

CATHOLICISM AND CIVILIZATION*

IT is thought in certain circles that these two words are the exact antithesis of each other. The persecution of Catholics is called 'kulturkampf'; and people do not hesitate to say that the prosperity of certain countries dates from the time when they repudiated the Catholic Faith. We are too used to such opinions to be roused by them. Ignorance of Catholic doctrine, usually involuntary, thus once more gives rise to an error, which becomes an injustice. We may surprise certain people when we say:—

- (1) That Catholicism insists on civilization and progress as a duty;
- (2) That the Catholic Church is the most effectual instrument, and most sure guarantee for progressive civilization.

What is Civilization?

Philosophers and sociologists are on the horns of a dilemma when they consider the nature of civilization. They have complicated the problem by indictments on the subject of 'Kultur' and civilization. They say that civilization is nothing else but *the help that social man is always giving to nature so that man can live better and better*. The expansion of life—by man's government of nature, by the enriching of his intellectual life, by his artistic, economic and industrial works, by the close connection of the finite with the Infinite—these are the ends and the limits of civilization.

*The substance of an address given by Father Mark de Munynck, O.P., during the *Semaine Catholique d'Etudes Internationales* at Geneva from the 16th to the 22nd of September, 1929.

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Civilization is a religious duty.

It is enough to have defined civilization, to see that continual effort towards a higher civilization is not only a tendency of human nature; it is equally a religious duty.

God created us. He created us for Himself. We exist for God. He is the only end and explanation of our life. All our efforts should be towards God. We must tend towards Him: we must get close to Him. This can only have one meaning: we must always look to God for our standards in life.

Now God is Being and Life in its entirety. In controlling still more our lives and ourselves, we become more like to Him and we perform a fundamental religious duty. Now *that* expansion of life is exactly what we call civilization. Is it not then evident that every religious man should regard civilization as a duty, as it ensures man's progress towards God?

Yet this task that the Creator imposes on us seems very difficult for our poor human nature. Does not humanity need a divine energy, in order to attain to its divine goal? The answer to this difficult question is made clear in the pages of the Gospel. 'The Word was made Flesh,' and 'I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world.' By faith we can become the 'children of God'; by grace we are members of His mystical body, so that we can live the divine life. Because the Saviour of the world is God, because we live by His life, we may go to 'His Father and to Our Father,' and we can aspire to the fulness of the divine life. Christian doctrine sanctions the religious desires of humanity. The progress of civilization, the orderly expansion of earthly life, becomes the hope and the guarantee of our life 'with Christ in God.'

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Catholic doctrine, leaven of civilization.

It is allowed by most people that the Catholic Church cares for this Christian ideal, and that therefore the progress of civilization is very near to her heart! But there is more to come.

In the most deserted deserts and in the saddest pages of history we find the tragic ruins of successive civilizations. They were born, they grew, they were all-powerful and then they fell! Can we discover the cause of these disasters? With regard to many of them, our sources of information are unfortunately fragmentary and problematical; but we can at least surmise the reasons for their dissolution. The absence of uniformity of ideas among the representatives of the same civilization,—the violent conflict between rival civilizations, and the disagreement between different factors, the union of which forms civilizations. This last cause of downfall is the most frequent. The German theorists even give this stage of decadence a special name—'Zivilisation,' as opposed to their healthy 'Kultur.' Above all, the superabundance of material wealth and its resultant sensualism have been the great obstacle to learning, art, fruitful action and thought for the things of eternity. And when we try to reduce all these reasons to one cause, we find that all civilizations that have fallen have been 'individual,' that they have substituted *limits of race, of time and of space for the essential, largely human factors of civilization.*

We can find a remedy for the mortal ills of civilization by looking at them from the angle of the Gospel and of Catholic doctrine. Many civilizations have fallen because they have sunk into sensualism. The first pages of the Gospel proclaim the great law of abnegation; and the evangelical counsels transform the chosen ones into the 'salt of the earth,' and pre-

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vent the human race from sinking into the slough of despond.

Moreover, the Catholic Church is above time and space. She respects nations and countries because the work of humanity, like that of the human body, is accomplished by many and different organs. But her greatness knows no limits, for her boundaries are humanity and the immensity of God. The Catholic Church thus avoids that individualism that has done to death so many civilizations in the past, and which will kill ours, if we do not rise above wild nationalism, overthrow the false values of the rational order, and strive after the Catholic ideal of Christian civilization.

The necessity of a visible and universal Church to support and maintain civilization.

But one must not imagine that the Christian ideal in individual souls is of itself sufficient to realise these divine intentions. Independently of any positive indication in the Gospel, the fact of human nature and of the nature of civilization, makes us understand that only a visible, universal and divinely organised Church can give permanent and supernatural support to the collective work of humanity, which is civilization. Man does not only consist of a soul. He is made up of matter and spirit. Even his highest ideals must rest on reality, and on a sensible life. To ensure that we avoid fatal fantasies, the divine Will must be interpreted for us by a visible authority which with the help of the Holy Ghost, raises us above the errors of our individual imaginations.

Moreover, do not forget that progress and civilization are collective. The nobility of one soul is a treasure for all eternity, the earthly work of the human race does not matter after death. The tasks which fall upon us, often in the face of hostile natural forces and of our own frustrated and disordered souls, are

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gigantic. These tasks force the grouping of enormous masses of people and their rational organisation. This working collection which should be as large as the human race, wants the divine principles of the life of Christ which will allow it to accomplish its work of civilization. Therefore these supernatural bonds should be at least as strong as those which unite humanity.

Certainly, civilization is only the natural, terrestrial and transitory aspect of the Kingdom of God; but it is required by our Heavenly Father for the peace and happiness of His children. Civilization will never be sure of being permanent if it is not supported by the power of the Holy Ghost who is in the Catholic Church until the end of time.

Modern civilization and Christian civilization.

Many speak of the inferiority of Catholics in the realms of civilization and of culture. Thanks be to God, Catholics, who are worthy of their name, think less of the good of this world than of their eternal salvation. They do not disdain matter, which is of God's creation, but they do not believe that progress consists in the stupidities of insensate luxury. They do not admit that their intellectual view of the world has to depend on a transitory hypothesis which will shortly join the melancholy specimens exhibited by scientists. They refuse to consider jazz and the 'talkies' as the highest form of art. If it is thus that Catholics are behind the times, let us thank God! They are, in that, only the more representative of civilization, for they escape that decrepitude, that senile weakness which has been the forecast of death for so many civilizations.

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