

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
A VISITOR'S IMPRESSIONS

THE Catholic Church in the United States of America is a very impressive institution; especially if one comes to it as a visitor from England. For then one usually lands on the eastern seaboard where Catholicism will be found to be at its strongest. Moreover such an one must bring to it the memory of the Church in England, where Catholicism is, by comparison, small, poor, and overshadowed by the much more impressive Establishment. Anyone who undertakes to give his impressions of America must ask for it to be remembered that it is a vast country, with not only many but with extreme diversities; so that what is true enough of certain areas or strata could be off-set by something just as true, but very different, elsewhere. It is in the eastern States, and, with the exception of a few middle State cities such as Chicago, only again in California, that the Church is well represented, not to say dominant; whereas it is hardly visible in such States as the two Carolinas and Georgia, for it has made very small conquests among the coloured people, while in what is called 'the Bible belt' a still existing, though gradually disappearing, open hostility may be apparent.

Numbers have some meaning, and the latest census gives the professing Catholics as over twenty-two millions: perhaps nearly ten times as many as we can really count upon. Moreover, what tells even more, this record has within ten years beaten the number counted as Methodists, which was for long the leading denomination, and perhaps the most influential, at least politically, for it had much to do with enforcing Prohibition. It is the Catholic Church, therefore, that is now the largest religious body in the States, though it can be questioned whether it yet has the place or the influence that its numbers ought to give it in the general life of the people. Political power it is perhaps inadvisable to seek, for the notoriously corrupting influence of Tammany, while broken, is not forgotten, and feeling and prejudice are still at a point where fear of domination might revive bigotry and provoke organized resistance. The lesson to be learned is otherwise: namely, that the Catholic Church increases most healthily, wins more respect from outsiders, when it enjoys none of that kind of prestige which comes from establishment, and when no preferential treatment or defence is provided by the State. For in

the States all religious institutions enjoy freedom from taxation, and on most of the railways official representatives, as well as all religious, men and women, are granted privileges of half-fare. There is no doubt also that the absence of anything like a persecution memory, on either side makes for a temper in which the claims of the Church can be calmly considered without past history having to be explained away, or fears of domination, however ill-founded, overcome. So despite the fact that the increase of Catholics in the States owes much to the waves of immigration from Europe, those fleeing from Totalitarian pressure recently adding a further quota, conversions account for a very respectable increase, though perhaps not in a greater proportion than with us in this country, and perhaps not so often embracing such outstanding figures, especially in the literary world. At a recent Confirmation service the Bishop of Brooklyn confirmed nearly seven hundred adult converts, nearly five hundred of whom were men: such a harvest is no accident.

The American Church is also impressively wealthy. Wealth is indicated by what would be called the Church's 'plant' (may it never come to be called a 'joint'); and so not so much by its numerous fine churches as by its institutions, particularly the enormous seminaries, often standing in extensive grounds, as well as orphanages, homes for the aged and infirm, not to speak of the magnificent schools and hospitals. Compared with what we have to accustom ourselves to in this country, these strike the visitor as positively palatial, while the multiplication of bathrooms, or at least 'showers'—one per person, even in the Orders pledged to poverty, but also apparently to cleanliness—is a pleasant surprise. No doubt very different conditions could be found in poorer dioceses, but the visitor of modest upbringing is bound to be impressed by what seems the luxury, or at least the elegance, of many presbyteries. It must be remembered, however, that all this only reflects the general standard of life, which is far higher than with us, even for the artisan class, and therefore no such odious comparisons are provided as, for instance, often gives a bad impression at home between the parson's huge residence and the peasant's cottage. This standard is also marked in the attire and appearance of the priests, smart and slim; for the American in any walk of life is in too much hurry to wax fat, however rich he may get. In this connection it is an interesting comparison that there the Irish manage to rise, whereas here they seem oftener to sink in the social scale.

The churches do not perhaps so obviously reflect the wealth of the country, but this is because they were mostly built a generation ago. Only a few seem to have been erected lately, and so there are still

very few in modernistic style; though there is among Catholic architects, Mr. Barry Byrne, a convinced modernist, whose church of Christ the King, at Cork of all places, provides a somewhat unexpected example nearer home. While the Gothic enthusiasm of Ralph Adams Cram—strangely enough, himself not a Catholic—has provided a fair number of Catholic churches, there are a few examples of perhaps more suitable significance which have adapted the old Colonial style. St. Patrick's, New York, with its twin spires, might look more impressive if it were not now surrounded by skyscrapers, the soaring cliffs of the Radio Centre being exactly opposite; but it is a fussy kind of Gothic, anyhow. The vast church of the Paulist Fathers, in the same city, has little architectural distinction, black without and dark within, but with its magnificent altar and baldachino, gleaming like ivory and gold (designed by the notorious Stanford White), is almost dramatically devotional, and the more so when its services are set to its almost theatrical but always moving music.

Comparison with other communions is not perhaps so impressive on this count, for Catholics possess (and some might think it just as well) nothing like New York's Riverside Baptist or Pittsburgh's Presbyterian buildings, each in some respect overdone, but only needing a short ceremony to make them what they look like, surely Catholic. A better example of something more original, native, and fitting is to be found in Sacred Heart, Pittsburgh, a church of strong simple design, full of suggestive but not too complicated symbolism, and with a most impressive high altar, the brilliant hangings of which can characteristically be changed by simply pulling a cord. It has, what one poor exiled suppliant found most moving, a sanctuary floored with a map of the world, done in stone of various colours, each taken from the land it represents, with dear little England in the very centre, and so, due of course not to favouritism but to the Greenwich line, right in front of the Tabernacle. There also, to bring in a more important consideration, the Liturgy is celebrated with exactness and beauty, while (another point worth noting) the church was erected, whether as regards money, material or workmanship, from local resources, with not even a whist drive allowed to be held for its support. This is somewhat of a rarity, Bingo having much prominence in far too many churches, while Hollywood additions to ceremonial have even been struggling to gain a foothold here and there. There is, however, a break, as well as a spur, provided in the newly-formed but splendidly organized Liturgical Movement, well advertised by the full Report of its Annual Conferences. This, together with the smaller Liturgical Arts Society, is leading the way, and will eventually prove, it is to be hoped, irresistible.

What of the more interior life? This can be judged by God alone, but it has its own unmistakable manifestations, and this is evidenced by the enormous number of communions which every parish has to provide for. This means in many places as many as ten to twelve Masses on Sunday, a lower auditorium enabling two to be celebrated at the same time. In one church, and that not in a city, it is reported that Holy Communion is administered to over ten thousand every Sunday; there, and in other places, perhaps unfortunately, distribution has to go on continuously through the swiftly succeeding Masses. It is no uncommon thing in Lent for business people, men and women, to receive Communion at midday, and then to go to their first meal that day in what remains of the lunch hour. The crowded Communion rails might sometimes appear to disturb devotion, though they need not; but they often almost put an end to preaching, especially since in only a few places had recourse been made to printed bulletins, with the relegation thereto of the provided Masses, which otherwise add to the always too lengthy notices.

The Paulists still keep up their attempts to reach the people by preaching, but comparison with their past successes has provoked the remark that Father Gillis is the last of the Paulists. This is prematurely pessimistic. Nevertheless he is almost the only one who can now fill their great church, and he not perhaps so easily as once. Monsignor Sheen has a national reputation as a preacher; but there seems hardly a third. The whole question is bound up with the problem of how to preach to the modern age, which has hardly anywhere found a solution. There is therefore need for the society which tries to avoid offending susceptibilities by calling itself 'The League for the More Effective Preaching of the Word of God'; for, despite all else, faith comes still mostly by hearing.

Something vastly important, and perhaps contributing to this need, has been attempted by the new revision of the Bible, of which the New Testament has already been published, and must now always be used publicly, especially since, to encourage the reading of the Scriptures, little pocket manuals have been provided from which a daily portion will secure that the Gospels, or the whole of the New Testament, will be read through within a year. This new version owes its initiation to the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, which makes much use of Discussion Groups, presided over, not by priests, but by trained laymen. This, no doubt, marks one of the many concessions to democratic feeling, so strong in America; though stronger perhaps in sentiment than in political enshrinement, social embodiment or racial equality, but always and everywhere sensitive, and to be reckoned with, even among curates! One excellent effort along

these lines is to be seen in the various attempts to make the Mass a worship in which the people partake, and do not merely watch or listlessly listen. One of these attempts is the Dialogue Mass. In one church at least it is the custom, once a month, to read the whole of the Mass, apart from the Canon, in English, the congregation joining in all the prayers, at the same time that it is being said in Latin at the altar. It can hardly be claimed, however, that this makes for a restful devotion, the attempt to be congregational only resulting in something more like an infants' school at its lessons. However only experiments are being made, for nothing is long pursued in the States if it does not work.

Of deeper significance is the attempt to teach the people, what the Mass itself insists on, that it is their offering, as well as that of the sacerdotal priesthood, and this by reviving the Scriptural doctrine of the Priesthood of the Laity. This can be safely done now the shock of the Reformation claim that there is no other priesthood has passed. The preacher at the Confirmation Service previously mentioned suggested that this Sacrament might be regarded as the ordination of the laity to their sacred task of being co-offerers, and not mere spectators, of the Mass; and this could be done without it being thought daring and novel, since many quotations to this end were given from recent episcopal exhortations and current theological writings. Foremost amongst these are to be counted the works of Father Ellard, which emphasize not only the obligation to personal devotion as incorporated members of the Mystical Body offering the One Sacrifice, but of the social duty that this imposes regulating all life. Another Jesuit, Father Lord, by his popular tracts and correspondence courses seeks to provide the laity with the deepest reasons for faith and practice.

A more specialised advance along social lines is to be found in the tracts published by the Catholic Welfare Association. These go beyond the mere insistence on Justice and Charity, or merely repeating the language of the great Social Encyclicals, and condescend to deal with specific reforms needed and possible in the States at the present time, such as Credit Banks, Co-operative Societies and the establishment of rural communities.

These examples of advanced ideas and practice cannot conclude without a mention of the forward work attempted in many of the Catholic High Schools which provide for all classes and needs. It must be noted that in some States the school-leaving age is 18, which has the effect that, in a city like Philadelphia, a visitor was asked to address, partly by wireless, an audience of as many as 8,500 Catholic High School girls, and, characteristically, one of the pupils introduced and another thanked the speaker. In some places there is being tried

out 'the progressive school,' which is designed for primary and ordinary parish scholars. These are feeling their way, and have yet to justify themselves to all critics; but in one well-known example, that of Corpus Christi, New York, where the teachers are University graduates as well as members of the Third Order of St. Dominic, can be seen an experiment whose success brings hundreds of visitors from all parts, and is indeed not only a hopeful experiment on co-operative lines, but a moving experience to watch at work.

In this very brief survey note has only been taken of the more advanced or hopeful elements; for these, even if still somewhat sparse or unusual, indicate the way growth is developing and the line which progress is likely to take. Other eyes, focussed on other elements, could find perhaps some things to criticize, and perhaps some to deplore. There are obvious dangers the Church must seek to avoid, but those on the spot are to be trusted to be sufficiently aware of them, and to find the solution better than a passing stranger and necessarily superficial observer. The American Church naturally stands in danger, if not of succumbing to the worship of the 'almighty dollar,' yet of allowing it, and mere businesslike efficiency, to count for too much. There is also a visibly rising danger to be faced in anti-Semitism, of which even some Catholics have rendered themselves suspect; for if ever this becomes serious the Jews in the States are too numerous and too wealthy to take it passively, and blinding passions and violent action may be aroused. The National Council for Catholics, Jews and Protestants represents a concrete effort to gain mutual understanding and to defend common beliefs and interests. It has, however, yet to win the full support of the hierarchy, some of whom suspect that it may take off the pressure and duty of making converts, though some bishops openly espouse it and speak for it. It would be a great gain if this venture could have its basis and purpose more carefully drawn up and more authoritatively supported. There is no doubt that Catholics stand only to gain from it, and are thus less likely to become what one well-known supporter calls 'an intellectual and spiritual Ghetto,' while the whole community would be taught a needed lesson in religious toleration.

The Catholic Church has yet to overcome the deeply entrenched colour antipathy, but for this the Inter-Racial Committee is working hard. But it is a loss, as well as a reproach, that so far the Catholic Church has been able to attract so few of these numerous citizens of the States. But if they are ever to be won, they must be allowed more self-expression than other Catholics seem to crave, and especially must they be allowed to sing. The Liturgical Revival has not yet found out how to make people sing even the Creed, and it naturally

has little interest, and perhaps less liking, for popular vernacular hymns. But even when these are used for processions the congregation does not join in, and indeed cannot, for there seems to exist no equally comprehensive or commonly used hymn-book. But work among negroes is being heroically undertaken, especially by the Holy Ghost Fathers, and dramatically by the Baroness de Hueck in the notorious Harlem district. Amongst the almost as needy down-and-out whites there must be mentioned not only Dorothy Day's sacrificial and saintly adventure with her House of Hospitality, but constructive movements to get the city dwellers, who so swell the unemployable and criminal classes, back to the land.

One other obvious danger is that the ordinary parish priest has not only enough work to run his local church and its societies, but he has such numbers to deal with, and such successes to rejoice over, that there is no natural incentive to look further afield. There are, however, not only the great Catholic Charity 'drives' and the Community Chests to which all contribute, and in which all share, but Foreign Missions are widely and enthusiastically supported; and fortunately, in present world conditions, for it is to the States that the Church will have to look in the near future for both men and money, if the latter does not suddenly take to itself wings and fly away. For there is not only the world-famous Maryknoll, but, amongst others, the Society of the Divine Word is training a considerable body of splendidly simple and utterly devoted men.

Half the population of the States is now revealed to have no church connection or professed religion; the day of the more fantastic and extravagant sects is now waning; the denominations are weakening in their basis, their impulses, and their resources; it is time for Catholics to step in and attempt the re-evangelization of the masses and the conversion of America to the full Catholic Faith. The Catholic Church in the States has a chance before it such as no Church anywhere has had since Constantine; but it must be seized now, or perhaps lost for generations; and then to open the way not only to unbelief and chaos, but to anarchy and decline. To undertake this great task the Orders, especially the Franciscans and Dominicans, need to recover their original inspiration and, perhaps, return to their particular expression of life and activity. But also more must be attempted by the ordinary parish priest. Brooklyn Diocese here sets an excellent example, as has been already indicated; and its fruitful efficiency is secured by grouping together a number of churches, and setting aside one priest in each group to give his whole time to the convert problem. Open classes are held each week during the winter, to which anyone may come, and ask questions, without it being expected they

will finally proceed to seek reception into the Church. Large rallies are held of all who come to the classes, and the free, frank and friendly atmosphere generated by these means between converts and those still enquiring, and especially between the official platform and the enthusiastic audience, is something to be felt for its capacity and promise to be understood. An army of the very best kind of priests' is wanted for the forward movement America needs, as well as for ordinary parish work.

So there we bid farewell to our survey, but never to diminish, as we hope only to increase by it amongst others, our interest and sympathy, our admiration and hope for the Catholic Church in the States. God continue to bless and prosper it, as indeed God must be thanked that it stands already in that land of new adventure and still somewhat doubtful attainment, a rock amid stormy seas and sinking sands.

W. E. ORCHARD.

THE PROBLEM OF PROPHECY

(A letter written during the Great War.)

DEAR X,

The questions you put require delicate handling. I will first of all set them down and then humbly adventure upon an answer.

'In the *Dublin Review* Fr. Thurston writes that St. Vincent Ferrer worked miracles in support of his contention that the end of the world was then imminent. And yet the Church tells us that God cannot deceive. What else did He do on that occasion?

'My confessor maintains the dogma that God cannot deceive; but he says that this need not necessarily mean that under no circumstances whatever God may not have reasons of his own for making an exception. This staggers me altogether; and has led to my giving up the sacraments. How can I go on with this doubt in my mind? If God who is Truth can sometimes deceive, how can I ever know when He is not doing so?'

There are two points of enquiry: (a) Some prophecies though vouched for by miracles seem to be false; (b) God sometimes seems to deceive us by false prophecies.

I.

Some prophecies, though vouched for by miracles, seem to be false.