

CATHOLICS AND THE LAND QUESTION

At the annual conference of the Catholic Social Guild, held at Oxford on 3rd to 10th August, a special feature was three addresses by the Rev. Lewis Watt, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Heythrop College, on "The Catholic Doctrine of Property in Land, with special reference to the theories of Henry George."

The first lecture was devoted to George's economic teaching, but failed to show any appreciation of the main point of the argument—the effect of material progress in increasing rent, the speculation in land value and the holding of land out of use generated by the expectation of future increases in land value, and depression of the margin of production and the impoverishment of the workers ensuing from this. In fact the lecturer denied the existence of monopoly in land.

The second lecture dealt with George's teaching on private property in land. The main point was an alleged inconsistency between such phrases as "we must therefore substitute for the individual ownership of land a common ownership" and the practical proposal "to appropriate rent by taxation." Any careful student of *Progress and Poverty* cannot be left in any doubt that George's argument is directed against the private appropriation of economic rent, and that such phrases as "individual ownership of land" or "private property in land" refer to this.

The chapter in which George states his practical proposal is entitled "How equal rights to land may be asserted and secured." The moral basis of his proposal is that if men have equal rights to life, then they have equal rights to the land without which they cannot live. The point is discussed at greater length in *A Perplexed Philosopher* in which he says: "The primary error of the advocates of land nationalization is in their confusion of equal rights with joint rights. . . . In truth, the right to the use of land is not a joint or common right, but an equal right; the joint or common right is to rent."

The second lecture led up to the third, which asserted that to take the value of land by taxation of economic rent would substitute private occupation for private ownership, and would therefore be inconsistent with Catholic doctrine, which asserted that there was a natural right to possess both the substance of the land and its fruits. It will be observed that Henry George did not propose to disturb private possession, or indeed property, in land subject to the payment of economic rent to the State. It follows, therefore, that in this he does not contradict any Catholic doctrine. The real point at issue is whether the taxation of land values conflicts with any Catholic doctrine. In an endeavour to prove this Father Watt indicated that the doctrine

of natural right to possession of land involved a right to the private appropriation of rent—an assertion which we have not before met with on the part of any exponent of standing. This contention throws some light upon an endeavour made in the second lecture to prove that the value of land was not different from the value of commodities (and so, presumably, was not an unearned value). However, in response to questions Father Watt admitted that there were evils in landlordism and that the rating of vacant sites was justifiable.

Reference must also be made to an attempt made in this lecture to belittle the importance of the McGlynn case. On this all that need be said here is that a brief account of this incident is contained in the foreword to the new edition of *The Condition of Labour*, in which is reprinted Dr McGlynn's own statement of his views on the economics and morals of the land question. This document, as both McGlynn and George stated and any impartial reader can see, contained a clear and unequivocal statement of the Henry George teaching. It was examined by a committee of four professors of the Catholic University of Washington and declared by them "to contain nothing contrary to Catholic teachings." Cardinal Satolli, at whose request the examination was made, thereupon declared Dr McGlynn free from all ecclesiastical censures, and stated that "Dr McGlynn had presented a brief statement of his opinions on moral-economic matters, and it was judged not contrary to the doctrine constantly taught by the Church and as recently confirmed by the Holy Father in the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*."

Among those who took part in the discussion were Messrs George Tulloch and Otto Ommer, of Glasgow, who, at their own expense, printed and distributed at the third session a brief reply to Father Watt. Mr F. C. R. Douglas took part in the discussion on the second paper.

In his Radical days Mr Lloyd George said (Swansea, 28th May, 1912): "I will tell you what is wrong with this country. There is one limited monarchy here, but also 10,000 little Tsars. They hold absolute sway. Who gave it to them? We mean to examine the conditions. A fight full of hope for the democracy, we are asking nothing unreasonable." We recall this bold utterance as we read covering letter to the report received from our correspondent in Wrexham, printed in another column. He writes: "I purposely omitted the names of the villages A and B. I am always sure of my facts when I send in a report, but the facts gleaned in a village may be traced home to my informant with unhappy results to the poor beggar." The English countryside is still terrorized by the little Tsars.