CORRESPONDENCE

TROUSERS VERSUS CASSOCKS

To the Editor of BLACKFRIARS

SIR,—In your March issue I read with astonishment the following sentence: "The soutane tends to mark off the clergy as an independent, if not parasitic, caste in civil society, and this enflames a resentment which is not always unpardonable, and may often be profoundly religious and Christian." Personally I do not believe that trousers or cassocks exercise such influence as the author of the above quoted passage seems to imagine. I do not believe that in cassock-countries "the priest is divorced from his people," nor that in trouser-countries "the priest is too much one of the people." Especially I do not see how "the soutane tends to mark off the clergy as an independent, if not parasitic, caste in civil society." The soutane in the mind of the Church is simply a uniform for her clergy, being but the old costume of the Romans which the clergy were ordered to retain, when in the fourth century lay folk began the new fashion of the barbarian invaders.

There are however two points in this matter which ought not to be confused: (a) that of *principle:* the Church in her Canon Law prescribes the wearing of the clerical uniform (cc. 136, 596), and she imposes certain penalties for infringements of this regulation (c. 2379); (b) that of *practice:* that is, whether or not the wearing of this uniform in particular countries is expedient; and this point is left to the Bishops, who in this country leave their clergy free.

(a) As to the question of *principle,* there should be no controversy at all among Catholics, who are bound to submit to the legislation of the Church.

In Civil Society there are many dazzling uniforms, as well as in the Army, Navy and Air Force; they are mostly a matter of discipline: everybody sticks to them, nor do I think that they have ever excited the "healthy suspicion the Englishman has of overconspicuous phylacteries," or made our beloved London *Bobby "too* freakish and unapproachable."

So I do not see any reason why the Church should not insist on her clergy wearing a special uniform, which in point of fact has formed the subject of more synodical enactments than anything else. This uniform in question is very simple and straightforward, and not so strikingly anachronistic as many civil uniforms, for example those of commissionaires, Beafeaters and Scottish Highlanders. Particularly here in England, the country of liberty *par excellence,* where nuns, both Catholic and Protes-

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tant, go about in their habits, and where even some of the Protestant clergy wear cassocks, it is difficult to understand why Catholic priests should not do the same.

(b) *The practice*. The same writer in BLACKFRIARS says again: "The perpetual terror of 'giving scandal' is apt to paralyze soutaned clerical activity, and to reduce the wearer to that inertia which is a powerful justification of much Continental anti-clericalism." Now, in my opinion, it is fair neither to anti-clericals nor to the clergy to justify Continental anti-clericalism by accusing Continental clergy of inertia! This accusation against the Continental clergy and this expression of contempt in their regard (both of which, by the way, seem to be rather common amongst the champions of trousers), are neither charitable nor just: and do but help to prove that islanders tend indeed to be very insular. It betrays an extraordinary lack of knowledge of the Catholic Continent to imagine that, in general, cassock-countries are behindhand in Catholic activities. Moreover the Continental cassock-countries *continue* to produce more canonized Saints among their clergy than this country; and on the other hand, in the matter of leakage, in these modern times, among laity *and* clergy, I do not think that this Island can by any means claim to be the lowest on the list, with the smallest number.

I should like to ask the writer of what sort of *inertia* he is accusing Continental clergy. I cannot think that he is referring to "Catholic Action," because, as far as I know, England is far from taking the lead in the Organization of "Catholic Action" as the present Pope conceives it.

We might perhaps discover the sort of *inertia* that is really meant, in that Continental clergy, "freakish and unapproachable" as they are in their soutane, and also living in a "perpetual terror of "giving scandal," cannot afford to be "absorbed in tennis, golf, and motoring, cinema and radio, cards and social visiting," as the same writer quotes from one of the English champions of cassocks. So, after all, the question is whether this *inertia* concerns not priestly work, but rather secular amusements (cc. 138, 140).

Of course, the wearing of most uniforms checks certain activity, and hence brings about certain inertia, as most uniforms require a certain standard of external behaviour. If I may be allowed to express my humble opinion, it is this, generally speaking, that is the reason at the back of all arguments against the wearing of cassocks.

So, as regards the advisability as to whether it is expedient that the Catholic clergy of this country should or should not wear the cassock in public, that will depend upon local circumstances. If the clergy here have not yet reached that standard of external

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behaviour which the cassock requires, then of course it is not expedient to wear cassock in England, lest "that perpetual terror of giving scandal" become too oppressive and too real.

I am, Sir,
Yours faithfully,
fr. P. N. ZAMMIT, O.P.

The observations by *Penguin* in the last issue of BLACKFRIARS were not intended to be provocative, but were a judicial summary of a controversy that has already assumed too great an importance. It may be useful here to quote the official directions of the Canon Law on the question of clerical dress. *Omnes clerici decentem habitum ecclesiasticum, secundum legitimas locorum consuetudines et Ordinarii loci praescripta, deferant, tonsuram seu coronam clericalem, nisi recepti populorum mores aliter ferant, gestant, et capillorum simplicem cultum adhibeant* (Can. 136). It is quite clear from the above pronouncement that the style of clerical dress is to follow (a) the legitimate customs of the various localities and (b) the regulations of the Ordinary. For England, at least, the "suitable ecclesiastical dress," which is "in accordance with the legitimate custom" of this country and "with the regulations of the Ordinary" of each of the dioceses, is at present the black suit and the Roman collar. If the local Ordinaries see fit to introduce a new custom or to issue new regulations, there is no question but that the clergy will accommodate themselves accordingly; if they decree the wearing of that particular form of clerical dress customary in certain countries, the soutane, the clergy of this country will wear the soutane. Meantime our own particular form of clerical dress, worn also in Ireland, Germany, Holland, the United States, and Canada, is one which has obvious advantages for the apostolate, and it was the concern of *Penguin* to point out these advantages and, incidentally, to defend the precise prescriptions of the Canon Law.

Several letters have been received both for and against *Penguin's* position. We do not, however, intend to reopen the controversy in BLACKFRIARS and no other letters will be published on this topic. The one printed above was accepted merely because the writer has misread into *Penguin's* remark a wholesale condemnation of the Continental clergy which he obviously did not intend. (ED.)

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