a rise in church membership has been reported during the past few years, but in the light of other evidence, one is forced to question how significant such mere statistics may be. One looks in vain for any corresponding increase of religion's beneficent influence upon the nation's life. Indeed, the trend in public and private morality has been downward; there is an alarming disregard in practice for God's teaching and God's law'.

The problem is not peculiar to the United States, of course. Even the bishops of Ireland – that land regarded by so many American Catholics as holy ground – have had to criticise practices of public life, labour relations and business which, as Bishop Cornelius Lucey of Cork has said, were no different from those of non-Catholic countries. On the bigger scale that the United States presents, however, the downward trend is more vivid, and not only bishops but civil authorities are alarmed. Long before the President's Commission on National Goals brought out its report in December, 1960, the materialism which reveals itself as secularism in politics and government, as avarice in business and in the professions, and as paganism in the personal lives and relations of all too many Americans had been analysed and excoriated even in such large-circulation publications as *Life* magazine. The *Official Catholic Directory* reported a total of 40,871,302 Catholics in the country for 1959, which was 1,365,827 above the previous year's total. This means that about 23 per cent of nation's population is Catholic. The growth of the Catholic population is ahead of the general population growth, and some estimates indicate that the country may be about one-third Catholic by 1970. But one may well ask whether this growth in numbers is having any real effect in view of the alarming moral decline of the country as a whole.

Archbishop Joseph E. Ritter of St. Louis said in a 1959 pastoral letter that the manner of the people's support is a good indication of the spiritual condition of the parish. If he is right, American Catholic parishes are in very good spiritual condition indeed. All over the country parishioners are making sacrifices to build new churches, schools and rectories. When the Bishop of Brooklyn set out last year to raise \$20 million for new schools in his diocese, he found within a few months that he had pledges totaling \$38 million; he and his priests admit that it was definitely an achievement of working people and poor people.

Against this generosity is to be set the selfishness and short-sightedness of parents in the matter of priestly and religious vocations. Cardinal Cushing declared, in fact: 'There is an abundance of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, but their fulfilment is blocked principally by parents'. He said that some parents objected outright to vocations to the priesthood and religious life among their children, while other parents declined to pray for vocations. The Cardinal also stressed the lack of spiritual perception on the part of many who expose their children excessively to television, radio, movies, rock 'n roll and other diversions which allow them to succumb to the secularism and materialism of the times. Others point out that the school population has gone up eighty-nine per cent in the last ten years, but the number of sisters has increased only twenty per cent. Bishop James H. Griffiths of New York sounded a warning note in his keynote address at a religious vocations rally when he said that 'the role of the laity is important, but it would be tragic if it were regarded as a substitute for the religious state'.

Whether it is due to parents' defects or not, it is a fact that America's young people need to be convinced that sacrifices are demanded of them, not only in the case of those who have vocations to the priesthood or religious life, but all of them, if they are going to take the part they should in the work the Church has now entrusted to lay people, nationally and internationally. Organisations like the CYO apparently helped to train youth in the right direction. Boxer Rocky Marciano was widely quoted when he said in 1954: 'It took the CYO and Father Minehan to show me and a lot of other kids that life wasn't a free ride'. When Douglas Hyde was asked what in American life impressed him most, he replied: 'the Catholic college girl and the nuns who have shaped her higher education'.

But young people in America have had it so good that it is

difficult for them to appreciate the problems of unemployment, migratory labour, and interracial injustice. And not only the young people. Their parents have to be prodded into manifesting some concern about problems at home, to say nothing of topics like the underdeveloped countries of Asia and Africa. American Catholics, and, in fact, most American people, do not feel themselves to be members of an affluent society, even though they *are* going up the ladder, and they will not take it when someone tries to tell them that they are – especially the farmers and steelworkers, who will reject outright the notion that they have been enjoying healthy economic conditions. In fairness to them one must add that the reasons that they give for not feeling affluent do not usually pertain to their own desires for enjoyment and pleasure but rather to the education of their children. The points parents and children have to get more clearly is that the all-pervading, demanding, but loving exactions asked of them by Christ Himself in and through His Church are for all the members of His Body.

Four years ago when Mgr. John Tracy Ellis, professor of Church history at the Catholic University of America, told the Harvard-Radcliffe Catholic Clubs that the Church in America had ‘come of age’, he added that there was still a curious timidity and backwardness in the matter of self-criticism and the taking of effective measures to remedy weaknesses. The inability of many Catholics to take a clear view of their own defects was ‘strikingly demonstrated’, he said, ‘in the attitude which some of our people still show toward the all too obvious failure on the part of American Catholics to produce their proportionate share of leaders of our national life and to win those influential posts wherein the mind of a nation is so often moulded in a long-ranged manner through scholarship – whether that scholarship be in the universities proper, in the fine arts, the arts of communication, the press, learned societies, or in the commanding governmental and business circles of the country’.

In recent years there have been many objective, critical articles and books about American Catholic life by American Catholics themselves, a sign of the vitality and fast approaching maturity of an Americanised Catholicism.

Recently Mgr. Irving A. DeBlanc, director of the Family Life Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, bluntly charged that too many Catholics were influenced by U.S. culture, which, he claimed, appears to be ‘one generation from paganism’. Catholic families, he said, too often reflect behaviour standards of their non-

Catholic neighbours, and he cited some studies which indicated that Catholic married couples used contraceptive methods of birth-control about as often as non-Catholics. Mgr. DeBlanc was said to be so disturbed by the problem that he proposed the solution of an 'open ghetto', by which he was said to have meant that Catholics should avoid cultural contacts with their non-Catholic neighbours. The charges were not denied as they might have been a generation ago. And more encouraging still, Catholic editors throughout the country flatly rejected the remedy. Mgr. DeBlanc subsequently denied that he had made such a proposal, but in the meantime the country had seen how far Catholics had come in self-criticism.

Now one can say that there are many kinds of American Catholics – one sees the differences reflected very definitely in the Catholic press – and even non-Catholics are now pretty generally aware of the differences. 'Liberals' and 'Conservatives' quote snatches of papal encyclicals at each other to demolish each other's positions. There are vigorous debates about adapting to American life and holding aloof from it; there are cries of 'America first!' and 'One-worlders!' There are some pretty acid arguments about 'right-to-work' laws. The McCarthy débâcle left wounds that are not likely to heal for generations. There are more and more competent Catholic critics who can call things what they are, and gradually they are getting a better hearing. When people become absorbed in details of private revelations, preachers and editorial writers vigorously point out, for example, that the basic thing about Our Lady's message at Fatima was: 'Do penance'. Not all will do penance, but most will admit the point is well taken.

A perusal of the 131 Catholic newspapers of the United States might lead one to think that Catholics are actually making out rather well in adjusting to their peculiarly mixed-up environment. It is a common thing to encounter a theological or scriptural article filling half a page – entitled, for example, 'Faith: What Price Must We Pay?'; and opposite it will be a half-page 'ad' put in by a local supermarket featuring boneless chuck roast at 59 cents a pound (and if you save your pink stamps you can get free two-dollar tickets to a baseball game). But this apparent mastery of indifference or detachment is accompanied by such odd things as the wide-spread habit many parents have of encouraging dancing class and dating for pre-teenagers in order that their children may be popular. The lack of spiritual perception implied by such attitudes makes even the parents finally begin to wonder about their co-operation with

grace when they find themselves embroiled in the problems attendant upon earlier and earlier marriages. Priests constantly have occasion to point out to their people that they are always in danger of becoming products of their secular environment, and they must therefore constantly examine their sense of values to correct and christianise whatever they do. In a country where there are so many divorced people on the loose – more than 1,000 divorces are granted every day in the United States – and where thirty per cent of the valid Catholic marriages are mixed marriages, it is not easy to keep the institution of the family on the right track. According to one study, we are losing forty per cent of the children from mixed marriages and thirty per cent of the adults.

In its famous look at American Catholics, *Look* magazine (October, 1957) did not include any observation of the spiritual life of the American Catholic body. The otherwise well-informed author of the article apparently discerned no vitality from membership in the Mystical Body of Christ. Apparently Catholics were a sect like other sects. It reminds one of the observation that used to be made frequently, as, for example, by Evelyn Waugh in his *Life* article, that until recently America had a poor record in contemplative vocations. That, of course, has been changed. Since World War II there has been a remarkable increase in the number of contemplative monks in the United States; the Cistercians have nine new monasteries and more than 1,000 monks in America.

It is curious, though, that a professional, large-circulation magazine would not have been aware of the spiritual life of American Catholics. We have come a long way from individualism and pietism and stress on one's own salvation. Our Catholic high schools and colleges are giving courses that stress the doctrine of the Mystical Body. The liturgical movement is restoring to the laity an active participation in the Mass and deeper awareness of the doctrines involved in the sacramental life of the Church. For years there was a charge that Catholics did not read the Bible: it was partly true, because the Douay version was so obscure that it discouraged reading and study. With the coming of the Westminster, Knox, Kleist-Lilly and Confraternity translations, there was finally fertile ground for the Biblical movement.

Fr. Martin C. D'Arcy and other visitors to the United States have observed that Catholics are making more and more of an impression on America. Fr. D'Arcy thinks this is true primarily because of the 'continued intellectual growth of Catholic teachers who are able

to instil a greater confidence of the philosophical truth of Catholicism in their students'. Fr. D'Arcy has noted that American Catholic college students now get not only the Scholastic approach to philosophy but a more complete picture of all other philosophies. We might add that they also get a much better religion course nowadays than they used to; in many colleges the course merits the title 'theology' that is often given it. America's suburbs now contain a good number of young intellectual Catholics who are the strength of the new revivals of liturgy and Catholic action in the parishes. But these edifying young people are still only a small minority of the Catholic faithful. For too many Catholic men, like most American men, reading books is 'not masculine'. The retreat movement is one of the strongest and healthiest movements in the country, but there are still far too many Catholic women making these retreats who think that Louis De Wohl's books are the ideal spiritual reading.

The Catholic Press Association recently announced that circulation of Catholic newspapers and magazines published in the United States has passed the 25,000,000 mark for the first time. Catholic publishing houses are numerous and they are turning out a fair proportion of worth-while books. But who is reading all these things? All too often the faithful are subscribing to various publications but reading only the captions under the pictures. The spirit of pessimism found in the writings of Guardini and others is not widespread in America, because those authors are not widely read. Most Catholics still seem to be subsisting for their spiritual values on the catechism that they learned as children. As Cardinal Cushing has said: 'We have much dead timber in our organisation and much mere formalism in our habits of mind, especially in the habit that regards our chief task as being merely to conserve'.

Christopher Dawson has written, however, that Catholics have actually 'changed the religious landscape of America and have become the largest, the strongest and the most united religious body on the continent'. 'In the face of this achievement', he added, 'it is impossible not to be optimistic about the future'. It certainly is vital that the spiritual life of American Catholics be solidly founded, because in accordance with directives from Pope Pius XII and Pope John XXIII the American Catholic bishops have given the laity the top role in the reconstruction of the social order, a vast project that will get nowhere without spiritual resources.

One often hears it said that 'you should go to the Midwest for

your lay leaders', but the bishops have been fortunate rather generally in securing enlightened laymen and laywomen to direct diocesan-wide movements and national movements. The real trouble is that on the parish level too many lay people feel it is the priest's job to devise and supervise everything, and too many priests seem to have that idea also. In the professions, in business and among the workers, therefore, the large influence the Church could have is not developed. Where some have gone ahead, as in the case of professional sodalities (like those in Cleveland, New York and Philadelphia), the results are striking and solid; these men are not more members of a pious union but participants in the apostolic labours of the Church. Lay folk and priests alike who have discussed the problem admit that sacerdotal paternalism is the principal obstacle to development of lay apostolic drive. Paternalism is out-of-date, by Pontifical decree, and the sooner it is realised the better will the American Church have the effect it should on the educational, economic, and political institutions of the nation.