

CANDIDACY OF THE CLERGY

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Tomorrow is election day. Tomorrow, France will name those of her children whom she deems are the most worthy to give it some new laws and to set the foundations for an unknown future where God leads it. Many have presented themselves and hasten ahead of this office; some, more modest or more fearful, await an opinion about them that they have not sought. All of them, electors and eligible, voluntary or prompted, men of fear and those of hope, whatever their past history, their projects, their memories, their ambition or their earnestness — all are equally certain that they cannot be witnesses or soldiers in a more sublime action.

The clergy presents itself also. For the first time in a half-century, it has found the inner courage to offer itself and, in the people, the courage to accept it. It is one of the most extraordinary results of the revolution that lies before our eyes. If the old clergy of 1789 had been called to the Constituent Assembly, nothing would have been easier; it was part of the political establishment which still existed and had been called upon with all the stations of the State of which it was the first, to set up with its hands its own funeral. But today, having emerged from its ashes, rejuvenated like everything else, it presents itself to contemporary generations, of which it is a part. It presents itself, after a half-century passed in fighting against the influence of the age, which aimed above everything else, it would seem, to keep it at a distance from the upper regions of the State. Finally, the clergy presents itself on the ruins of three monarchies in the name of the Republic, which, sixty years ago, had despoiled it, exiled it, bruised it, consigned it to hatred and to death, and that today, not

only allows it to live, but invites it to its festivals, asks for its blessings, and allows it to aspire to the honor of representing the Republic in the very assembly where it will receive, after the inauguration of success, the even greater consecration of the will of everybody.

What is the cause of this new situation of the clergy?

Should it repudiate both the advantage and the danger?

Is this a durable or a temporary status for the clergy?

The cause lies evidently in the general disposition of minds, but especially in the innermost disposition of people regarding religion. The victory of 1789, that of the 18th Brumaire,¹ also that of 1830, all had been victories of the bourgeoisie, or, in other words, the victory of the rich and educated minority of the country. This minority, respectable from many points of view, had drawn from incomplete and false study an extreme aversion to all things religious. Dogma appeared to it as a fable; the morality of the Gospel, a chimera; the priest, a kind of man needed to some degree for the sake of the people, but completely undesirable and dangerous. To debase him without killing him, such was the traditional policy concerning him held by the bourgeoisie for fifty years. This was the case more than ever when the people, namely the poor and unlettered majority of the country, overthrew, on 23 February 1848, the third royal house founded by this bourgeoisie — very proud of its material wealth, and even prouder of what it considered its superior mind.

The people found nothing in their heart against religion. Religion was poor and had not taken anything away from them. The priest, child of the countryside and of the workshop was a close relative; if both had met after a half-century, it would have been an occasion for suffering and relief. Besides, what did the people gain from all that knowledge of the bourgeois and all their revolutions? Were they better off than before, better furnished with the goods of the earth, more free, more loved, better helped, amounting to more in the

affairs of the world? Alas! Whatever the reason, they earned as formerly, perhaps with greater difficulty than formerly, bread for the body, and as regards the soul, they did not feel they had received any compensation for their material misfortunes. In short, the people experienced somewhat of a return to tenderness for the Good Lord. They looked on His churches without anger, and gave Him, in the person of His ministers, strong handshakes. The priest reacted favorably, and the ancient alliance, founded by the Gospel between the people and the Christ, was reproduced in the streets of Paris by an event that, according to the portents of the men of State, would destroy the very last vestiges of human and divine order.

The people of Paris had favored the priest, the priest who was therefore a Frenchman, a citizen, and a republican; he could vote in elections, run as a candidate and take a seat in the National Assembly. He could do so, but should he? Would this not be a premature use of the popular good will, and a laying of himself bare, first in electoral meetings, then on the seats of the Constituent Assembly, to the unforeseen whims of an opinion, still in its infancy?

This matter created a division between minds. On our part, it seemed to us that France, in the grave situation in which it was placed, had need of the cooperation of all enlightenment and of all enthusiasm without exception. To withdraw in such a moment would be to abdicate military service at the hour of battle. In the general assembly of a country that is restoring its life, no element should be lacking; religion has too great a place here below for it to have the right to be absent where the lowliest have the right to appear and to plead their cause, the cause of everybody. Besides, there are transcendent questions, that is to say, questions beyond the confines of the two orders, spiritual and temporal, which necessarily require the presence of the clergy.

But above all, the clergy had to aspire to mark a place for itself in the National Assembly, to declare to the eyes of France and to those of the entire world the weakening

of the strong irreligious passions in our country. As long as there will be a struggle between the State and the Church, just as long as divine matters are treated with the selfishness of mistrust or the blindness of hate, it is impossible for France, whatever it does, to place its destinies on a durable foundation. An elder has said it: "A city will be built in the air before one is built without religion." The bourgeoisie believed that it could work this feat; it did not die from the work because the educated portion of the country will never perish; but it engaged in an unstable task whose fragility would, in the end, bring it more than fissures. The Republic was better inspired: it called on the priest. How could the priest refuse such an appeal, the likes of which he had not heard in sixty years, and which the echoes of the world have already carried to all the hearts that have not despaired of the deliverance of their country? Ah! If the priest had shown himself insensitive to the voice of the people, (let us say it better), to the voice of France, this would have been an infallible sign that he did not deserve to have his name mentioned. One could have said of him that he was dead, and that nothing was left but to seal him in his selfish and treacherous tomb.

For all that, the political role of the clergy seems to us to be a transitory event. Once the Republic is established, the priest will again find himself in the presence of a nation extremely anxious about the distinction between the two powers, spiritual and temporal, and which had entertained for a long time such a high ideal of the priesthood, that it reacts with pain at all that brings it down from the heights of Mt. Horeb and of Calvary, even for a brief time. France was gifted with a sharp awareness that the slightest discrepancies wound greatly. No nation has treated the Christian priesthood with more reverence. Even those of its children who do not believe in the divine mission of any priesthood, nonetheless accepting this as a social supposition, expect of the priesthood a holiness of morals that satisfies at least the innocence of their personal taste and the instinct of faith that survives over all unbelief.

The clergy of France will never display itself without damage from the breath of political passions. However eloquent it be, however enthusiastic and courageous, it will

appear less exalted at the podium than at the humble pulpit where the country pastor brings the glory of his age and the simplicity of his virtue. In the applause of the forum, the clergy will miss the souls that came in the shadows to ask it for peace of conscience and the joy of truth. One will no longer find in clerical life a reflection of the serenity of heaven; the clergyman himself, seeing himself in the reality of the sacrifice he will have made to politics, will not recognize sufficiently in that voluntary cross, the cross of Jesus Christ. France will recognize it even less; it will suspect ambition to be the most authentic sacrifice, it will think that, behind clear phrases, hides the pride of renown. Should it be mistaken, it does not want the man of God to leave it open to mistakes. The France that today believes and the France that will believe tomorrow both ask of its priests a hidden life, modest and dignified, a charity known to the poor and to God, a great kindness in judgments, an elevation of the soul above the events of the earth, a virtue that does not await ostracism but that condemns itself to it, out of respect for the one who veiled himself on Sinai and who was so on Thabor.

Here you have the priest that France desires and will respect, even while sacrificing him.

It is true that this was not always the case. The Christian nations, and France at their head, had invited the clergy to all their deliberations, even to their headquarters. The cross of pontiffs was intertwined with the flag of war, and the word of pontiffs to the voice of princes and soldiers. But at that time, the world was Christian to the very marrow of its bones. The temporal order and the spiritual order, blended together, allowed no intellect to find there either distinctions or limits. The bishop shone brightly through the baron, and the baron acknowledged his vassals through the crozier of the shepherd. Far from impeding each other by reason of the mixture, the two reverences obtained from it an influence that fit the spirit of the times and kept it entirely faithful and enthralled. And yet, even then, what laments St. Bernard expressed when Europe ordered him to leave Clairvaux; what glances he cast from the height of his miracles onto the humbleness of his cell and the face

of his brothers! What tears the denials given by the events to his public counsels cost him.

Every era has its laws. Man must know them to be able to survive; the Christian, to serve God; the priest, to display in every age the most exact and the most welcomed image of the One he represents and Who favors even in His immutability the infinite variety of fleeting matters.

The clergy of France, we should hope, will take its place worthily in the National Assembly; it will appear as the mediator between the extremes, and without adopting any party, it will spread over all of them the influence of an impartial and generous light. This is the only role worthy of the clergy and of the temporary mission to which both country and Providence seem to have called it.

ENDNOTE [Trans.]

1. Date of the Republican calendar, i.e., 9 November 1799. On that day, Napoleon moved the government from Paris to St-Cloud, and, on the following day, dissolved the Directory.

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