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# SOCIAL APOSTOLATE

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THEORY • PROCEDURE • ACTION

## CATHOLICS AND THE BOURGEOIS MIND

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In 1935 Christopher Dawson published a wonderful article with the title "Catholicism and the Bourgeois Mind." (1) His article seems more relevant to Catholics in North America today than then, for we are confronted with more clearly demarcated cultural choices now than fifty, or even twenty years ago. Specifically, we see various subcultural groups espousing some of the ideas that Dawson considers a natural part of Catholic civilization, but, for the most part, these groups have no connection with the Church, are not aware of their sometimes profound sympathy with important elements of Catholic culture, and, more strange still, these groups and their way of life are rejected by otherwise zealous and orthodox Catholics. I will discuss this in more detail below, after a short summary of Dawson's article.

Dawson begins by stating that bourgeois civilization and Catholic civilization are fundamentally opposed to each other. Today, though, our entire culture is permeated by bourgeois ideals, yet if we look back at an earlier age when the bourgeois were merely one element within society, we can discern the particular characteristics of the bourgeois mind, and see why that mind is so opposed to Catholicism.

### *Features of the Bourgeois Mind*

The first feature of the bourgeois mind that Dawson notes is its urbanism.

It involves the divorce of man from nature and from the life of the earth. It turns the peasant into a minder of machines and the yeoman into a shopkeeper, until ultimately rural life becomes impossible and the very face of nature is changed by the destruction of the countryside and the pollution of the earth and the air and the waters. (2)

Secondly, the bourgeois spirit is characterized by a peculiar attitude toward economic life. Instead of having the love of the artist or the craftsman toward his work, the bourgeois regards the things he deals in as

external and impersonal. He sees in them only objects of exchange, the value of which is to be measured exclusively in terms of money. It makes no difference whether he is dealing in works of art or cheap ready-made suits: all that matters is the volume of the transactions and the amount of profit to be derived from them. (3)

Further, "the bourgeois is essentially a *money-maker* (emphasis Dawson's), at once its servant

and its master, and the development of his social ascendancy shows the degree to which civilization and human life are dominated by the money power." (4) Dawson concludes his essay by explaining that a true Catholic civilization is dominated by a spirit of love, love for God, and expresses that love in vibrant art, music, and various other uneconomic means. Bourgeois civilization, on the other hand, will never rise above essentially worldly motives and maxims, such as 'Honesty is the best policy,' etc.

### *Counterculture and Catholicism*

Now I think that no one will fail to notice that certain of the traits mentioned by Dawson as unbourgeois and akin to Catholic culture are very much prized by certain groups in the United States today. I mean, of course, what is usually called the counterculture. The counterculture is not one single thing, but within it there are groups strongly emphasizing virtues such as the value of being close to "nature and...the life of the earth," of not bringing about "the destruction of the countryside and the pollution of the earth and the air and the waters" and of having the attitude of the artist or craftsman toward one's work. I think that it is very unfortunate that these people do not recognize their affinity with Catholic culture (an affinity manifested also on the part of some by their attitude toward contraceptives, the government school system, cooperative economic enterprises, breast-feeding, etc.); this is a loss both for them and for us in the Church. They are deprived in the first place of the many benefits of membership in Christ's Mystical Body, but also of the key to their critique of modern Western life; we are deprived of brothers in the Faith who have valuable things to teach us, but also of possible allies who could do much to help outflank our enemies, the secularists.

But there are only two ways these people could find out that Catholicism is their natural home. One is by reading about Catholic things: not only writers such as Dawson, Belloc and Chesterton, but even old manuals for Catholic parents which, e.g., recommended breast-feeding in the forties and fifties when almost no one was nursing her baby. But for numerous reasons few are going to discover these books. Even the most well-known are largely ignored by general establishment (bourgeois) culture, and unless they should come into contact with our Catholic subculture they will not even know that such a man as Dawson existed, much less what he had to say. Which brings me to the second way.

The other way these people of the counterculture could discover that Catholicism is their real home is by seeing that nearly all Catholics live lives which reject bourgeois values, and that there is a Catholic counterculture which militantly stands up for many of the values they hold dear, yet with more consistency and for more complete reasons. But, alas, where will they find such a body of Catholics? Of course, there are some groups that do exemplify all facets of Catholic culture, but they are not many. Rather, if they look towards Catholics in America they will likely see two groups, each engaged in articulating its vision of Catholicism, and each involved in a discussion of the many political, social and moral issues facing us today.

The first group is the heterodox neo-modernist clique, unfortunately so prevalent today. With them the people of the counterculture might at first feel some kinship, for the neo-modernists in general probably favor the counterculture in general, but only for the same reasons that non-Catholic secular liberals do; namely, because it is new, different, and (so they think) opposed to traditional Western civilization (by which they mean whatever was done and thought in 1955). But were these heretics to take a good look at the counterculture (or at least at certain elements within it) I think they might be distressed at what they saw. So, though there doubtless is some fraternizing between liberal Catholics and counterculturists, I think this is based on a superficial acquaintance by both parties as to the real aims of each group.

The other articulate group of Catholics in America is the one I am mainly concerned with here. This is the group which vehemently eschews dogmatic heterodoxy and adheres strongly to the Church's magisterium. In addition to that, this group reads Catholic authors such as Dawson, Belloc and Chesterton. The members of this group, in many cases, attempt to steep themselves in Catholic culture and traditions. They are aware that there is a great gulf separating modern Western life from Catholic civilization. Yet, with some notable exceptions, members of this group sometimes seem to possess the bourgeois character to a greater degree than the population in general. They oppose, e.g., not just the excesses of the environmentalists, but sometimes their entire cause; they tend to look upon the counterculture as useless, faddish, self-indulgent and eccentric, or at best utopian; too often they ally themselves with right-wing groups that are thoroughly bourgeois, that stand for laissez-faire capitalism and its concomitant attitudes and values. Only in their attitude toward contraception and their valuing of large families will there be found much of a bond with the counterculture. But why is this so? Why is it that these Catholics, who are in possession of the key to the correct critique of bourgeois culture, do not see the implications of that critique; while the counterculture intuitively feels the wrongness of

certain things without any knowledge of the underlying principles of their rebellion?

As to the first of these questions, I think the answer has two parts. Orthodox Catholics very often reject things such as a craft approach to work and a concern for ecology, because those they see who promote these things in some cases also promote drugs, Eastern religion, unchastity, etc. Most people only with difficulty and a deliberate effort can separate in thought things they habitually see conjoined in fact. Yet it is perfectly possible for someone to believe some true things and some false things. And this is true of movements too; they can be in part right and in part wrong.

The second reason, I think, is simply that the way of life of most of the orthodox group of Catholics is so different from what the counterculture aspires to, that this strangeness creates a distrust and lack of sympathy. Since everyone living what is considered an ordinary life in the modern West is more or less thoroughly bourgeois (as Dawson points out), it is natural for orthodox Catholics, likewise leading this bourgeois existence, to see this kind of life as the norm. Age doubtless has something to do with it, since most people of a certain age were not affected by the experiences that produced the counterculture and have consequently little sympathy with it. And, as of this point, most people in the orthodox Catholic resistance, at least those who articulate its policies and goals, know of the counterculture only through reading.

### What Can Be Done?

If the situation is generally as I suggest here, what can be done? Well, perhaps naively, I think we must begin both to evangelize the counterculture and enlighten our fellow Catholics. As the second begins to succeed, the first will be done more easily. Will it be easy to do the second? Probably not; yet really all it will take is to get them to pay attention to certain themes and passages in authors they already read. But I have greater hope that as more people whose formation was affected in a good way by the counterculture's critique of American society attain positions of leadership or influence among orthodox Catholics, they will help cast off the present bourgeois associations and look to the counterculture, both to teach and to learn□

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Reprinted in Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956) p. 200-212.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 202-203.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 204.