

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, OP

Only one thing in the liberal regime frightens many Catholics: the freedom of the press. They cannot understand that error could be given unlimited ability to come into being and to defend itself against the truth. They seem to think that order is destroyed if the lie is allowed to deal with truth as an equal — all the more in that truth has to use weapons that are necessarily inferior and partially disabled. If we are not mistaken, this is the state of mind of many Catholics of good faith, who wholeheartedly celebrated the funeral of absolute power, but who sometimes find themselves troubled by the appearance of a printing press — an old phantom at that — whose powerlessness against religion had been demonstrated for three centuries, and which, three centuries hence, will make little children laugh.

Freedom of the press implies only one thing, which could displease those who are not Catholic, but which Catholics are forced to admit: namely, that there exists no civil tribunal capable of distinguishing the true from the false in matters political and religious. From this, it follows that no civil tribunal has the right to set itself up, *a priori*, by way of criticism, as supreme judge of the truth. Except that, when a book has become public, a mere twelve citizens can say to the author: “We do not know whether what you wrote is true or false, but what you have written is rejected by common opinion, which condemns you to a fine of so many francs or to so many years of prison.” This *a posteriori* judgment, by way of repression, is not entirely logical; nonetheless, it is tolerable because it does not make of the prince — that is to say, of one individual man — the master of good and evil in his kingdom, the supreme moderator of thought, the unique and true high priest of the nation. There is no doubt that the jury is no more infallible than the prince. But it is composed of citizens from all ranks and all opinions; it is not enclosed in a palace; it sees, it hears, it changes. It does not render its judgment until after ideas have been clarified in

print, and consequently, until after it has been enlightened by the general impression which those ideas have produced in the country. Condemnation, on the contrary, hides — I do not know where — some men, sold to the conscience of power, who make decisions about all truths according to the anger or the ignorance of each day, extending their scissors all the way to the chancel, there to cut some pages from the Gospel, emend apostolic bulls or episcopal mandates. With this, they reduced Bossuet¹ to implore the mercy of Madame de Maintenon² to respect that pen which, in their day, neither genius nor the Holy Spirit could defend against the Chancellor. Condemnation is nothing other than the substitution of the prince for the Pope; in view of the fact that the prince rarely gives himself to thought, it becomes, in the end, the substitution of a Minister of State for the Vicar of God. But I'm not saying enough, because the Pope follows recognizes as rules both the Gospel and traditions; since the Ministers recognize no superior law in the spiritual order, condemnation is not even the substitution of the government building on Saints-Pères Street for the Vatican, but rather an impious despotism without a name: it is Mr. de Montalivet³ made God. Boldly do we state it: idolatry has never imagined anything worse; for when it created gods, at least its gods were men.

What, then, do Catholics want when they dream of freedom of the press with a tinge of fear? They want ministerial infallibility to replace papal infallibility, the golden calf in the place of Mt. Sinai.⁴ They seek the degradation into which the Russian Church fell, with its mandates composed in government offices and its crozier a club. In a shocking doubt against the power of their faith, they want to throw themselves down, with their feet and wrists bound, into the anteroom of the first atheist made Minister. They are little concerned for having fallen so low, as long as the universe falls into the mud with them, and that they not be so choked up as to be unable to speak to the universe about God, for want of any thing else to do.

Did the Catholics expect that, with the reestablishment of the censure, care would be taken to exempt their writings? If so, they would have really been deceived, and should have taken a better look at what was happening in their times. The privilege of freedom is impossible today, it is impossible forever; the princes who formerly entertained the strongest desires for the progress of our religion, never established for it anything other than the privilege of servitude. We blame them far less than we pity them: the spirit of equality,

much more alive than that of freedom, invincibly opposed their efforts. Returning to the world with the blood of the Bourbons in his veins, Napoleon could have again bent France before the metal of his will; but to create a France that was both free and enslaved had never been seen before, and would never be seen except under one condition: that the Catholics be part of the enslaved. Besides, it would involve more than exempting their writings from censure for the rights of Catholics to be respected. All men are brothers and all men are Christians; all were set free on the same day by the same blood. In their estimation, no prince can be the supreme judge of truth, unless the Church be instantaneously destroyed. What is left is a choice between two alternatives: freedom of the press or condemnation exercised by the Church. This is where things stand.

Now, can civil condemnation be exercised by the Church? No! Freedom and God be blessed! May God be blessed for having made man a creature of such high stature that power vainly conspires against his intelligence, and that thought has in this world no other judge than thought. Far from order being destroyed by the untrammelled combat of error against truth, it is that very combat which constitutes the primitive and universal order. In the designs of God, nothing has been accomplished by way of censure, and everything has been accomplished by way of self-control. Hell exists only because censure is impossible for God Himself; or at least, He preferred the role of censure over that of hell. For if hell creates condemned souls, it also creates men and saints while censure only peoples the world with immortal idiots. For my part, I never understood how some Catholics have rebelled against freedom of the press, despite the frightening deluge of crimes and evils with which freedom has flooded the universe. If God had reasoned like Mr. de Villèle,⁵ the world would have been happy, as happy as a lamb could be under a monarchy; but God wished that every man be free, even at the risk of his losing eternity.

One could object to the Sovereign Creator that evil would be stronger than good in the liberal regime He had chosen. Nonetheless, He did chose it, knowing that freedom is the good par excellence, against which crime cannot prevail, since crime is a proof in itself of freedom, and that it attests to the presence of a divine creature everywhere that a crime is committed. Nero,⁶ who committed patricide, was an important figure: the animals nourished at the Vatican to furnish the wool for the *palliums*⁷ of all Christianity are of no account. Besides, it is not at all true in any sense that error is stronger than good, and that truth fights, here on earth, with weapons whose disparity would require that they be

repaired with the help of an absolute power. If this were so, truth would indeed be afflicted, since absolute power never worked well in its favor. Was it with the help of absolute power that Christianity was founded? Was it with the help of absolute power that the heresies of the Lower Empire were overcome? Was it with the help of absolute power that the Arian peoples of the West were converted? Was it with the help of absolute power that eighteenth century philosophy has turned into dust today? Truth persecuted has triumphed everywhere over protected and powerful error: that is history. And today we are told that if truth is reduced to combating error by means of its own weapons, out in the open, without restraint, all is lost. Nonsense! There is only one proof that all is not a lie or a play on words, namely, that something, hated from its origin, a slave from its origin, wounded and bloody from its origin, which has nonetheless triumphed from its origin against all human obstacles. And that something, tossed by the waves, you think that it will perish because of freedom? Many men have shaken their heads while passing before Christ; but I swear to you that I have never in history found anyone whose blasphemy was equal to yours. You do not know the Galilean.

Believe me, Catholics. Leave those who have faith only in earthly princes to their hopes and servitude. Allow them to say that all is lost if the press speaks, thereby plunging themselves into unfortunate consequences where they will have to choose between the destruction of order or that of reason. They are children of the day who have not yet seen an eclipse, and who wring their hands while invoking I know not which gods. For us, long-time sojourners on this earth, we should not trouble ourselves over so little. With the crucifix on our chest, we pray and fight. Days do not kill centuries, freedom does not kill God.

ENDNOTES

[Trans.]

1. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, French bishop and orator (1627-1704).
2. Second wife of Louis XIV; very intelligent and strongly religious woman (1635-1719).
3. Pierre Bachasson, Count de Montalivet (1766-1823); minister of state.
4. Where God gave Moses the tablets of the law.
5. Jean-Baptiste Seraphin Joseph, comte de Villèle (1773-1854); statesman.
6. Nero Claudius Caesar (37-68), Roman emperor.
7. Band of wool, a kind of stole, part of the vestments of an archbishop.

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