

CIRCULAR LETTER OF THE MINISTER OF CULTS

TO THE BISHOPS OF FRANCE

AND AN ARTICLE BY “FIGARO”

(23 December 1830)

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While France was preoccupied with the most important of lawsuits,¹ the Minister of Cults feared that Catholics would take things too seriously so he addressed a circular letter to their bishops. “Figaro,” a clerk, understood the intentions of His Excellency and very graciously took part in the matter and composed an article in support of the letter.

Here is a summary of their common effort to divert the attention of the Catholics of France.

The Minister called for a copy of the *Bulletin of Laws* to be brought to him and since everything is contained therein, he found an article of law stating: “No feast day, with the exception of Sunday, is to be established without permission from the government.” No feast day! A positive statement, a legal statement. But what is a feast day? A feast day is something announced at the sermon, an event calling for bell ringing, to attract people to Church, where Mass is celebrated with more precious vestments than usual, with the glow of six large candles. Evidently, this is what constitutes a feast day, and is what the law supports. Why would the law support it? Because religion is free, in conformity with Article 5 of the Constitutional Charter. Allow us to write:

“The bottom line, Bishop, the feast days preserved are those of Christmas, the Ascension, the Assumption, and All Saints. No other can be announced or can interrupt the work of day-laborers, of fairs or market days, etc.”

“. . . Patronal feasts whose celebration was a constant over time (on the days when they are indicated in the calendar), cannot call for *public services or a ceremonial ordinarily employed when people are gathered together*, those days having been wholly assimilated to the other days of the week. In that case, the feast is regularly transferred to the following Sunday.”

The Minister signed, and “Figaro” picked up his pen to add the following postscript: “The peasants are very pleased with this circular letter that does not force them to encounter three Sundays in one week. The young ladies are disappointed; these are lost occasions for them to display their finery.”

“I could not believe,” said the Minister, “that I had done so well. The Law of 1802 is back in force, freedom of religion flourishes, the peasants are happy, the young ladies desolate. Here is something legal, constitutional, popular, and moral.” This is saying a lot for a common circular letter.

The letter left with “Figaro” for the eighty sees and archbishoprics of France; here is what ensued. There sat around a table five canons, two vicars-general, and a secretary; the bishop sat at the right corner of the fireplace. The man-servant entered and said: *From his Excellency the Minister of Public Instruction and of Cults*. God be praised! answered the bishop. What does the Minister of Public Instruction and of Cults want from us? Ah! A circular letter; in his concern for all the Churches, he sends us a circular letter. God be praised! When the late King Louis XVIII, of erudite memory, appointed this admirable Minister of Public Instruction and of Cults — pardon my error — of Public Instruction and of Ecclesiastical Matters, that was a very wonderful day, a transcendent day. . . And what is more: “Figaro! Figaro!” . . . A circular letter is one thing; but “Figaro,” my very dear brothers! What can you add about this matter? — One of the oldest canons answered, it is probably the work of a division chief at the Ministry of Public Instruction and of Cults. — That is to be expected, replied the bishop.

The bishop read the document. After reading it, he pondered, and after his reflection, his opinion was formulated. — “By the patron saint of my cathedral,” said he, “I have never read anything so charming; we have to admit that we have as Minister the kindest man in the world. For him to take the trouble of amusing us when Europe finds itself on the edge

of the precipice! To express the change with such a pious inventiveness of mind! Read this, my very dear brothers.” All of them read the letter and all were convinced that finally they could seriously hope for something good to come from the Revolution of 1830.

“Would it not be praiseworthy,” the bishop spoke again, “to answer the witticism of our Minister with something imaginative that would please him? It could be supposed, for example, that we took his letter and *Figaro* very seriously; we could offer him respectful observations on both.” This idea was received with applause. The bishop got up, the two vicars-general stood up, the six canons stood up, the secretary stood up: everyone had gotten up. They laughed, they chatted, they forgot the Palace of Luxembourg and the Grand Duke Constantine, the Holy Alliance, and the Vistula. A few days later the Minister of Public Instruction and Cults received the following letter:

“ Mr. Minister, Sir,”

“ *Law is the political divinity of people*, because it is the people who create it. Now, the people have created a law that declares *no feast day, except for Sunday, can be established without permission*. Since this is what the people wanted, there is no more to be said. Nonetheless, we entreat Your Excellency to overlook the petty thoughts that have intruded in the religious respect that we have for the will of the people.”

“We were surprised that the people had created a law such as the one in question in your circular letter and in “*Figaro*,” and here is why. No holiday can take place unless the people want it; and once the people want it, it is rather strange that they would have to ask permission for it from themselves! Your person is the mouth of the law, that is to say, the instrument of their will. A holiday is when the people amuse themselves in some location or who sing in church. Indeed, Your Excellency understands that a holiday does not reside in a church organ, in a chasuble, or in six large candles. A holiday, then, is when people amuse themselves, singing or praying. How is it that they bound themselves to ask you for permission to amuse themselves, to sing or to pray, whenever the action will please them?”

“I have a young secretary who read Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He went to find a volume in his library; this volume was entitled *The Social Contract*. We have all read what follows: *If the people wish to do themselves harm, who has the right to prevent them from*

doing so? All the more, Mr. Minister, Sir, if the people want to amuse themselves, to sing and to pray, who has the right to restrain them?”

“It is true that “Figaro” — who appears to be an employee of your ministry, and who, in any case, is a witty person — supposes that people could be forced to attend a festival against their wishes, and that to prevent this abuse, they need to ask your permission to amuse themselves when they feel like it. At least, this reasoning is logical.”

“Another consideration has affected the young men in my seminary, and I believe it is my duty to report it to Your Excellency. They say that the Charter of 1830 has validated the principle of religious freedom and that a feast day being the object of religion, linked with all that is most intimate in conscience, no one can prevent a citizen from celebrating a feast day when he has the piety for it. One of them, my top student in theology, a deserving young man, added this: ‘Suppose, Bishop, that after your Highness has entrusted me with a part of his flock, my flock requests a high Mass on the feast day of St. Barnabas. They love St. Barnabas; they are free to do so; I love him, too, because I am free; I choose a very appropriate chasuble, and I am free to do so; I ascend to the altar and remain there for an hour; I am indeed free to do so. That being the case, Bishop — it could not cease to remain so except by exterior and illegal violence — can Your Excellency imagine how the law could prevent my celebrating the feast of St. Barnabas, who was a great man and who is my patron?’

“I admit, Mr. Minister, Sir, that even though a bishop must always be reasonable, even when he speaks to this top student in theology, I experienced a moment of embarrassment. Fortunately, “Figaro” came back to my mind; although I suspect that he does not fulfill his Easter duties, I based myself on his authority. Do you not see,” I answered the young man, “*that the peasants are very happy with the letter of the Minister of Cults and that the young ladies feel downcast?* What stronger evidence could there be for the legality and the constitutionality of the matter? — ‘Pardon me, Bishop,’ he replied, blushing, ‘but I find in “Figaro” himself a new argument in favor of my opinion. By what right does the Minister of Cults send letters that grieve the young ladies of the kingdom? That is evidently contrary to the Charter and to the freedom of worship.’ ”

“This is where I found myself, Mr. Minister, Sir, when the chief sacristan of my cathedral asked to be admitted: I myself had called for him so I could relay your orders to him. It was the eve of a feast day of piety; I charged him, under pain of *ipso facto* excommunication, to be careful that there be on the morrow only *public offices* and a *ceremonial ordinarily in use when people are assembled*. I repeated this twice. His countenance flushed as he wanted to laugh, but dared not. What is the matter with you?” I asked. — ‘My God, Bishop, since Your Excellency allows me, my problem is that I do not understand. How can Your Excellency wish that only a simple Mass be said, *without the ceremonial ordinarily in use when people are assembled*? Your Highness can see clearly that the ceremonial *ordinarily in use when the people are assembled* is the ceremonial of every day. The ceremonial of *ferias* [i.e., ordinary days. - Trans.]. That gentleman will have to specify how many candles we need to place on the altar, the duration of the Mass, whether the smaller or the larger bell will be rung. Otherwise, I am no longer answerable for Your Highness’s sacristy.’ ”

“Thereupon, Mr. Minister, Sir, I assembled my chapter; and after three hours of deliberation, we resolved to address Your Excellency, humbly, with the following questions:

“I. If my pastors recommend to their flock, in the secret of confession, to come to church on feast days that have been suppressed by law, how would I be able to learn about it so as to let you know?”

“II. If the people come to church on suppressed feast days, should we close the doors to them, since your letter forbids *public ceremonies*, or should the pastor simply abstain from celebrating Mass?”

“III. If the priest is allowed to say Mass, the doors opened, and the people wish to sing in church, how would he go about stopping them?”

“IV. Would it be permissible to read or explain the gospel to the people on that day?”

“V. Would we be allowed to ring the small bell which announces the celebration of low Masses?”

“VI. If none of the above is authorized by law and by *Figaro*, how is religion free? And if religion is not free, then how is the Charter a *reality*?”

“These are, Mr. Minister, Sir, our respectful doubts. I hope that Your Excellency will not find in them anything unworthy of a Frenchman who is convinced about limitless veneration owed to laws, especially when the latter have the good fortune of being interpreted by a Minister, friend of freedom.”

Chance placed this letter in our hands, and since our country is decidedly saved, we believed that after having thanked God and the National Guard, we needed also to offer some sign of gratitude to the Minister of Cults and to “*Figaro*.” The Minister of Cults probably did not want to banter, as did the good bishop with his chapter; but, unquestionably, what he did was innocent. He thought that we were living in a time when religious feasts were also obligatory on civic grounds, that *they interrupted daily work, fairs, or markets*. — At such a time, lay authority undeniably had the right to meddle into a matter that had civil effects: today, Sunday interrupts the work of citizens only to the degree that they choose; the conscience of each French person is the sole judge of his feasts and of his rest. The Minister of Cults could have another role to play than the one he engages in with an illusion closer to caricature than to despotism. Today, despotism is impossible even against a simple sacristan. The last chorister of the village, supported by the power of things, will mock, like it or not, the actual meditations of Merilhou.² There is another role for the Minister of Cults to play, if he would understand that he is not the protector, born of freedom of conscience, if he would help liberate the Catholic Church by a genuine love of our liberal institutions, and by a deep foreboding of the fate reserved for Christianity in the new social era, whose second dawn started this very night. This role would be more important and more popular than that of *foremost churchwarden of France*.

ENDNOTES [Trans.]

1. This deals with a legal process begun by the former ministers of Charles X.
2. Joseph Merilhou (1788-1856); lawyer, politician, sometime Minister of National Education and Cults.

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