

CATHOLIC SOCIAL REFORM IN BELGIUM.

The Review, St. Louis.

The "Visitor," the Catholic paper of the Providence diocese, and the "Northwestern Chronicle," the St. Paul diocesan organ, are entitled to a medal each; the former for the wonderful knowledge which it displayed in an article treating of "Christian Democracy" in Europe, and the latter for coming to the assistance of the "Visitor" in diffusing that knowledge.

Passing over much matter in the article that would all read much better in a Protestant paper than in a Catholic periodical, we beg to quote these lines which especially concern the progressive little country whose hospitality the writer is just now enjoying:

"We are bound to aver that the Catholic Conservatives (in Belgium) have done next to nothing, in the way of social legislation, towards the betterment of the laborers' condition. They have been all-powerful in both houses now for fully twenty years, and, while their personal and charitable deeds are deserving of sincere consideration, they have enacted but a very few laws for alleviating the lot both of the lower middle-class and what is called the proletariat."

Now, if we had read these lines in any other but a Catholic paper, we should have said: The scribe who penned them is either an ignoramus or a bigot; for what the Belgian Catholics, as a political party at the head of the government for the last twenty years, have done for the laboring classes, so far surpasses anything done anywhere else in Europe or America, that only a man who gets his cue from the editorials of the Socialist and Masonic press, or one who is imbued with the spirit of the worst enemies of all that is Catholic, could come out with such a boldfaced falsehood. What then, are we to think of a Catholic writer, in an American Catholic weekly, whose duty it is to take up the cudgels for Catholic interests, making a statement so sweepingly condemnatory of a Catholic government, as if that government had utterly failed in its trust? What, for instance, would a Democrat think of a Democratic paper, of his choice, if the party of which it is the recognized organ were assailed in it in such a way? We believe that said Democrat, if he has any backbone, and thinks anything at all of his party, would, after one or two repetitions of like flings, fling the paper to where it could no longer offend his eyes and ruffle his temper, and, no other exponent of his cherished political principles being at hand, would subscribe to a Republican journal; for it is not half so hard to be smitten by one's enemies as by one's own. What use is there in a Catholic burdening his budget with the price of a subscription to a Catholic weekly, if it takes up, and makes its own, the slurs on Catholics of the Judeo-Masonic press, instead of posting itself and refuting them. Why are people urged to subscribe to a Catholic weekly? It need not be to secure the local church news; for that is, as a rule, secured quicker in the secular daily than in the ex-professo Catholic weekly. It is the foreign and distant news of things Catholic, the comments and appreciations on Church matters with which the American dailies regularly regale their unsophisticated readers, that must be set aright by the Catholic weekly. It is in correcting the false impression the newspaper devotees too often glean from the dailies, that it has one of its chief "reasons d'etre." If it only partially accomplishes that duty, why, there is no need for having it; for the daily has also its days when it gives articles favorable to the Church. Its editors are capable men, well posted, and as such, unless conspicuously hostile, they know better than to make statements disparaging to Catholics and not borne out by facts, such statements, for instance, as the one made by the Providence "Visitor" and reproduced by the "Northwestern Chronicle."

"The Belgian Conservatives have done next to nothing in the way

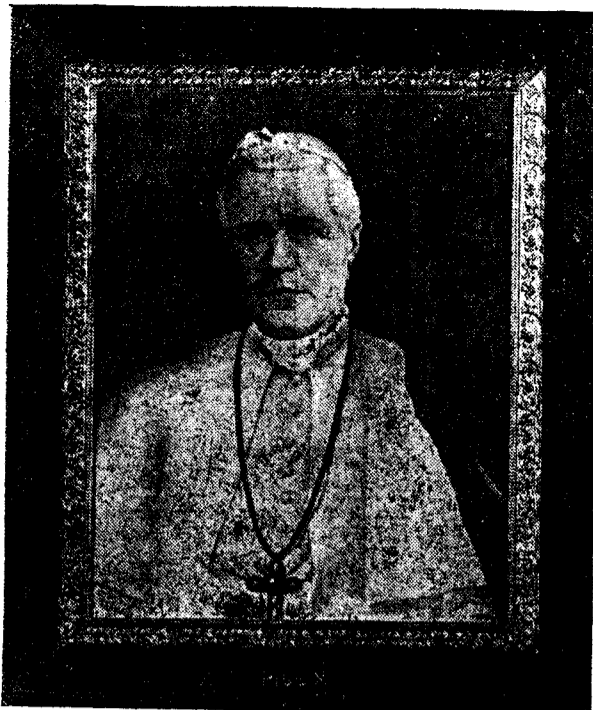
of social legislation towards the betterment of the laborers' condition!" Forsooth! We have before us a list of forty-five laws in favor of the laboring classes, enacted by the Catholic government during the twenty years of its power. Computed in cash, the advantages of these laws for the working people represent an outlay of ninety million francs per annum, and that, we beg to remark, in a country not by a thousand square miles the size of Maryland. Of these ninety million francs, the State spends fifteen million yearly in pensions for aged workmen, and fourteen millions in remunerating workmen's sons whom conscription calls to the army. The national treasury is yearly the loser of thirteen millions because of the special, ridiculously low rates accorded to workmen going to and coming from their work. These rates granted to workmen only, are on the basis of a descending scale, ranging from one-third of a cent per mile for distances under three miles, to one-twelfth of a cent for distances of sixty miles and over. Moreover, thanks to the aid furnished by the State and to the prosperity of the country under the clerical administration, thirty thousand families of laboring men have become the owners of their homes during these twenty years; and these homes, as well as the homes of all the working people, are exempt from any and every house tax. The deposits in the post-office saving-banks have increased from 186,356,733 francs in 1885 to 760 millions in 1904. This amount is divided between nearly 2,000,000 depositors—a proof that it is the money of the poorer people; for it gives one P.O. bank-book for every four inhabitants.

We might go on aligning columns of statistics to show what the government of the parish priests has done for the most interesting and most numerous class of its citizens—the common people. However, we hardly think that there is need of saying more. Nevertheless, we might add two facts that were lately brought to our notice. One of these goes to show that if the clerical government has done "next to nothing to alleviate the lot both of the lower middle-class and of what is called the proletariat," these classes seem to be singularly adverse to escape—notwithstanding a density of population greater than of any country in Europe—from under the sway of a government so outrageously indifferent to their wants; for of the 178,360 emigrants who embarked on the Antwerp boats for the United States last year, less than three per cent. were Belgians. Of the ninety-seven per cent., the vast majority were Germans and Poles. The other fact is that Mr. Carnegie said of this little country: "Belgium, considering its size, is the most wonderful of industrial countries. The extent of its commerce is something astounding. Its imports and exports per capita are far ahead of those in England; its exports are twice as large and its imports still larger." Would this be the case if the government had done next to nothing during the course of these twenty years for the immense majority of its people? We think not; at least not in a country with 544 people to the square mile and with no extraordinary natural resources. Mr. Carnegie was evidently better posted on Belgian conditions than the writer in the Providence "Visitor" who would do well to put into practice what he no doubt preaches to his readers, to look for Catholic news in Catholic papers, and, incidentally for Belgian Catholic news in Belgian Catholic papers. To make up for lost time and opportunity, he might read with profit the latest edition of Father Vermeersch's work, "La Legislation et les Oeuvres en Belgique."

Rev. J. Van der Heyden.
Louvain, Belgium.

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