

10

THE
PRIEST IN POLITICS.

BY THE LATE

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DUBLIN :

WILLIAM MCGEE, 18 NASSAU STREET,
COLLEGE, SCHOOL, LAW, & MEDICAL BOOKSELLER.

1885.

PRICE SIXPENCE.

Printed by
SEALY, BRYERS, & WALKER,
94, 95 & 96 MIDDLE ABBEY STREET, DUBLIN.

The following article was written by my dear husband a short time before his sad illness.

On his death-bed he expressed a wish that it should be published "before the meeting of the Bishops in Rome."

The solemn and sacred duty then rested on me to carry out his dying wish.

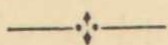
I have performed that duty.

Jeanie Myers Smyth.

3 Crosthwaite Terrace,
Kingstown,
March 16th, 1885.

Houses of the Oireachtas

THE PRIEST IN POLITICS.



IN every political and social question that arises theology mingles. It is the science of God, and as He is the Supreme Lawgiver and Omnipotent Ruler, the founder and preserver of civil society, all legislation, whether its objects be social or political, must have reference to Him; and no law, no social arrangement, is valid without His sanction; and every political or social agitation for the redress even of admitted grievances is only constructive of new grievances unless it be conducted in a spirit of order, of charity, and of deferential submission to His Divine will. "It is wonderful," says M. Proudhon, "how we even stumble on theology in all our political questions." It is in no way wonderful, for paganism itself confessed that religion is the indestructible foundation of human society, and even a Voltaire has written, "That wherever there is a society, religion is absolutely necessary." He who knows God, believes in Him and loves Him; such a one alone knows the laws to which human governments and human societies are subject; he alone is capable of interpreting them, he alone possesses the essential qualifications of a safe political leader or social reformer. A man may possess intelligence (that, God does not deny him), cultivation, eloquence, genius; but if he has not faith he has not truth (for the ages attest that as faith diminishes truth decays), and wanting faith and truth, he is condemned to error, and furnishes an

example only of the "blind leading the blind." Theology is the lamp of history, and he who would understand the political or social system of Egypt, or Greece, or Rome, must first learn the religious system of each. My subject is Ireland, and it is remarkable how through all her contests for 700 years the spiritual and religious ever mingled with the material and political. Her great departed orator, Father Thomas Burke, O.P., loved to expatiate on this grand feature of his country's history, for he accepted Moses as the figure of the human race, and in an especial manner of the Irish race, and he knew that as long as Moses kept his hands raised to the Lord, the people of Israel could not be overcome. Alas! ere the voice of the great preacher was stilled in death, ere his eyes had closed on the land he loved so well, he saw, or fancied he saw, that the hands of Moses had fallen, and that his people for the first time in their history had thrown themselves madly into an ignoble contest under the banner of a godless materialism. In his boyhood he had seen them proudly arrayed under the leadership of the great Christain Patriot O'Connell; his closing years were saddened by beholding them the prey of a Jacobin Club. Whence the transformation?

It is a belief among all peoples that great disturbances in the moral or physical world are usually the consequence of sin, and it is in evidence that some fifteen years at least before Land Leagueism appeared a section of the Irish population had become infected with the Socialistic poison. Certain it is that the apostles of the

"new departure" found multitudes ready to accept the false doctrines which accompanied its exposition, "Landlords are robbers, thieves." "Property is robbery." "Down with landlords." "The land for the people!" "Pay only what you consider a just rent!" "Pay no rent at all!" "If any man thwarts your movement, denounce him, boycott him, ruin him, treat him as a leper of old." "Keep within the law"—"murder is unnecessary where the Land League is established." Such were the cries re-echoed from a hundred platforms. They were cheered by the multitudes, and soon, very soon, the false doctrines, the reckless speeches, the insane cries were translated into barbarous, inhuman, and murderous deeds. Where were the priests? Where was theology?

Land League, National League, Parliamentary Party, Invincible Society, Dynamite, are parts of one great whole. The second is the natural successor and heir-at-law of the first, and without the occasional active support of the two last, the third would lose much of its efficacy. The system is one, though multiform in character, and so regarded it is a repudiation of the Decalogue, an outrage on the fundamental principles of Morality, and a negation of the dogmas of Christianity. "If Christ Himself were to come on this platform and attempt to oppose the League, He would be hooted." So vociferated an enthusiastic orator at one of the meetings. Where were the Priests? They were there some of them. They heard and were silent. More than that,

by their active aid, the blasphemer was raised to the position of a paid Member of Parliament. At all the meetings the Priesthood were and continue to be largely represented.

The Parliamentary Party is the respectable, the legal the constitutional, and the decorous part of the multiform system. It is the creation mainly of the priesthood. On what principle is it based? The most wondrous gift of God to man is free will, the faculty of choosing between right and wrong, good and evil. It is a tremendous faculty, but if it did not exist, human liberty would not exist. The representative man ought to be above all men a freeman. Under this party system he is obliged to surrender his individual liberty, his faculty of choosing between the right and wrong of any given subject. Practically, the party is irresponsible, and acts that would call down penalties on the head of an individual member, not of the party, elicit votes of thanks when done by another in his party character. Thus: a non-party member opposes the admission to Parliament of Mr. Bradlaugh, and for so doing is denounced at a League meeting—a venerable parish priest leading the chorus. Later, a party member adopts the same course as the non-party member and is rewarded with a vote of thanks by the same people. This is one example out of many which I could cull from the columns of the *Freeman's Journal*, of the absurdity, not to say, the wickedness of this party system. Taking away free will, the faculty of choosing, it destroys individual liberty. Denying the

latter, it denies individual responsibility, and the denial of individual responsibility carries with it the denial of responsibility in common. Responsibility gone, penalty loses its *raison d'être*. The outcome of these several negations is Nihilism. Personal liberty, acting in subordination to the Divine understanding and will, is the cement of civil society, the corner-stone of the edifice of political liberty, and the mainstay of social and domestic life. Separated from that understanding and will, subjected to the control of irresponsible faction, it becomes an instrument of despotism, and the handmaid of anarchy. Are priests justified in imposing on a Parliamentary candidate a pledge involving a renunciation of his judgment, his conscience, and his liberty? Is the candidate who accepts such pledge fit to be a legislator?

The animating principle of the organization of which I treat is hatred, bitter, rancorous, relentless hatred. Love has no place in it. It is not hatred merely of an institution—be it a good or a bad one—or of a class, or a party; it is an individual, a personal hatred—a hatred which pursues the victim from the public platform to the domestic hearth, a hatred which follows him, like a shadow, in his daily walks, drags his hidden infirmities to light, and exposes him an object of ridicule and contempt to the public gaze. This in the name of Morality! Or, is the victim a just man, then the hatred maligns and calumniates, blasts his reputation, and then leaves his body to be disposed of by the executioner on duty. This

in the name of Patriotism ! This, all this, with the tacit sanction of ministers of the God of Mercy and Love ! It is a truth, a glaring truth, which it would be wrong to conceal, that the most virulent and scandalous aspersions on individuals are traceable directly to sacerdotal lips. And it is true that the publications which most commend themselves to their favour are those which most abound in hatred, ill-will, and all uncharitableness. I state the fact, it defies contradiction, explain it who may. I can only say positively that it is irreconcilable with the commands, "Love thy neighbour as thyself," "Do good to those who hate you."

One of the most eminent Catholic divines in Europe, contemplating the spectacle which Ireland presented lately, is reported—and I believe correctly—to have said, that the Catholic Church had failed as a moral teacher in Ireland. On that point I will not venture to offer an opinion, though I am free to confess, it is hard to understand how a people thoroughly imbued with the principles of Christianity, instructed in its doctrines, and well grounded in the Moral Law, could have fallen in a day from the height of Christianity to the abyss of Paganism—for so swift and so abyssmal was the fall. If the clergy had done their duty, how came it to pass that when the lowest instincts of the people were appealed to, and they were tempted, like our Lord in the desert, they eagerly embraced the evil and forgot Our Father who art in heaven ?

I respect and admire the Irish priest ; he is pious, he is

charitable to the poor, he is patriotic, and I may add, without meaning to disparage, he is a peasant. He has all the passions, prejudices, failings, and instincts of his class. The cries of the platform penetrate the walls of Maynooth, and copies of the low journals find their way, probably, into the seat of learning. He is ordained, he is a curate, and his first public appearance is at a political meeting in his parish. Intoxicated by the cheers, he indulges in the wildest extravagance of language, and is as illogical and as personal as possible. This is the typical political curate. The parish priest is better informed and more sagacious. He distrusts these agitators, and sees in their movement a peril to faith and morals. But, he argues, I must go with my people, and reluctantly he consents to take the chair. He makes a moderate and sensible speech which is coldly received. The movers and seconders, however, of the resolutions utter sentiments which a priest should not allow to pass unrebuked. To protest would create a scene, and he holds his peace. He is accorded a vote of thanks for his dignified conduct in the chair. This is the typical parish priest. Noble exceptions there are in the persons of a few, a very few noble men, who seeing the evil, set their faces against it from the first. Threatened with boycotting, stoppage of dues, &c., they answered, "We would go with you if we could, but we are forbidden to go with you going wrong. If you starve us, insult us, we can go forth into the desert—take up our cross, and follow Him." These are the exceptional Irish priests. The bishops have all the weak-

nesses of the good P.P.'s, and when the horrible disturbance came, the consequence at once and the cause of sin, they proved themselves to be lamentably unequal to the emergency.

"Nationalization of the land : " "the land for the people." The people of any country, properly speaking, are its inhabitants of every order and degree. On the practical recognition of this truth the maintenance of the social hierarchy depends. In the sense, however, of the Socialistic agitator, the word "people" has no such broad and national signification. It means a class, or a party, or an organization representing a class interest. "Nationalization of the land" means that the abstraction called the State, is or ought to be the absolute owner of all the land of the country. The rights of private property, and the rights of the family, are one and inseparable. Destroy one, and you destroy both. Civil society, in the eye of the Catholic Church, is of divine origin, and its main pillars are Property and the Family. Take these from beneath it, and the structure comes to the ground. How shall we explain the fact that the teachers and propagators of these false doctrines are extolled, commended, and testimonialled by C.C.'s, P.P.'s, and higher dignitaries, as the best, the "heaven-sent" leaders of a Catholic people?

"Pay no Rent." That is, level Sinai with the plain, and make of the "Island of Saints" a Golgotha. That such was the intent and meaning of the No Rent Manifesto is evident from the means employed to give it effect.

Tenants obeying it were promised that they would be "sustained without stint." Tenants disobeying it were threatened. The promise was a lie. The threats were a reality. Surely now at least the bishops would assemble, and with a voice that would resound like the thunder of Sinai, would condemn the manifesto and its authors, and make proclamation anew of the Eternal Law. No. As a body they were silent. Save that of the Cardinal Archbishop alone, no strong voice issued from the sanctuary. I mention no names in this paper, and I endeavour to avoid personal allusion; but it is matter of sad and humiliating record that the No Rent Manifesto was promulgated under the immediate auspices of a priest holding a position of influence and trust near the person of a conspicuous Archbishop. Several priests defended it in speech and writing. Its most violent supporter was a southern curate, and he has lately been promoted to a lucrative parish!

As the individuals composing a nation are, such the nation is. If, individually, they are truthful, honest, kindly, virtuous, and brave, the nation which they compose will manifest in all its actions the same noble qualities. If, individually, they are untruthful, tricky, fraudulent, cruel, cowardly, and deceitful, the same qualities will characterise the nation, and be photographed in all its public acts. The future of the Irish nation is in the hands of the priests, for with them above all is the power to mould for good or ill the character of the people. That of late years their political power has—

unconsciously I grant—been exercised for ill, I have demonstrated. The fault lies not so much with them as with the weapon which they are too eager to grasp, but all unfit to wield. It was not fashioned for hands like theirs. It is a carnal, a very carnal weapon, and they are ministers of Him whose “Kingdom is not of this world.” Let them train their flocks—the young and the old—to know God, and knowing Him they will obey His commandments. Let them instruct them in the dogmas of their religion, and understanding they will fulfil them. Let them explain to them, over and over again, the precepts of the Moral Law, and saturated with their divine influences they will spurn the seductions of the Socialist, the Communist, and the Infidel. Let them impress on the minds and hearts of their people that the Decalogue underlies all ritual, and all Church organizations, all civilizations, all politics, all governments, and all laws. It corresponds in theology with natural facts in physical science. Ignore those facts, and the material structure falls—“a house built upon the sand.” Ignore the Moral Law, the Ten Commandments, and every religious system falls, the solidarity of the human race perishes, society dissolves, and humanity itself, losing its spiritual element, ceases to be human.

From the pulpit, and from it alone, can the Irish priest influence effectively and for good the political and social life of his country. There is his throne. There he wields a sceptre more potent than that of earthly minister or king. In conclusion, I submit for consideration this

problem—whether, in the interests of religion and country, it be not advisable that the Irish Priest should cease to be an Irish Agitator ?

Non enim bonum hominis est, hominem vincere ; sed bonum est homini, ut eum veritas vincat volentem ; quia malum est homini, ut eum veritas vincat invitum. Nam ipsa necesse est, sive negantem, sive confitentem. Da veniam, si quid liberius dixi, non ad contumeliam tuam, sed ad defensionem meam.—S. AUGUSTINUS.

P. J. SMYTH.

Houses of the Oireachtas