DEMOCRACY AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

CATHOLICS ARE AS MUCH MEMBERS OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION AS ARE THE CITIZENS OF EVERY TRUE REPUBLIC

From among the shadows that come and go upon the stage of royalty, there stands out in our time a most pathetic and arresting figure, Pius the tenth, Pope of Rome. He, the Supreme Pontiff, combines in his own person claims which might appear at first view in deadly opposition; for his dignity comes by election and betokens a democratic triumph, while his powers are held to be supernatural and not of this world. He is a king of men, yet by birth a peasant. Not borne in the purple, he takes rank before imperial Caesar. Armed with unquestioned authority over tens of millions, he governs by divine right; yet whoso will may join or may quit the Catholic Church, since it is founded on the free choice and deliberate faith of its members. The American republic itself is not more of a voluntary and sovereign society than is the Roman Communion. And the Pontiff on the Vatican hill, like the President in the White house, rules by the people's selection of him for a trust that is more sacred than the interests of any passing generation—liberty at Washington, religion at Rome. These are the highest services that can be rendered to mankind. Catholicism and Democracy are two Greek words, signifying the same thing, for it has been said "The truth shall make you free"; Veritas liberabit vos.

How great these subjects are may be shown by their aptitude, or rhetorical handling. They lend themselves to poetry as they demand enthusiasm, that is to say, the passionate vision of ideals, if we may aim at measuring their significance. The proof is that men and women have always been ready to die on behalf of the republic and the church. I should feel ashamed, however, to use rhetoric in speaking of Pius X. did it imply undue heightening of such facts as, related in cool prose, bear out my argument and prove him to be a most palatable instance of the likeness, the affinity, between Catholic and democratic principles.

It will not be charged upon me, I hope, that I am looking rather to forms than to realities, or declaring monarchy unchristian. But long before the American Constitution was dreamed of, and nearly two hundred years previous to the States-General of 1789, our leading theologians, Jesuits in the front, had affirmed that power comes to the ruler through the people, who are its immediate depositary. In resisting that superstition which makes kings irresponsible, these eminent teachers were following St. Thomas Aquinas; they did but repeat the lessons inflicted on European tyrants by the Papacy during its glorious Middle Age. To bring out the whole of the story by citation from documents is not now my design. Scholars know it well. Pope Leo XIII. has thrown into lucid Latin the idea itself in his beautiful style; and the eloquent state paper which begins Immortale Dei, or that other entitled Libertas, will furnish me with warrant enough for the parallel on which I am insisting.

The sum of these things is that as regards the persons who shall govern, the Catholic Church is a free elective system; that Catholics are as much members of a voluntary association as are the citizens of every true republic; that the Pope himself is, according to the sublime ascription, "Servant of the servants of God;" and that consequently he is at home in a democratic age, as he never could be under the yoke of the old absolute monarchies. Therefore he belongs to the future, not to the ancient regime.

I am quite unable to see how these positions can be denied by historians or overthrown by political philosophers. If any fact is clear in past centuries it is that the Papacy brought in, and has ever upheld, the distinction between the Church and State, whereby absolute power finds a check to its exorbitance. The world-famous quarrels, lasting all through feudal times, renewed under Napoleon, and raging at this present hour have always turned on the claim of the Holy See to independence. The Pope will never consent to be a state official like the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Metropolitan of Moscow. He will die rather than submit to an earthly government. He glories in the record of such past martyrdoms. And by independence he means the freedom which Catholics are everywhere to enjoy as regards their dogmas, their worship, their discipline, united to the head of their Church on earth.

If this be termed an imperium in imperio, then the Pope lays claim to it. He cannot give it up. Whether in Sevile or Symrna, in London, or San Francisco, his spiritual jurisdiction is the same; but, evidently, it makes for freedom, supposes the willing assent of believers, and appeals to each as if alone; in other words, it implies democracy. For if I do not vote to be a Catholic there is an end of the matter. Faith is in a very definite fashion my free thought. And what the Pope demands for himself he demands for all who are on his side.

This it is which makes the pathos and the tragedy of a character such as Pius X. He cannot rely upon the forces of the world; they have turned against him. To the enemies who are bent on destroying Catholicism it may well appear that never before could they reckon so many chances in their favor. Liberals, Freemasons, Positivists, Socialists, Modernists—a motley but united array; these gathering hosts are encamped over against St. Peter's shrine, in the Holy City, this year keeping holiday to celebrate their victorious advance. The Pope is beleaguered in the Vatican. A great painter, who could indeed dip his pencil "in the gloom of thunder and eclipse," might show us that solitary, saint-like apparition, clad in white raiment, lifting pure hands and beseeching eyes in prayer beneath a stormy sky, not daunted by the tumult and the shouting, saddened yet steadfast in the presence of anarchy, which boasts of itself under discordant names and flags of rebellion as pledged to the liberty it will not share with Catholics, to the progress it is making in civilization falsely so-called.

Pius X. prays and does not surrender. He remains, in this day of rebuke and blasphemy, the champion of religious freedom. There is tragedy in the picture of a Vatican so beleaguered; but there is pathos, too; for these new Liberals—who are glorifying the Slave State, with its compulsory secular education, its collective despotism, its seizure of public and private resources—have almost persuaded their victims that the Pope is the people's enemy. Such is the amazing condition of the French and Latin world. If the Vatican were taken, absolute secular governments would control and exploit it from end to end.

A prisoner in his own palace, undoubtedly, hard beset by Apollyon's confederated hosts, Pius X. might be compelled to come to terms with "modern civilization" but for one thing. He holds the secret of democracy. What is it? you will ask. I answer, it is that which lay hidden or implicit in the Catholic Church from the beginning—you may find it in the most astonishing sentences of St. Paul's Epistles—but which was partly revealed by the printing-press, by Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and at last by the revolutions that swept into limbo eighteenth-century Europe. Let me call it the universality of man. Wherever man is, in spite of race, color, custom, tradition, there is Humanity whole and entire. If you will throw yourself upon some instinct or power common to all, no space can imprison you. Neither Jew nor Greek nor Scythian, but human, as right, duty, science, religion—those laws and discoveries of man thinking universally—are human—in this lies the secret.

Now what, by definition and purpose, as well as by strenuous endeavor from the first, does the Catholic Church declare itself to be? "Universal" is the very style and title which it assumes. The Pope is international, obiquitous, pervading the whole organism by a constant action to which every part and element makes reply. He is the visible embodiment of a universal power, just as science is, or printing, or true philosophy; and he simply cannot become a mere local name. The Vatican does not hold him in; the Papacy is as wide as the world. He is an incarnate idea, appealing to mankind at large. But this, and nothing else, is what we understand by Democracy, the inheritance common to all. You remember Napoleon's account of it, which Carlyle thought so admirable: "A career open to talent." The talent of talents is religion, and Catholicism knows the way to its use. If the City of Man does not suffer a miraculous change into the City of God—if the New Jerusalem foretold by prophets, beheld in visions of the night by saints' it is a myth and a delusion—what profit in our Republic, though never so free? We must be free to conquer and possess divine things.

Hence, the Pope's unique situation comes out more vividly on our modern background every year, in the decay of churches once upon a time dogmatic as Rome itself, and as the newer sects multiply. For he abides, the keeper of divine knowledge, or as we say, of Revelation maintaining its literal truth, its place in history, against dissolving critics, on behalf of the multitude who cannot live by criticism. Cardinal Newman was speaking with scientific precision when he described the Pope as "heir by default of antiquity. Who, he suggested, has brought down to Western civilization the religious treasures of the past, if Rome has not? With equal point we may affirm that Pius X. is heir by remainder of Christianity, which in the strongest among non-Catholic bodies would seem stricken unto death by those portents termed Monism and Modernism. I state facts; the evidence is at hand; too abundant, alas, and growing night and day. Revelation is in charge of St. Peter's successor. He is the king, priest and prophet whom the world must see and hear, whether it will or no. In the language affected by Kantians, he holds of the transcendental. Faith tells us that he has the keys of eternity. The thousand churches of unbelief admit or insist that no one else puts forward this bold pretension, or would deserve a moment's credit in comparison with him. If Pius X. is not the greatest of impostors, he is what he calls himself, the Vicar of Christ.

I grant, and all Catholics with me, that if Christ be dead once for all, never having risen and never to come again, the Pope will die too. But mark how we stand toward the movements of this time. At heart neither Monist nor Modernist—to say nothing of the vulgar Socialist—believes in anything real except his own mind. He cannot get away from himself. All that he magnifies under the name of humanity—whatever he would fain take to be Christ or God—is the Brocken-shadow projected by his dreams on the void beyond him. To that complexion he has already come, or must come; for by the philosophy of modern skepticism, current among all these reformers, man is imprisoned in his own Ego. He has created God and Christ, and now is uncreating the work of his hands. This will leave him with his world of the five senses, and physical science as their instrument. Do we seek illustrations? Let us read the journals of life in New York, Paris, Berlin. Outside Catholic influence and that which the separated churches have not yet lost of it, what do men and women live by? Not by ideals, nor with a view to establishing ideals. The springs of conduct are interests and passions; Utopia when it arrives is to make a life beyond the grave superfluous and incredible. The dispute between rich and poor, as carried on by Social Democrats, is not for righteousness' sake, but for possession.

"Yet man has that within which transcends the shows of time; he is and will be religious, that is to say, a lover of eternal things; and prophets he must have, true or false, who will bring him a message from the unseen. To tell him that his dreaming fancy has created God and Christ is to drive him upon moral suicide. Since the Eternal exists, there shall be some way of grasping it; on that he is determined. The history of Religion, with its splendors and its sorrows, is man's answer to theories of the Unknowable. His heart leaps up at the saying in Pascal, "Thou hadst never sought Me, hadst thou not known Me." And lo, the undying power of Catholic dogma, which, in affirming Bible, Creed, Sacraments, Papacy, has done for an experimental and sure acquaintance with religious realities the same service that modern science has rendered to physics and biology. It has discovered and afterwards democratized, the method of Religion. Taking to itself the most ancient symbols, building its Holy Place in Rome between East and West, it holds out Revelation to all tribes and tongues as from a central shrine.

Rome is the Christian Delphi. The Vatican is still the oracular Mount of Vision. Whatever else it was, or may be, forms but an episode in the supernatural history which it carries onward. The Roman Empire was its preparation; the Kingdom of Italy is a guest in one of the Papal courts, and may pass with tomorrow. Papal Rome cannot pass. It is the organized and concrete shape of that Bible religion which has called out of chaos Europe and America, subduing their peoples to Roman law, Greek philosophy and the God of Israel. It is antiquity living and moving in the world of to-day.

A living, not a dead, antiquity, that is my contention; and the seeming paradox will bear a great weight of argument. Scholars delight in the wonderful changes which were due to the Renaissance—changes transfiguring art and literature. But of the Catholic Church we may say that it is a perpetual Renaissance, without which the younger peoples would be utterly divided from the past. And how grotesque, how uncultivated, is a present so shut in upon itself! Among the English-speaking races, when attempts are made to found a new religion, what monstrous births affront the light; Mormonism and Eddyism, most unbeautiful to behold! Culture is the safeguard of genius in religion as elsewhere; the saint should edify, not lay waste, the sanctuary. At all events, Catholic usage binds and builds up; it is original even when observant of tradition; and Rome is the Mother of Saints.

We need only glance at Pius X. to learn how magnificent and stubborn a character may be developed on purely orthodox lines, by a training into which not one single principle has been admitted from outside. Your common schools in America, we are told by observers, do not create strong men. But the Catholic seminary does; the master of novices in a religious order knows how it may be achieved. Heroic resistance to evil seems in the eyes of Pius X. as plain and clear a duty as attending on lepers in Molokai seemed to Father Damien. Our annals of the latest canonized men and women are crowned with figures like these. The Catholic standard is always heroism; and every good priest or nun expects to be found in some minority which wins by suffering.

Thus I am brought to the strange position of latter-day Catholicism and of the Papacy, which journalists, or even statesmen, cannot reduce to any formula, satisfactory to themselves. Sharp-eyed reporters look in at our churches, sketch in glowing colors the scenes they present, and go away profoundly ignorant of the spirit therein. To newspapers, taking and making impressions of this kind only, the Catholic Church is all parade, panorama, and at best a Passion Play. No view could be more misleading. These journalist-eyes are traitors to the vital fact. Politicians, again, feel toward the Pope much as that English philosopher did who denied him as the ghost of Caesar, sitting crowned on his tomb. The Holy See is a Great Power, yet unsupported by fleets or armies, somehow spell-binding large populations, marring the symmetry of state, vexations and unmanageable—in short, Caesar's ghost wandering at large. But neither Caesar nor ceremonies will exhaust the mystery of that disturbing force. There is in it something beyond nature, hence it appears almost spectral in common day-light. Thanks to its supreme impulse, into every form of art and energy it can pour its inspiration, from Palestrina's music to the lowliest offices in prison, hospital, almshouse.

But its miracle, every day repeated, is the new-creation of men. Catholicism, taking hold of its subject under any condition offered, begins at the heart, moulds the will subdues the intellect, and sends out of its spiritual retreat to fight, if necessary to die, the creature it found a slave and has made, by obedience, free. This wonder it can do for any race, however low down in the scale—for Australians, Chinese, Central Africans, Malays, taming and lifting them, as it tamed and lifted our wild forefathers of the forest and the ocean. It makes Christians by men. Is not that the true Democracy?

Consider, if it be so, what follows. A genuine Catholic, man or woman, is inured to self-control and ready for self-sacrifice. With transcendent calm the Church requires of her clergy and religious orders that they shall renounce home, forsake their kindred, labor without reward, and die without notice. She recruits them from all ranks, by the ten thousand; and they succeed so brilliantly that, after the persecutions and spoilings on every side, they stand in the twentieth century embattled, the mightiest army of conservative forces on earth. Their identity of principles sustains a discipline by which all move on, Pius X. leading, but no more a master than the babe christened yesterday. He did not make the Church; the Church made him. What he says and does, any priest would do and say who was throned in St. Peter's Chair. Yet not by mere policy, not as kings read speeches that ministers have composed for them, but from heartfelt conviction, as one, and as affirming that which all believe. If M. Loisy or another dissent, he falls out, as it were in obedience to a law of gravity; the faithful drop away from him, and he becomes, ever since Lamennais, a lonely heresiarch without a following.

All the signs tells us that while the Reformed bodies disintegrate, the Church of Rome concentrates; and that by a rapidly growing instinct, or by the sense of danger, as if a world-crisis were at hand, we may picture what is happening in two strokes; persecution without, Modernism within. These are the perils of the last times. How shall they be met?

By persecution, I understand the effort to put down real Christianity to secularize education and to destroy family life. In all countries, by no means excepting the United States, this Antichrist wields great power; but his headquarters are, as we should expect, at Paris. From the City of Light he rays out darkness. In the name of a free people, he stamps his image and prints the mark of the beast of millions of children forced into his training schools. He confiscates the property of religious orders, and flings them out of France. He confesses to be an atheist, and will not suffer God to be mentioned in books of history. It is the head and front of his design to make it impossible that a priest should teach, or so much as breathe, in the liberal air of enlightenment. To the supernatural Church he opposes the all-too-natural school, where young children are taught freedom from every law except state law. Moral anarchy, protected by an absolute government, is the goal to which democracy of the French type rushes onward at accelerated speed. Moral anarchy, judging by symptoms and statistics, will yet claim a footing in free America. The average citizen, brought up in a school without God, feels bewildered for want of guidance, and drifts whither impulse takes him. His mind is a chaos; he has never been taught to obey others, or to control himself. He is not the mighty atom, but the feeble unit. And so he drifts, and democracy in his wake towards Niagara.

He drifts, I say—hopelessly. All his works prove it. The organized power which have robbed him of his public resources, exploit him and them. He has no resisting force, simply because he never knew what it was to rely on the divine arm; and he is weak because he is undisciplined, selfish, and separated from the brethren. This peculiarly modern man is the exact opposite of the Catholic. But he forms the majority; a disorganized, anarchic majority, taught what it shall do by newspapers, and those not its own. An unstable majority, lost in eager money-making, and trivial or obscene amusement. An untrained majority which cannot fight the lordly syndicate it abhors; and what would it do if an army of resolute aliens, broken to the laws of war, came against it? Perhaps it would learn then, by anguish and defeat, that the condition of victory is obedience.

That is an old principle in the Catholic system. We are in a minority; be it so. But our regiments know how to march, and how to fight. In a few years, if the French persecution goes on, and the other Latin States follow its example, such an awakening may be looked for as will surprise the world. These fiery trials have their purpose. They burn up the chaff; they clear the ground; we know what has been their effect in Ireland, in Poland, in Catholic Germany, in Belgium. Moreover, we are laying the foundations of a new Christendom. The old was established by law and privilege; deservedly so, for the Popes had rescued Europe from barbarism. But this which I contemplate as the grand event, the golden age, in a world regenerate, will found itself on free human choice, on the gradual drawing together of Christian elements, wherever existing, into a society ruled by the mind of the Master. It will be a visible kingdom, yet no force save that of opinion will hold its parts in their due place and rank. It will deserve to be called an International, but not an Empire. Language, race, boundaries, flags, will put no limits to its influence. The world is moving on all paths toward this confederation, not military, nor political, but of the higher type cherished by Catholicism from the day of Pentecost. In Virgilian words, prophetic when first uttered, "Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo." The people reign; they must have religion; there is none that can meet the demands of civilized order save the Christian; and the historical Christianity is centered in Rome.

Such, in substance and principle, would be the Catholic answer to prophets of evil who imagine that where democracy flourishes the Church cannot live. These men do not perceive that modern anti-clerical governments, French or Italian, are nothing else than forms of the Serville State, and that "Secularism" is merely a false religion. But Rome has long known these truths. Rome has a clear policy of resistance, and appeals from Caesar, republican or monarchical, to conscience, to freedom, to the people. We have seen that strong attitude maintained from the dawn of the French Revolution until now—a period of one hundred and twenty years. On the other hand, Catholicism makes way at a growing rate in the United States and the British Empire. And why? Because in such countries government lets it alone. There the enthusiasm which works miracles finds free scope. Hence, although unwilling to yield up her chartered rights at the bidding of her enemies, Rome has never been afraid of dealing directly and democratically with the millions. She welcomes the hour when her teachers can address them face to face.

The Pope himself is as accessible in the Vatican to pilgrims of every clime and every color as a father to his children; and they come to him more and more. He is not a recluse, not a veiled prophet, not simply a name, but familiar as no other living ruler to all his faithful. This, too, is exceedingly modern. The great era of public audiences and world-celebrations dates from Pius IX; it covers a range of sixty years. Thanks in large measure to the facilities granted by science, the Pope now governs by personal action as he has never done at any previous epoch. Moreover, three Pontiffs have reigned, in all, nearly seventy years. Their policy, amid complications never before experienced, has been consistent from the religious point of view, and so far a success that no hostile power has been able to score a victory over it except by brute force. Germany, in the person of Prince Bismarck, went to Canossa; Piedmont is merely entrenched in Rome; France discovers that even M. Briand was giving way before the Catholic conscience. In seventy years no surrender has been registered. But there are more Catholics, and better Catholics, too in the civilized world than ever.

Great changes are hanging over us. Demands of intellect and energy unprecedented in extent will be made on the Supreme Pontiff, as on every man who holds in his hands immense public charges. But the Pope is not so much an individual as the embodiment of a system, and that system at once rigid in principles and astonishingly flexible in matters of detail so long as the faith is secure. "It treats the world," says J. A. Froude, in his biting way, "alternately as an enemy to be encountered, or as an instrument to be bent to its own designs, and caring nothing for any institution but itself; free from all prejudices in favor of any nation or any political form of government, it allies itself with all the principles which sway successively in the various organizations of society. Monarchies, aristocraticies, democracies, it accepts them all." Nevertheless, Froude, on the same page, declares that "the Holy See remains unchanged, and incapable of change."

What can be the meaning of characteristics opposed in this manner? Surely that the Catholic spirit is one, persisting under every reign, be it long or short; that individual genius will always find itself mastered by the tradition of which it is the keeper; in American language, that the President passes, but the Constitution is immortal. We may use up our popes as the French use up their ministers; how can that signify when the Church's mind is the same? Changes, I repeat, are to be expected in a changing world. They move toward democracy; they will bring about a common sharing in all that is best, in the treasures of religion, culture, art, science, human fellowship. It is impossible that the future should not inherit the past. Now, the past is gathered up in Christian Rome. And Rome without the Pope would be a desolation as Virgil's hero beheld it—

"Passimque armenta videbant Romanoque foro, et lautis mugire Carinis."

Our problem is formidable, as never perhaps in any previous era, but it is simple. Regarded in the light of a method to direct life, science has been declared bankrupt. It cannot define what we should live by; that purpose, that final cause, we learn from a teacher the latchet of whose shoe science, physical or biological, is unworthy to loose.

Again, the large plausible schemes of Humanitarians come to nothing, for they despise if they do not deny, man's immortal yearnings; and here is their obligation? How shall they persuade any man picked out of the crowd to sacrifice for a posterity unknown his present pleasure? Socialism makes an end of freedom, and man would be free. The Catholic Church, while enchancing his freedom, holds up for imitation a perfect human life, supplies abundance of motives to minds and tempers the most varied, teaches with authority, and proves her teaching by experience. The Communion of Saints has been a thousand-fold kinder to man and his works than the best-meant Communion of goods among on-Christians ever could be; and we know how these attempts have ended. I do not hesitate to say that democracy without religion is slavery, more or less disguised. No force on earth can balance it except a power that derives its origin from heaven. The safeguard of liberty for the people and, when need shall be, against them, is Revelation.

At such a time of intellectual confusion the challenge of Modernism rang out, asking Catholic dogma to disarm before the enemy. There was to be no Revelation, but only men's accumulated fancies, which converted some Oriental documents into the written word of God and magnified a mere Hebrew peasant as His Son. If the Church would bow to this philosophy of unbelief and make-belief, she might find indulgence at the bar of science and history; otherwise, her doom was sealed. By the most daring of pious frauds she had won her great dominion; by confessing it she would win a greater still. With infinite delicacy, with unction almost apostolic in its fervor, and with a pleading earnestness, the new Concordat was urged upon Rome. Other Churches, or at least many of their representive clergy, were hastening to sacrifice the truth of the letter that they might save the spirit of a hardly-pressed Christianity; why should the Vatican hold out? It was not a question of one doctrine, but of all; yet how easy to mutter the word "Pragmatism," and reduce eternal truths to the opinions of a Time-Spirit, who had spoken Hebrew before learning Greek, and had discarded Latin for German as he traveled down the centuries! The mind of Christ, after all, was but a name for the views of theologian, beginning with St. Paul about Him. He was a creation of religious genius.

And the answer came, without delay from a peasant, exalted because of his simple Christian faith and saintly life to the infallible Chair. It was given him, at an unexampled moment, to save the Creed. I compare him, in that hour of distress, to Lincoln; and, in doing so, I would honor the American patriot, the Roman Pontiff. These otherwise very unlike men had one thing in common; each knew what was at stake. Their clear vision was owing to their grand, their heroic simplicity. Lincoln saw that the Union must be preserved at whatever cost, if democracy were not to perish from off the face of the earth. He has said it in words that will endure with those of the Athenian Pericles consecrating freedom in its springtide on the shores of Hellas. And Pius X. is our Lincoln who saw that if Revelation is not a dream and the Gospel a lie, the Church must maintain her dogma—though it should drive thousands into revolt. But the Union was brought out safe doubtless that popular rights and elected governments might have their day. The Church, in like manner, stands foursquare to all the winds that blow. When Pius quits the scene, Peter will not die. What signify the political vicissitudes of Italy in comparison with a new Christendom, planted securely on the faith once delivered to the Saints? That is a power to move the world, when our little jarring sects of Liberals and Freethinkers shall have sunk into the deeds out of which they arose.—Rev. William Barry, D. D., in Atlantic Monthly.

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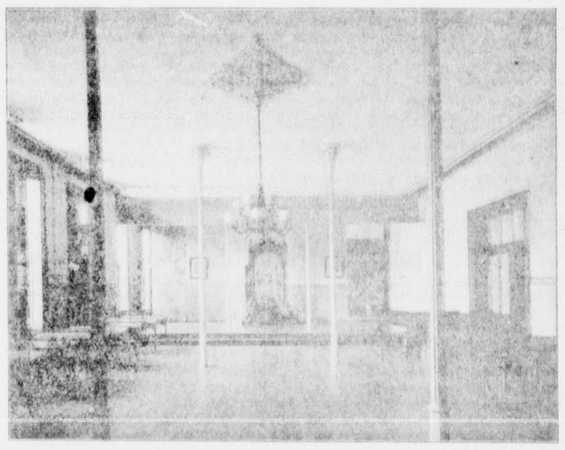

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