

CHRIST'S MORAL METHOD.

That our Blessed Lord came to earth to establish a Kingdom—to found a church, a visible society of men and women, is a fact recognized by the great majority of professing Christians. As to the exact character of that church, and its relations to the outside world from which it is drawn, there is very considerable diversity of opinion, and that even among people within the same section of the Christian church. For the first 300 years those daring to profess the name of The Crucified were liable to annoyance, suffering, and even death, at the hands of the State, which in every case was heathen. Christians were looked upon as dangerous followers of a new superstition, which was not content with merely exercising its influence over its own votaries, but even went so far as to say that it was of universal importance, and ought to be embraced by all men. It claimed to be the one and only true faith; and, so long as any State upheld another faith, it could not fail to be in direct antagonism to that State. There is no one nowadays who will dare attempt the vindication of the cruel persecutions of early days, notably those of the reign of the Emperor Nero; and yet, from their point of view, the heathen who persecuted the Christians were thoroughly consistent. They, as a State, were being opposed by a party of men who professed to follow One whom the heathen recognized only as a fanatic—a revolutionary. He had been put to death, but his followers spread, and multiplied, and disseminated His teaching, which was of a nature calculated to overturn all the old national faiths. Until they could be convinced of the rightfulness of His claims, it was only natural that they should protect the interests of the State and the Faith of the State, and put down with a strong hand those whom they could only look upon as hostile both to the State and its faith.

So long, then, as there existed this antagonism between the Christian church and a heathen State, there was no difficulty about the relations between Christianity and Heathenism.

Christianity showed, by its lines of action, the distinct and well-defined principles upon which it was based. It showed itself to be more than a mere system of worship; it claimed to be of paramount authority in regard to the social life of men. Unlike the old Hebrew faith, it did not lay down a complete moral code, with a certain fixed punishment for the violation of each separate article in that code. Christ gave, not laws, but principles, for the guidance of men in social life, and left it to men themselves to adapt these principles to the varied ex-

igencies of the varied circumstances in which they found themselves. That the early church, as a church, carried out these adaptations, we know both from Sacred and Secular History. We know also that it exercised authority in matters of social morality, and did a great deal towards the creation of a thoroughly organized public opinion in regard to matters concerning which there was no exact rule laid down in Holy Scripture.

But, when Constantine the Great established Christianity as the religion of the State, when "The sword was grafted on the crook," the aspect of things changed very materially. Instead of it being considered a disgrace to profess Christianity, it was now quite the opposite. The court was outwardly Christian: the laws were Christian; Christianity was the fashion. Everyone "who was anybody" felt constrained to adopt it as an outward mark of respectability. But everyone was not prepared to take up the cross, and so it came to pass that many little weaknesses and darling sins got to be overlooked, or, at all events, dealt with leniently. So it has been in every age of the church. In the Middle Ages, men of every rank considered themselves members of the Catholic church, and attended to its outward observances; but, how comparatively few showed the spirit of Christ in their lives! Men of opulence did pretty much as they liked, and hoped to atone for their deficiencies by giving up a few acres of land to the nearest monastery or cathedral, or by bequeathing their estates to the church, when they themselves could no longer enjoy them. As to social morality, there was very little of that.

Are we, in this 19th century, this age of progress and enlightenment very much better than our fathers? I do not think we are. Most people, who desire to be regarded as moving in respectable society, keep up their connection with some religious body, and contribute to its funds. They put in an appearance at one of the Sunday services, and so far as outward appearances go, seem to be good Christians. But, have the majority of them any idea of the moral principles involved in being a follower of Christ; or, if they do know them, do they ever dream of trying to regulate their lives by them? One has only to glance at the condition of things in every rank of life to see that our Lord's moral method is not understood; at all events, it is only practised by isolated individuals and communities.

Let us try to see some of the leading principles in our Lord's moral method.

1. He wants character, not conduct merely. He does not say, "Thou shalt do so and so," or "Thou shalt not do so and so," but "Thou shalt be so and so," or "Thou shalt not be so and so." Of

course, we acknowledge the fact that character cannot, if real, be a mere abstraction; it must manifest itself in a concrete form. As thoughts find expression in words, so character has to express itself in deeds. The teaching of Christ has to so take possession of men that they will feel constrained to apply it to the circumstances of the day. We need consultation among small bodies of representative Christians. We want men who know what life means, in our schools and colleges, to give the benefit of their experience, so that the moral principles of our Master, Jesus Christ, may be applied to every action—to every suggestion to action. And, we want the same thing done in regard to athletic sports and contests, to say where use ends and abuse begins. We want this also to be done in respect of business transactions, to say where clever business tactics have given way to questionable dealings. In regard to workshops, we want to bring down Christ's moral method to settle the true relations of capital and labor, of master and servant. In political life, we want it to say wherein consists fair, healthy rivalry, and wherein unworthy, selfish ambition; and to settle what means and methods are lawful and what unlawful, in the political arena. We want it in our law courts, to say how far circumstances may be taken into consideration, in discussing a crime—its motives, and so on. We want to get a central public conscience of the Church, deliberately formed, as to the sort of typical acts and refusals to act, in which the Christian spirit must show itself in the various situations of life.

2. Our Blessed Lord lays down principles for the basis of His spiritual kingdom; but, He seeks its establishment through the personal goodness of life of the individual. Christian effort for social improvement must always have its stronghold in the genuineness of the individual character. We cannot think of any movement for the amelioration of the social condition of mankind as being of any real lasting good, unless it is based on righteousness, that is, unless its promoters are actuated by the spirit of Christ, and are simply desirous of carrying Christ's teaching into practical effect. We hear a great deal at the present time about the "lapsed masses," the "submerged tenth," and many are the agencies in operation for the raising of these lapsed—these spiritually dead. Professing Christians, of every shade of religious belief, are sending missionaries to preach to these poor unfortunates; but, we cannot help feeling that their labor is to a great extent wasted, because it begins at the wrong end. What we have to aim at is a change in the environments of the "lapsed." Bad dwellings, inadequate wages, etc., are as stones on the graves of the spiritually dead; and, these stones