

CATHOLICISM'S UPWARD MOVEMENT

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No progress can occur in time without fluctuations and points of rest; this is the law of minds as well as of bodies — especially the law of what is immortal in the midst of perishable and changeable elements. An immense lever resting on an unlimited foundation would lift up all the possible worlds without once having to pause; but such challenging conditions belong to the realm of eternity, they cannot be realized here on earth. And, like the ocean, religion advances in waves.

This is the law; now let us move on to history. Whoever has followed Catholicism in its wondrous route through human events knows that on many occasions it was seen as hopeless. It did not follow a straight and a certain path from its crib in the old world to its conquest in America, only to fall back to the high point of the era of Louis XIV and of Voltaire. It had experienced troubles before that one, prior falls from which fifty years of marvels had begun to lift it up. Between Charlemagne and Gregory VII, for example, it collapsed into a chaos of which we have frightful memories, and which lasted during the ninth, the tenth and half of the eleventh centuries. The Arabs had despoiled it of part of the Orient, Africa, and Spain. The goal of Photius² was to separate his relationship with the remnants of the Byzantine empire; this is to say, half of the known world passed from his hands to the victorious hands of Islam or to the decaying regime of heresy. In vain had Leo crowned Charlemagne in order to give support to the Christian civilization. This prince, the descendent of three great men, carried the entire race with him and yet his successors were unable to defend the relics of saints against the godlessness of the Normans. While those hordes pursued their assaults into all directions, in Pannonia, the Slavs, subdued by Christian arms, became restless against the faith that had conquered them; the Church, imprisoned by error in a section of Europe, was left with no more than a territory as afflicted as it was diminished. Her

discipline disappeared in the tumult of wars; her knowledge perished with the great men. As for the popes, to crimes previously unheard of, they brought about, on the apostolic chair, a succession of even more tragic disasters. It was Stephen VI, strangled in a prison; Leo V, pursued by Christopher, Christopher by Sergius III. It was John X elevated to the pontifical throne by a woman and strangled on orders from another woman, sister of the first — both together, or one following the other, assigned the See of Rome at their whim. It was John XII, adding new crimes to this story; Benedict V, dying in exile; Benedict VI, strangled, with his absence quashing the question of simony and corruption.¹

Nonetheless, alongside this horrible decadence, the young and imperial civilization of the Arabs shone brilliantly; its victory carried it from the Indies to Spain. It fulfilled the promises of Mohammed, proving to the world that the Era of Christ had given place to that of the newcomer. Never was a display more beguiling. What could the Christians of Pelagius have been thinking, when from their mountains they scouted around them and saw along the rivers of Africa and of Asia schools, academies, libraries, the thousand structures the Arabs had built as a result of war and the Peace of Samarkand, while ignorance, vice, and the Northmen vied with each other for the Catholic peoples abandoned by Providence? The Arabs translated Aristotle, composed chronicles, traced geographical maps, cultivated medicine, chemistry, the arts, devoted themselves to algebra. Of all the fortunate skies of the Roman Empire, they left the Christians with Italy only, even though their weapons came to frighten Rome. What a spectacle! And it had to be borne for more than two hundred years! And to think that the civilized world had once belonged wholly to the Cross! Indeed, the fall was immeasurable; never should a new religion have been able to prophesy the ruin of ancient gods with a greater appearance of truth. And yet, God misled the vain thoughts of men: Gregory VII was born and fifty years later, the banner of Christians waved in Jerusalem over the sepulcher of their Lord.

Four centuries of glory followed upon the chaos of the preceding centuries, and, at the end of the cycle, Catholicism, ready to turn pale again, shared unknown worlds with its conquerors, astonishing the East Indies with an ambassador of the faith named Francis-Xavier, turned South America Christian, celebrated the most magnificent and most enlightened of all her councils, won the battle of Lepanto, and completed the

church of St. Peter. All of the above was to survive for the following centuries as a monument of what could have been achieved, in the previous centuries, by the alliance of arts with religion. And then there followed another period of decadence.

It is not fruitless to mention the causes of all this, so as to have a better understanding of the immense progress that Catholicism has made since 1783, the moment when it resumed its upward march, interrupted by the acclamations that ended the Middle Ages at Trent. The break of kings from the papacy and their efforts to regain their hold on the spiritual direction of the people are two correlative facts revealed in history even before Gregory VII had consolidated the supremacy of his office in Europe. This supremacy had a dual purpose: the freedom of people, and the freedom of the faith: the freedom of the people by assuring them of a recourse against the excesses of their sovereigns, and the freedom of the faith, by preventing the interference of princes in matters of religion. The kings fought against that charter, just as they had combated many others; they instigated specialized lawyers as its enemies. They took advantage of all occasions to weaken the papacy; the universities, even the councils, supported their jealousy. Protestantism was born the day when Rome could be separated from the Church in the minds of Christian nations. That day did arrive. Some princes rushed into the arms of the Reform; others were afraid of it. Charles V wavered between the two sides, protected Trent and seized Rome. But all of the princes used it, with more or less skill, to recreate their absolute power and retake the direction of the spiritual matters of the world. Three systems prevailed: that of Henry VIII, of Louis XIV, and of Joseph II — namely, Anglicanism, Gallicanism, and Josephism. These are but three forms of a royal pontificate and the more or less schismatic expression of the reaction of the kings against the time-honored freedom of nations regenerated in Jesus Christ. It is useless to indicate how low the Church and Europe fell; everyone knows it and we recognize it.

The causes and effects of the decadence of Catholicism since the XVIth century having been stated, it is easy to recognize the progressive movement that today carries it to new destinies. To be sure, in 1778, when Voltaire died, when Rousseau accompanied him to the tomb, despair was able to enter into the heart of a Catholic. But, in 1830, it had happened too late to bewail our troubles when the Churches of the United States, of Ireland, of Belgium, and of France emerged through incredible events from the hands of those who had hoped to keep in chains forever the freedom of men and that

of God. Fifty years ago, Washington began the resurrection of Catholicism by means of freedom; today, his tomb receives, in the admiration of the Two Worlds, the prize of a mission faithfully accomplished. The Church of the United States is a marvel such as never before seen. We had been oppressed, treated as equals by sovereigns, recognized by them as chiefs of thought and of justice, and, in the end, subdued under the shadow of their thrones. But a Church liberated in the freedom of the citizen; God protected on His altars by ten million men, the greater part of whom does not believe in Him; the God of a single free man, under pain of seeing perish in an instant the freedom of everyone — this is a social transformation whose progress comes to pass on everything that its power has not killed. Now, its power did not kill Catholicism: Catholicism grew, in North America, in the midst of the admiration of a population divided into innumerable sects. Eleven dioceses were set up to satisfy the needs of its believers; there was not one in existence in 1783. There, the Church had nothing to separate from authority. It chose its bishops, who were almost always foreigners; it communicated directly with Rome; it founded monasteries and schools; it gave the nuptial benediction before or after the civil act, as it pleased; it bought, it sold, it survived according to laws common to everything that breathes in the country wherein sleep the remains of the greatest of men.

Far from America, in the bosom of the seas that separate Europe in the East, there arises another great nation, conquered by heresy, if a nation can be characterized as vanquished when it has retained its faith. There, too, the freedom of Catholicism prevailed, but with even greater glory and influence, since it prevailed despite the conquest, despite oppression, despite its isolated position, as if lost at the extremity of Europe, which made Ireland an enslaved land by nature. It prevailed in a combat of three hundred years. Ireland is the sole Catholic nation that the ruin of the Middle Ages did not hand over for a single day into the greedy hands of kings. The latter were able to do everything against it except to vanquish God there.

We will not speak of Belgium: Belgium has surpassed the expectations that Catholics had for it. Its firmness against the base ruses of Calvinism, the alliance of its believers with its liberals, their mutual trust after the victory, the noble behavior of clerics at the congress, the absolute separation of Church and State, freedom of instruction and of association: — all these developments gained in a few days must trouble the ghosts of Joseph II, and provoke thought in those who dream of ruins during

days of resurrection.

But there is a country wherein the decadence of the Church was a sacred thing, in which memories, piety, fidelity, patriotism were kept together, to protect it against blows from God. A king, famous for the most radiant of despotisms, had attached his name to it; a bishop, whose ashes still have a formidable eloquence, had intermingled his glory; a majestic and unfortunate race brought it from exile, as the religion of its fathers, like the sacred fire that was to extinguish our civil disagreements by consuming their last remains. Freedom itself had taken under its care the religious traditions of the castle of Versailles; it had created unanimous harmony against the advance of Catholicism, a holy alliance that, one day, our nephews will have trouble explaining, but one that we have seen with our own eyes. For all that, on this country and on its Church depended the fate of its faith, the fate of freedom, the fate of the XIXth century. Anglicanism, Gallicanism, Josephism, that triple gnawing worm, could not die unless it were first crushed in France. God raised up a single man. Ten years later, it took three days. The following day, it was done: the Church of the United States had two more sisters in the old world: Belgium and France. Ireland greeted the two with love, and Poland, moved to the depths of its wastelands, bound in schism and heresy, found some bishops who could feel its oppression, and some hands, turned pale in cloisters, to rebuild its walls and defend its freedom.

It was in the presence of these important events that the *Globe* speaks of the decadence of Catholicism, just as it did fifty years earlier. If these events had no connection with the past, no relationships between each other, only left to chance, we would still have to take them into account as significant movements, following no general rule, but remarkable by the impossibility of even being put into words. But that is not the case. The formula is visible, progress is constant, and in separating itself even from history, it is evident that in our days a social transformation is taking place and that Catholicism, worn out by two centuries of subjugation, nonetheless has enough strength to adapt itself to this transformation. That in itself is proof of its influence. In the physical order as in that of the intellect, the passage of one form to another is a dangerous movement which requires youthfulness and energy. No doubt, if the new social order were a backward movement, it would be cowardice and weakness to adapt oneself to it; but it is not, according to the *Globe*, nor to us.

The progress of Catholicism for fifty years is further revealed by its admirable stability in the billows of revolutions, by that perseverance in standing tall when everything is tumbling down, and by the great men that God gave it in only the first quarter of the XIXth century; indeed, great men are the living expression of destiny. Who produced the de Bonald, Chateaubriand, de Maistre, and the one whom we dare not name, and Daniel O'Connell, that pope of Ireland in the manner of the Middle Ages? Is there a philosophy, a religious fellowship, that had men comparable to these in the past fifty years? We will not speak of superior writers, but of the less noteworthy that Catholicism has in France, in England, in Italy, and in Germany. The time has long since gone when God broke in our hands the sword of genius. The scattered broken pieces have been collected; they will not be used to carve on sand the testament of God.

What, then, did the *Globe* see as forecasting our demise? What did it see in this powerless world that revealed to it that we were like a lamp in a tomb already sealed? It saw *some fresh facts that came in droves*. What facts? A prelate from the North welcoming the emancipation of Poland, *more as a sycophant of Caesar rather than as a disciple of Christ*. And that bishop is a subject of the king of Prussia, allowed this choice as an exception to the Concordat of 1821. Today, from its ramparts, Warsaw looks at the religious who remember that the Christian is a soldier. What other facts? *The Roman people breaking the last link by which the Head of the Church still fastened to his pontifical crozier a remnant of political society*; that is not the case, and were it ever to be so, do you think that, today, God could not find for his Vicar a land more free than the one wherein kings have so often humiliated His pulpit? The Vatican is built everywhere there is peace; and Rome, is not a collection of stones; Rome is freedom. What other facts, then? A Catholic priest who has made *a preliminary effort to link the spiritual and the temporal world by an action unprecedented in the ostentation of the Church*. No, that action is not unprecedented; it conforms to all the existing laws of Catholicism, to the examples of Rome, to the primitive memories of Christian society when it was sufficient unto itself; a large body hidden under the earth that demanded of the world neither laws, nor judges, nor soldiers, nor bread, but only freedom to live under heaven just as it lived in caves and catacombs. The *Globe* itself justifies this effort that assembles traditions together and that signifies: *any social profession has to be exercised by a man filled with love for society and dedicated to its moral, intellectual, and material advancement*. Which is to say again, that Christian society needs to arrive

at freedom, to attain it, through all the openings it could pass, even to the point of reconstituting in Europe the primitive association of oppressed Christians.

These are the facts, the sole facts of decadence alleged by the *Globe*. We have called up the most powerful of them, the most numerous to help us. We have delineated the formula of our current progress. We will march before those who deny our movement, and since we are young, one and all, we invite the *Globe* to a meeting in the fiftieth year of this century whose children we are.

ENDNOTES

1. If some disputes about history could arise concerning some of these facts, the general character of the times cannot be gainsaid. (Note by Lacordaire.)
2. Photius (820-c. 893): Patriarch of Constantinople; ambitious and unscrupulous. Broke with Rome.
- [Trans.]

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