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THE FRENCH CANADIANS

Viewed in Their True Light by Honest Protestants—Their Language Not a Patois.

Rev. Father Grenier, S. J., in his address before the Catholic Truth Society of Winnipeg, last Thursday, aimed at refuting the calumnies so often uttered by ignorant and bigoted Protestants against the real character of their fellow-citizens. After recalling the fact, that at the time of the conquest of Canada by English arms, there were not seventy thousand Canadians, all French, of course, in the whole country; he first quoted a long and imposing array of well authenticated historical facts and Protestant authorities. History, he says, shows, among other things, how the French Canadians, who, for nearly a whole century after the conquest of their country by the English, received from England scarcely anything but coarse insult, or heartless treatment, yet constantly proved loyal to the English Crown, thanks to the counsels of their spiritual guides. Twice, especially, in 1775 and 1812, would Canada surely have been lost to England, had the French priests or bishops been less vigilant or their flocks less obedient to the voice of conscience. Then were produced a great many testimonies, all Protestant, such as the following:

1. "The Canadian Population," says Lieutenant-Colonel Sleight, displayed a "chivalrous devotion and faith which find not, in the records of the past, a more noble example. In 1812, the defence of the country mainly depended upon the French Canadians. A second time they proved their loyalty; the Americans were repulsed on all sides, and Canada was saved." (1).

2. "England holds the Canadas," adds another Protestant writer, "by the influence of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy alone." (2).

3. "The French Canadians," says Sir Francis Head, "retain all the virtues of the French, without their propensity to war." (3).

4. "They are mild and kindly," observes Lord Durham, "frugal, industrious and honest, very sociable, cheerful, and hospitable, and distinguished for a courtesy and real politeness which pervades every class of society." (4).

5. "They vastly surpass," observes Dr. Shaw, in 1856, "the people of England in the same rank of life . . . I have seen them flocking to their churches in great numbers, as early as five o'clock in the morning . . . proving one thing at least, that they are not indolent religious." (5).

6. "I confess," says Mr. Godley, an Anglican Protestant, "I have a strong sympathy for the French Canadians; they are *si bons enfants*. And, then descending to details, Mr. Godley enumerates some of the qualities he found in them, such as contentment, *Gaiete de Cœur*, politeness springing from benevolence of heart, respect to their superiors, confidence in their friends, attachment to their religion." (6).

7. "Everything we saw of the French Canadians," says Mr. Buckingham, "induces us to believe that they are amongst the happiest peasantry in the world . . . I think the Canadian more sober, more virtuous, and more happy than the American." (7).

8. Colonel Bonchette, after declaring that neither the crimes nor the social misery of England exist in Canada, adds that "its priesthood use only the influence of the understanding, are merely the advisers, and not the rulers of their flocks." (8).

9. "The Catholic priesthood of this province," says Lord Durham, "have to a very remarkable degree conciliated the good-will of persons of all creeds; and I know of no parochial clergy in the world whose practice of all the Christian virtues is more universally admitted."

(1) Pine Forests, etc., by Lieut. Col. Sleight, ch. xi, p. 275—edition of 1853.

(2) The Statesmen of America, p. 305.

(3) Sir Francis Head's Narrative, p. 194.

(4) Despatches, p. 17.

(5) Ramble Through the United States, etc., ch. iii, p. 90.

(6) Godley's Letters from America, vol. 1, letter v, p. 89.

(7) Canada, etc., pp. 211—18—20, 264, 270.

(8) British Dominions, etc., ch. xvii, p. 414.

and has been productive of more beneficial consequences." (9)

It were easy, added the Reverend Father, to find similar words from competent and upright Protestants, with which to refute any accusation inspired or invented against the French Canadians by the rancor of heresy.

But there is a point, he said, on which the French Canadians have been and are yet every day calumniated, and to which I would call your attention in a special manner. It has been said, and is still believed by not a few that the language they speak is at best a sort of slang, a mere *patois*, and nothing like the language spoken by the people of France.

Here something better can be had than the testimony of English-speaking writers. Listen, if you please, to the following witnesses, about whose competency surely, nobody could reasonably entertain the least doubt.

1. Father de Charlevoix, S. J., is, as every Canadian ought to know, the celebrated historian of La Nouvelle-France, the author of the first great historical work ever written on Canada. Now, Fr. de Charlevoix belonged to a family standing high in Parisian society. Born and brought up in Paris, he twice visited Canada (in 1705 and 1720), spending considerable time in the country, travelling over the length and breadth of it in order to collect materials for his intended history. Surely, if a man was ever qualified to pass a correct judgment on the French Canadians, particularly on their language and manners, de Charlevoix was that man. Well, listen to his words about Canada, French Canada, the only one then in existence: "Nowhere else is our tongue spoken with greater purity. Not even anything like a peculiar accent is to be noticed here. . . . Gentle and polite manners are common to all; and boorishness, either in language or demeanor, is unknown even in the remotest parts of the country." (10).

2. At the very beginning of the French colony, a quite similar testimony was rendered to my ancestors by the "venerable" Mother Marie de l'Incarnation, a lady of superior parts, who came over to Canada and founded, in 1639, that renowned Ursuline Convent of Quebec where she died in the odor of sanctity in 1672.

3. A member of the French Academy, the abbe D'Olivet, a distinguished author in French literature, who died in 1768, thus writes: "An opera may be sent to Canada, and it will be sung at Quebec note for note and with the same accent as in Paris; but one could not send a bit of conversation to Bordeaux and to Montpellier, and have every syllable of it pronounced as in Paris." (11).

4. Thus, so far have we learned, on the best authorities, what kind of French the Canadians spoke up to the present century. But what kind of language have French Canadians spoken since? What sort of French are they using now?

Here is Father Grenier's answer. Being a French Canadian sixty years old, he says, and having had, since my becoming a Jesuit in 1858, the advantage of an almost daily intercourse with several distinguished fellow-religious educated in Paris, I might perhaps, without laying myself open to a suspicion of presumption, venture to express my personal opinion in regard to the manner of speaking of my own people; I prefer, however, to recall a fact well known to many others as well as to myself, the fact, namely, that, of all the very many religious, Jesuit and Oblate Fathers especially, that have come to Canada from old France and preached missions for the last fifty years all over the country, constantly going from parish to parish, not one that I know of could be found that

(9) Despatches, p. 97.

(10) "Nulle part ailleurs, on ne parle plus purement notre langue. On ne remarque même ici aucun accent . . . Les manières douces et polies sont communes à tous; et la rusticité, soit dans le langage, soit dans les façons, n'est pas même connue dans les campagnes les plus écartées."

(11) "On peut envoyer un opéra en Canada, et il sera chanté à Québec note pour note et sur le même ton qu'à Paris; mais on ne saurait envoyer une phrase de conversation à Bordeaux et à Montpellier et faire qu'elle y soit prononcée syllabe par syllabe comme à Paris."

(12) "On m'a dit que le français se parle assez bien à Moscou et à Saint-Petersbourg. Mais si vous voulez entendre le vrai son de la langue de Bossuet et de Corneille, l'avis général est qu'il faut aller jusqu'au Canada, où verdit un rameau du vieux arbre de France."

(13) "Ici" (au Canada), "l'on garde, dans l'usage de notre langue, cette élégance, cette sorte d'atticisme du grand siècle. Le peuple lui-même le parle assez correctement et n'a point de patois."

(14) "On parle en ces feuilles un langage très pur, riche en adjectifs anciens dont la saveur est délicieuse. C'est la langue à peine altérée que parlaient nos pères, les premiers colons de la Nouvelle-France."

(15) "Il nous a été donné d'assister, cette année même, à une séance de ce genre; et ce qui nous a particulièrement frappé, c'est le langage correct des acteurs et la pureté relative de leur accent."

did not express his wonder at the uniformity and purity of the French they have heard everywhere.

5. Paul Feval, one of the brightest and most popular novelists of France, who died a fervent and devoted child of the Church in 1887, observes as follows in one of his novels (*FORCE ET FAIBLESSE*): "I have been told that French is pretty well spoken in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. But if you wish to hear the true accent of Bossuet and Corneille's tongue, the general opinion is that you must go to Canada, where thrives an offshoot of the old French tree." (12).

6. Xavier Marmier, an illustrious member and perpetual secretary of the *ACADEMIE FRANCAISE*, whom we had the pleasure of seeing in Montreal, could write in his last work, a few years before his death (1892): "Here" (in Canada) "is preserved, in the use of our tongue, that elegance, that sort of atticism which distinguished the golden age of our French literature. Even the common people speak it pretty correctly; and there is no *PATOIS* among them." (13).

7. A French journalist reviewing, in Dec. 1890, the French Canadian press in the columns of the *ECLAIR*, which passes for one of the most cleverly written papers, of Paris, observes as follows: "We find in these" (Canadian) "papers a great purity of language, a language rich in these good old-fashioned adjectives so delightfully pleasing to the ear. It is, with scarcely an alteration, the language spoken by our forefathers who were the first settlers of New France." (14).

8. Another journalist from France, Mr. Bellay, who, in Oct. 1891, contributed an article (*l'Enseignement des Peres Jesuites au Canada*) for the *Revue Canadienne*, of Montreal, said, speaking of the plays occasionally performed before the public by the pupils of St. Mary's, the Jesuit College of Montreal: "It has been our privilege to be present, this very year, at one of these performances; and what struck us most, is the actors' correctness of language and relative purity of accent." (15).

9. Mr. J. C. Fleming, then, said nothing but what is strictly true, when he was writing in the *New York Catholic World*, some years ago, that *FRENCHMEN WHO VISIT CANADA ADMIT THAT THEIR TONGUE HAS LOST NONE OF ITS BEAUTY ON THE BANKS OF THE ST. LAWRENCE*.

10. And, finally,—not to multiply beyond all measure similar quotations—when last March, at a literary entertainment, a most beautiful and heart-stirring French play was performed by the pupils of St. Boniface College to do homage to our beloved Archbishop, on the occasion of his consecration, every competent judge, in the crowded audience of ladies, gentlemen, priests, bishops and other ecclesiastical dignitaries from Manitoba, Quebec, Montreal, etc., felt that His Grace gave way to no exaggeration, by noticing with highest praise the among merits of the actors, and, many other things, their excellent French pronunciation.

Let me repeat it, therefore: the French Canadians speak no *patois*; as a rule they speak pure French. Whoever says the contrary is only giving a glaring proof of his utter ignorance or deep seated prejudices, or rather, of both. I do not pretend, mark well, that there is nothing at all incorrect in the language of the French-Canadians, that their

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manner of speaking French is absolutely faultless; far from it. And nobody knows better my way of thinking in this respect than the numerous boys I have had under my tuition since 1860, either in Montreal, or New York, or St. Boniface. Nay, I readily admit that there are blunders, and not merely a few, in the way my own people speak. Yet it remains perfectly true to say that, if the French Canadians often sin against the rules of syntax, do not always use words according to the strict laws of propriety, and have a defective pronunciation in more than one respect, they, in spite of all that, do certainly stand far superior to their revilers in point of language, as well as with regard to nobleness of character, genuine Christian and civic virtues and moral dignity.

I said the French Canadians, though generally speaking correctly, yet make some mistakes, and who can find this strange? The wonder is that they do not blunder more, considering the various circumstances of their social position since the first settlement of Canada.

And compare French Canadians with other countries either of Europe or America. How do the common people speak in English, in France, in the neighboring country, the United States? Have we not heard, for instance, the American twang? Do we not know the existence, up to this day, of various *PATOIS*, or corrupt dialects in France and England? Why, even in Paris there is current among a certain class of the common people a peculiar kind of slang, the famous Parisian *ARGOT*, as it is called, which is not intelligible to the ordinary Frenchman. And I have known English-speaking Canadians who could not understand at all the language of the people in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cornwall, etc., even after several years spent in England. And as for the English people of a better class, who speak real English, suffice it to quote the following words of a first class periodical published in London: "In the art of speaking indistinctly, confounding vowel sounds, slurring consonants, marking only the accented syllable of a word and gobbling up all the rest, and in other feats of this sort, we (English people) have not a rival." (*The Month*, Nov. 1884, p. 453).

But I must not conclude my remarks without saying one word at least of state schools. What kind of language or pronunciation is to be found in the *LYCEES* of France and the public schools of our neighbors, in those *LYCEES* and public schools held up to us with so much pride by some persons as the very ideal of perfection? Says a school inspector in France: "I enter any class—listen to any boy reciting his lesson . . . He rushes through the words, he hesitates, his tone is sing-song, he repeats as many as ten times the end of each sentence. No pause at periods or commas; no shading; no emphasis; jumbling of clauses and a mixing up of words and ideas. What you have heard is neither Latin, or French; it is not a human language; you have gathered nothing but *INARTICULATE* and *BARBAROUS* sounds." (16).

And the North American Review, speaking of our American neighbors, a few years ago, made bold to say, in the very teeth of the whole tribe of public school admirers, that according to competent and impartial testimonies gathered from all parts throughout the country, *THE BULK OF THE PUPILS IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE UNABLE TO READ UNDERSTANDINGLY, TO SPELL CORRECTLY, TO WRITE LEGIBLY, TO DESCRIBE IN AN INTELLIGENT MANNER THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE COUNTRY, IN ONE WORD, TO DO WHAT CHILDREN DECENTLY BROUGHT UP ARE EXPECTED TO DO WITH EASE*.

My last word is, if some people in this Canada of ours, have reason to bang

(16) J'entre dans une classe, quelle qu'elle soit. Voyez cet enfant récitant sa leçon. . . . Il précipite les mots, il étouffe, il chante, il répète jusqu'à dix fois la fin de chaque période. Nul repos aux points, aux virgules; point de nuances, nul accent; confusion des phrases, mélanges des mots et des idées. Ce n'est ni du latin ni du français que vous venez d'entendre; ce n'est pas un langage humain, on n'a recueilli que des sons inarticulés et barbares." (*Mannel de lecture par un supérieur de séminaire*, Paris, 1862, p. 352).

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down their heads in shame for their uncharitableness, their haughty bearing, spirit of intolerance, rudeness, ignorance, or lack of real genuine patriotism, they are not the French Canadians.

FATHER SEARLE ON CATHOLIC EDUCATION.

Extract from "Plain Facts for Fair Minds."—p. 156.

We are very far from despising the ordinary branches of knowledge taught in the public schools; though, in common with many others, we consider a great deal of the instruction there imparted to be useless, simply a stuffing of the heads and straining of the memory of the young with matters of no use except for those who are to pursue some special line of intellectual work in later life. But we consider instruction in the principal points of faith as more necessary than even the most elementary teaching of arithmetic; since it is much more of an advantage to know the way of salvation than to be able to add up a column of figures. We do not wonder that our Protestant or infidel fellow-citizens do not look at the matter just as we do; for as they look round on the world in general, it necessarily seems to them that creeds are simply opinions held on a subject on which certainty is quite unattainable, and that every one will have to form his own opinion after his school-days are over. But it is different with us. The truths of faith are with us a matter of certain knowledge, not of opinion; they are verities revealed distinctly by Almighty God, and coming down to us, by the wonderful means which He has instituted, unchanged and immovable through these eighteen centuries. They are more certain as well as more important than anything else we can know, for it is God Himself who tells them to us.

We insist, then, that they be not sacrificed to matters of far less value. We do not want to have our children, tired out with mental application during the week, restricted to an hour at most on Sunday for learning these supremely important branches of knowledge. And we desire this not only as Christians, but as patriots; for we know that the teachings of the Catholic religion are the best that can possibly be given to make good citizens. A Catholic who believes what his religion teaches cannot be a socialist, an anarchist, or a free-lover. Indeed, all the real dangers now threatening the social fabric come, as we know very clearly, and as others would also know if they would only try to find out what we really do teach, from the neglect of Catholic doctrine.

It is, then, no more than reasonable, since we cannot expect that these truths, salutary as they are, should be taught in the public schools, that we should use all lawful means to secure them at least for our own people. We do not want to force them on any one else, but we do not want to lose what we have, and what our children ought to have after us. And also it is reasonable that we should protest earnestly against all compulsory schemes of education which would prevent us from teaching adequately these most important matters to those who, by the faith they have, will firmly believe and act upon them. And it is also perfectly reasonable that we should endeavor to have the public school system so arranged that parents, whether Catholic or not, may, where it is practicable, provide for the religious instruction of their children in the same schools in which their secular training is given. In other countries of mixed religions this is done without detriment to good schooling and without making the State responsible for anything more than the secular studies.

Now, I say that we are willing that the State should teach the children the common branches of knowledge which all should have, such as reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, and the more elementary portions of mathematics and of physical science. But there is, do doubt, a difficulty here.

It is with regard to history especially. We are not willing that distinctively Protestant education on this matter should be given to our children. We are not willing, for instance, that they should be taught that Luther began his Reformation because the Church was selling

(Continued on page 3).