

CLERICAL JOURNALISM

THE Catholic bishops of Slovakia and Carpatho-Russia not long ago issued a peremptory order strictly forbidding priests in their dioceses to edit newspapers, even Catholic newspapers, or to become permanent writers for the Press. We have not been able to discover the reasons that have dictated this episcopal discouragement of clerical journalism; but it may, without rashness, be guessed that the prohibition had something to do with the complicated political situation in Slovakia. The bishops are doubtless only giving expression to the wise desire to withhold their clergy from entering an unseemly welter of political passion and racial fury: there is no evidence to show that they have banned clerical journalism on the general principle that priests, by reason of their priestly office, are unsuitable persons to hold pens in their hands or to sit in editorial chairs. Indeed, the fact that St. Francis of Sales has been officially declared the Patron of Journalists would seem to make so sweeping a proscription impossible.

Yet a writer in *The Fortnightly Review* (St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A.) quotes this action of the Slovakian bishops as an argument against all priest-editors and clerical journalism in general. 'A similar prohibition might be salutary and profitable,' he says, 'if extended to other countries.' A priest who becomes an editor, he goes on to say, 'deserts his calling, neglects his training, and gives himself to a service that a layman can do as well.' Again, 'priests as a rule make rather unsatisfactory editors, not only because they are not trained for that sort of work, but because their hearts cannot be in it, since they have given up all for the priesthood, which is their great treasure, and

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where their heart is.' Moreover, 'where priests become newspaper editors, laymen must be hewers of wood and drawers of water.' In short, let the priest stick to his own job, which only the priest can do. The harvest is great and the labourers few; therefore, says the layman, let the priest concentrate all his energies upon the peculiar work for which he is specially equipped and set apart, and let him at least leave in lay hands the editing of his newspapers and magazines.

This criticism is perhaps worthy of notice from *BLACKFRIARS*, which, since its first appearance nearly eight years ago, has been edited by priests. The first rather extravagant assertion about the priest who becomes an editor being one who 'deserts his calling' need not concern us very much except to suggest how interesting it would be as a mere exercise if we were to reckon up the number of Cardinals, Bishops and Priests who must, in the view of this writer, have been guilty of a black desertion of the highest calling of all.

As to the priest's lacking the training required in a journalist or editor, we may ask, What is this training? and where does the successful lay editor acquire it? The training desirable in a writer implies a certain discipline that provides a man with a stock of ideas and the power of putting those ideas, more or less agreeably, into words; and would our layman assert that the education that goes to the making of a priest leaves him destitute of ideas or with his powers of self-expression undeveloped or diminished?

'Well, let the priest anyhow busy himself with his own noble work of saving and sanctifying souls: there is plenty of scope for both without his wasting time on editing and writing for the papers.' This objection is based on the most grotesque notion of what apostolic work means and what journalism means. A

priest's essential work, as a priest, is to offer the holy sacrifice of the Mass, to administer the sacraments, and to preach the word of God. Whatever is incompatible with those stupendous duties is to be ruled out of his life. He may not become a stockbroker, or engage in commerce, or become a soldier; but there is no prohibition against his becoming a writer. After he has said his Mass and fulfilled his essential duties as a minister of Christ, there will still be time for him to engage in study, and, if he has the inclination, to put his thoughts into writing, and even into print. The busiest missionaries have found time for writing amid their ceaseless labours—from the voluminous St. Alphonsus to Father Gavan-Duffy of the present day. It would have been more than a pity if St. Thomas Aquinas had been checked from writing through any qualms or scruples about its being inconsistent with his priesthood. It would be very lamentable if Fr. Ronald Knox was silenced or if Fr. Martindale's excellent journalism—in the best sense of that much tortured word—had to cease appearing each week in *The Catholic Times*.

One of the most industrious and zealous parish priests that we know founded, a few years ago, a journal called *The Sower*, dedicated specially to the cause of Catholic education. Its editor has combined this splendid journalistic work with the exacting duties of a heavy parish. The latest number of *The Sower*, whose editorship Father Drinkwater has now handed over to Monsignor Gonne, is in itself a very eloquent refutation of those who would assail clerical journalism. The contributors to the October issue of this superb little magazine include a Cardinal, an Archbishop, a Bishop, a Monsignor, and two priests—a too brilliant company surely to deserve the shame of being deserters, repudiators of their own training, and usurpers of the functions of laymen.

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There is no dearth of writers of the first rank among the Catholic laity of England, and if they do not always undertake the editing of journals which the clergy would gladly hand over to them, it is because they are making a wider appeal and influencing those who are not members of the Church. We are not urging any rivalry between clerical and lay editors and journalists. We are fortunate in this country in that all our newspapers and several of our reviews and magazines are under lay editorship. But our protest is against the prohibiting of priests from fulfilling what is part of their apostolic function. No one would wish to advocate setting up an ecclesiastical Northcliffe; but a wise editor or newspaper proprietor—even one who was worldly-wise in the Northcliffian sense—might find it prudent or diplomatic to consult occasionally a priestly adviser in order to prevent him from perpetrating the blunders about things Catholic that constantly crop up in the daily press—or it might be really ‘news’ if he asked some priest who knew how to hold a pen to explain exactly what transubstantiation means and what it means when used by the two prelates of the English Church who have been exchanging Open Letters.

There is, we maintain, a place for the priest in journalism.

EDITOR.