

FRENCH CONGREGATIONS

Letter From the Pope to the Archbishop of Paris.

To Our Dear Son Francois, Cardinal Priest of Santa Maria in Via, Archbishop of Paris, Dear Son, Health and Apostolic Benediction.

Amid the consolations afforded us during the Holy Year, by the pious eagerness of the pilgrims who have flocked to Rome from all parts of the world, we have been struck with sadness at the news of the dangers which threaten the religious congregations in France. By dint of misunderstanding and prejudice it has come to be thought that it will be necessary for the good of the State to put restraints upon their liberty, and perhaps to proceed against them with even greater rigour.

In the name of the heavy cares which you share with us it is for you to dissipate the prejudices which exist among your countrymen, and to prevent as far as possible any irreparable misfortunes befalling the Church and France.

ORIGIN AND OBJECT.

The religious orders, as everyone knows, have their origin and the reason of their existence in those sublime evangelical counsels which our Divine Redeemer gave to those who in every succeeding age would attain to Christian perfection—to those brave and generous souls who by prayer and contemplation, by pious austerities and the observance of certain rules, endeavor to climb to the highest summits of the spiritual life.

Their vows, made freely and spontaneously after ripening in the meditations of the novitiate, have ever been regarded and respected by people in every age as sacred things—and the source of the rarest virtues. Their object is twofold: first, the raising of those who take them to a higher degree of perfection; and secondly, by purifying and strengthening their souls, to prepare them for a ministry which is exercised for the everlasting salvation of their neighbor and for the alleviation of the numberless miseries of humanity.

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Services to Civil Society. But it is not the Church alone that the religious orders have from their first appearance rendered immense services; they have benefitted also civil society itself. They have had the merit of preaching virtue to the multitude by the apostolate of good example, as well as by that of word of mouth, of forming and adorning men's minds by the teaching of sacred and profane knowledge, and of enlarging the heritage of the fine arts by splendid works that will live.

What their doctors shed renown on the universities by the depth and breadth of their learning, and their houses became the refuge of divine and human knowledge and in the shipwreck of civilization saved from destruction the masterpieces of ancient wisdom, other religions have penetrated into the most remote regions, swamps or tangled forests, and there braving every danger in draining and clearing and cultivating the land by the sweat of their brow they founded round their monasteries and beneath the shadow of the cross centres of population which grew into villages and flourishing towns, whence, under a kindly rule, agriculture and industry began to spread abroad.

Under these circumstances to deprive the religious congregations of the home of the freedom and peace which alone can ensure the recruiting of their members and the long and laborious task of their training would not only be to require so many great services with inexplicable ingratitude but would also, at the same time, be a clear renunciation of the benefits that flow from them. Other nations have already had sorry experience of such a policy. After having checked the expansion of the religious congregations at home, and gradually dried up their seed they have seen their own influence and prestige around proportionally decline, for it is useless to seek fruit of a tree from which you lop the branches.

Such briefly indicated are the merits of the religious orders of the past. They are registered by the hand of impartial history, and it is superfluous to dwell on them at any greater length. Nor is their activity, their zeal, or their love of their fellow men diminished in our own day. The good that they do strikes every eye, and their virtues shine with a brilliance which no accusation, no attack can tarnish.

In this noble arena in which the religious congregations vie with each other in beneficent activity those of France, we say it again with joy, occupy a foremost and honorable place. Some devoted to teaching instructed the young in secular knowledge and the principles of religious virtue and duty, upon which public peace and the welfare of the State absolutely depend. Others, consecrated to various works of charity, afford effective aid to every physical and moral misery in the numberless houses wherein they tend orphans, the deranged, and the incurable; and they may meet with to reap their courage or check their ardour. These meritorious services, recognized again and again by men above any suspicion of favoritism, and thus after time rewarded by public honors, make these congregations the glory of the Church at large, and the particular and shining glory of France, which they have ever nobly served, and which they love, as we have many a time seen, with a patriotism that feared not to face death itself with joy.

The disappearance of these champions of Christian charity would, it is evident bring on the country an irreparable loss. By the drying up of such an abundant source of voluntary aid public misery would be notably increased, and at the same time an eloquent preaching of brotherhood and concord would be silenced. A society in which so many elements of trouble and enmity are fermenting needs assuredly great examples of self-sacrifice, love and disinterestedness. And what is better fitted to raise and purify men's minds than the sight of these men and women, who, giving up a happy, distinguished, and oftentimes an illustrious position, voluntarily make themselves the brothers and sisters of the children of the people, practising in their regard true equality by utterly forgetting themselves to the disinterested, the abandoned, and the suffering?

So admirably is the activity of the French congregations that it could not be kept within the frontiers of the country, but has gone forth to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and with the Gospel the name, the language, and the prestige of France. Exiles of their own free will, the French missionaries go out across stormy seas, sandy deserts in search of souls to gain for Christ in the most distant and often unexplored regions. They are often seen settling amongst savage tribes in order to civilize them by teaching the elements of Christianity, the love of God and their neighbors, work, regard for the weak and cleanly living; and they devote themselves to this without looking for any earthly reward even till death, which is often hastened by fatigue, the difficulties of the Church, or the sword of the executioner. Respecting the laws and submissive to the civil authorities they bring with them wherever they come, civilization and peace; their only ambition is to enlighten the less fortunate people to whom they devote themselves, and to lead them to Christian morality, and to a knowledge of their dignity as men. Nor is it an uncommon thing for them to make important contributions to science by the help they give to researches which are being made in such different domains as the study of the differences of race and tongue, of history, the nature and products of the soil, and other questions.

It is moreover precisely upon the laborious patient and tireless action of these admirable missionaries that the Protectorate of France is founded, which government after government has always been jealous to preserve, and which we ourselves have publicly acknowledged. The inviolable attachment of the French missionaries to their country, the eminent services which they render her, the great influence which they secure for her especially in the East, all these are facts recognized by men of the most varied opinions, and only lately proclaimed by the voice of the highest authority.

Under these circumstances to deprive the religious congregations of the home of the freedom and peace which alone can ensure the recruiting of their members and the long and laborious task of their training would not only be to require so many great services with inexplicable ingratitude but would also, at the same time, be a clear renunciation of the benefits that flow from them. Other nations have already had sorry experience of such a policy. After having checked the expansion of the religious congregations at home, and gradually dried up their seed they have seen their own influence and prestige around proportionally decline, for it is useless to seek fruit of a tree from which you lop the branches.

It is easy to see that all the great interests at stake in this question would be seriously compromised, even if the missionary orders were spared, that one others might be struck, for careful consideration shows that the existence and the action of the one are bound up with the existence and action of the others. As a matter of fact the vocation of the missionary religious germinates and develops under the word of the preacher religious and even under the supernatural influence of the contemplative religious. One can imagine, too the difficult situation in which the missionaries would be placed, and the decline of their authority and prestige which would follow on the people whom they are seeking to evangelize learning that the religious congregations, far from meeting with protection and respect in their own country, were there treated with hostility and harshness.

IS THE PROTECTORATE TO LAPSE.

But, looking at the question from a higher standpoint, we may point out that the religious congregations, as we have already said, represent the public practice of Christian perfection, and it is certain that there are in the Church and always will be elect souls aspiring to it under the influence of grace, it would be unjust to hinder their designs. It would, moreover, be an assault on the liberty of the Church which is in France guaranteed by a solemn treaty, for every thing that hinders her from leading souls to perfection injures the free exercise of her mission.

To strike at the religious orders would be to deprive the Church of devoted co-operators, at home where they are the necessary auxiliaries of the bishops and clergy in the exercise of the sacred ministry and in the function of Catholic teaching and preaching which the Church has the right and the duty of dispensing, and which is demanded by the conscience of the faithful, and abroad where the general interests of the apostolate and its chief power in all parts of the world are for the greater part represented by the French congregations. The blow which struck them would be felt everywhere, and the Holy See, bound by a divine command to provide for the spread of the Gospel, would find itself under the necessity of offering no opposition to the occupation of the vacancies left by French missionaries by the missionaries of other nations.

Lastly, we should point out that to strike the religious congregations would be to forsake to one's own advantage those democratic principles of liberty and equality which form the very foundation of constitutional right in France and guarantee the individual and collective liberty of every citizen so long as his actions and manner of living have an honest aim which in no way injures the rights and legitimate interests of anyone.

Now, in a state of such advanced civilization as France, we refuse to think that there is anything to be gained nor respect for a class of citizens who are honest, peaceable, and devoted to their country, who, possessing all the rights and fulfilling all the duties of their fellow countrymen, have, either in the towns they make or the life they lead in other lands in view but to work for the perfection of their own souls and the good of their neighbor. They only ask for liberty, and the measures taken against them would appear to be all the more unjust and odious since so many of them are so generous at the same time in their treatment of other different.

SECULARS AND REGULARS. Of course we are not unaware that as a justification for these rigours there are people who are about declaring that the religious congregations encroach upon the jurisdiction of the bishops and interfere with the rights of the secular clergy. This assertion cannot be maintained if one cares to consult the wise laws published on this point by the Church, and which we have recently enacted in perfect harmony with the decrees and spirit of the Council of Trent. They regulate the one hand the conditions of existence of persons vowed to the practice of the evangelical counsels and to the apostolate, and on the other they respect as far as possible the authority of the bishops in their respective dioceses. Whilst they safeguard the dependence due to the Head of the Church, they also in a majority of cases give to the Bishop supreme authority over the congregations by way of delegation.

As for the attempt to make out that the episcopate and clergy of France are disposed to give a favorable welcome to the ostracism with which it is desired to strike the religious orders, it is an insult which the bishops and priests can only resent with all the energy of their priestly soul. There is no need to give any more importance to the other reproach that is being made against the congregations, of being too rich. Even if we admit that the value set upon their property is not exaggerated, there is no contesting that they are in honorable and legal possession, and consequently to dispossess them would simply be an attack upon the rights of property. It is, moreover, necessary to remark that they possess nothing for their personal interest or for the good of their individual members, but for works of religion, charity and beneficence, which turn to the profit of the French nation at home and abroad, whether they go to increase its prestige by contributing to the mission of civilization which Providence has entrusted to it.

Passing over in silence other considerations which are made on the subject of the religious congregations, we confine ourselves to this important remark: France maintains amicable relations with the Holy See founded upon a solemn treaty. If then, the inconvenience in that I have upon given points any reality the way is open to bring them to the notice of the Holy See, which is ready to make them the subject of a serious investigation, and if need be to apply suitable remedies. We desire, however, to reckon upon the goodwill and impartiality of the men who guide the destinies of France and upon the fairness and good sense which distinguish the French people. We feel confident that they will not wish to lose the precious moral and social heritage of which the religious congregations are the representatives; that they have no desire, in seeking to secure general liberty by laws of exception, to wound the feelings of Catholics, and to aggravate to its own great detriment their country's internal disorders. A nation so truly great and strong, and can regard the future with any assurance of security, only if its people are closely united in working for the common good in full regard for the rights of all, and with conscience free and undisturbed. From the beginning of our pontificate we have never omitted to make an effort to further this work of pacification in France, which would have brought her incalculable benefits not only in the religious, but also in the civil and political order. Undeterred by any difficulties we have not ceased to give France particular proofs of our respect, solicitude, and affection, always feeling sure that she would respond to them as a great and generous nation should.

We should be overwhelmed with the deepest sorrow if in the opening of our days we should discover that we had been deceived in these hopes, deprived of the price of our fatherly solicitude, and condemned to watch in the country which we love a ruinous struggle between party passions, with no power to know how far their excess would extend or toward off the misfortunes which we have done all we could to prevent, and for which we decline, in advance, to be held in any way responsible.

In any case the duty which is at present incumbent on the French people is to labor in perfect harmony of thought and action to prevail upon the people to save the rights and interests of the religious congregations, which we love with all our fatherly heart and whose existence, liberty and prosperity concern the Catholic Church, France, and humanity.

May the Lord vouchsafe to hear our ardent prayers and to grant success to the efforts which we have now for so long made in this noble cause. And as a token of our benevolence and of divine favors we grant you, dear Son, and to the whole episcopate, clergy and people of France the Apostolic Benediction. Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, on the 23rd day of December, in the year 1900, and in the twenty-third of Our pontificate.

LEO XIII., POPE

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