

Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope Leo XIII.

ON THE DANGERS WHICH THREATEN THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY, AND THE REMEDY FOR THEM.

To all the Patriarchs, Primate, Archbishops and Bishops of the Catholic World.

Venerable Brothers:— Health and Apostolic Benediction.

Having come to the twenty-fifth year of Our Apostolic Ministry, and being astonished Ourselves at the length of the way which We have traveled amidst painful and continual cares. We are naturally inspired to lift Our thoughts to the ever blessed God, who, with so many other favors, has deigned to accord Us a Pontificate the length of which has scarcely been surpassed in history. To the Father of all mankind, therefore; to Him who holds in His hands the mysterious secret of life, ascends, the canticle of Our thanksgiving. Assuredly the eye of man cannot pierce all the depths of the designs of God in thus prolonging Our old age beyond the limits of hope: here We can only be silent and adore. But there is one thing which We do well understand; namely, that as it has pleased Him, and still pleases Him, to preserve Our existence, a great duty is incumbent on Us—to live for the good and the development of His immaculate spouse, the Holy Church; and far from losing courage in the midst of cares and pains, to consecrate to Him the remainder of Our strength unto Our last sigh.

After paying a just tribute of gratitude to Our Heavenly Father, to Whom be honor and glory for all eternity, it is most agreeable to Us to turn Our thoughts and address Our words to you, Venerable Brothers, who, called by the Holy Ghost to govern the appointed portions of the flock of Jesus Christ, share thereby with Us in the struggle and triumph, the sorrows and joys, of the ministry of Pastors. No, they shall never fade from Our memory, those frequent and striking testimonials of religious veneration which you have lavished upon us during the course of Our Pontificate, and which you still multiply with emulation full of tenderness in the present circumstances. Intimately united with you already by Our duty and Our paternal love. We are more closely drawn by those proofs of your devotedness, so dear to Our heart, for what was

personal in them in Our regard than for the inviolable attachment which they denote to this Apostolic See, centre and mainstay of all the Sees of Catholicity. If it has always been necessary, that, according to the different grades of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, all the children of the Church should be sedulously united by the bonds of mutual charity and by the pursuit of the same objects, so as to form but one heart and one soul, this union is become in our day more indispensable than ever. For who can ignore the vast conspiracy of hostile forces which aims to-day at destroying and making disappear the great work of Jesus Christ, by endeavoring, with a fury which knows no limits, to rob man, in the intellectual order, of the treasure of heavenly truths, and, in the social order, to obliterate the most holy, the most salutary Christian institutions. But by all this you yourselves are impressed every day. You who, more than once, have poured out to Us, your anxieties and anguish, deploring the multitude of prejudices, the false systems and errors which are disseminated with impunity amongst the masses of the people. What snares are set on every side for the souls of those who believe! What obstacles are multiplied to weaken, and if possible to destroy the beneficent action of the Church! And, meanwhile, as if to add derision to injustice, the Church herself is charged with having lost her pristine vigor, and with being powerless to stem the tide of overflowing passions which threaten to carry everything away.

We would wish, Venerable Brothers, to entertain you with subjects less sad, and more in harmony with the great and auspicious occasion which induces Us to address you. But nothing suggests such a tenor of discourse—neither the grievous trials of the Church which call with instance for prompt remedies; nor the conditions of contemporary society which, already undermined from a moral and material point of view, tend toward a yet more gloomy future by the abandonment of the great Christian traditions; a law of Providence, confirmed by history, proving that the great religious principles cannot be renounced without shaking at the same time the foundations of order and social prosperity. In those circumstances, in order to allow souls to recover, to furnish them with a new provision of faith and courage, it appears to Us opportune and useful to weigh attentively, in its origin, causes and various forms, the implacable war that is waged against the Church; and in denouncing its pernicious consequences to indicate a remedy. May Our words, therefore, resound loudly, though they but recall truths already asserted; may they be hearkened to, not only by the children of Catholic unity, but also by those who differ from Us, and even by the unhappy souls who have no longer any faith; for they are all children of one Father, all destined for the same supreme good; may Our words, finally, be received as the testament which, at the short distance that separates Us from eternity. We would wish to leave to the people as a presage of the salvation which We desire for all.

During the whole course of her history the Church of Christ has had to combat and suffer for truth and justice. Instituted by the Divine Redeemer Himself to establish throughout the world the Kingdom of God, she must, by the light of the Gospel law, lead fallen humanity to its immortal destinies; that is, to make it enter upon the possession of the blessings without end which God has promised us, and to which our

unaided natural power could never rise—a heavenly mission in the pursuit of which the Church could not fail to be opposed by the countless passions begotten of man's primal fall and consequent corruption—pride, cupidity, unbridled desire of material pleasures; against all the vices and disorders springing from those poisonous roots the Church has ever been the most potent means of restraint. Nor should we be astonished at the persecutions which have arisen in consequence, since the Divine Master foretold them, and they must continue as long as this world endures. What words did He address to His disciples when sending them to carry the treasure of His doctrines to all nations? They are familiar to us all: "You will be persecuted from city to city; you will be hated and despised for My Name's sake; you will be dragged before the tribunals, and condemned to extreme punishment." And wishing to encourage them for the hour of trial, He proposed Himself as their example: "If the world hate you, know ye that it hath hated Me before you." (St. John xv, 18.)

Certainly, no one, who takes a just and unbiased view of things, can explain the motive of this hatred. What offence was ever committed, what hostility deserved by the Divine Redeemer? Having come down amongst men through an impulse of Divine charity, He had taught a doctrine that was blameless, consoling, most efficacious to unite mankind in a brotherhood of peace and love; He had coveted neither earthly greatness nor honor; He had usurped no one's right; on the contrary, He was full of pity for the weak, the sick, the poor, the sinner and the oppressed; hence His life was but a passage to distribute with munificent hand His benefits amongst men. We must acknowledge, in consequence, that it was simply by an excess of human malice, so much the more deplorable because unjust, that, nevertheless, He became, in truth, according to the prophecy of Simeon, "a sign to be contradicted."

What wonder, then, if the Catholic Church, which continues His Divine mission, and is the incorruptible depositary of His truths, has inherited the same lot. The world is always consistent in its way. Near the sons of God are constantly present the satellites of that great adversary of the human race, who, a rebel from the beginning against the Most High, is named in the Gospel the prince of this world. It is on this account that the spirit of the world, in the presence of the law and of him who announces it in the name of God, swells with the measureless pride of an independence that ill befits it. Alas, how often, in more stormy epochs, with unheard-of cruelty and shameless injustice, and to the evident undoing of the whole social body, have the adversaries banded themselves together for the foolhardy enterprise of dissolving the work of God! And not succeeding with one manner of persecution, they adopted others. For three long centuries, the Roman Empire, abusing its brute force, scattered the bodies of martyrs through all its provinces, and bathed with their blood every foot of ground in this sacred city of Rome; while heresy, acting in concert, whether hidden beneath a mask or with open effrontery, with sophistry and snare, endeavored to destroy at least the harmony and unity of faith. Then were set loose, like a devastating tempest, the hordes of barbarians from the north, and the Moslems from the south, leaving in their wake only ruins in a desert. So has been transmitted from age to age the melancholy heritage of hatred by which the Spouse of Christ

has been overwhelmed. There followed a Caesarism as suspicious as powerful, jealous of all other power, no matter what development it might itself have thence acquired, which incessantly attacked the Church, to usurp her rights and tread her liberties under foot. The heart bleeds to see this mother so often oppressed with anguish and woes unutterable. However, triumphing over every obstacle, over all violence, and all tyrannies, she pitched her peaceful tents more and more widely; she saved from disaster the glorious patrimony of arts, history, science and letters; and imbuing deeply the whole body of society with the spirit of the Gospel, she created Christian civilization—that civilization to which the nations, subjected to its beneficent influence, owe the equity of their laws, the mildness of their manners, the protection of the weak, pity for the afflicted and the poor, respect for the rights and dignity of all men, and, thereby, as far as it is possible amidst the fluctuations of human affairs, that calm of social life which springs from the just and prudent alliance between justice and liberty.

Those proofs of the intrinsic excellence of the Church are as striking and sublime as they have been enduring. Nevertheless, as in the Middle Ages and during the first centuries, so in those nearer our own, we see the Church assailed more harshly, in a certain sense at least, and more distressingly than ever. Through a series of well-known historical causes, the pretended Reformation of the sixteenth century raised the standard of revolt; and, determining to strike straight into the heart of the Church, audaciously attacked the Papacy. It broke the precious link of the ancient unity of faith and authority, which, multiplying a hundredfold, power, prestige and glory, thanks to the harmonious pursuit of the same objects, united all nations under one staff and one shepherd. This unity being broken, a pernicious principle of disintegration was introduced among all ranks of Christians.

We do not, indeed, hereby pretend to affirm that from the beginning there was a set purpose of destroying the principle of Christianity in the heart of society; but by refusing, on the one hand, to acknowledge the supremacy of the Holy See, the effective cause and bond of unity, and by proclaiming, on the other, the principle of private judgment, the divine structure of faith was shaken to its deepest foundations and the way was opened to infinite variations, to doubts and denials of the most important things, to an extent which the innovators themselves had not foreseen. The way was opened. Then came the contemptuous and mocking philosophy of the eighteenth century, which advanced farther. It turned to ridicule the sacred canon of the Scriptures and rejected the entire system of revealed truths, with the purpose of being able ultimately to root out from the conscience of the people all religious belief and stifling within it the last breath of the spirit of Christianity. It is from this source that have flowed rationalism, naturalism and materialism—poisonous and destructive systems which, under different appearances, renew the ancient errors triumphantly refuted by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church; so that the pride of modern times, by excessive confidence in its own lights, was stricken with blindness; and paganism, subsisted thenceforth on fancies, even concerning the attributes of the human soul and the immortal destinies which constitute our glorious heritage.

The struggle against the Church

thus took on a more serious character than in the past, no less because of the vehemence of the assault than because of its universality. Contemporary unbelief does not confine itself to denying or doubting articles of faith. What it combats is the whole body of principles which sacred revelation and sound philosophy maintain; those fundamental and holy principles, which teach man the supreme object of his earthly life, which keep him in the performance of his duty, which inspire his heart with courage and resignation, and which in promising him incorruptible justice and perfect happiness beyond the tomb, enable him to subject time to eternity, earth to heaven. But what takes the place of these principles, which form the incomparable strength bestowed by faith? A frightful scepticism, which chills the heart and stifles in the conscience every magnanimous aspiration.

This system of practical atheism must necessarily cause, as in point of fact it does, a profound disorder in the domain of morals for, as the greatest philosophers of antiquity have declared, religion is the chief foundation of justice and virtue. When the bonds are broken which unite man to God, Who is the Sovereign Legislator and Universal Judge, a mere phantom of morality remains; a morality which is purely civic and, as it is termed, independent, which, abstracting from the Eternal Mind and the laws of God, descends inevitably till it reaches the ultimate conclusion of making man a law himself. Incapable, in consequence, of rising on the wings of Christian hope to the goods of the world beyond, man will seek a material satisfaction in the comforts and enjoyments of life. There will be excited in him a thirst for pleasure, a desire of riches and an eager quest of rapid and unlimited wealth, even at the cost of justice. There will be enkindled in him every ambition and a feverish and frenzied desire to gratify them even in defiance of law, and he will be swayed by a contempt for right and public authority, as well as by licentiousness of life which, when the condition becomes general, will mark the real decay of society.

Perhaps We may be accused of exaggerating the sad consequences of the disorders of which We speak. No; for the reality is before our eyes and warrants but too truly Our forebodings. It is manifest that, if there is not some betterment soon, the bases of society will crumble and drag down with them the great and eternal principles of law and morality.

It is in consequence of this condition of things that the social body, beginning with the family, is suffering such serious evils. For the lay State, forgetting its limitations and the essential object of the authority which it wields, has laid its hands on the marriage bond to prolate it and has stripped it of its religious character; it has dared as much as it could in the matter of that natural right which parents possess to educate their children, and in many countries it has destroyed the stability of marriage by giving a legal sanction to the licentious institution of divorce. All know the result of these attacks. More than words can tell they have multiplied marriages which are prompted only by shameful passions, which are speedily dissolved and which, at times, bring about bloody tragedies, at others the most shocking infidelities. We say nothing of the innocent offsprings of these unions, the children who are abandoned or whose morals are corrupted on one side by the bad example of the parents, on the other by the poison which the officially lay State constantly pours into their hearts.

Along with the family... and social order is... ed by doctrines which... origin to authority, and... corrupted the genuine... government. For if so... thorty is derived forma... consent of the people a... God, who is the suprema... nal Principle of all powe... the eyes of the governe... august characteristic and... into an artificial sove... rests on unstable and sh... namely, the will of those... it is said to be derive... see the consequences of... the carrying out of our... often these laws instea... sound reason formulated... are but the expression o... of the greater number a... of the predominant polit... It is thus that the mob... seeking to satisfy its de... loose rein is given to pe... sion, even when it distu... horiously acquired tra... the State, when the disc... last extremity can only b... violent measures and th... of blood.

Consequent upon the re... those Christian principles... contributed so efficacious... the nations in the bonds... hood, and to bring all hu... one great family, there... little by little in the in... order, a system of jealou... in consequence of which... now watch each other, i... hate, at least with the s... rivals. Hence, in their g... takings they lose sight o... principles of morality... and forget the protectio... feeble and the oppresse... right to demand. In the... which they are actuated... their national riches, they... ly the opportunity whi... stances afford, the adv... successful enterprises, and... ing bait of an accompli... sure that no one will... in the name of right or... which right can claim. S... fatal principles which hav... ed material power as the... law of the world and to... be imputed the limitless... military establishments, ... armed peace, which in ma... is equivalent to a disast...

This lamentable confusi... realm of ideas has produc... ness among the people... and the general spirit of... From these have sprung t... popular agitations and o... our times which are only... ludes of much more terri... ders in the future. The... condition, also, of a larg... the poorer classes, who... merit our assistance, furni... mirable opportunity for... of scheming agitators, and... of socialist factions, whic... to the humbler classes th... extravagant promises and... carry out the most dreadf...

Those who start on a... descent are soon hurled... spite of themselves into... Prompted by an inexorab... society of veritable crim... been organized, which, at... first appearance, has, by... character, startled the wo... to the solidarity of its co... and its international ran... it has already attempted... work for it stands in fear... and recalls before no dang... diating all union with so... cynically scoffing at law... and morality, its adepts... opted the name of Anarch... proposed to utterly subve... tual conditions of society... use of every means that a... savage passion can sugges... society draws its unity a... from the authority which... so it is against authority... archy directs its efforts... not feel a thrill of horro... tion and pity at the reme... the many victims that of... fallen beneath its blows... empires, kings, presiden... erful republics, whose only... the sovereign power with... were invaded?

In presence of the immen... evils which overwhelm so... the perils which menace it... compels Us to again warn... of good will, especially t... occupy exalted positions... conjure them as We now... visa what remedies the... calls for and with prudent