

THE CATHOLIC PERIODICAL PRESS.

A Paper read before the Catholic Congress, Baltimore, Md., Tuesday Nov. 12, 1889, by George D. Wolff, LL.D.

Your Eminences, Most Reverend and Right Reverend Archbishops and Bishops, Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, Mr. President and Gentlemen.

Your Committee have honoured me with the request to prepare a paper on "The Catholic Periodical Press," to be read before this assembly. I attempt the task willingly, yet with unaffected diffidence for I realize its delicacy and its difficulty, as well as its importance.

In the thoughts which I propose to present, I shall confine myself almost entirely to Catholic newspapers, or, as they might more properly be styled, Catholic journals. For as, with but very few exceptions, they are published only once a week, their reports of current events are anticipated by daily newspapers, and cannot, therefore, have the freshness and novelty usually attached to the word "news."

In thus confining the scope of my intended remarks, two considerations influence me. In the first place, considering the necessarily restricted limits as regards time and space, of this paper, I do not think I have misinterpreted the intention of your committee. Secondly, the number of Catholic periodicals that are published quarterly or monthly, is comparatively small. Moreover, there is reason to believe that they more closely approximate the ideal of a truly Catholic periodical than do Catholic weekly journals, and are, therefore, less open to criticism.

Of the immense power of the press, and more particularly of the newspaper press, in the United States, it is needless to speak. To dilate upon it would only be to repeat acknowledged truisms. The issues of the newspaper press penetrate into every village and hamlet and family in our vast country. Their statements and expressions of opinion are read with avidity, and affect, for good or for evil, almost every one, powerfully influencing his thoughts, feelings and actions. They are made the subject of constant conversation and comment, are quickly communicated to the few who, in this age and country, are unable to read, or to read with facility, and thus they mould the opinion and character even of the illiterate. In short, the press, and particularly the newspaper press, is to-day the mightiest human instrumentality that man can employ. Its power, immense and far reaching, has been recognized and emphatically referred to by Sovereign Pontiffs of the Church, especially by our late Holy Father, Pius IX., and by his successor, Leo XIII. Speaking of how the power of the press has been perverted to wrong ends and employed by the adversaries of true religion to malign the Church, and especially the Holy See, our Sovereign Pontiff, Leo XIII., said to a deputation of Catholic journalists, whom he received on February 23rd, 1879:

"A person would not deviate far from the truth were he to ascribe this deluge of evils and the miserable condition of the times to the wickedness of the press."

But as every instrumentality that men can invent or discover is powerful for evil only when it is misdirected, misused, and perverted, so, too, it is equally or more powerful for good when it is rightly directed or rightly employed. This truth our Holy Father declares in the same address from which the foregoing quotation is made. He says:

"Wherefore, since custom has made newspapers a necessity, Catholic writers for them should labour principally to apply to the salvation of society and the defence of the Church, that which is used by the enemy for the destruction both of the one and the other."

It would be impossible to describe in fewer words and with greater clearness the true mission of the Catholic press, or to show the noble and exalted ends it should strive to subserve — "The salvation of society and the defence of the Church." Of the activities and immense power of the agencies that are working for the destruction of society, and, were it possible, of the Church also, no observing and thoughtful mind can doubt. The general trend of opinion, outside of the Catholic Church in Europe, and it is rapidly becoming so in this country, is in this direction. Hostility to authority both in Church and State. "The majesty of the law" has almost become an obsolete phrase. In the name of liberty false notions are

disseminated, which, carried out to their logical conclusions, are destructive alike of civil order and of religion.

In Europe infidels and atheists, miscalled Liberals, differing among themselves as regards their respective notions and theories, yet united by force of a common hatred of religion and of all true legitimate authority, whether in the Church or the State, under the pretence of concern for human rights and liberty, are seizing and holding the reins of political power, and tyrannize over people of which numerically they form but a small part. In the names of liberty and of popular government they are striving to subvert the fundamental principles of social and civil order, and to establish a socialistic bureaucratic despotism under which the individual would be reduced to an insignificant atom, a mere automaton destitute of all real volition in the aesthetic commune, in which personal rights and true freedom, religious, civil, educational and industrial, would be impossible. In the name of free education it is sought to impose on the public a system of education from which freedom of religious education shall be excluded. In the name of religious freedom it is sought to rob religion of its divine elements and sanctions, to either exclude it entirely from public recognition or else make it a subject that has its foundations in the State or in human opinion [as regulated by the State, and thus to deprive the Church and its membership of all real, true freedom, by making the Church subordinate to the State, in fact, a mere department or bureau of the State.

These ideas, alike false and destructive of religious faith, of the true principles of morality, civil liberty and social order, are rapidly finding expression on this side of the Atlantic as well as in Europe. They pervade much of our popular literature. Some of our most popular magazines and most widely circulated newspapers are constantly putting them forth under every possible form. It is this pernicious literature that forms the daily pabulum of a large part of the people of the United States. It enters into and affects their intellectual and moral development as certainly and vitally as the food they eat enters into their bodies and affects their physical health and strength.

It is of the utmost importance, therefore, to the interests of religion and the welfare of our country that our Catholic literature present, as our Holy Father Leo XIII. has declared it can and should present, the antidote of the pestilential literature to which we have just referred. And in no other form can that antidote be so effectively presented as in that of vigorous, ably conducted newspapers pervaded by a truly Catholic spirit. Whether it be regarded as something to be rejoiced at or to be deprecated, it is nevertheless a fact that the rapidity of movement that characterizes our age in other respects also characterizes it as regards its intellectual and moral ideas and action. Hence, to properly influence the public mind upon subjects in which it is interested, newspapers from a convenience, have become a necessity. Very many of our non-Catholic newspapers which honestly intend to be fair and impartial in their discussions of subjects bearing upon the Catholic religion, nevertheless are unconsciously pervaded by an anti-Catholic animus. To counteract their influence in this respect it is all-important that there should be a vigorously, intelligently and ably conducted Catholic newspaper press.

There is one other reason that we will mention. It is a reason which comes directly home to everyone who wishes to be a faithful, devout, and consistent Catholic and to train his children in like manner. We refer to the obligations of Catholics who value their own souls and the souls of the children God has given them and whose souls He will require at their hands, to guard themselves and to guard their children against the subtle and pernicious influence of reading that will injuriously affect their spiritual welfare.

There are, in fact, few non-Catholic, secular newspapers, which can be read indiscriminately by Catholics without their injuring themselves spiritually and involving themselves in the sin of disobeying the precept to abstain from whatever brings us into companionship with impurity (whether in thought or word or deed), or that tends to weaken faith, devotion, the spirit of filial obedience, or reverence for holy things. Very many Catholics think, or act as if they think, that they are at liberty to read newspapers which notoriously