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PATRIOTISM

by

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Bishop of Clonfert

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PATRIOTISM

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LITTLE acquaintance with the world, modern or ancient, is required to convince one that love of country is a powerful force in human affairs. In order to understand its strength it is only necessary to recall the passion that can instantly be evoked by an insult to national honour or, still more decisively, the sacrifices of life and material possessions that whole populations accept in time of war in order to triumph over their rivals. When crisis comes and peril threatens patriotism is liable to sweep through a people with extraordinary emotional appeal, releasing enthusiasm and energy and eliminating selfishness more widely than almost any other influence can do.

For proof of this we need not go beyond our own country. The history, oral traditions and ballads of Ireland are evidence of the large place that patriotism has occupied in the minds of our race in spite of the continuous frustration of national aspirations. Throughout the world our country is known for its record of resistance to oppression at home and for the enthusiastic assistance and leadership which its exiled sons have often given to other struggling peoples. We can claim to have played a part, by various means, in the righting of many injustices. In the temple of patriotism, whose building can be traced back to the Chosen People and the Greeks, Irish people may feel that there are many shrines and sanctities of our contribution.

THE ROOTS OF PATRIOTISM

Patriotic endeavour is highly rated by public opinion in every nation. This, the cynical may suggest, is only natural, since it pays the community to attract the service of its citizens by popular praise and by the prospect of figuring heroically in the national annals. There are better grounds however for the common estimate. Love of country is an outgrowth of love of one's family and kinsfolk and participates in the goodness of cherishing and

helping those nearly related to us. The great Christian virtue of fraternal charity obliges us to love all men and regard all as neighbours, but at the same time it recognizes that those closest to us have first claim on our goodwill, that charity begins at home. To devote oneself to advancing the interests of one's fellow-countrymen from the motive of Christian charity is obviously an exercise of virtue and when personal advantage, and still more life, is sacrificed for this end virtue of heroic stature is attained.

True patriotism is also rooted in the virtue of justice. It discharges a debt to one's kinsfolk from whom so much is derived, materially, culturally and spiritually. The desire to redress wrongs inflicted on one's people—another aspect of justice—is also a powerful stimulus to supporting a national cause. In addition to these two primary virtues, patriotism also fosters and gives opportunity to many others such as fortitude and courage, perseverance, self-discipline, endurance, unselfishness. And, last but not negligibly, it calls for the exercise of the virtue of prudence, in all its many-sidedness. Not least of the uses of patriotism is that it provides a great school of character.

In spite of many excellences, however, love of one's fatherland does not automatically impart the stamp of rightness to all that is undertaken in its name. If fostered too exclusively or pushed too far it forfeits its claim to esteem: in this it resembles pursuit of the good of one's own family, to which it is closely akin and which also, if undertaken blindly and disproportionately, may easily change from virtue to vice.

EMOTIONAL ELEMENTS BRING DANGER

The fact that emotion is so largely involved in this field is a warning signal; where emotion takes the lead, reason, the proper guide of conduct, is often superseded and we are apt to be led into excesses and errors. For evidence of this we have only to recollect that for unjust causes as well as just ones men in time of war have often fought out hopeless positions to the death and sacrificed their lives in "suicide" attacks. For all their unsavoury associations, empires were not built up without the

co-operation of brave and unselfish men. Patriotic feeling is often skilfully exploited in such interests, while rational moral thinking is skilfully discounted. The glamour of heroism has been associated with national selfishness and greed time and again in history, with the tacit suggestion that community interests purify and sanctify any kind of aggression. "The herd instinct" and "mob psychology" are not mere names. They are the governing influences in communities that substitute emotion for reason. "My country right or wrong" is a sentiment at least implicit in the attitude of many people to international affairs.

It is a sentiment that may appear even when the cause of one's country is basically just. A fundamental ethical principle lays it down that an act is not constituted good merely by being directed to a good end; the means used must also be morally defensible. The end does not justify the means. No people is disposed to be over-critical of actions done in its favour, especially if courage has been shown or life lost in their doing. But neither courage nor the provocation of unjust treatment dispense from the moral law, whose precepts apply in every department of human activity. "Of course the Irish are entitled to freedom," said Pope Benedict XV, "but be careful of the means you use to gain it." Even in reviewing the past it is not true history or wise policy to palliate or overlook what is wrong: one-sided or partial versions of events will seed a bad harvest in the example they offer succeeding generations. It is unjust to the young to make a country's story a mere propaganda weapon to influence their minds in particular directions. History is necessarily selective, but to select a nation's military endeavours for disproportionate attention and to glorify them beyond other achievements of a higher order is distortion of the past.

It is a safe rule that the more deeply we find emotional factors engaged the more studious we should be in applying our critical intelligence to assess the moral issues involved and to discount prejudice and sentimental considerations. Enthusiasm should follow judgment and be governed by reason. Passion ought to act as a boosting factor, an auxiliary influence, not as the primary source of activity or main generator of power. A good cause,

a noble aim, may be so irrationally accepted that conscience is dulled or blinded in a mist of feeling. Apart from our duty to ourselves, surely the best tribute one can pay to an ideal is the use of only such means as will not disgrace it. Disproportionate, indiscriminating dedication to the national interest may amount to fanaticism, a caricature of patriotism which is poor service to a good purpose and a grievous abuse of intellectual nature.

PATRIOTISM NEEDS A HIGHER DEDICATION

Patriotism must be viewed reasonably and critically. We should first of all see it in its context, in its relation to our responsibilities generally. It is all-important to recognise that devotion to one's country is not an absolute value in life, a law unto itself, the source of dictates and demands admitting no subordination to other interests. It is not to be classed as equal to, or above, our duty to God. It is not a religion or a substitute for religion: we should be clear on this in times when political ideals, good and bad, so often usurp the place of religion. It is not an ultimate goal of action. It is a force that should be directed towards God within the framework of His law, an effort to fulfil His will by perfecting the human society He has created through the promotion of justice and good government and community well-being generally. Only so will it be integrated into a Christian life and become a Christian virtue. It is sometimes suggested that death for one's country of itself establishes a right to Heaven; but in fact it is only when such a sacrifice is ultimately given to God that it can have any supernatural value whatever.

To any works that are not directed towards God, however admirable they may appear, Our Lord's words of those who have acted for worldly motives apply: "Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward." If we keep clearly in mind that service of our country is ultimately to be offered to God we shall not need to be told that only those activities which are pleasing to God, that is, morally right, should be undertaken under its inspiration. "Patriotism is not enough." Even though it may occupy the major part of one's thoughts, as is legitimate and

laudable in those who give themselves to public affairs, it will not be as an autonomous element in life but as subject to higher principles. It will take on a special colouring by reason of its dedication to higher purposes. "All whatsoever you do in word or in work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." (Col. 3, 17). This is Christian patriotism, subordinated to higher values and gaining merit from association with them. It is a rational, balanced, though none the less warm-hearted and generous devotion to the interests of the community to which one belongs. Like the virtue of charity from which it derives it "is patient, is kind, is not envious, does not deal perversely, is not puffed up, is not ambitious, is not provoked to anger." (1 Cor. 13, 4-5).

SELFISH MOTIVES ARE OFTEN OPERATIVE

Even by human standards it is easy to realize that patriotism may need to be purified of considerable elements of dross. Samuel Johnson defined it as the last refuge of a scoundrel and there have been at every stage in history and in every country persons entering public life for the most selfish ends disguised under the highest professions. And even apart from hypocrisy on this scale people may easily deceive themselves about the motives that attract them to community affairs. Publicity, fame and desire for authority and influence may be factors telling more weightily than is readily acknowledged or recognized. No one should seek to take from service of the community all its agreeable features but, in so far as these are the main factors that attract to the public service, such a choice of career cannot be considered praiseworthy and is likely ultimately to prove more harmful than beneficial to the public interest.

Even where pursuits are concerned that endanger life and personal liberty we cannot exclude the desire for adventure and dreams of fame as exercising considerable appeal. Valorous and difficult exploits, with or without acclaim, exert much fascination in their own right—witness the feats of mountain-climbers and explorers and the bravery even of mercenary soldiers who may be quite unconcerned about the matters at issue. Ambition for

renown is not different in kind from the quest of other worldly rewards. Courage alone does not establish unselfish motives: it is a common denominator of both sides in every struggle, not the distinguishing feature of a just and good cause. There are people who regret that their lives are cast in times when their country is at peace: it is clear that what they are seeking is not such service of their country as her circumstances require, but the emotional satisfaction of physical combat.

Irish people are not alone in forgetting to make this kind of self-examination at times. Even the very rational Samuel Johnson already referred to showed some sentimental weakness in this connection when he said that every man despises himself a little for not being a soldier. The most famous novel ever written tells of a Spanish gentleman who foolishly romanticized physical combat, as a result of unbalanced, uncritical reading. Cardinal Wyszynski in his first statement after being released by the Communists pointed out that the time has come when Poles must learn not how to die but how to live for their country. "One dies quickly and becomes famous quickly. But one lives in difficulties, in pain, in suffering, in sorrow, for many years and this is the greater heroism which is needed at the present time." Irish people too are highly emotional and need to be reminded that the greater heroism is not always found in spectacular exploits, in spite of the applause which they may attract.

Patriotism in oneself or in others should be questioned and tested before it is accepted for what it declares itself to be. Sometimes it may be espoused out of laziness and distaste for a humdrum life. An important question is whether one is prepared to contribute to the common good unobtrusively and patiently, by way of hard work offering no gratification to vanity. Again, one should ask if one's patriotism is of the type, known latterly in many countries, that seeks to impose on a population a particular régime or way of life in defiance of their expressed will—a still more grievous proceeding if this is done on the theory that the population are somehow disqualified from making any valid decision at all, so that a small group constitutes the only legitimate repository of the national will. Thinking along

those lines is the reverse of patriotism, it makes for dictatorship and tyranny. It is egotism and desire for power assuming other names and appearances.

TESTS OF MORALITY, HUMAN VALUE, REASONABLENESS

It must never be forgotten that the moral law obliges us to obey and respect the public authority. Even though a country has lost part of its territory it may still establish a lawful government: aggression can surely do enough harm without our supposing it can deprive even the unconquered part of a nation of the right to self-government. Who in West Germany, for instance, would suggest otherwise? To deny that a nation can establish a lawful government until its full territories are regained or some similar condition realised is more radically opposed to a citizen's duty than simple disobedience since it asserts what is tantamount to a principle of anarchy. There are, one must insist, no ethical grounds for such a position and it is vain to attempt to invent any.

Devotion to a particular theory of government may lead to a tragic diversion of patriotic endeavour away from the men, women and children who should be its beneficiaries and in the direction of a personified national entity which is so largely an imaginary conception. When patriotism ceases to be the servant of the population of a country and despises their opinions and their authority it has transformed itself from a useful force into an extreme danger. The state exists only for the benefit of its individual citizens: *patria propter homines* we may say, adapting a theological adage. It is a form of state-worship to suggest that a nation is a reality superior to the human beings that compose it. To assert that the soul of a nation must be protected from its citizens, whose proceedings are violating its rights, is pushing an absurdity to extremes and constitutes merely an attempt to justify the imposition of the wishes of a minority upon the rest of the population. It should be needless to add that it is the present population of a country whose voice is to be heard in its affairs, not the dead—whose outlook in any case it is so easy, by arbitrary selection, to misrepresent.

Every national group has of course inherited a mass of common traditions and characteristics and does well to foster and develop its typical culture in every mode of expression. By such means natural gifts and capacities are brought to full maturity and the whole human family is diversified and enriched. But attachment to the distinguishing features of one's own racial endowment should not lead to an exaggerated estimate of the significance of nationhood. This might result in a type of nationalism which is no part of the Christian virtue of charity and which is nearer in many ways to paganism than to Christianity. The brotherhood of man is a bigger reality than the distinctness of nations. The inhuman, doctrinaire shapes that patriotism is sometimes made to assume are a dreadful distortion of a noble ideal.

Reasoning and discussion on such lines is sometimes represented as unworthy of the theme of love of country. This is because there has been imported into this subject an element of irrationality and a contempt for cool judgment which are fertile sources of error. It is made to appear that heroism and sacrifice should, on precedent, be the order of the day here, that folly and recklessness have received the stamp of high approval and taken on a kind of nobility. But it can scarcely be too often insisted that intellect was given us to be the governing and discriminating factor in every department of conduct. Feeling and passion—and especially anger and hatred—are disastrous alternatives either in public or in private life. To suggest that there is something noble in ignoring the voice of reason and being led by instinct and emotion is the reverse of the truth.

It is an indignity to man's highest faculty to put emotions, which are so largely nervous reactions, on a level with it or above it and to say: "I cannot defend these courses, I *know* that they are wrong but my instincts, my *feelings*, are all with courageous and challenging deeds." Instinct is the proper guide only of creatures devoid of intelligence.

Hero-worship too, in so far as it blinds us to human defects that may provide evil example or attaches weight to statements that offer false guidance, must be checked and controlled. We should scrutinize popular slogans and reject those that are indefen-

sible no matter from whom they may have emanated. The honour we rightly give to patriots should not preclude such criticism. A Christian cannot accept from any source the statement that the shedding of blood and the taking of life are good things in themselves and that one may even be careless about what lives are taken. Similarly if the saying that we take our religion from Rome but our politics from home was meant to convey that politics are outside the scope of moral judgment this was a false principle. Other political aphorisms too should not go unchallenged, some of them associating religion with politics not as the superior and guiding element but as on equal terms or even subordinate.

PATRIOTISM NOT ALWAYS NATIONALISTIC OR VIOLENT

The drift of our times as well as other factors points to the need of correcting over-emphasis on the political and nationalistic side of patriotism. This does not of course exclude the legitimacy of striving by just means for those forms of government one thinks best. Politics and political theories are necessary and people naturally take sides about them. When ways can be seen of improving democratic systems or replacing faulty policies remedies should be advocated and acceptance of them sought by legitimate means: nobody need suppose that the final shape of the social fabric has now been attained. But such receptivity of new ideas should not be confused with the childish impulse to throw away the whole framework of a society because it is imperfect and to assume that radical change will necessarily bring something better. All human institutions are imperfect—including those that come by way of revolution.

Even when our goals are political and social we should not think of violence as the only means of reaching them. Gandhi was surely as great a political regenerator of his people as any figure of this century and he entirely excluded the use of violence. No one can doubt that his stature is all the greater for this restraint. We should not find his methods alien from our traditions if we read our history comprehensively and fairly. Both at home and

abroad the Irish people have made their most notable contribution to public life by the resource and persistence they have exhibited in exploiting democratic methods and exerting moral pressure in the interests they championed. Daniel O'Connell is our best-known political figure in world history, not so much for the results he achieved as for having been a pioneer in developing the techniques of peaceful agitation and passive resistance.

If we are guided by the concept of patriotism as designed to help and serve human beings we shall have the means of correcting the undue emphasis on nationalistic, political, and violent aspects of patriotism which an unbalanced presentation of history has brought us to regard as the sole manifestation of this virtue. It is as if governmental forms were everything for the community and public welfare could not be promoted independently of them. Patriotism, it should be clearly understood, is not identical with nationalism. The latter is a narrower concept and much more ambiguous morally. Philosophers of history have demonstrated that many of the evils of mankind are traceable to its excesses and some thinkers can foresee no real tranquillity or order in the world until it is superseded or subordinated to a higher allegiance. Some measure of restriction upon complete national autonomy seems indeed almost certain to come. But there will always be room for patriotism, truly understood, no matter what the status of nations may be in new world orders.

Patriotism should not be blind to other ways than the political in which one's country may be served: sometimes if these are persistently followed political adjustments ensue almost automatically. Let us have done with two pernicious errors that are closely akin—the notion that there can be no progress until certain administrative changes occur and the feeling that if such changes were realized all would be well, almost without further effort. The bedrock of all patriotism is the principle that this virtue must serve the actual people of the country. Since they can be helped in other ways than by alterations in the structure or status of the state it follows that patriotism can take other forms than the political.

WIDER INTERPRETATION OF PATRIOTISM

The great need in our present circumstances in Ireland is to accept a wider interpretation of patriotism and to put this into practice. Constitutional forms are only the framework of community living: it is what goes on under their protection and with their support that is the important matter. In the judgment of many self-expression is the most worthwhile part of nationhood: it can be established while many other aspirations remain unrealized. A highly-developed and typical culture is the best basis for national claims. Let us give the world something better to remember us by than our name carved on a tree.

For such ends we may not neglect economic realities. If our numbers diminish much further and our economy continues to run down we shall not have the strength or the interest left to develop the spiritual and cultural resources of our people and to offer to the world evidence of an individuality justifying our struggles for independence; yet this is perhaps the greatest reward of freedom. To keep national prosperity abreast of rapidly rising standards of living in other countries is evidently the only way of preventing our country from being drained of its most ambitious citizens.

We cannot progress along these lines without the all-out effort of all our people. There is need for the whole of our patriotic energy. To anyone who has the good of the country at heart it is sad to see idealism and unselfishness drawn into wasteful and even harmful channels. Surely a moral is easily drawn from the fact that our economic backwardness is being used more and more as an argument against the re-integration of our country. A healthy economy is a presupposition of any political progress. To exist at all is more important than the political manner of one's existence. Everything we can achieve and contribute as a people is founded on our survival as a people and if there is danger here it has priority over any political injustice. Our patriotism needs to be realist not escapist, practical not spectacular and romantic. If only a remnant of the Irish people is left at home, living on a run-down economy, it will matter little

how we are governed; we shall be a negligible factor in human affairs.

The first half of the present century has seen the political rebirth of our country. The energies thrown up and the exertions made in the struggle were a revelation of what Irish people are capable of. Although several portions of the ideals aimed at are still unrealized, the transformation effected in the life of our country and in the outlook of our people was an extraordinary achievement. It would be appropriate if the second half of this century were to witness a corresponding economic rebirth. A necessary precondition of this will be to rid our minds of any idea that there is something inherently selfish and material about ordinary productive work and that the highest service to one's country can only be thought of in military terms.

MISCONCEPTIONS AND FAILINGS TO BE OVERCOME

We must cease to be slaves of the past, or of selective versions of the past, and recognize that changed times may require changed methods and new objectives. We must try to overcome our temperamental impatience, our preference for physical to moral force, our susceptibility to waves of emotion and impulse—failings which show our immaturity as a political society. We must be prepared to accept not merely hard and persistent work but also the even more exacting discipline of carefully thought-out programmes, critically supervised and controlled by comparisons with what is being done elsewhere. Most important of all, we must invite and encourage leadership from our most capable citizens in organizing and directing the measures that are necessary for our economic salvation, in the way that leadership was evoked in the course of our political struggles. It is only the prospect of service to the community that will attract the best of our young people into public affairs. Here is the opportunity today of national service on a grand scale.

Economic measures are patriotic if they are done from patriotic motives. Even if they bring advantage and profit to oneself they are none the less so—after all, the individual who

exerts himself is a deserving member of the community as well as the others. And there is an element of alloy in almost every good motive. Probably the most useful patriotic work in Ireland today is being done by those associations that are improving productivity in our chief industries and raising standards of life socially and culturally. The spirit which they foster must be communicated outside their membership and appear in private and personal activities as well as in organized undertakings. People should be expected to promote the common good even without the encouragement and rewards of publicity. Each individual should feel a responsibility in his own sphere of work to increase the national credit and promote prosperity. The approval of one's own conscience should be a better recompense than public recognition. There are many improvements that can come only through the minute, continuous efforts of individuals whose work will never be acclaimed. An enterprising industrialist may be the truest patriot: he is certainly giving indispensable service to the community in our present critical circumstances.

Any development of the country's resources is a contribution to patriotic ends. To improve standards of Irish products, to see that flaws and diseases are eliminated in livestock and other market commodities, to raise the fertility of land and thereby contribute to a healthier balance of payments, all these and similar undertakings should not be thought so mundane and commonplace as to be unworthy of the honoured name of love of country. They bring this virtue down to earth in a way that is nowadays essential. If everyone improved his own work and property we should have a transformed nation and should be much nearer to attaining all our aspirations. To remove unsightly objects from one's surroundings and add beauty to the landscape, to show courtesy and welcome to visitors, to develop restraint in games and to indicate disapproval of displays of bad temper and violence, these too are patriotic courses. "To make us love our country," said Edmund Burke, "our country ought to be lovely." By propagating the national language and developing our own music, games, literature and art we enhance the reputation of Ireland and raise the national morale in a way that will be reflected in

economic life and in other spheres as well. In innumerable ways we can substantiate our claim to individuality by showing that we possess distinctive talents.

EMANCIPATING PATRIOTISM

Different opportunities invite us in various directions. People with contrasting tastes and gifts will severally be attracted towards what they know they can do best. The first essential is to emancipate patriotism from domination by purely political thinking and to extend its energies into wider fields where its influence is more urgently required. Let us restore to this virtue its *human* significance. Let us bring it down from the clouds and see it as offering a friendly approach to human problems and ample scope for every kind of goodwill and constructive intelligence. Above all let us see that it is not perverted into a malignant destructive force.

If by processes such as these we lose the stimulus and glamour that have traditionally attached to nationalistic enterprises we shall not have to go far afield to find compensations that are more than adequate. No activity of ours reaches its full perfection unless it is related to God. Human values are not self-supporting; they are securely maintained only when grafted into the tree of divine faith and nourished by divine grace. Unless God builds the house of our nationhood we shall labour in vain in its building: if we neglect to take account of Him it will be built on a foundation of sand. Personally too a patriotism that is supernaturalized confers a special enrichment. By thinking of it as a service to God and an exercise in several of the chief Christian virtues, we may be happy to forego the praise of men for the sake of the approval that truly counts and the rewards which neither rust nor moth consume.

