

SPAIN—PERSECUTIONS OLD AND NEW

THE English Press for some years past has consistently misjudged the Spanish people and our Press of to-day, with scanty exceptions, is not exempt from this unhappy phase of English journalism. But however complacent we may hitherto have been in accepting the views of our journalists, we must feel something of a shock in the revelations of the Spanish Hierarchy who have so effectually drawn aside the curtain concealing things deliberately hidden from us.

The document they have published is one couched in calm language uttered without either bitterness or rancour. It is a plain statement subscribed by 48 prelates ruling or administering 54 of the 60 dioceses of Spain, men on the spot speaking from personal experience. It opens with a clear account of the injustice of the 1936 elections, when through "the lawlessness of a Government, which, in defiance of the will of the people, set up a political machinery in direct opposition to the majority of the nation, the Right, with a majority of more than a million votes over the Left, was given 118 deputies less than the Popular Front. For this purpose the votes of entire provinces had been entirely cancelled."

Of the utmost importance is their reply to the objection that "Whatever were the Reds' excesses, the fact remains that, had Franco not rebelled, the hundreds and thousands of priests who were assassinated would have been saved for their spiritual work." The Bishops' answer is: "As witnesses of the position at the moment when the conflict arose, we are unable to agree with the statement. The exact opposite is the truth. Documents make it clear that the minute plans of the Marxist revolution which was being prepared, and which would have overrun the whole country but for the half-civil, half-military movement, contemplated the extermination of the whole clergy and of every man belonging to the Right, the Sovietization of industry, and the establishment of Communism."

The Bishops then point out the fact "that five years of persistent provocation against Spanish subjects in the religious and moral order, exposed the existence of public welfare to a grave danger and increased the tension in the minds of the Spanish people to breaking-point; that as legal means had been exhausted, the national conscience felt that to save order and peace, the only recourse left open was to force; that powers, alien to the authority assumed to be legitimate, decided to upset the established order, and forcibly to implant Communism; lastly, that the inevitable logic of facts drove the Spanish people to two alternatives: either to succumb to the last assault of the destructive Communism which had been definitely planned and decided, as happened in provinces where the National movement failed, or to try, in a gigantic effort, to shake off the dreaded enemy, and save the fundamental principles of social life and its national character."

We must notice the insistence of the Bishops on the fact that the rising was not a mere military one, but *civil and military*: and that it was not in the first instance the Government forces that were encountered, but the popular militias. "Protected by the Government's passive attitude, and armed by the State arsenals, these hordes threw themselves against every element that stood for order." It is mainly the atrocities committed by the uncontrolled rabble that make up the long list of terrible horrors of persecution related, as we have already remarked, without rancour or bitterness but with a cry for mercy on the persecutors.

We cannot but see in this appalling national convulsion a striking parallel with the Carlist civil war of exactly a century ago. In the same degree was the Liberal anti-Catholic Government of that day at the mercy for a long time of an armed rabble in Madrid who ransacked and set fire to the religious houses in the city after murdering the peaceful inmates. Like scenes were enacted in Barcelona, Sarragossa, and other cities. In 1835 three thousand religious houses were suppressed, the goods of the religious confiscated and even the sacred vessels stolen to fill the war-chest of the Liberals. Neither was Spain spared the miseries

of foreign interference, for the English Liberal Government, inspired by its foreign secretary, Lord Palmerston, permitted and openly supported the dispatching of a "British Legion" of 10,000 men to Spain under an Irish Protestant, General de Lacy Evans, a mischievous action bitterly opposed by the Duke of Wellington. Thanks to this formidable army the Liberals gained the day and the Carlists were excluded from the Spanish throne. Espartero, the Liberal leader, responsible in no small measure for the persecution, had a very short-lived triumph, and was forced to give way to another. The remainder of Queen Isabella's reign was but the history of continuous military revolts which culminated in her dethronement by the military dictator, Marshal Prim, in 1868. This general offered the crown to Leopold, a Catholic Hohenzollern, but France took alarm at the prospect of Prussians on either flank, and as all the world knows the outcome of these Spanish troubles was the Franco-Prussian war which, in turn, narrowly missed embroiling all Europe, just as the present position threatens day by day to succeed in doing.

All through the many military risings that took place in the peninsula between the first Carlist war and 1870 the Church was almost a continual suffer, and it is significant of the state of things that Blessed Andrew Claret, probably the greatest Spaniard of modern times, died in exile in 1870. Many of his sons, the Claretian Fathers, were in the vanguard of the martyrs of this latest persecution, which has exceeded all in ferocity. It is indeed doubtful if in the whole course of the Church's history there has ever been a persecution comparable to this: and just as the anti-Catholic feeling of the Liberals in the eighteenth century allowed amongst their followers the most terrible treatment of the Church and thus almost raised the Carlist rising to the status of a Crusade, so to-day the criminal weakness and worse of the Popular Front Government has done the same for the rising of General Franco. The Bishops in fact make this clear in their final conclusions.

"(1) Though the Church did not want the war, she could not remain indifferent to the conflict, with one side against

God, and on the other side, in spite of human failings, a magnificent effort to preserve the old Spanish and Christian spirit.

(2) The Church does not associate herself with acts, tendencies or purposes that may now or in the future deface the noble aspect of the National movement.

(3) We affirm that the civil and military rebellion has sprung from two roots in the national conscience: patriotic feeling, which has found in armed resistance the only means to raise Spain to her feet and save her from ultimate ruin; religious feeling, which looks upon armed resistance as the force that will dispose of God's enemies and guarantee the continuity of its faith and the practice of its religion.

(4) To-day in Spain there is no hope for the re-conquest of peace and justice except the triumph of the National movement. This is truer to-day than it was at the outset of the war, because the forces in opposition, in spite of the efforts of their leaders, offer no guarantee of political and social stability.

The letter ends in a declaration of forgiveness of the persecutors. "God knows that we love in the bowels of Christ and that we pardon with all our heart all those who without knowing what they are doing, have done the gravest damage to the Church and to their country. They are our sons. We implore before God and in their favour the merits of our martyrs, of the ten bishops and of the thousands of priests and Catholics who died forgiving them, and also the suffering, like a deep sea, which Spain is undergoing. Pray that in our country hatreds may be extinguished, that souls may draw together, that we may all again be one in the bond of charity."

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