

PIUS THE TENTH

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A CATHOLIC always finds a papal audience a thrilling experience and we know how men and women of every race, colour, creed and social station have been moved by the charm, graciousness and penetrating holiness of the present Holy Father. But it was a unique event in the life of a young priest, whose professional studies had synchronized with the first half of the reign of Pope Pius X, to see and hear and kiss the hand of that holy Pontiff as I did in 1912. Even then he was commonly regarded as a saint, as we now know that he was; and to have been in such close contact with a beatified or canonized saint is in itself something to remember for a lifetime.

I can see him now as he entered the large hall where he greeted many hundreds of people. He gave an impression of great age, but still more of extreme weariness. The years of responsibility and of constant strife had taken their toll. No longer was there the splendid physique and optimistic outlook which we recognize in the portrait of the Bishop of Mantua of thirty years earlier. I remember most vividly the tone of his voice and the rather sad and appraising eyes with which he gazed on each of us in turn; his very slow progress round the room; and, as a final impression, his quite different appearance as one glanced into a smaller audience chamber where a very small boy was almost romping about him and tugging at his cassock.

His eyes might well be sad for he had only just emerged from a sea of trouble and he probably had a vision of the world catastrophe which was soon to come. He seems to have been preparing for it from 1906. He foretold the Great War to his sisters and to Cardinal Merry del Val in 1911 and 1912.

Indeed his pontificate was a time of stress from 1903, when he found himself immediately engaged with the French Republic on the issue which developed into the Law of Separation and the expropriation of the possessions of the French Church, to 1914, when the declaration of war broke his heart. He had to defend the Church against aggression from without in France, Portugal and

Mexico, and from indiscipline and the spread of false doctrine within. In Italy itself he was confronted with the undisciplined zeal of social workers who were eager to form political democratic parties independent of ecclesiastical authority. It must be remembered that Liberal Catholicism had been a source of trouble to Leo XIII who had championed the rights of the workers in his famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. There were many, priests and laymen, who, impatient with the efficacy of spiritual means, were anxious to develop the 'Works of Charity' politically, and to unite with other democratic parties. For them the 'active' virtues were of greater value than the 'passive'. This movement Pius X sternly repressed.

Another aspect of the disregard of authority was the readiness to acquiesce in the Italian State's spoliation of the temporal power of the Popes. Those of my generation will remember that the necessity of some temporal sovereignty was a serious theological thesis in those days. Rebellious spirits had boldly asserted, and still defended, the thesis that Italy had a right to Rome. A notorious ecclesiastic, Don Volpe, had laicized himself rather than submit. Pius X called him to Rome and proposed a reconciliation. There was nothing the poor man wanted more; but when invited to retract he replied that he was still convinced that Providence wanted the renunciation of all worldly power by the Pope. 'Let us say that Providence *allowed it*', suggested the Pope; and Don Volpe at once agreed to a complete retraction, and a few days later he was reinstated by his bishop.

That is the nearest thing to a compromise that I can find in the records of this great Pope. Compromise, so much admired in this country and so greatly cultivated by statesmen everywhere, found no favour with Pius X when he felt that principle was at stake; and he had a habit of seeing all the affairs of the Church as matters of principle. Rather than compromise with the anti-clerical government of France he faced the loss of all ecclesiastical property in that country, although at every stage of the long drawn out conflict he protested against the breach of the terms of the concordat and the injustice of the public robbery. Briand tried to evade the issue by proposing the *associations culturelles*, and many French Catholics and even some of the Pope's own counsellors would have saved the estates of the Church by these means. But not the Pope; and in spite of the expropriation the

French Church has since achieved a prosperity and independence which have justified his attitude.

All this struggle was going on simultaneously with the unmasking and destruction of Modernism. The name was unheard of before the Pope's *Pascendi* encyclical of September 8th, 1907, in which the thing was described. Most unsophisticated Catholics did not know of its existence and were open to its poisonous infiltration. Scholarly and apparently pious men were spreading the disease in books that were widely read. But as decree followed decree, and reprimands were followed by excommunications, and book after book was put on the Index, the Catholic world shook off its sleep and became aware of the danger. There were good and intelligent Catholics who thought that the attack was going too far, but the Pope knew that it was a war to the death and no quarter could be given to the enemy who continued to fight. Now we all know, and the modernists themselves have confessed, that Pius X not only showed Modernism for what it really was but killed it outright.

It has often been alleged that the Pope was not a scholar and that his zeal restricted the field of scholarship. It is the function of the scholar to enlarge the domain of known truth; but resistance to falsehood is at least as valuable a service to the cause of truth. The splendidly powerful and fast-moving train which gets on the wrong lines will do untold damage. The only safe action is to get it back to the right track or to stop it dead. For progress the signalman is as important as driver or fireman.

Scholar or not in the technical sense, the son of the poor man of Riese was brilliantly intelligent, as he showed in the whole course of his student's career, and continued to show in his intercourse with statesmen in the period of administration which was his lot for half of his long life. As early as 1887, when Bishop of Mantua, he had written of the 'modern Christianity in which the folly of the cross is forgotten and the dogmas of faith are twisted to fit in with the ideas of the new philosophy'. There the St George of our day had taken his first glance at the dragon which he was one day to slay.

The encyclical *Pascendi* showed that Modernism was a system involving philosophy, theology, history, criticism, apologetics and reform. Its philosophy was based on agnosticism which sets aside all proofs on the plane of reason, and an immanence which

makes religious truth spring from 'vital' needs. The corresponding theology makes faith a perception of God in the depths of human nature; the development of dogma is due to the work of the intelligence on this primitive datum; the sacraments are the result of the need to give religion a palpable body and of the need for expansion; the Bible is an epitome of the experience of Israel and the first Christians; the Church is the fruit of collective consciousness; and its authority has no firmer basis than the sentiment of individuals.

Modernism demanded reform in seminary teaching, the expurgation of catechisms and popular devotions, the alignment of ecclesiastical government with modern democracy. It insisted on the primacy of the 'active' virtues, the suppression of ecclesiastical ceremony and of the celibacy of the clergy. Well might the Pope call it the meeting-place of all the heresies.

To safeguard his flock he introduced the anti-modernist oath which all professors of ecclesiastical studies and all clergy who are appointed to positions of trust must take. This oath is designed to guarantee the acceptance of traditional teaching and to stop the holes of such modernists as had gone to earth. The first part imposes the acceptance of rational *demonstration* of the existence of God; of the *probative* value of the motives of credibility; of the institution of the Church by Christ while on earth; of the immutability of the dogmas of faith; of the intellectual character of faith. Both Scripture and the Fathers are to be interpreted in the light of the Church's teaching, and the divine character of tradition is to be respected.

At first the oath evoked a noisy opposition which was loudest in Germany. But eventually no more than a couple of dozen German priests refused the oath and left the Church, and scarcely as many revolted in all the rest of the Church.

On the Feast of SS. Peter and Paul in 1908 the Pope had a medal struck showing himself stamping out the modernist error which was represented as a hydra. All were agreed that he had subjugated this monster. In that same year Father Tyrrell in a private letter confessed that the wave of modernist resistance was a spent force.¹

While the Blessed Pius will always figure in Church history as the exterminator of Modernism he will be remembered by many

1. cf. *Dict. Théol. Cathol. art. Modernisme*, Col. 2042.

who never gave a thought to Modernism for his restoration of the habit of frequent communion. Those who are still in the prime of life will not easily appreciate the radical change that he effected in this matter so essential to the life of the soul. While the theologians had always insisted on the importance of weekly communion for all, there was little insistence on frequent communion; and daily communion was restricted to those who had no affection to deliberate venial sin and who were making a serious attempt to advance in perfection by means of prayer and mortification of the senses. I well remember the joy with which we received the news in my subdiaconate year that henceforth all were encouraged to approach the holy Table daily provided that they were in a state of grace and had the right intention. By his decree of November, 1905, the Pope swept away the last traces of Jansenism. In future the dispositions required for daily communion were just the same as those required for weekly, monthly or annual paschal communion.

This decree was followed in 1910 by another² which approved of the earliest possible age for first communion: there was to be no more waiting for the tenth or twelfth year. This decree, too, was criticized by some supporters of the old-fashioned ideas. But who nowadays would disagree with the sentiments of the Pope, who said: 'It is better for children to be sanctified by the reception of Jesus in Holy Communion while their hearts are still pure than to wait until the devil has got his grip on them'? Henceforth all that was deemed necessary was that they should have come to such a use of reason as would enable them to learn the difference between the Eucharist and ordinary bread and should have an elementary knowledge of those mysteries of the faith which are necessary to salvation.³

He also gave concessions in the matter of the fasting laws to enable the sick to go to communion more frequently, concessions which the present Holy Father has considerably enlarged not only for the sick but for others who labour under specified difficulties. His reforms were extended to the liturgy. In his earliest days as a Bishop he manifested his concern for dignified and suitable Church music. As Pope he insisted on these reforms in his famous *Motu Proprio* of November 22, 1903, the terms of

2. August 8, *Quam singulari Christus amore*.

3. *Capello*, III, p. 410.

which are still being debated today. He reformed the Breviary so as to bring in a more complete recitation of the Psalter and a restoration of the regular Sunday Office, which formerly was frequently displaced by festive Offices.

Nor should it be forgotten that it was Pius X who commissioned the then Mgr Gasparri to undertake the formidable task of the codification of Canon Law. That task demanded ten long years of strenuous labour and the originator of it was dead when Benedict XV formally promulgated the Code, taking occasion to attribute the glory of its inception to his great predecessor.

In estimating his personal character we observe that 'inflexible' is the epithet which constantly occurs in the summary of his virtues, but he was inflexible only in the defence of the Church. To those who withstood him merely personally he was always humble, gracious and generous. Though a model of clerical decorum, he was never aloof. As bishop, Cardinal or Pope he never stood on his dignity. Perhaps the man who has to stand on his dignity is of no great stature. M. Loisy, a ringleader of the Modernists, was declared *excommunicatus vitandus* for his unrepentant Modernism and persistent defiance of authority, but the Pope wrote to his bishop advising that if M. Loisy moved one step towards him he should advance two towards the culprit.

That Pius X was a born fighter no one can doubt, but he never fought except in the cause of God and his Church; and those who attacked him most bitterly as the Vicar of Christ and brought the greatest injury on the Church were ready to confess that he was a man of supreme virtue defending what he believed to be a just cause. That he was by nature irascible is allowed by Cardinal Merry del Val, who nevertheless testifies that he had so disciplined himself that he was never carried away by anger. Stern he could be with delinquents and severe with the recalcitrant, but he always administered necessary rebukes with a gentle firmness and opened his arms wide to welcome the repentant.

He was only too ready to declare himself personally of no worth, and if others sneered at his humble origin or belittled his intellectual capacity he was content to say that they were right. *Servus Servorum Dei* is the time-honoured title of every Pope, but he said in less formal phrase, 'I am the least of the priests of God'.

He was humble and loved poverty, imitating the Poor Man of

Assisi. Men might sneer as they did at the 'Peasant Pope', contrasting him with his predecessor Leo XIII; but he was a peasant with the manners of a prince and, as Pope, with the conscious authority of a Caesar. At his first audience with the diplomatic corps he astounded all by his simple dignity, his ready grasp of affairs of State and the clear direct exposition of his own views. Speaking to a Frenchman during the crisis of the expropriation laws he declared that he was no diplomatist: his task was to defend the law of God; while many were concerned about the goods of the Church his concern was for her good; he would prefer to endure the loss of churches of stone than to see the destruction of the Church herself.

NEWMAN AND POLITICS

TERENCE KENNY

SINCE Newman's death in 1890 there have always been those who have pictured him as being in some way cut off from his age, so that, although his life traversed the nineteenth century, they think it would be difficult to gather evidence from his writings of the precise period to which he belonged. Now this opinion has been held not only by those out of sympathy with Newman, who have held it as a kind of reproach against him that contemporary secular affairs seemed to interest him so little, but has often been held also by many who were so convinced of the sanctity and otherworldliness of the great Oratorian, that they thought it quite too much to suppose that mundane matters, like a war in the Crimea or a Trust Bill in Parliament, could succeed in gaining his attention. The limit in this direction has been reached, now that a recent writer has portrayed, in a brilliant and informative book,¹ a Newman, saintly indeed, but quite oblivious of the political world about him, or beyond his shores; a man, in fact, who would best be represented, at the time this author was writing, by a churchman of eminence who did not seem aware of the war in Korea. With this judgment what before was a matter of over-emphasis, or misconception, becomes

1. S. O'Faolain, *Newman's Way*, 1952.