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Letter from Scotland

One Hundred Years After...

As I write to you the celebrations marking the centenary of the introduction of antiseptic surgery by Joseph Lister are drawing to a close. It was very pleasing to us in Scotland that so many of your eminent surgeons were here to join us in our celebrations.

In this letter I would like to discuss some of the problems we have been, and indeed still are facing in the field of LINACRE QUARTERLY's prescribed interests, philosophy and ethics as they affect the practising doctor. Of heresy I hope there will be none, perhaps it will not in all parts merit the *Imprimatur*; I can but present and comment upon some of the weighty problems — the views expressed are not always those of the author!

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

In Scotland we are unusually fortunate to have a completely independent system of Catholic schools wholly supported financially by the government. Being accustomed to such a system, I suppose we tend to take it for granted. The Church in Scotland is at least spared the awful financial burden of building and maintenance. In 1965 we have already seen the threatened closure of the Jesuit Beaumont College in England. There is at present a national policy to convert our grammar schools into comprehensive schools and such conversion does place a severe financial burden on

religious education in administering private schools. The comprehensive school should have many advantages and would benefit the child who is a "late developer" though we have our worries about its effect on the performance of the "university stream" — in fact a fear of "leveling down" rather than "leveling up" of academic standards. Severe though these problems are they are in no way to be compared with the problem presented by the desperate shortage of teachers. This is a national problem and not only a problem of our Catholic schools. The fear is that such shortages might eventually demand regrouping and reorganising schools into larger units with the inevitable consequences of denominational schools, already regarded as something of an unnecessary luxury in many administrative minds.

Pius X, that great patron of education, put it this way: "By their fruits you shall know them. Good schools are the result not so much of good methods as of good teachers."

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

This has been described as an age of "debunking." I would rather call it an age of negativism. It seems fashionable to sneer, to belittle; we seem to hear a lot about what people are *against* and all too little about what they are *for*; too many people standing up for their rights and all too few for their

principles. Not that there is anything new in all this — from time to time nations seem to go through periods of apparent stagnation — periods when they lose their sense of purpose. Yet hear the plaintive cry of Wordsworth in 1802:

"Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour.

England hath need of thee: she is a fen

Of stagnant waters; altar, sword, and pen,

Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,

Have forfeited their ancient English dower

Of inward happiness. We are selfish men:

O raise us up, return to us again;

And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.

Thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart;

Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea,

Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free.

So didst thou travel on life's common way

In cheerful Godliness; and yet thy heart

The lowliest duties on itself did lay."

These lines might just as well have been written a century and a half later, and we know too that even Aristotle despaired of the youth of his day!

Today we appear to be passing from the age of nationalism into an age of internationalism and I believe that when we have made the transition there will be much to fire the imagination. While there is much that is laudable in national-

ism there is much that is restricting, and it may engender complacency and self-sufficiency.

COLONIALISM

Colonialism seems to express something that is wholly bad. Ironically, the British as the greatest colonial power of all time are now preparing to celebrate in 1966 the 900th anniversary of the Norman Conquest of Britain. From afar we can see things in perspective and I hope that when the heat and hatred has died away in the newly emerging states that they too may see the benefits which colonisation has brought — Christianity, education, communications.

BIRTH CONTROL

Birth control is still *the* medico-moral talking point. There is no denying that there is a spirit of reformation moving in the Church today. Guidance is eagerly awaited by the laity. I think it true to say that it is often awaited with expectation of some change in the Church's present teaching. It is difficult to imagine why the arrival of the "pill" should lead people to expect change, but I think the reasoning goes something like this: The Church accepts the use of the "safe period" for the better spacing of children under certain conditions. This seems to establish in many people's minds that the Church accepts this as a form of "contraception" in principle. The fact that the Church rejects all unnatural forms of contraception is often more difficult to understand. Inevitably, people will point out that many

Churchmen did, and some still do, hold that it is immoral to relieve the pain of childbirth because of God's utterance; ". . . in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children. . . ." (*Genesis*, 3, 16). And yet no Catholic doctor of my acquaintance would subscribe to this. Again the unhappy episode over Galileo will be mentioned, and again it may be difficult in all conscience not to accept that Churchmen had erred, however well the episode may be explained away.

The Church is completely opposed to unnatural methods of contraception as these are "contrary to the natural law" but is there a single development in medical science that is not equally "contrary to the natural law" and yet we do not hold anaesthetics or antibiotics to be occasions of sin?

And so the argument proceeds, something added at every step until there is made out a case for contraception that is exceedingly difficult

to refute. It is wrong that we should go without doubt for so long about such matters and how urgently we await the guidance of His Holiness.

I began with a brief mention of the Lister Lectures. I think there may be an important lesson to be learned for us all to reflect upon one hundred years later.

There are many grave problems facing mankind today and there are many points of disagreement among nations. Especially there are many areas of agreement. Can we not therefore agree to disagree, and where we do not in concord work together to alleviate hunger, suffering and poverty?

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