

## THE CATHOLIC OUTLOOK IN FRANCE

“AS at other epochs in the history of the Church we face a world that has once again fallen into paganism.” These words of the Holy Father must have found an echo in the serious-minded of many countries, and in France we find them abundantly justified. In most of her institutions paganism is rife, in her literature, schools, theatres, cinemas and radio. One can discern it in her economic outlook and in the manners and customs of our contemporaries; and, most insidiously, it is penetrating the lives of an appreciable number of Christians, attached to the Church by sentiment and tradition but exposed to the worst forms of self-indulgence by their lukewarmness and lives of ease.

Rather than enumerate the various spheres where this neo-paganism is specially rampant, I will give you some recent statistics. Something like 10% of the French people are unbaptized, not a quarter fulfil their Easter duties, and not quite a fifth attend Mass regularly on Sunday. This sufficiently indicates the state of Catholicity in France to-day, the France of the Crusader, the France of Saint Louis.

It is certainly inadequate to pronounce on an actual situation without looking for its probable origin in the past and the direct causes in the present. For the remote cause we may look back from contemporary rationalism and materialism in all their forms, by way of the French Revolution and the Encyclopedia, to the Reformation, and to the pagan humanism of the Renaissance. But rather, let us examine what seem the permanent elements of this de-christianisation of French society to-day. We will place in the front rank Freemasonry, which for over a hundred years has worked destructively in Europe. Freemasonry is mainly responsible for the “lois laïques,” laws established by an anti-Christian Government which at the end of the last century and the beginning of the present expelled the religious Orders, removed the Crucifix from the Civil Courts and barred priests from the schools. If the religious Orders

have now been able to find a *modus vivendi*, which is more just in practice but still illegal, one consequence of the "lois laïques" remains, becoming worse as time goes on, and that is the Godless school, the "école laïque." Year by year whole generations of teachers, destined to instruct the children of the working classes, are trained in the schools without any religious influence whatever, but with the conviction that Rationalism is sufficient to solve all problems. Trained by Atheists, these teachers of the future are in the habit of looking on Catholicism as an outworn Creed; and if on leaving school they do not always aim to wage a bitter war against Christianity, the greater number certainly consider religious questions of no importance. What Péguy used to call "the hunger for the metaphysical" has been killed. The kind of teaching they are giving to the sons of workmen and peasants can therefore be well imagined. Hostile to the Church, which they consider to be a paradox and an anachronism, the neutrality guaranteed by law is turned by them all too soon into persistent enmity. Moreover, if the attitude of many of them to the religious question is one of calm indifference, in the case of many others their lost Faith is replaced by Marxism. When this happens their teaching will be deliberately and bitterly opposed to the Christian law of Charity. Thus for the last two or three generations the majority of the French working class have been trained in schools where the existence of God is ignored or denied. The influence of the Clergy, too few in numbers, and of parents with sometimes a mere veneer of Christianity, has been completely incapable of counteracting the constant action of official education. So Paganism is spreading gradually amongst the working classes.

Another cause, contributing profoundly to the disaffection of the working classes in regard to the Church is the long-standing conviction, still believed by them, that the Church was the accomplice of the abominable exploitation of the working man by Capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A glance at the Encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI would have at once dispelled this misunderstanding and have shown how the Holy See has always condemned

*amoral Liberalism.* But what have the more educated Catholics done in the way of thoroughly examining the generous social teaching of the Church? And where it was in their power to do so, what have they done to ensure its application? Undoubtedly we have had such men as Tour du Pin, Albert de Mun, Jacques Piou, and there are still in our own day admirable Catholic business men, but on the other hand there are many Catholics, possessing the Faith and practising their religion, who have preferred to compromise it by adhering to political parties connected with an un-Christian economic system. I may here recall a historic meeting of the French Parliament, which took place before the Great War. The discussion turned on some social question, but not one among the Catholic members of Parliament could explain the Church's teaching. On seeing this, Jaurès, the great Socialist leader, turning towards the seats of the "Right" and, remembering his own Christian education, recalled to them with splendid eloquence the eternal lessons of Christ. "That is what you should have said," he cried, "if you still had the Faith, but there is no longer any life in you." A stern lesson, but one justly merited. Happily, for the honour of my country to-day, there are few French Catholics who would deserve a like reproach. I am going now to show you with what faith the best of them are working to build up in the sight of God the bulwarks of the State of the future.

This State, I know, will be Christian; but I must draw attention to other aspects of the State in which we still find ourselves, invaded as it is by the forces of paganism. The de-christianisation which ravages the working classes does not spare those classes considered (rightly or wrongly) as the "élite." I need not insist on the demoralisation that wealth so often brings with it; that is no new thing. "The wheel of fortune," wrote Léon Bloy, "has always turned in the mud." Like all generalisations this is an exaggeration, yet we must acknowledge that what we see in an important minority of the upper classes, their choice of companions, of amusements, of books, is in direct opposition to Christian morality. This contributes to spread an atmo-

sphere of scepticism in which weak Catholics, attached to worldly prejudices, expose their faith to real danger. These Catholics, it is true, accustomed to base their religious convictions on grounds apart from their daily life, are for that reason relatively protected, but it remains a serious menace, in that their constant participation in a reprehensible manner of life is compromising to the Church.

These *dilettanti* are easily influenced by a contemporary literature, which to a greater extent influences the different categories of Intellectuals. It is at least satisfactory to realize that this influence does not tend wholly in the direction of Agnosticism. There is a splendid Catholic element, too: I need only mention here the work of Péguy and of Léon Bloy, and amongst those still with us Claudel, Mauriac, Malègue and a few others. But as opposed to these one cannot ignore the influence of a literature, brilliant but secularist, sometimes amoral, sceptical, rationalist and at other times mystical, but with a mysticism that misleads. The influence of Maurras and of Alain on generations of men, now middle-aged, continues to-day, albeit in a less degree, amongst some elements of the intellectual youth. In speaking of Alain I ought to call attention to the power he possesses and employs in spreading a doctrine completely rationalistic, calculated to arouse a dangerous proselytism against the Christian Faith. This influence penetrates every grade of culture, as for example through the teachers' syndicalist publication in which by arguments suitable to his readers he proceeds to undermine the historical and philosophical bases of the Christian tradition. The influence of Maurras is complex. It is exercised in the *first place on a class of disciple which* adheres wholly and without reserve to his positivistic teaching. On these his influence is complete: it implies a surrender of the Christian idea of man in favour of the pagan conception in which Maurras seeks the secret of his wisdom. Over others the director of *l'Action Française* exercises political prestige; certain partisans of an authoritarian régime and of corporative ideas, which are not by the way the discovery of Maurras, have chosen him as their leader in civic action.

Yet their knowledge of the philosophy of the master they have chosen is incomplete. If some of them wholly approve his plan of reconstructing a harmonious but pagan State, others blind themselves to the essentially anti-Christian character of his doctrine, which they claim can be reconciled with their own Christian Faith; but, in general, they are obliged more or less consciously to admit, with their leader, the primacy of the idea of the State over all religious conceptions.

One still sees, following Maurras, ardent but unenlightened Monarchists, who persist ingeniously in seeing in him the restorer of the truly Christian Monarchy of their dreams. It is indeed one of the characteristics of Maurras to have a good many among his disciples who have never reflected on the first principles of his doctrine.

Many Frenchmen who have received their lessons in politics and philosophy from Alain and Maurras are now advanced in years. Younger men have sought in the works of André Gide an ethic that suited the anarchist aspirations of youth just after the Great War. They became associated with his rebellion against all morality and with his persistent unrest. Glory did not crown Gide at the beginning of his career; the upheaval of the war was needed to gather adherents to his discontent and his revolt. Gide will remain undoubtedly one of the most brilliant masters of the French language, but his thought has no longer the same attraction for the youth of to-day. It does not suit the hard conditions of daily life. Those who desire, apart from Christianity, to give a meaning to their existence, seem to be drawn, sometimes unknowingly, to the higher conceptions of Nietzsche, rather than towards Gide, who has taken nothing from the philosophy of Nietzsche, by which he is nevertheless inspired, but its amorality.

The aversion of many of our French contemporaries to the Christian teaching has often been explained as due to the philosophic or moral influence of the three writers just referred to; but it is impossible to omit Renan's work which still moves certain minds, principally those whose critical studies are confined to this writer's books alone; the study

of more recent works would considerably reduce the extent of Renan's influence. Certain priests and students, specially qualified to speak of University youth, assured me recently that the unbelief of the young intellectuals to-day was rarely to be found in controversy over Holy Scripture, and that the works of M. Loisy and his fellow critics are no longer responsible for those painful crises that Malègue has described with such acuteness in his magnificent book *Augustin; ou le Maître est là*. This work has been compared with that of Martin du Gard, the illustrious novelist who has just been honoured with the Nobel prize. If in Martin du Gard we see the more pernicious elements of the psychology of a free-thinker, in Malègue on the contrary we see the progressive re-discovery of the Faith by a University Professor who, to attain Christ, overcomes the difficulties strewn in his path by rationalist critics. This work shows how Faith is reconciled with the legitimate freedom of the mind and with the results of a really independent critique. It is summed up in the following phrase, often repeated: "God has chosen to work through our intelligence."

I do not pretend to have enumerated all those who have contributed to give contemporary France an agnostic or materialistic literature; otherwise I could rightly be reproached with many omissions. I have simply stressed those who seemed to me to have the most profound influence in intellectual circles; and moreover I do not wish to under-rate the magnificent Christian revival, shown elsewhere in our modern literature, by dwelling overmuch on the undoubted irreligious element. The names of Claudel and of François Mauriac are familiar. Claudel's serene faith and strong spirituality have guided many souls suffering from the unrest so well described by Mauriac. Under the influence of Claudel many souls have followed Jacques Rivière in *Le Trace de Dieu*. In the light of Mauriac's writings many others have found that the frailties of heart and flesh are not insurmountable to faith, and that true serenity is to be found only in Christ. Catholic literature in France is also enriched by the collaboration of Daniel-Rops, both in his many novels and in the columns of the Catholic Press.

The talent of a Claudel or a Mauriac spreads the testimony of their Faith far beyond their Catholic readers. But Catholic literature is not limited to psychological and poetical works; it offers to serious minds, desirous of studying the basis of Christianity, a long series of recent books whose critical value is undeniable. It would be wearisome to enumerate all those writers who are continuing and developing the historical work of Père de Grandmaison and Père Lagrange. Christian philosophy interpreted in its different aspects by Blondel, Maritain, Gilson and others, to speak only of a few, attracts the attention of many young minds. Some have been brought to consider favourably a spiritual philosophy by the remarkable evolutionary theory of Bergson. This is not, of course, a Catholic philosophy, but his recent correspondence with Père Sertillanges merits attention.

If I confine myself to illustrating the diffusion of our Faith by the writings of leaders of thought, it would give a very incomplete idea of the actual character of Catholicism in the France of to-day. The younger generation, on many of whom contemporary paganism has set its mark, includes a considerable number of young Catholics of different types and of different degrees of education, fervently devoted to Christ and resolved to spread His doctrine amongst their brethren. It is to Catholic Action chiefly that we owe this revival; but at the same time it cannot be denied that a chosen band of youth had already been prepared to receive the teaching of Our Holy Father Pius XI. Among the more specialized movements evoked by the Encyclicals, I will mention two: the Association of Young Sailors and that of Young Agricultural Labourers. The latter is particularly effective as it works in country districts where the Christian traditions still exists. Among the young peasants it re-establishes habits of personal piety and of spiritual life. According to a statement of their Chaplain, Père Foreau, in many Departments of the West of France two or three members of the Catholic Agricultural Youth in each village are in the habit of making a daily private meditation on the Gospel. Cases of this kind, though rarer, are to be

found in other districts which are even less Christian. When we consider that in addition to their thorough technical training they also receive one in civic and technical matters, which will enable them to act as leaders in civic life and in the Trades Unions, we can see that such an influence in the hands of instructed Catholics should be able to effect a considerable change in the outlook of French agriculturists.

The J.O.C. is becoming better known. Every one has heard of the magnificent Congress where more than 80,000 young men gathered together in Paris to proclaim their Faith in a most formal manner, during the Mass, celebrated out of doors by a priest himself formerly a manual labourer, when this great army of Jocists (as they are called) with one voice responded to the liturgical prayers. I have met many of these young Catholics, and have been struck by their frank enthusiasm and their spirit of initiative; but the most touching thing about them is their love of Our Lord, and the efforts they are making to have a better knowledge of Himself and of His Life. Christ is the model ever before their eyes, and still more is He in their souls by grace; and this Divine presence gives a meaning to all their thoughts and actions. To give an example, here is the answer given by a Jocist to his Chaplain when asked: "How long are you without thinking of Christ during the day?" "Sometimes five minutes," was the answer. Ten years ago there were four Jocists in France, to-day there are a hundred thousand young men and girls. Does it not seem certain that their prayers and their zeal, the sufferings they endure in surroundings so often hostile to their Faith, must draw down on our country the blessing of God?

Conceived in the same spirit as the Jocists, the "Jeunesse Etudiante Chrétienne" exerts a strong influence in our schools and universities. Divided into three branches, it reaches the pupils of the elementary, the secondary and the higher grade schools as well as the members of the Universities. The movement in the University is difficult of observation, for in France, unlike England, there is no true University life. The student members of the J.E.C., coming from the four quarters of the town, meet weekly to hear a



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lecture and then return home. They do not form a centre, and apart from their hours of study it is difficult to bring them together; and yet, some of the most energetic representatives of J.E.C. have succeeded in organizing groups so that the influence of the Christian life may be spread abroad by their prayers and their example.

Life in the Public Schools makes an exchange of views easier among the pupils. At the Polytechnic, the school which has been said to inculcate in its pupils the personal culture of Napoleon, the proportion of Catholic pupils is 150 out of 230. The greater number during their holidays take up different Catholic works; they are members and leaders of the J.E.C. Among them is a certain number of young Protestants, sympathisers with the Oxford Group Movement, whose religious spirit brings them into close relation with their Catholic comrades. A century ago the Polytechnic was composed almost entirely of atheists. They called themselves Catholic officially, but used to make fun of the rites in which they were obliged to participate. The difference in our own day will be appreciated. It is in great part the result of Catholic Action, but also of the work done for some time by the Union of Catholic Engineers. At the *Ecole Normal Supérieur*, where Herriot, Tardieu, and Delbos were educated, we now find over 50% of the students are Catholics. Of these about 20% are deeply in earnest, and some of them form part of the J.E.C. In the Public Schools and Universities the conflict between Catholics and non-Catholics is more a matter of social principles than of doctrine.

I should like now to draw attention to the characteristic *spirit* of this movement among the young Catholic students. It is contained in the words of St. Paul: "*Mihi vivere Christus est.*" To them Christianity is not a system of ethics; it does not consist so much in trying to acquire this or that virtue, but in a constant aspiration to identify self with Christ. As one of these young students wrote: "What I wish is not to be poor even like Him, but to be Jesus Himself." We see to what heights they are drawn by this Christo-centric mysticism. One of their Leaders, pupil of

the Polytechnic, said to me: "We understand at last that for priest or layman the duties concerning the spiritual life are the same."

Such remarks make us realize better the growth of these movements of Catholic Action amongst the French youth. Though for a long time past much had seemed to be done for them, yet I am afraid we were often content with seeing that they went to Mass on Sunday and warning them against grave dangers. This was right of course as far as it went; but it seemed sometimes as if there was a fear of teaching the sublime doctrine of the Mystical Body, whose result is the practice of virtue and the reception of the Sacraments. Yet this doctrine is the basis of our Faith, and those to whom it has been revealed find in it the secret of their strength and of their influence. Experience has now shown us that it can be understood equally by peasants, workmen and intellectuals.

So in France, which does not escape the moral agony of the present day, acts of Faith and Love go up to Heaven, such as perhaps have not been known since the Middle Ages. Facing the Prince of this world, already judged, but whose seduction and strength are still great, Catholics, gathered round their Leaders, have found once more the fervour of the first centuries. Why should not their Faith have the same power of expansion as that of their forefathers? Is not a complete antagonism between the pagan mob and the Christians (still numerous and more ardent than ever) one of the characteristics of our epoch and of our Western world? This alone would justify the words of the Holy Father to Cardinal Verdier last year: "At the present moment no one has the right to live a life of mediocrity."

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