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## RELIGION IN FRANCE.

BY G. G. COULTON, D.Litt.

SOME weeks ago, a correspondent wrote to ask me whether it was true, as he saw sometimes asserted, that Roman Catholicism had made great progress in France during the war. I replied, as I think most English observers would have replied, that I had seen no real trace of this on my fairly frequent visits, but that I would answer him more fully in a few weeks, when I hoped to have spent another fortnight cycling in Burgundy and Berry, and at a Congress of Religious History in Paris. Now that I am recording my impressions of that visit, it seems worth while to share them with readers of THE CHURCHMAN.

The progressive decrease in vocations, and the consequent shortage of clergy, are notorious. At a political trial in Alsace just before Easter, an editor (Abbé Haegy) was accused of pro-German propaganda, of fomenting religious hatred against the "atheist" government of France, and of asserting that there were 10,000 parishes in the country without a priest. He denied the words imputed to him; but I myself found the assertion placarded on the walls of the great church of Notre Dame at Semur, in Burgundy. The placard, about a yard long, and emphasized by every typographical device of capitals and italics, began as follows:—

[We want] Priests! Such is the bitter cry of the Church of France. The war killed 4,618 of her clergy [i.e. including those in lower orders], and it emptied the seminaries for five years. It is reckoned now that 10,000 parishes have no priest! Nowadays, on an average, there is only one priest to 1,061 souls. And, in this number, how many are old men at their last gasp! [*à bout de souffle*]. . . . Too often, the dead priest is not replaced! What a desolation! The priest is far off, priests are few. . . . Therefore, folk live without priest and die without priest. And yet, can we do without the priest? No, France must not lack priests. Give us priests."

This is only a fraction of the document, which bore the imprint of one of the best-known orthodox publishing houses in Paris ("Edition Spes," 17, Rue Soufflot).

At the neighbouring town of Avallon, the great church had been decorated with a similar but less emphatic appeal, beginning:—

DES PRÊTRES! . . .

Les prêtres manquent, partout, chez nous . . . que de paroisses privées de Curé! Bientôt, si cela continue, il n'y aura peut-être plus, ici ou là, qu'un Curé par canton!

In Paris, I had an opportunity of talking with a representative of one of the oldest families in France, Catholic by immemorial

tradition. She and her family were practising Catholics, and had recently had a private audience with the Pope. I asked whether these figures of 10,000 were not exaggerated; she replied, as nearly as I can remember, as follows: "Perhaps; but the shortage is certainly very serious. Since the Government no longer pays the clergy, and therefore they must look to the congregations for their sustenance, things go very badly in the villages; there is a great lack of vocations. In Paris, it makes little or no difference; but in the villages it is otherwise. In our department (about 50 miles from Paris), a single priest often serves three, or even four, villages. There is no doubt that dogmatic religion is decaying in France, as it is apparently everywhere. But there is one other effect of this shortage; we have few priests now, but the people have personal respect for them. If you have read anything of mediæval history, you know that that was not so in those days." It was interesting to hear this French lady, of immemorial Catholic ancestry, taking it for granted that well-informed people knew things which would often be vehemently denied not only by Roman but also by Anglo-Catholics in England.

An Italian professor whom I met at the Congress, a Modernist Catholic, told me that, though the *personnel* of the clergy at Rome was far more respectable now than in the days of papal government in the city, yet the village clergy were often notoriously immoral, especially in the South, and that this was a serious factor in the religious situation. He mentioned this quite spontaneously, as arising from what he himself had been saying, and not in connexion with any question or suggestion from me.

I had an equally intimate talk with a waiter at Bourges. My companion had lost a foot in the war; this led the waiter to speak of his own experience in the trenches, and he was so intelligent and straightforward that I felt safe in questioning him as to religion since the war. He thought there was no definite change either way. I remarked how, even on Fridays in Lent, the hotels, great and small, provided meat dishes as a matter of course, and apparently nobody refused them. "Oh, no," he said, "scarcely anybody refuses meat except on the one Friday before Easter. A few strict folk do here and there, but scarcely any. So with the High Mass; on Easter Sunday you will find the Cathedral full; but we don't go often as a rule. There are vast numbers who are not practising Catholics. We respect the priests; some of us take off our hats to them in the streets; we Catholics are baptized in the Church and get married there and the priest buries us, but there are many of us who have little else to do with him." That was his way of describing what the lady described: "dogmatic religion is undoubtedly decaying." One reason is certainly the childish absurdities which are still permitted, and which must offend really thoughtful souls among the faithful. In the cathedral of Nevers, on the railings which enclose the chapel of St. Antony, hangs a long printed litany for repetition in honour of that saint. The last two verses run: "Throughout the course of our life, O St. Antony,

protect us. Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world." <sup>1</sup>

A word should be added about the *Action Française*. This is a powerful society, with an ably-edited daily paper as its organ, representing a jingoist and anti-republican movement. It may be compared, as to extent of influence, with the Anglo-Catholic party of to-day, with its organ the *Church Times*. The numbers in both cases are probably fairly equal, and both have the tactical advantage of extremist views and close organization; beyond that, I have no wish to suggest any parallel. For the *Action Française* is mainly run by men who have no dogmatic faith, and who frankly accept Catholicism simply as an organization, and as a convenient avenue of approach to the Higher Paganism of the future. Maurras, their ablest writer, has openly repudiated Christianity and Christian morals; "natural law preaches one virtue alone, and that is, force." But he preaches the greatness and the necessary authority of the Church, as a bulwark against democracy; the Pope and the leader of the *Action Française* are the two beacons of humanity. The society is violently anti-German, and the present Pope has the reputation of being rather pro-German; this may have precipitated a crisis which was perhaps inevitable in any case. The Cardinal Archbishop of Bordeaux condemned the *Action Française* publicly as a movement led by atheists, who are "Catholics by calculation and not by conviction" (August 25, 1926). He then asked papal approval (of which he had doubtless had private assurance) for his action. The Pope, in a brief of September 5, supported the condemnation; this organization, he said, showed traces of the paganism which infects this present generation, educated in the godless schools of to-day. Practising Catholics, like my Paris informant, accept the Pope's decision, in some cases reluctantly. Meanwhile the *Action* refuses to bow, publishes its paper as usual, and boasts (truly or falsely) that its adherents are increasing, even among the priests. Here is a serious dilemma for many good folk, especially for old Royalist families; and the "Editions Spes" have published a booklet by a prominent priest (J. Boullier, S.J., de *l'Action Populaire*, "L'Eglise et l'Action Française," 2 fr. 50 c.). The good Jesuit writes in the form of a dialogue; he is advising an enthusiastic and religious young man. "At your age, John, in 1909," I also seriously thought of joining the society; but great theologians warned me of the danger. Now, at last, "*Roma locuta est*" and "permit me to read you those words which, for me, are the first rule of orthodoxy:—

" ' In order to be assured that I am holding to the truth in all things, I must cleave constantly to this principle, that what seems to me white, I must believe to be black if the hierarchical Church were thus to define it; persuading myself that, between our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Bridegroom, and the Church His Bride, there is but one and the same spirit which governs

<sup>1</sup> Dans tout le cours de notre vie, St. Antoine, protégez-nous. Agneau de Dieu, qui effacez les péchés du monde.

and rules us' (S. Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, Rules for thinking as the Church thinks)."

I give this Jesuit's exact words, with his own italics, etc., at the end of the article. Many readers will realize why in Roman Catholic countries there is now, and always has been, a deep gulf between two strong and bitterly antagonistic parties, the Clerical and the Anticlerical. And, as the idea of a *via media* is repugnant to the Catholic mind, this means that men are mostly either professing Catholics or antichristian. Freemasonry, which is a moderate thing in Britain, and one of the greatest friendly societies in world-history, is fiercely political and anticlerical abroad. It is almost impossible, in any Catholic country, to be a Socialist and a Christian. A Belgian professor who spent the war-years at Cambridge and made many friends there, told me of his surprise, as an orthodox Catholic, to find here a country in which men could differ enormously in religious belief, and yet remain really religious.

*From page 3 of Fr. Boullier's book:—*

*"Pour être assuré de tenir la vérité en toutes choses, il me faut tenir constamment à ce principe que ce qui me paraît blanc, je dois le croire noir, si l'Eglise hiérarchique le définissait ainsi; me persuadant qu'entre Jésus-Christ Notre-Seigneur qui est l'Epoux, et l'Eglise son Epouse, il n'y a qu'un même esprit qui nous gouverne et nous régit."*

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SELECTIONS FROM THE POETICAL WORKS OF BENJAMIN GEORGE  
 AMBLER. London: *Elliot Stock, Paternoster Row, E.C.*  
 1s. 6d. net.

The other day we found a friend, with literary tastes, at work with an interesting tool, in the shape of a *Dictionary for Versifiers*, wherein you discover that "cat" rhymes with "rat" and so on! But the art of writing poetry cannot be acquired in such an easy fashion and the instrument in question is one for which such poets as Mr. Ambler have no use! This little peep into his work will doubtless whet the appetite and a list of seven volumes, all published by Mr. Stock, is given.

These charming lines—To My Wife—speak for themselves :

Twenty-nine years of joy beyond all guessing,  
 Not all unmixed with pain in love's despite,  
 Twenty-nine years of God's embodied blessing,  
 Twenty-nine years of leading to the light.

How shall I tell you all that they have taught me?  
 Words are too weak and so my lips are dumb,  
 The everlasting gain that they have brought me  
 May yet be spoken in the life to come.

S. R. C.