

THE
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THE FRENCH CONGREGATIONS IN SPAIN
AND ENGLAND.¹

THE members of the French congregations which left France have now had time to settle themselves in the different countries to which they have gone. The three countries which have been especially favoured by them are Belgium, Spain, and England, and some have had recourse to Italy. In Belgium half the nation gladly welcomed them; the other half would fain dispense with their presence. In Spain they have published their experiences in a book entitled "Six Mois d'Exil au Pays du Cid," which is sold for the benefit of the monks, with the imprimatur of a French Bishop and the approbation of the Superiors of the Franciscan Order, to which the monks belong. The description which they give of themselves is singular. They are plainly enjoying themselves thoroughly; but in the midst of the accounts which they give of the honours paid to them, they think it necessary to interpose from time to time piteous lamentations over their hard lot. The book reads, for the most part, like the diary of a tourist to whom all the sights of the country have been willingly thrown open; but a tourist does not think it necessary to call for sympathy in respect to all the little troubles which every traveller meets with, nor would he describe a railway journey from the French frontier to Burgos thus, "Our journey of banishment across uncultivated lands, rocky mountains, or snowy peaks came to its end at Burgos" (p. 129), nor represent himself as so alarmed by the cries of night-birds and owls as to be unable to sleep till a dog belonging to a previous occupant of his house came back to protect him. All this is padding which the "exiles"

¹ "Six Mois d'Exil au Pays du Cid," Paris, 1904; "Les Crimes des Couvents," Paris, 1903.

feel it necessary to introduce to show that they have not forgotten France. But there is no doubt that they are perfectly happy where they are—the welcome guests of Archbishops and Bishops, Mayors and municipal officers, and having a piquancy added to the usual enjoyment of tourists by their reputation of being persecuted for righteousness' sake. They are sure that St. Francis recommended them to Mary, the sweet Queen; and that Mary, in answer to his prayer, has given them an asylum, such as they might have chosen before all others, where they find themselves “in the midst of a truly Christian populace, which from the first day of our coming among them has exhibited a cordial sympathy for us, and receives us with enthusiasm.” “We have our faults,” said the Mayor of Grañon to them, “but we would die by our own hands for the Holy Virgin.” “And, in fact,” exclaim the exiles, “this people is the people of Mary” (p. 363). “Mary is the patroness of the people who receive us, and she is the patroness of France” (p. 373). The “exiles” want for nothing. Disused monastic buildings are given them for their habitation, and their fellow-worshippers supply all their needs. All that they have to do seems to be to visit cathedrals, attend Masses, take part in processions, adore the various images of St. Mary, worship relics, listen to and record legends,¹ witness bull-fights, and admire Spanish dancing.

Will not this account of “Six Months of Exile in the Land of the Cid” induce some of the French immigrants into England to join their companions in Spain? For a larger number of the self-exiled have settled in England than in the Peninsula. Englishmen have become aware that the growth in the number of the Roman Catholic monastic institutions in England during the past few years is portentous. We do not propose to dwell

¹ *E.g.* : When St. Dominic was a child he laughed aloud at Mass, and when scolded replied that he saw two women talking in church, and the devil sitting at the other end of the bench near the bénitier taking notes. He had been writing a long time, and had filled his strip of parchment. Then he took it between his teeth and claws, and began to pull at it to make it longer. But the women, leaving off talking and returning to prayer, had without doubt asked pardon of God; for on a sudden the parchment tore in two by force of the pulling, and the devil's head went crack against the stone bénitier with great violence. It was this mischance and Master Satan's queer grimace that had made him laugh (p. 316; quoted in Wentworth Webster's “Modern Monasticism,” p. 8). Of St. Pierre Régat we are told “the flames of his fervour became visible during his prayer, and passed through the convent walls, so that the neighbours, believing the building to be on fire, hastened to extinguish the conflagration (p. 323; Webster, p. 8). The last miracle is modelled upon one related of St. Teresa, who had to be held down by her attendants to prevent her body rising into the air, owing to the exaltation which she experienced in prayer.

upon this fact, but rather to inquire how these institutions are to be supported.

There are three methods, viz. : (1) Begging ; (2) boarders ; (3) orphans.

1. *Begging*.—The begging conducted by nuns is not like that we are accustomed to in England. It is not difficult to dis-embarrass ourselves of a beggar in the street by giving a coin or refusing to give. But it is not so easy when we find two French ladies, in a striking dress, standing in our hall, and, when invited into a sitting-room, telling us that they are asking for nothing on their own behalf, but pathetically setting forth the needs of the poor to whom they minister.

In France the *Quête* is recognised as one of the means of supporting the institutions to which the nuns belong ; but those that beg do not always enjoy or approve of the system that they have to carry out. "My Father," said a sister at Rennes to the priest who was visiting the convent, "we are rich, but they send us out, four of us, every day to beg everywhere. We go into the houses of our relatives, and of the friends of our relatives and of strangers, to beg. No one brings back less from her *Quête* than fifty francs in the evening ; very often we return with much larger sums. But all the time the greater part of the community is not sufficiently fed. Where does the money go ? It is for our orphans that we are sent out to beg, for them that we hold out our hands, and charitable persons think that they are giving for them. But how much do they see of all that we gather ?" ("*Crimes des Couvents*," p. 201).

2. *Boarders*.—It will no doubt be a temptation to parents, desiring to obtain an education for their children at a cheap rate, to find that they can board them at a small expense where they may pick up a little French as well as some sort of education. They will easily persuade themselves that there will be no risk of perversion to *their* children. *They* will be far too sensible, and, besides, the nuns will promise not to interfere with their religion. This confidence is misplaced, and that promise is not to be relied upon. Very possibly the girls will not be directly taught to use prayers to the Virgin and adore her images ; but minds are not affected only by what they are directly taught. The atmosphere in which a young girl lives does more than lessons. She looks up to her teachers. She becomes attached to her companions. She sees or, even if she does not see, she knows that they are taking part in processions, ceremonies, observances with banners, lights, and incense. She sees them bowing before pictures, images, crucifixes, tabernacles, and wearing medals which they are assured will save them from dangers bodily

and spiritual. All this cannot be without its effect. Their curiosity leads them to desire to attend a retreat with their companions. "The result," says the Abbé Perriot, in the "Friend of the Clergy," published at Langres, "is that a certain number of them become convinced that they cannot be saved unless they embrace the Catholic religion."

Parents will probably say that home influences will counteract any tendencies of that kind; but are they sure that their children's minds will be any longer open to them? May not, will not, the children think it right, and even meritorious, to hide from their parents the sentiments that are growing up in them in favour of the dear Sisters' religion. The Sisters are taught that it is "their duty" to "rectify a conscience perverted in religious matters," but it is not necessary to make this "rectification" public. When the girls go home, they may attend family prayers and accompany their parents to the Church of their religion, though no longer believing in it, provided that they only "acquiesce passively," giving "a mere material co-operation," and "detesting the necessity laid upon them of submitting to these compromises." The time will come when "they will at last be free to enter definitely into the Catholic family, and participate in the spiritual advantages that there await them"; but they are not bound to "expose themselves to the persecution of their parents." They may "seek in secret the ministry of a Roman Catholic priest," and should do so "as often as they can." So teaches the Abbé Perriot in his popular "Friend of the Clergy." There is no characteristic of a family which is so valuable and so delightful as mutual confidence between its elder and its younger members. Will parents run the risk of exchanging this for underhand dealing and deceit, and later on for the separation of their children from themselves, and for the practical loss of them, which cannot but ensue from conversion to Romanism, whether they continue to live under the same roof or no? And the loss is not their own only, for every English man or woman absorbed into the Papal Communion diminishes to that extent the force of England as a Protestant power in the world. And what is this risk run for? That a little saving may be made on an education which in any case, according to Mr. Hugh O'Donnell ("Ruin of Education in Ireland"), is flimsy.

3. *Orphans*.—Neither begging nor boarding will be sufficient to support our immigrants. Their *pièce de résistance* must be taking orphans or other poor children, and employing them in laundry work or sewing. This has been the system on which the "exiles" have depended in their own country, and which it is therefore probable that they will desire

still to rely upon. How, then, has that system worked in France?

The treatment meted out to the orphans or quasi-orphans employed in the nunnery of the Good Shepherd at Nancy has become known through the protest of the Bishop of the diocese, Mgr. Turinaz, and the action of the civil tribunals put in motion concerning it. But we must not consider that the convent at Nancy was peculiar in its ways, for the Bishop says: "I am led to believe that what takes place here takes place in more or less degree in a great number of houses in this congregation, perhaps in all of them; for if the house at Nancy made an exception, the provincial and the head institutions would have been indignant, and would immediately have taken measures to recall the house at Nancy to order without waiting for my complaints. The fact of their resisting every remonstrance shows that they approve of what is done here" (p. 7).

The charges brought against the nuns in the matter of the treatment of the children under their care may be reduced to—(1) Overwork; (2) underfeeding; (3) confinement within the nunnery; (4) inhumanity; (5) conventual greed; (6) destitution on leaving the convent; all which may be still further summed up in the one word "sweating."

1. *Overwork.*—On the subject of overwork, Bishop Turinaz represents to the Sacred Congregation that "the nuns make the young girls whom they receive work for eleven hours, and sometimes fifteen hours, every day, which is contrary to the civil law of France" (p. 35). A letter, quoted by the Bishop in defence of his statements, says: "The children are condemned to work every day for eleven hours, if not for fourteen or fifteen. Except on days of obligatory rest and the Festival of the Mother, they never have a holiday, not even on the day given by the Bishop. They never go out walking throughout the year. They never attend evening service, even in Advent, or Lent, or Holy Week, or the month of Mary, or of the Sacred Heart, or of the Sacred Rosary. It would be a loss of time. Very often they don't go to Mass during a week because they have too much to do" (p. 41). The civil tribunal found that, "according to the season of the year, the hour for rising was 4.30 or 5 in the morning, and of going to bed 8.30 or 9 in the evening, and when there was a pressure of work they were often kept up to 11 or 12 o'clock at night"; and that, besides this excessive daily work, they were expected to do other pieces of work for presents to the nuns. And the Bishop of Nancy's statement is quoted: "I have said, and I repeat, that there is not in the whole country any master of a workshop who makes his workmen and workwomen do so

much, and who treats them as these nuns treat the young girls whom they pretend to receive for charity" (p. 78).

In the Convent of Mans girls of ten or twelve years of age are said to have to make two men's shirts every day. At an orphanage in Paris there is a system of paying a small sum to the girls, and then demanding payment for board, which compels the girls to be always in debt to the community.

2. *Underfeeding.*—At an orphanage at Parpeville the invariable menu was as follows: In the morning, a piece of bread; at mid-day, a plate of soup, a piece of bread, and a vegetable; in the evening, a plate of soup, a piece of bread, and a salad. "One piece of bread had to suffice. On one occasion a little girl came to the table and asked for more, on which the nun gave her a back-handed blow that struck her to the ground. She was quite a little girl, but some were fifteen or sixteen years old" (p. 189). At Nancy, Mdlle. Laurent reports that, when she did not finish her task, she was made to kneel down, and given only a piece of dry bread. "At that age" (twelve), she said, "I had a good appetite, and when I woke up in the night I used to cry from hunger. Sometimes I was so weak that I had to hold by the bed to prevent myself from falling. Dinner ordinarily consisted of bacon, which was rancid" (p. 23). "The bacon which served to make the soup was always of a very bad quality, and we could hardly eat it" (p. 57). "The common practice was to give us cold water and rusty bacon, which we left on our plates," says Mdlle. Marchal. The same evidence is given by a number of the orphans.

3. *Confinement within the Nunnery.*—Mdlle. Lecoanet writes: "The Deputy" (*i.e.*, M.P.), "M. Chénil, said that none could be kept in the establishment against their will. What a mistake! How can they get out? Is not the house kept locked? How can we communicate with those outside and tell them of our sufferings? Many of us are orphans. To whom can they address themselves? And those that had relations were no better off. How were they to hear the complaints? Should we write? But our letters were never sent. When relations came, how could we complain to them? We could only talk behind a grille, and there was always beside us a nun whose presence froze our lips. You do not know the atmosphere of constraint and terror in which we lived. And what were girls without relations to do if they left? We asked ourselves what would become of us even on the day of our departure. It is only those who have experienced it who can understand how much we were tied, unable in any way to escape. It was terrible! I shudder now at the memory of it! Oh, the years that I lived there,

and everyone thought how well we were getting on!" (p. 50).

The above is part of an appeal to the French Attorney-General.

Another girl, Jeanne, says: "It was impossible for me to complain to my family, who came to see me sometimes, for a Sister was always controlling me, who made me change the conversation by a threatening look or gesture" (p. 54).

Mme. Régnier's evidence: "When I came of age on March 2, 1892, I wished to leave, but I was prevented. They intercepted my letters to my guardian, and his to me. The Mother Superior told me to write to my uncle. I did, but my letter was not sent, nor was I given a letter that he wrote to me. 'One day,' said the Mother Superior, 'you shall go out with your feet foremost.' I replied that I would rather die than remain there" (p. 65).

Mme. Lazarus: "While I was out walking I went to my grandmother's to ask her to take me away. I was punished by having to wear for eight days dirty clothes, with my cap and frock hindbefore. I could not tell my parents because, when they came to see me, the Mother of M. Carmel was always present, and I was very much afraid of her" (p. 66).

The Court of Justice found "that Mdlle. Lecoanet had been really confined without power of communicating with her family; that her letters were intercepted; that her conversations only took place on the other side of a grille and in the presence of the Mother Superior, of whom the pensioners were afraid; that she made many vain efforts to get out; that she could only communicate with her family by the connivance of the Almoner, who compassionately undertook to convey a letter in secret to her sister" (p. 70).

4. *Inhumanity*.—Mme. Régnier says: "I knew Solange; she was ill for a length of time with a bad cough, unable to walk or to eat, yet she had to work like the rest. The night before she died she asked to be allowed to go to bed; the Sister refused, saying she had not finished her task. The class murmured, and the nun said: 'One would think that there were dogs here growling.' Solange died the next night. I was punished, by being made to kneel and kiss the ground, for having given my arm to Solange at recreation-time" (p. 63).

5. *Conventual Greed*.—Mdlle. Lecoanet says: "There are at least 150 young women hard at work at their needle every day from morning till evening. You may think how much that comes to at the end of the year. The Sisters told us that our twenty best workwomen paid the whole

expenses of the house; consequently, the work of the other 120 or 140 brought in a net gain to the convent" (p. 13).

"By the mémoires and letters sent to Rome, I have shown," says the Bishop of Nancy, "by authentic and indisputable proof, that the nuns of the Good Shepherd of Nancy have spent in a few years more than 500,000 francs in buildings, of which a great many are not wanted; and 200,000 francs in enlarging and decorating their chapel" (p. 34).

6. *Destitution on leaving the Convent.*—The Bishop of Nancy writes: "At the Good Shepherd of Nancy they give nothing to their protégées, though they have worked for and gained a large amount of money for the house. They turn them out without resources, without finding them any place, without asking them to revisit the institution. Girls without relations, or with relations unable to help them, are exposed to every sort of peril from the moment that they leave. Sixty young girls sent away by the nuns in one year were left in this condition. I protested to the Superior; but all that I could obtain was a little money given to two or three, in order that the nuns might be able to say that they didn't send them all away in such a condition. . . . By making it difficult for them to go, and giving them nothing when they do go, they are able to keep the good workers with them. I demand that an engagement be signed as to money and clothes to be given to the girls when they leave the house, in proportion to the time that they have been there" (p. 8). As proof of his charge, the Bishop quotes the evidence of several of the girls: "Monseigneur," says one, "I received nothing, not even a chemise, nor a handkerchief, nor a sou. It is true that I had only been in the house two years, but I know that a great number of my companions who had been there for ten, fifteen, twenty years did not receive any more, and many of them earned three or four francs a day" (p. 42).

Another says: "I spent twenty-nine years in the house, and am fifty years of age. My mistresses gave me only twenty francs, and did not find me any situation. At my age it is difficult to find one. I possess nothing, and have no occupation" (p. 44).

A third writes: "My mistresses did give me, when I left, the clothes that I was wearing when I came, but they added nothing. They gave me my fare from Nancy to Bar-le-Duc, but no more" (p. 45).

Mdlle. Lecoanet asks the Attorney-General: "Is it right that they should profit by our best years, and that after the labour of every day and every instant there should remain to us nothing, nothing? If I have no claim for the loss of my eyesight and for the years that I have worked, I have

only to beg you to excuse my appeal; but if otherwise, Mr. Attorney-General, I pray for the assistance of the law" (p. 52).

The judgment of the Court on this point was that "it appeared that after long sufferings, aggravated by want of care, Maria Lecoanet was conducted to the railway-station, and received from the hands of a nun a ticket to take her to Paris, and that she arrived there without money and stripped of everything" (p. 83).

The final decision of the Court was that the Congregation of the Good Shepherd should pay to Maria Lecoanet 10,000 francs and bear the cost of the legal proceedings.

Defending himself, Bishop Turinaz says: "As my duty was, I set an example of good discipline by keeping silence for nearly four years, until my letters, which were entirely confidential, were published. Several times I have insisted on the evil consequences of any publicity being given to these documents. I repeat I have only done my duty as an honest man and a Bishop, and if I had acted otherwise I should have been neither Bishop nor honest man" (p. 95). The reply of the Sacred Congregation to his appeal was: "As it is not appointed in the rules, and there does not seem to have been a practice in this respect, the burden of giving something to the orphans and other girls when they leave the convent cannot be imposed upon the nuns without grave hardship" (p. 36). It was after this that the civil trial took place.

We have said enough to show that French nunneries are not always the peaceful abodes of love that sentimentalism often represents them to be, and that no encouragement should be given, from a false sense of charity or from a confidence inspired by religious professions, to the new institutions established among us. A system of supervision, as conducted by English inspectors, now strangely wanting, might do something to mitigate the evils which have been pointed out, but would not remove them. And even were they all removed, our chief objection would not be removed with them. There would still remain the fact that each new monastery and nunnery adds to the proselytizing power of the Roman Community established in England by Pope Pius V. on Feb. 25, 1570, as a rival to the Church of England, and would strengthen that party within the community which represents the foreign rather than the home element and seeks to re-invigorate the Ultramontanism of which the monastic system has always been the support. Do we realize that in the last fifty years "religious houses" in England have grown from fifty to one thousand?

F. MEYRICK.