

## A PLEA FOR MORE CONVERSIONS

By BRO. JOACHIM BAUER, O. P.



PEACE on earth to men of good will." These tidings brought joy to man for it meant that his Saviour had come. The darkness that had enveloped man was to be dispelled by Him who was to be the Way, the Truth and the Light. God had abandoned man for a time as it were, in order that he might better appreciate things divine. The Jewish people had received divine guidance in an especial manner, yet even they had fallen short in their fulfillment of their obligations to God. With the advent of Christ salvation was to be brought to the entire world, to all mankind; "Peace on earth to men of good will," that peace, which alone can come to man when he is at peace and in union with his Creator. This peace and rest of the soul is beautifully expressed by St. Augustine in his "Confessions," which are an account of his own quest for God. All else failing him he came to a knowledge of the truth, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee."

What is the Catholic laity doing to bring this peace of heart to other souls, that have not been blessed with the gift of Faith? Have not too many of them been willing to leave this task to the Church, to the hierarchy, to the pastor, or to the work of missionary Orders? Or, have they been smugly complacent in the heritage that is exclusively Catholic, without ever thinking of what they might do personally to help bring this God-given gift to others? A great work lies before the Catholic laity in the work of making converts and carrying peace of mind to men, who are usually men of good will even though lacking in knowledge of matters religious.

A certain diffidence and indifference towards things religious is taking hold upon many people of America. Witness the decline of the many sects in this country. Many of them have already fallen into desuetude. A few still hold sway, and a few new "isms" are making an endeavor to satisfy that innate craving of the human heart which can alone be satisfied by the soul's establishing some relation with its God. Amidst this chaos men see the Catholic Church rising into the heavens—gaining daily

in strength and numbers. The Church as an institution now, as ever, continues in her growth, but what is the individual Catholic layman doing? Is he waging the good fight; is he enthusiastic in taking up the extension of his religion, intelligently and personally, or is he affected by that indifference which surrounds us on all sides? If he has his religion at heart, he will endeavor to stem this tide of indifference. More than this, he will rise out of that lethargy which causes many to treat non-Catholics with utter indifference, as regards their religious status.

In the past, it has been the attitude of Catholics in this country to take an apologetical attitude regarding their Faith. Our efforts have been confined in no small measure to a refutation of calumny. Today, we have to launch an offensive in order to make the Catholic philosophy of life better known. This change has been recognized. To mention but a few examples of such work, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the Knights of Columbus and the Diocesan Unions of the Holy Name Society have accomplished untold good in many fields. They have not left unchallenged, the erroneous statements that were made so frequently in the past concerning things Catholic. The effects are apparent in the attitude that is now taken by many of our large dailies when treating of Catholic items. Our work for cleaner movies, for cleaner literature, better drama; our investigation of educational and sociological problems are examples of the application of Catholic principles to the problems of the day. Yet this is but a beginning of the great work that is still to be accomplished here in America. We may gain some idea of our power for good, of our possibility to satisfy the needs of individuals and of the nation by making a study of the fruits produced by a small minority in England where they have more keenly realized their mission to non-Catholics. But our plea, is for greater help, for a more enlightened understanding of the needs of the non-Catholic here in America, and a consideration of how we, as individuals, can bring the Faith to other souls.

First of all we must get rid of the inane idea that all who are not allied with us, and within the fold, are either Protestants or unbelievers. We must realize that these, our neighbors, are individual souls who like us are groping about in the dark, or wrestling with the supreme questions. Each soul could tell, if it would, its own peculiar spiritual Aeneid. Each one has his own dark night of the soul, each has individual trials and sorrows to

encounter. It is through these that one may draw nearer to God. For us at such times there are the Sacraments and His Presence to sustain us. We have penance to set us again on the right road; His eternal Presence within our hallowed sanctuaries, where we may go apart and rest and have our burdens lightened. But what is the plight of the sincere non-Catholic searcher in quest of his God, who desires to know the truth? He has his own pains and sorrows, a long drawn out quest for an inheritance that was lost to him by his forbears. Indeed the sincere searcher may be more active spiritually than many a Catholic who has, complacently and in a matter of fact way, accepted his God-given inheritance. He is seeking the true God. Everything about him bespeaks His praise; all nature is a manifestation of Him—"sermons in stones and running brooks," and yet his religion and creed do not satisfy those infinite cravings of the heart. Where is he to learn more of this, his God? How is he to gain certitude? Now, God seems to be calling him elsewhere but, human as he is, he is attached to his home and friends of earlier years. No one seems to give him the helping hand that would make the journey easier. His heart tells him to go on, and this perhaps he does. As he makes his first inquiries concerning the Church, his friends and acquaintances manifest an unusual interest in his well-being. All are now concerned with his welfare, temporal and eternal. He is blamed. Reasonable in all else, these, his friends will not be reasonable in things of faith. Some ask or encourage him to wait a while, not to be too hasty, to be less biased, and more indifferent, so that he may be able to weigh values more truly. If faithful to the inspirations of God, he corresponds to grace; each step is taken timorously, fearfully, all the while trying hard to trust confidently in the goodness of God. Gradually the way becomes clearer. His conscience is more at ease. He begins to breathe more freely as he sees his path marked out for him. At one with God, he can endure the trials that his conversion may entail. Even these will be lessened as his friends see for themselves that in truth now, the adventurer is beginning to live as never before, for his "find" has given him a new life. But what of the many others who have not gone this far, for whom things are not marked out as clearly, who perchance are in need of our help by way of example, prayer, and a kindly word of explanation as to the essential truth of some dogma or practise of our Faith?

We know that there is no middle ground between the modern Protestant indifference to dogma on the one hand, and the authoritative interpretation of the Catholic Church whose center is Peter and his successors in the See of Rome. Christ never taught that one religion was as good as another. He declared certain truths necessary to be believed, with loss of our eternal beatitude as the penalty for doing otherwise. Moreover He commissioned certain men to teach in His Name. These He vested with powers to minister to the needs of His people, and this for all time. We must realize this and know that the world has erected its altars to an "unknown God," whom it will surely recognize if His Presence revealed in the Church is pointed out to it. Like St. Paul on the Areopagus, we must make known to the people, that the God whom they are seeking is the almighty and bountiful Father who revealed Himself in Jesus, and founded His Church, that He might continue to abide among men.

There is need of interpretation to those without of things Catholic, whether it be the fundamentals of our devotions, practices or dogmas. There is a goodly supply of literature available on all these points. Added to this wealth of apologetical literature we have an untold number of splendid pamphlets from our various Truth Societies and kindred organizations. But, merely to give one of these to our neighbor or fellow workman when we are questioned concerning some practice of our Faith will not suffice. All too many Catholics think that since their Church is to be found everywhere, there is no need to explain to the world of today a religion so well known—to interpret a creed with which all are already acquainted. Here is precisely where many misunderstand the true state of affairs. Perhaps the externals, or even the letter of our Creed, are known to some of the representatives of our modern secular and unbelieving thought (though we question as to the extent of this knowledge), but these and the vast majority of those without the fold are wholly ignorant of the inner meaning of our worship. To many it is unreal, perhaps a fable expressed in beautiful poetry or magnificent pageantry; our liturgy, creed, but survivals of an ancient creed, having no application to modern life. Our fellow citizens are awakening in part from this false impression. It is for us to give them a reason for the faith that is within us.

This work will require real personal effort, a personal interest in the heritage that is ours, a personal interest in those who

are in quest of that truth which we possess and which alone can satisfy them. We must try to understand their teaching so as to sympathize with what is good and true in it, while setting aside that which is false. By trying to understand their needs and by being able to answer their queries concerning the reason for parochial schools, the attitude of the Church on labor problems, birth control, divorce, confession, celibacy, the Sacrifice of the Mass and similar subjects, we will enable the unbeliever to realize something of the real character of our Faith, of its bearing on modern problems, of the infinite depth of meaning concealed under what are apparently only external or childish doctrines. He will see its applicability to all the needs of the soul of the present century as well as of the first ages of the Church. Then he will study and reverence it, perhaps be converted to it. At all events he will be a friend and staunch supporter of those things for which Catholicism stands. But this cannot be unless the Catholic realize and appreciate that the unbeliever, Protestant, or any other who plys him with questions or perhaps only hints them, is very sincere and, who, without being conscious of it agrees with much of the teaching of the Church and is ever ready to welcome the truth if he can find it. In such a state of mind, the Catholic will not only see, but will also be in a position to make his neighbor see, that in so far as any form of Protestantism, or any other religion, satisfies the needs of the soul, it has owed this influence to the truth and goodness that it has retained from Catholicism;—as fruit may ripen on a limb that has been lopped off from the parent tree. It is in virtue of this partial truth that these various forms of religion make their appeal and have their following. This understanding of these partial and one-sided, though oftentimes powerfully presented truths, may be used to point out, that in all their truth they agree with Catholic Faith, and thus, as far as they go, they bear witness to that Faith. This fundamental idea is the basis of the certitude that we have in our Faith regardless of what the findings of science or learning may be, for, "Since faith rests upon infallible truth, and since the contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated, it is clear that the arguments brought against faith cannot be demonstrations, but are difficulties that can be answered." These are the words of St. Thomas taken from his Summa, this has ever been the teaching of the Church, yet it is a fundamental truth

which has escaped many minds in ages past, even as it does today. Logical in their thought, when applied to affairs of science and commerce, many fail to distinguish between mere sentiment and feeling and that which is not only the truth, but the most reasonable as well. 'Tis true that they lack the gift of faith, yet even without this gift man can reason out, and be made to see, the untenableness of his position if he holds aught than the teachings of the Church. This is our task.

To sum it all up briefly, Catholicism contains all the truth of Protestantism, Pantheism and all other-isms that have been, are, or ever will be. In pointing out the errors of any false system that may be suggested to us as being as good as Catholicism, or as being popular, let us not be unmindful to recognize the truth contained therein, and then show how that truth is already contained with all of its complementary truths in our God-given inheritance. The modern world is alienated from the Faith, and is contemptuous of the Faith, largely because it does not understand. It tends to see only the outward forms, and to be blind to the inner life of Catholicism. If perchance it sees aught of good in Catholicism it separates it from the Faith as a whole. It sees only that which is opposed to its thought and feeling, failing to have pointed out to it that which would be congenial and would satisfy the needs and cravings of the soul. For this reason let us be patient with the inquirer, in fact with all who are outside the fold. We have nought to fear, and we do owe them our sympathy, and therefore should explain, and not denounce. Thus we may hope to bring others to a knowledge of the fact that all man's deepest needs are satisfied by Catholicism alone, that in the Faith they will find entire, that which is elsewhere partial, and that whatever of good has been found without the Church is to be found a hundredfold within. Our appeal then is for a lay apostolate that will supplement the work of the clergy and hierarchy, who will sow the good seed and prepare the soil for grace and the work of the priest, when once the inquirer is well disposed, or in quest of truths which are beyond the layman. Through such work we may hope to bring that "peace of God, which surpasseth all understanding" to the many souls who are seeking that peace and rest which is to be found in the Church alone, and is only so found, if the teachings of the Church, and the Church herself, are known as they really are.