

THE ACCEPTABLE TIME

Great Britain

By PAUL CRANE

FOUR years ago, during the reign of Pope Pius XII, the American Institute of Management gave the Catholic Church an extremely high efficiency rating. It scored 8,800 points out of a possible 10,000. Recently, a new audit has been held and the results are even better. Under Pope John, the Church has attained an even higher pitch of efficiency. Her 'management excellence' has been raised by 210 points to a total of 9,010, a sum equalled or bettered only by such organisations as Standard Oil of California, General Motors and the Eastman Kodak Company. On the surface, it would seem that the Church has little to worry about. But it is said that statistics often conceal more than they reveal. This would appear to be a case in point.

One turns back to an early Church whose efficiency modern analysis would have classified as extremely low. Yet, its missionary effort swept the known world. Today, by comparison, the positive effort is not so easily discernible. The impression is often of a Church confined to the defensive, its business often that of protecting its members from the secularism of modern surroundings. The contrast with early days is startling. To restore the balance, something more would seem to be required than an efficiency rating equal to that of the Standard Oil Company of California.

A clue is provided by a further comparison between the modern and the primitive Church. The early Christians saw their Faith as something that gave them life. For them it was a deliverance from the slavery of paganism into the freedom of the sons of God. They knew that, when they emerged from their baptismal dipping, grace gave them the key to life. Behind them was not merely the slavery, but the frustration of paganism. Ahead lay fullness of living, understood by them rightly as fulfilment in Christ. For the first Christians, their Faith was much more than a list of observances. It was abundance of life in Christ, something men lived by, enriching their days, the key to their happiness here on this earth. Christianity for the first Christians meant triumphant fulfilment, both for themselves

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and, through them, for their world. By bringing them to share life with Christ, baptism made each a Christopher, a bearer of Christ to those about him. It could not be otherwise, for the gladness of life in Christ was not something a man could keep to himself. It flowed out effortlessly to others through the full living of a Christian life. The secret of the missionary effort of the early Church lay there. Men saw their Faith as something to be lived and transmitted, thereby, to others.

Today, by contrast, it is not so. For most Catholics in this country the Faith is seen as a discipline to which one must be loyal, a list of observances to which men must remain faithful. It is rarely related to life because seldom understood as fulfilment in Christ. Yet, fulfilment is what men want. They are not taught, however, to find it in their faith. The picture that emerges is the familiar one of a younger generation holding on out of loyalty to a code of observance, which they have come to identify with their Faith and which they see as related in no real way to the business of life itself. Under the circumstances, it is not to be wondered at that many lapse, and that, of those who remain loyal, far too many are little more than formalists in the practice of their religion. The result is not merely an absence of missionary effort in the sense already described, a reduction, to the point where it is almost negligible, of Catholic impact on the society of contemporary Britain. The trouble goes deeper. The picture is of many in whose persons the Faith is being overcome by the world. They do not see the happiness they want in terms of their religion. It follows that they look for it elsewhere, in terms of the materialism of the world around them. One is treated to another disturbing picture: of Catholics, in search of happiness, clutching at the fag-ends of the secularist happiness of their neopagan friends. Never having been taught to find their happiness in the riches of their Faith, their problem becomes that of discovering how closely they can follow the way of materialism without provoking a clash with the code of observance which is all that their religion means to them. One thinks of the young man who asks how far he can go with a girl, or the couple who seek advice on the best means of avoiding children without the use of contraceptives. The Faith for these does not spell fulfilment. It is rather, a deprivation, tolerated as an insurance policy, which sets them the problem of extracting from life the best possible time that is compatible with what they think of as the repressive and negative nature of the injunctions of their religion. It is rarely seen as related to life.

Rather is life regarded as something to be lived despite their religion. For the many young Catholics today, happiness on this earth is forbidden fruit, something to be plucked surreptitiously from pagan surroundings. Their regret is that they cannot have more of it. Very often, when the desire to do so becomes overpowering, they give way; for there are limits to a man's staying power when this is based on blind loyalty alone. Of those who give way and fall down, a fair number fail to get up. Why should they come back to the deprivations of a code whose relevance to life they fail to understand? That is their position, and they will not be scared out of it by the threat of hell-fire. Young human nature takes the short view as a rule: death seems far away at twenty-five. There will be plenty of time for reconciliation. Meanwhile, there is life. So the young who have lapsed head cheerfully and tragically for what must bring them, in fact, only further frustration.

Above, we have given a thumb-nail sketch of what we believe to be the story of many teenage Catholics in Britain today. From it, we conclude that the neo-pagans have stolen our thunder. The appeal of early Christianity to their ancestors was that they should forsake the frustration of pagan living and find fulfilment as sons of God. The appeal of modern paganism to the contemporary Christian is that he should forsake the frustration of something pictured as an outworn code of observance and find fulfilment in uninhibited living. In either case, the appeal, understandably, is to happiness in terms of fulfilment. Tragically, today, it is identified with a neo-pagan existence. The task of the Church stands defined as a representation of the Faith with a view to the complete reversal of this position. The rising generation of young Catholics must be shown its religion in terms of life. Nothing less than this will do. It is no longer inclined to be loyal to a system that it does not understand. It is not necessarily to its discredit that it should be so. At the back of its queryings is a demand that it should be treated as adult, shown life's key in terms of the richness that is Christ. The demand is much more to its credit.

We are brought to the bright side of the story, which is made manifest, by implication, in the questions put by many concerning their Faith. What they are asking for is that depth should be given to their understanding of religion. The Holy Spirit is at work here; in the boys and girls of the Young Christian Workers and Students and Sodality Groups who strike one, sometimes so startlingly, as feeling their way towards Christ as the very core of their lives. One

thinks, too, of the priests connected with these movements. They are men acquainted with the meaning of grace and the work it is meant to do, sensibly inclined to allow grace to do its work in the soul of the layman, as distinct from an older fashion which concentrated on pumping doctrine ruthlessly into his head. One notes, on the part of a growing number of clergy and religious, an increasing uncertainty as to the efficacy today of well-tried methods of former times, a willingness to think seriously of liturgical possibilities in the parish and to revise their approach to the task of religious teaching in the schoolroom. There is a healthy and growing discontent with the working of the older Catholic lay organisations. From the ranks of these, many of the best of the young laity are beginning to dribble away. They are recognised increasingly as no longer suited to present needs. The best of the young men and women are looking for depth in their lives. They see little chance of securing it from the older lay associations within the Church with their accent on organised activity and their domination, as a rule, by the members of a previous generation who do not understand them and their ways; who fail to recognise behind the posturings of their juniors a cry for fully dimensioned living, which can be satisfied only by life in Christ. There can be a terrible conceit behind the attitude of the old when confronted with the new ways of the young. The damage which can flow from their blindness is at times tragic beyond measure.

Understandably enough, the points at which the Church is trying to make a start with its task of re-presenting the Faith to a rising generation, are those which are, as a rule, most resistant to change. The school very often is a closed corporation, consecrated to outworn methods of religious teaching, resentful of criticism because it hears, as a rule, only that which is outrageous, throwing up tradition as a smoke-screen to cover up a multitude of defects which it is vaguely conscious of, but which it rarely has the courage to admit to itself. Mr. Chips may be a quaint institution; he is not prevented, thereby, from being a fearful old stick-in-the-mud. Our point is that few Catholic schools, in all probability, are prepared to undertake the kind of agonising reappraisal with regard to the teaching of religion which is so urgently called for at the moment. What is needed is a re-emphasis – away from Apologetics and towards a revelation of religion as enrichment in Christ. The process of restoring Christ to the rising generation must be begun in the classroom. One goes further. The re-emphasis must run right through

the life of the school. How many headmasters are willing to face the implications of that statement? As a prelude they would have to ask themselves whether their primary aim is to turn out scholastic successes, English gentlemen or other Christs.

Back of the school, of course, lie the training college and religious house of formation. The school can only be touched through them. Yet, very often and understandably, the religious house is closed to the impact of outside ideas more effectively than the school itself. The training college, too often, is taken up with what you might call the secular technique of its trade. The task of swinging either to recognise the relevance of the reappraisal we plead for is not nearly so easy as it seems at first sight. It is our business in this context only to indicate its existence and to stress the importance of seeing it through. We believe that the Church has no more important task in this country today than that of teaching a rising generation the meaning of life in Christ.

Force of circumstances gives the school a part of primary importance in this effort. It should go to the family, but parents, till now, have been brought up in terms of the code. The school has to effect the break-through in order to build a generation of parents able to impart to their children the spiritual re-emphasis so necessary to their lives. The school, however, cannot act alone in this matter. It must have the support of a parish whose priest sees his task as that of revealing Christ to his people, and whose parishioners see their parish not primarily as a place of religious observance, attached in the shape of pickings from the pools; but as a source of supernatural life. The liturgy is not a fad, nor the titivating of a weekly ceremonial. It is the articulate, the essential expression of the whole of our living in and with Christ.

School and parish, as we see it, are the nodal points at which the effort must be made to present the rising generation of Catholics in Britain with the richness of life in Christ. Being young, they are rightly in love with life, which means that they should be in love with Christ. We believe that they could be. The obstacle, at the moment, is not primarily from their side. It comes, rather, from those who teach them in pulpit and classroom. We conclude that the most immediate need is for a much greater awareness, in seminaries and religious scholasticates, of the prevailing mentality of the young and rising generation of lay Catholics in twentieth-century Britain. It would be tragic if steps to secure this were long delayed. A good deal more than a generation is at stake.