

THE BUDGET FOR WORSHIP UNDER THE REPUBLIC

Article I

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Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, OP

One of the issues which most strongly preoccupies believers and nonbelievers alike is how the Republic will organize the material support of worship, and in particular, that of Catholic worship. On this point, we wish to express our thoughts both honestly and without delay.

At first glance, under an administration of freedom of conscience, and of separation of Church and State, it appears logical that each form of worship provide for its needs and its ministers, as well as for the building of its temples, and for the splendor of its ceremonies. Why should a Protestant commit his purse to the propagation and the continuation of a church which he deems to be corrupt? Why should a nonbeliever be obliged to contribute to the establishment of what he considers in his writings and in his daily life as superstition? Let everyone support his own faith, let no one support an alien faith — this is the rule of common sense as well as of justice, everywhere that society has not adopted any religion for itself.

The statement is made that any official recognition of one particular belief system, or of all systems together, necessarily places all of them in a contrived position, very dangerous for the moral state of a country. In fact, under the auspices of an assured material organization, religions are no longer a genuine and trustworthy reality: the matters of God between the priest and the faithful person, the faithful one who believes, the priest who blesses — both supporting each other throughout the span of life, one providing spiritual goods, the other sharing part of his temporal goods: this is a touching example of voluntary harmony between two worlds, those of time and of eternity. On the other hand, the priest, officially supported by the State, can exist without ministering to a single believer; he can

pray in an empty temple, speak before an imaginary audience, be a shepherd without sheep, a soul without a body, a kind of stylite,¹ incomprehensible to those around him, and without even raising his solitude to the dignity of a protest against heaven. For unbelievers, is not all this a dreadful confirmation of their unbelief?

A living religion necessarily makes itself respected. A poor missionary, offering to God the bread and wine altered by his words and adored by some poor natives, sojourners like him, will remain unendingly for the heart of man a difficult and emotional topic. Even without his wanting it, the missionary will find there the power of God, the piety of the creature, the reality of faith; and if he shudders, it will be in his soul which does not fully comprehend the good which has come from so high and from so far away to the simple children of shanties. But the priest without a flock, under a bell tower maintained by the State, in a rectory repaired by the commune, clothed with linen and silk, not woven by charity: what is he but a dead person who seeks to represent God? The uncovering of contempt shouts to him like the Apocalypse of St. John: “. . . you have a name of being alive, but you are dead.”²

At least in ancient times, when the priest was no longer priest, he remained an important landowner; today, the priest who is no longer priest, either by his choice or by a defect of the times, is nothing more than a useless employee in the eyes of peoples. Their first notice asks him: Who are you? Their second: Go away. Their third: Eat, drink, and sleep; and let us not talk about this any more.

The abolition of the budget for worship by the Republic would bring a remedy, so it is said, for this all too frequent situation; at the cost of some transitory pains, genuine parishes of the faithful would be reconstituted under sound pastors. Man usually holds on to whatever comes at a cost. The apostasy of indifference, so easy today, because no one has invested monetary or positive goods in the religion in which he was born, would become a serious matter in life. No longer would one belong to a parish simply because of belonging to the town. The bell tower, the temple, the rectory, the cemetery — those things are ignored by many persons who believe they own them; and because they believe they own them, those things would become for many, even those wavering in their faith, items of great worth. Should it happen that certain places lack priests, would it not be better for the man of impiety to be without the man of God, rather than to be given the right or the

pretext of contempt?

It is further said, in favor of the abolition of the budget for worship, that it is the only means for everyone, and in particular for the Catholic religion, to achieve legitimate independence in its relations with the State. Indeed, is it not possible that the salary, by whatever abstract name it is decorated, even if it is an indemnity stipulated in a contract, manifests the superiority of the State which pays it, and the subjection of the clergy who receive it? The State is not an ordinary debtor. In the dealings of man to man, it is the creditor who has the advantage over the debtor; in the dealings of the State with the Church, the dependency and the worry fall on the creditor. Indeed, from the moment that the temporal subsistence of a religion, of priests, and of temples, falls into the hands of civil power, the latter, without ever refusing to pay its debt, nonetheless reduces religion to an ephemeral life, which does not arise from the foundations of faith, namely, from a divine source. Thus, religion loses the habit of living on its own; the faithful, seeing that it is underwritten, are no longer concerned about its needs. They consider these needs as something foreign to them; they are surprised, almost scandalized, that the priest should ask something of them. They tell themselves: Is he not being paid? What is he thinking of? An unseen problem slips into this apparent good fortune. Religion covers with gold those tatters that are all the more pathetic in that we do not notice them nor do we believe them possible. And so, rejected by its own believers, religion turns its eyes to the State; it begs for its favors, it asks of its administrators alms for upkeep or for an ornament, and is pleased to receive them.

But to obtain alms, one has to merit them. And so, one earns them by an unexpressed lessening of priestly dignity that only God can perceive; even the most pure conscience cannot detect it. Is it not for God that one humbles himself? Is it not for His dear Church, bought at the price of His blood? Is not each act of humility a sacrifice? This is what the priest tells himself; and, in truth, could he tell himself anything else? His life no longer comes from faith or from possessions achieved by reason of faith; no, his life comes from an ice-cold hand which pays indifferently the Hebrew and the Christian, and which has to be mitigated or stimulated by the inventive and unassertive flexibility of charity.

In our estimation, these are some of the reasons alleged by those who demand or who hope for the abolition of the budget for worship. We are not talking about those who

strongly wish for it as a means of ending all religions: unseeing minds, who convince themselves without ever becoming discouraged that there exists here below some as yet unknown or unexplored means to rid oneself of God. We will not argue with them. If we were to think as they do, that the suppression of the budget for worship would entail the ruin of all religions, we would not bother to defend either the Catholic Church of France nor its budget. We would allot for their requests: one, thirty-five million francs, the other, nothing, which amounts to the same thing.

Fortunately, we have not yet reached that point. The question of the budget for worship, however it may be resolved, is not a question of life or death, but one of justice, of convenience, of equality between the poor and the rich, of fraternity between individuals, of mutual support in that endeavor in which it is most important for us to help each other. Only by working from these principles will we declare ourselves in favor of keeping the budget, after having refuted the objections just read.

Endnotes

1. An ascetic living atop a pillar.
2. *Rev 3:1b*. New Revised Standard Version. 1969.

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