

THE EPISCOPAL CONGRESS.

The Episcopal Church Congress which closed some days ago in New York gave evidence of a wide divergence of opinion among its members.

The Rev. Hall Harrison, of Maryland, thought it would be wrong for the Episcopal Church to intrude into Roman Catholic dioceses, especially as the Roman Catholic Church was not heretical, but only schismatical, and a good Roman Catholic was a million times better than a bad Protestant.

We cannot take for granted this intended compliment; for the Catholic Church is in no sense a "branch." She is the divinely planted tree in its totality of root, trunk and branches.

The Catholic cannot return this compliment; for even if an Episcopalian minister were to abjure all his peculiar errors he would not be recognized as a priest by the Catholic Church, or even by the Greek or the Russian Churches.

The extract given below is taken from the Derry Journal, of Ireland, and is a comment on the feeling manifested by Catholics on the recent death of Dr. Knox, the Protestant Lord Primate of Ireland.

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sign, however. They are anxious, uncertain and restless, and the first step to a cure is to know that one is not well. All their talk about Rome erring by excess is in the nature of a hypnotic device to soothe a disturbed conscience.

It is astonishing what an amount of truth and error Dr. Dumbell manages to mix up together. For instance, here are a few truths worth remembering. He says:

"It is idle to invite the Romanist into the Episcopal Church, for, as a rule, the former can learn nothing from the latter."

Again: "The average Romanist knows as much of the faith of Christians as any of our own people. I never knew any proselytes from the Roman Church who had not neglected their duty in their own Church."

It is needless to say that Dr. Dumbell was caustically criticised by some of the brethren.—Philadelphia Catholic Times.

THE BELLS WERE TOLLED

At the Catholic Cathedral for Ireland's Protestant Lord Primate.

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FREEDOM OF THOUGHT IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.

Very Rev. J. Hogan, S. S. in Donahue's Magazine for December.

Forty years ago it was a prevalent notion among Protestants that Catholics had no independent right to think for themselves on almost any subject; that whatever liberty they enjoyed was merely on tolerance, and that their Church might step in at any time, and, on the plea of religion, prescribe to them at her discretion, in every sphere of thought, what to believe and what to discard.

Gradually these rhetorical flourishes have ceased to sound in our ears. Even Protestants have come to see things in a different light. Especially within the last generation they have read history to more advantage, and learned to discriminate between reckless assertion and solid fact.

They have looked around them too, and listened, and the plain fact has steadily forced itself upon them, that in the various paths of human thought and conduct, Catholics seem, after all, to be very little hampered by the authority of the Church, and to act pretty much on the same principles as the rest of the world at large.

In a word the prejudice is fast disappearing. Yet it lingers still in narrow minds and in remote places—sometimes even in our cities, among those who seldom come in contact with Catholics. It is still occasionally heard in the excited utterances of some "minister of the Gospel," or it meets the eye in the columns of the so called religious newspaper or review.

For the benefit of such, and as a subject of which all enlightened Catholics should possess an accurate conception, it may not be amiss to recall in a few words the true condition of things.

I. It is not in her own name, as all know, that the Catholic Church claims to guide in any measure the thoughts of men. It is as the bearer and authorized interpreter of a divine message. Religion and religion only is her sphere. Outside and beyond it she assumes no authority. Yet outside and beyond it lies almost all that man can know. For religion, although the highest and most necessary form of human knowledge, is only a very narrow portion of the area to which the mind of man extends. In reality, the range of the human intellect is almost boundless. Through the senses it reaches the ends of the earth, and explores the depths of the heavens, embraces the phenomena of the whole visible world, and builds up in its various forms that ever-growing science of nature, of which the present age is so justly proud.

By its improved methods of historical research, it sees into the most remote past of the human race, brings back to life peoples and civilizations long since disappeared, and dwells, as it were, among them. It contemplates this earth of ours millions of years before man appeared on its surface, and foretells, with assurance, changes which will be witnessed only after countless ages. It ascends into the higher world of thought; wanders with delight through the paths traced by the greatest thinkers of all ages; or it ventures into unexplored regions, to bring back from them new and beautiful principles and truths. Above all, it concentrates its powers upon that intermediate and inexhaustible world, man himself, body and soul—his manifold life, physical, intellectual, moral, political, economic and social, each one the object of distinct and elaborate sciences.

Such, in brief, is the range of the human mind; fields of knowledge opening up in every direction, each so vast that no single intelligence can take complete possession of the least of them. Yet to the Catholic they are all open and free, as they are to the rest of mankind. The Church claims no special authority, in their regard. Like God Himself, and because He has chosen to do so, she leaves all human science to secular investigation, and to the varying and conflicting views of men; "Traditum mundum disputationi eorum." (Ecl. III, 11.) There is no such thing as a Catholic physiology or astronomy, nor even, in a true, technical sense, any such thing as a Catholic philosophy or a Catholic history. In all matters, in a word, of purely human knowledge, the Catholic thinks and speaks, like his fellow-man, with a full and unlimited sense of freedom.

Yet even such unfettered and seemingly boundless liberty has its natural and necessary limitations. When we speak of freedom of thought, we mean exemption from any interference from without; but thought, like action, has a higher law to which it owes absolute submission. The sovereign law of thought is truth. No man has a right to be wrong. He may have a right

not to be dictated to by this or by that one; but he is bound intellectually to truth, as he is bound morally to goodness. He is, in a true sense, answerable for his convictions as well as for his actions. He is bound to regulate both by the rules of wisdom. Indeed, evident truth, common sense, or universal experience are limitations of thought which no sane man thinks of setting aside. Were he to attempt it, he would be soon brought to order by his fellow-men; and if they failed, they would simply cease to hold intellectual intercourse with him.

In a much wider degree, though in a less peremptory manner, freedom of thought is hemmed in by the unceasing pressure of intellectual and moral agents, such as public opinion, established manners and customs, popular prejudices, and the like. The great majority of men obey all these as they submit to the order of nature, never questioning their author nor doubting their wisdom. They believe themselves free, because they yield without effort; in truth they are only unconscious slaves. Only those of stronger build feel the yoke and attempt to cast it off, and even they succeed but in a limited measure, and at the cost of much effort and trial. Such were pre-eminently the great political and social reformers; such, the great discoverers and the original thinkers of all ages—Columbus, Galileo, Newton, Spinoza, Descartes, and so many besides. Such, in another and a higher sphere, were the early Christians, who, through the thick mist of Jewish prejudice or of Pagan error, recognized and followed the divine light of the Gospel. Such in our day those generous converts, born outside the Church, and trained to distrust or despise her, yet discerning the divine truth in its Catholic fullness, despite the almost irresistible pressure of ancestral tradition and social prestige; or, again, those noble souls who, rising in our midst, superior to the worldliness of their surrounding, and in opposition to the wisdom of those who have guided them in all else, enter, as it were, alone and unsupported on the narrow and rugged path of the higher Christian life.

In all these, there is the noblest and happiest exercise of freedom of thought. But they are exceptions, and meant by Providence to be exceptions. The truth is, that for the vast majority of men, independence of thought can never be much more than a name. They are too devoid of knowledge and of original power to be capable of emancipating themselves from the bondage of prevailing judgments and beliefs, and, as a rule, too conscious of their weakness to attempt it. Their liberty of thought is confined to the common objects of life. Indeed, when we come to consider things more closely, we find that it is very limited even in the most cultured. To many departments of human knowledge, those who know most are entire strangers, and of what remains outside their own speciality, they can possess but the barest elements. They might, if they chose, go beyond in any special direction, but so long as, for lack of time or of taste, they have failed to do so, they are entirely dependent for what they think on the authority of others, and the only freedom of judgment they can practice, lies in the choice of the guides they decide to follow.

Now this is exactly what happens in the matter of religious belief, with which principally we are concerned here. Religion, that is, the knowledge of man's true relations with God, his duty and his ultimate end, is what all men need equally to possess, yet what, left to themselves, they have invariably missed—the brightest and the most gifted, as well as the dull and the most debased. God, we know, vouchsafed to supply to all that necessary form of knowledge by a special revelation. Revelation when it came, was like a light, struck in a dark and intricate passage, where men went groping their way, and were constantly losing themselves. For all those to whom that light unmistakably shines, there is an end of seeking and of guessing. Once they behold it, they know what to think, and cease to inquire any further, unless to ascertain the full meaning of the divine message which has reached them.

So far the condition of all believing Christians is exactly the same. Where God speaks there is an end of all independence of thought for Protestant and Catholic alike, with this difference nevertheless, as history shows, that the burden of authority presses much more gently on one than on the other. For as long as Protestantism held together in any tangible shape of doctrine, it placed the minds of its followers at the mercy of fallible teachers, varying creeds, irrational dogmas, or of their own ill-regulated fancies, whereas the Catholic rule, even irrespective of its divine origin, was made acceptable by the very fact of its imposing only what had been held by the civilized world for ages.

But, it will be asked, if all this is true; if the Catholic Church confines herself to the teaching of religion; if she simply echoes the divine message, and at most explains its true meaning to her children, how comes it to pass, that we find her concerned with all sorts of human knowledge, interfering constantly with historians, scientists, philosophers, economists, statesmen, attempting to dictate to them, and loud in her denunciations when they decline to listen to her?

This indeed is a difficulty to many, but a few remarks will suffice to dispose of it.

Religion, of its nature, particularly revealed religion, touches on many things outside itself; it deals with many subjects accessible to the mind of man, and upon which it has been busy before and after God had spoken. Revelation, for instance, is a historical event; it mingles itself with a series of events extending over many ages; it becomes thus a part of human history. Again it contains a doctrine of God, of the soul; it tells of the origin of things, thus touching on philosophy at various vital points. It is, above all, a law of life, following human action in every phase and at every stage of existence, individual and collective. Religion proclaims the fundamental laws of human society. It has always had something—a good deal in fact—to say about marriage, education, property; about the duties of those in power, and the mutual dealings of men; in a word, about everything in which the practice of justice or of charity is involved. It is the mission of the Catholic Church, as God's messenger, not only to proclaim, but to defend, and so far as depends upon her, to enforce the fundamental laws and truths upon which things divine and human ultimately rest. There are facts and principles which she cannot permit her children to deny, because they are of the essence of religion, natural or Christian. If they claim to be Catholics, or even Christians, they cannot be materialists in philosophy, nor fatalists, nor sceptics. In presence of revealed truth, they have to relinquish certain speculations, in which, if left to themselves, they might have indulged about the origin, the history, and the ultimate end of the human race. They may not believe in the lawfulness of goddess education or of crooked politics, or of transactions either unfair or heartless with their fellow-men. In such things the Church allows no freedom of thought, because divine truth permits none. Who, if he be a Christian, can complain of this? Who will not rejoice that, in matters of such importance, the steady, clear light from above supersedes the faint and fitful gleams of natural reason? In general speculations and theories may interest and amuse the seeker after truth; but (if he seek it sincerely) how promptly and gladly he drops them all, when positive, certain knowledge stands revealed before him! Such is the condition of mind of a Catholic in presence of the teachings of his Church. He rejoices to find in them the sanction of his anticipations or the correction of his mistakes. Instead of narrowing his mind, they give him a broader base of solid truth to build upon. They make him stronger and bolder in thought, and, to use the comparison of St. Augustine, like the wings of the bird, far from weighing him down, they permit him to soar aloft, and reach the skies. Under the watchful eye of his divinely appointed guardian, he is only tempted to more daring flights, and thus it has come to pass that some of the noblest efforts and boldest speculations of human thought are due to the most dutiful and docile sons of the Catholic Church.

Such, then, is the liberty, and such the limitations of thought among Catholics. To think for one's self; to see things with one's own eyes, and to judge of them as they appear to one's own judgment, is the privilege, in some measure, of all rational beings. It shows itself as an instinct with the earliest manifestations of thought; it grows with the increasing strength of the mind; it assumes in some of its acts the solemn character of a duty. Faith is an act of this kind. It is an act of independent judgment, by which a man does, of himself, what no earthly power can compel him to do, believe in God's word, and trust himself to the guidance of the Church. A Catholic who does this, uses his judgment as fully, and acts as freely as the client who chooses his lawyer, or the patient who puts himself in the hands of his physician. But the choice once deliberately made, the wise man abides by it, and only a fool claims to control in detail the decisions of physician or lawyer in matters of which he knows next to nothing. The Catholic believes absolutely in the solemn decisions of the Church; he relies on the wisdom of her guidance; he follows it even when not strictly binding, because he knows that it is his best chance to be right.

In return the Church is usually slow—very slow—to repress or to narrow the intellectual liberty of her children. So long as they are respectful toward her authority, and ready to abide by its rulings, she is in no haste to censure, even what she knows to be untrue, and preferring to see things yield to friendly influences, or right themselves, rather than inflict the humiliation of rebuke on those she loves. The general good may compel her sometimes to more prompt action, because

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error is often contagious; but it will be remarked that long after theologians have censured, the Church remains silent, and that, in her dealings with her children, and with the world at large, there is a combination of patience and gentleness with authority and energy which is more than human, and lifts the mind of the true believer to the divine source from which she originally holds her power and ever learns how best to use it.



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