

## INTRODUCTION

**A**S A STUDENT of twentieth century political history, I find the story of Engelbert Dollfuss a great anomaly, a golden sign of contradiction in an age of wretched extremities. His life and thought are a small, welcome respite from a century that produced so many powerful criminals as to throw the very concept of Authority under suspicion, so many false patriots as to threaten the legitimacy of Nationhood itself. In the thought, writings, and speeches of this short-lived leader of inter-war Austria, we breathe a spirit which is alien to the dark twentieth century, heavy as it is with the smell of blood, mustard gas, and burning cathedrals. In Dollfuss's modest, emphatic words we encounter once again the pure atmosphere of the High Middle Ages, or at least of Maria Theresa's baroque Vienna – for in them we find a blessed complexity, a willingness to embrace the great diversity of life and work that constitute a civilized, free society. Instead of grimly reducing politics to a Manichean caricature, in which a single race, or nation, or class embodies goodness and its opposite pure evil, Dollfuss followed Catholic social thinking which finds in every station of life the potential for virtue as well as sin, just as St. Paul named the various functions within the Church the “members” or limbs of the Body of Christ.

Himself the son of peasants, who worked all through his early years in unforgiving agricultural labor, Dollfuss stands as a noble contrast to the resentful idler Adolf Hitler, the narrow-souled pamphleteer Lenin, or the dreary Socialist time-servers of the French Third Republic. His actual experience of rural life inoculated Dollfuss against intellectual fantasies that romanticized the lifestyle, exalting as “folkish” whatever narrow and bigoted ideas a (typically urban) polemicist wished to promote. Nor had Dollfuss

any patience for those on the Left who dismissed the peasantry as a reactionary barrier to progress which must be liquidated. Indeed, he saw the maintenance of a strong, independent farming class as a critical guarantor of both the nation's cultural continuity and liberty and its economic security. If anything, Dollfuss followed the Popes of his era in seeing the proletariat as the one class which must be "redeemed" – not liquidated, of course, but rather delivered from their dependence on the vagaries of employment in factories, and granted a share in the means of production, either in the form of land, or small businesses, or at least some say in the administration of the industries which provided their livelihood.

More than most self-appointed defenders of the working man, Dollfuss knew the bitterness of hard labor, and what a privilege it is to enjoy afterwards a truly liberal and humane education. But the severities of his youth did not lead Dollfuss to resentment against those who had earned or inherited greater wealth; as a faithful student of human nature and son of the Church, he knew that the diversity of conditions within society is part of the hierarchical nature of the State, and the inevitable result of human freedom and natural inequalities among individuals. Instead of working to collapse or exploit these differences, to punish the achiever or repress the needy, Dollfuss struggled in all his writing and work to bridge the gaps of understanding that divided rich from poor, urban from rural, skilled from unskilled. In his "Corporate State," which Nazi putschists strangled in its infancy, he sketched out one attempt to forge links among the classes, by uniting men politically according to their particular trades – regardless of their station. Thus factory workers and owners, farmhands and landowners, tailors and fashion designers, respectively, would be represented in "corporations," whose variety was meant to displace the partisan multiplicity of political parties. The desire to do away with factions must have seemed especially urgent to a citizen of a nation whose two most prominent political movements were a variant of Socialism, one "German" and National, the other Bolshevik and International.

Inspired by the writings of Pope Leo XIII and Pius XI, Dollfuss sought to create the first state directly modeled on

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Catholic Social Teaching – drawing on the recent organic traditions of guilds and crafts unions which for so long had flourished in Austria, to forge a political experiment in solidarity among classes, and charity among men. Before we dismiss this idea as quixotic, we ought to note that the same idea was in fact partly implemented in post-war West Germany; to achieve labor peace, and avoid the historically crippling effects of general strikes, the Adenauer government instituted a mechanism it called “co-determination,” through which labor unions were granted important voting powers on the corporate boards of their companies. On a smaller scale, we see here the very “corporations” which Dollfuss hoped to construct. And indeed, this institution largely succeeded in eliminating strikes, and reducing the polarization that once pitted workers against their employers in murderous hate.

Whereas National Socialist ideology sought to cancel class conflict by channeling aggression outward towards neighboring countries or potential colonies, Dollfuss sought to diffuse it altogether, by concretely encouraging men to view their economic relationships as cooperative, rather than competitive. If there is some necessary tension between the interests of an employer who seeks low labor costs, and a worker who yearns for a higher wage, it is nevertheless true that they also must cooperate if either of them is to profit; in fact, this truth is primary, essential if anything is to be created or accomplished. Whatever ways in which these men’s interests diverge are secondary to the greater truth of their mutual dependence. Where this ceases to be the case, where mutual interests are outweighed by conflicts, it’s time to dissolve the business relationship and find a new employer or worker.

Instead of making international affairs the realm of sublimated aggression, pseudo-Darwinian competition, or grandiose “historic” crusades, Dollfuss saw that the relations between governments must be ruled by the same laws of justice and charity that should prevail in families, among co-workers and employers, even among competitors in the same business; because he accepted the Natural Law as a universal mandate, which applied equally from the microcosm up to the macrocosm, Dollfuss was never tempted to delusional notions of the significance of the nation, to the grand-scale national egotism that so often masqueraded as pa-

triotism – usually to the ruin of the actual, concrete nation. Since the rump of post-Imperial Austria was not a promising candidate for territorial expansion, men who were tempted to such dreams of empire tended to gravitate towards the parties at the political extremes – the Socialist partisans of a universal Bolshevik revolution, beginning in Moscow but radiating throughout the world, or the National Socialists who abandoned their homeland and its tender claims, identifying instead with a bloated, expansionist Germany that sought to gobble up bleeding hunks torn from its weaker neighbors.

Dollfuss was tempted by neither of these crass alternatives. Instead, he remained loyal to his concrete *patria*, his little fatherland with its local customs, its variegated texture and internal contradictions, its ancient traditions and deep-rooted Catholic Faith. For all its imperial past – which had provided such a rich cultural background and immeasurably enriched Vienna – the new German Austria was more akin to her ancient rival Switzerland in population and political importance. The patriotism which Dollfuss championed and attempted to awaken throughout his countrymen in his short term of office in many ways resembled the proud particularism one finds among those mountain cantons – a human-sized loyalty to genuine human goods, instead of a grandiose attachment to fetishes of gigantism. For an image of the contrast, compare one of the tiny, jewel-like onion-dome churches of Tyrol or Carinthia with the hulking constructions Albert Speer threw together for Hitler. The former still shine after centuries, while Speer’s very marble, revealed by a few decades as defective, rots away with each year’s rain. Like another great opponent of National Socialism and defender of the moral component of economic life, Wilhelm Röpke, Dollfuss found the spirit of greatness amidst the small things of this world.

Of Dollfuss’s life and death, others are more qualified to write. The narrative which follows is a little window into the life of a saintly and courageous man, whom history has neglected most unjustly. When people write of the first opponents of Adolf Hitler, how many think of Dollfuss? He is dismissed, by the typical left-leaning historian, with the label “clerico-fascist,”

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as if the term signified anything beyond an author's biases. In fact, it is simply a leftist slogan of abuse. What this book makes clear is that Dollfuss ought to be remembered alongside all other principled, patriotic opponents of totalitarianism. When he held supreme power in Austria, Dollfuss used the minimal force necessary to repress terrorist groups of the extreme right and left, each of which cherished openly treasonous plans to turn their homeland over to foreign invaders or revolutionaries. In the depths of the Great Depression, he attempted bold economic and political reforms, experiments such as have never been tried before, in the attempt to defuse the hatred that separated social classes, and prevent the poison of biological racism taking root in his homeland. He never imposed Catholic Faith or practices on religious minorities, and rejected the wild anti-Semitism that was appearing across the Continent at the time. How many men in positions of leadership recognized the evils of their day so clearly, fought them so forthrightly, and offered their lives so bravely, as this little-remembered Austrian peasant statesman? The list is sad and short. The book that follows will forever enshrine Dollfuss in his rightful place in that list. A humane, generous, brave and decent man, Engelbert Dollfuss's merits ought someday to commend him to the attention of the Church. If I may speculate, let me suggest that this book may someday serve as the first exhibit proving Dollfuss's heroic sanctity. How fitting it would be if the humble Dollfuss someday joined his last sovereign, the Blessed Emperor Karl, among the saints of the Roman Calendar. Reading his story, one cannot help thinking Dollfuss would be embarrassed by the attention.

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Feast of St. Vincent of Lerins