

THE POPE IN THE MODERN WORLD

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WE are living in an age when every conceivable attack is made against civilization and against the Church which is the mother and bulwark of civilization. Social upheaval and economic disorders are external signs of the moral decay within society, the death rattle of civilization. Justly may we Catholics thank God whose Providence in these times has provided Christendom with a Chief Pastor who fearlessly and courageously has defended the rights of God and proclaimed the dignity of man.

Years of scholarship and rich experience have fitted him for the task of guiding the bark of Peter through strife and storm. Dauntlessly he has exposed the errors of those who would cast souls adrift on the sea of unbelief, souls whose faith a godless world would pervert by its false maxims and sham philosophy. And yet with paternal kindness he has called upon men to "turn their thoughts for an instant at least from the earthly and transitory things in which they are struggling so unhappily towards eternal, celestial things, abandoning the sadness of present conditions."¹ In proclaiming the solution to the vexing problems that disturb mankind, our Holy Father has drawn not merely from the experience of the ages but from the wisdom of eternity which is the Divine Law of God, a law which has too often been set aside and even ignored as a matter of convenience. In the struggle which inevitably follows, it is our duty as Catholics to rally to the cause of the Vicar of Christ and pledge him our loyalty, and if needs be our very lives.

In the press, in the theatre, in universities and in public places morality is assailed, our inherited moral notions are classed as outworn, and sin is ridiculed as the product of darker ages. "For now, alas!" writes the Pope, "not secretly or under cover, but openly, with all sense of shame put aside, now by word, again by writings, by theatrical productions of every kind, by romantic fiction, by amorous and frivolous novels, by cinematographs portraying a vivid scene, addresses broadcast by radio telephony, in short by all the inventions of modern science, the sanctity of marriage is trampled upon and de-

¹ *Acta Apostolicis Sedis*, xxv, No. 1, (Jan. 30, 1930).

ridged; divorce, adultery, all the basest vices, either are extolled or at least are depicted in such colors as to appear to be free of all reproach and infamy.”² With firmness and consistency, Pope Pius XI in his exhortations and encyclicals has called upon Catholics to stem the devastating tide of godlessness and immorality that threatens to engulf the human race. The adverse forces of modern paganism, irreligion and heresy have been succeeded in our day by a transcendent anti-God movement that is powerful, defiant and destructive. There was a time when the Church could count on the support of non-Catholic denominations to defend the heritage of Christian civilization. But even this last prop to ancient loyalties has been swept aside by the corrosive and skeptical spirit that calls itself “progress.”

The result is that there is now a sharp line of cleavage between the Catholic Church, with the Pope as its visible head, and the modern notion of culture, which is Neo-Paganism. We see on the one side the Church, with its doctrine and morals, and on the other the very antithesis of all that the Church represents. The worship of God has been superceded by the worship of the state; and patriotism, a worthy thing in itself, has proved to be a poor substitute for the ultimate values of religion. With the abolition of the sanctity of the family, with the enslavement of the individual, with the denial of God and the immortality of the soul, in a word, with immorality rampant and tyranny triumphant in so many places, our Holy Father, standing on the last ramparts of sanity and with an authority that is above the things of this world, proclaims the one and only solution, namely, a return to the age-old principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Will the voice of the Pope prevail? That depends on the loyalty of us Catholics to the Vicar of Christ and to the gospel truths he has enunciated in his encyclicals.

Man was not made to live for bread alone, he was not made for the paltry toys of this world even though he must use them. Material goods can never fully satisfy him, for he was made for happiness with God in this life and forever with Him in the next. The only way to God is through Christ Who said, “I am the Way.” The real disorder, therefore, is a spiritual one, not an economic disorder. “No leader in public economy, no power of organization will ever be able to bring social conditions to a peaceful solution,” writes the Holy Father, “unless first in the very field of economics there triumphs moral law based on God and conscience. . . . This is the underlying value of every value in the political life as well as in the economic life of

² Encyclical: *Casta Connubii*. December, 1930.

nations; this is the soundest 'rate of exchange.' If it is kept steady, all the rest will be stable, being guaranteed by the immutable and eternal law of God."³ Economic chaos, the ancient quarrel of the rich against the poor and class against class inevitably follow a denial of spiritual values. Today the conflict is universal. The standards of revolt are unfurled against heaven itself, and the church under the leadership of its fearless Chief Shepherd is prepared for a long and arduous combat. It is a struggle between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of the cross; and wherever they come into conflict there is a new crucifixion, a new persecution. But history's pages record that the standard of the cross was always the last ensign left on the field.

Loyalty to the Pope in this hour of conflict means loyalty to the principles of Christ, whose Vicar he is. In season and out of season he has urged that social injustice be remedied without delay, not by fire and the sword, but by an observance of the precepts of the gospel; not with the clenched fist of hate, but by the law of love one for another and a personal sanctity which alone can bring true and lasting peace. Throughout all his exhortations, there runs the one dominant note, namely, that the rights of God and man be respected here on earth and that our hearts be centered on the things of heaven. Our loyalty to the Pope should not be something static, no one of us should be satisfied with a mere profession of Catholic doctrine. If Christian civilization is to endure at all, if our culture and the glorious heritage of the past is to survive the perils of the moment, the profession of our Catholic faith must have a practical application in the lives of all of us. In a word, the profession of our faith must take on the form of action, Catholic Action. That is the only real way of manifesting our loyalty to the Pope, that is the only means for us Catholics, individually and collectively, to draw order out of moral chaos. Our loyalty then, should be not so much a sentiment as an inspiration to an active participation in the work of the hierarchy under the Sovereign Pontiff. Pope Pius XI was farseeing enough to realize that the religious, moral, social and economic disorders could not be remedied by political means for the simple reason that these ignore God, the Creator of the world and the Author of grace, Who alone can restore Christian living and give lasting peace. The re-Christianizing of the world can only be accomplished by a holy and charitable social activity, by a good example that is identified with the divine mission confided to the Church, which is a mission that tran-

³ Quoted by George Seldes in *The Vatican: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*. (New York: 1934) p. 369.

scends all boundaries and political parties. The Holy Father, in a letter to the Cardinal Archbishop of Milan, clearly defines the scope of work in this new movement: "Having been given exclusive competency over all problems of a moral nature, the Church, that is to say in a certain measure Catholic Action, has the right and the duty in the social and labor fields not to substitute itself for the syndicates, but to strive everywhere for the honor of God, the welfare of souls and the supernatural life with all its benefits."⁴ Surely this provides a solution to our vexing problems. But the lost ideals of mankind can never be brought back into the world unless there is a vast legion of active and loyal souls who will hearken to the appeals of the Pope and restore the reign of Christ in the hearts of men.

May we as faithful Catholics be not unmindful of our obligations towards God and man, that by our constancy and devotedness to duty, loyally following in the footsteps of the Vicar of Christ, we may contribute our share in the regeneration of the world. The genuine sincerity, the undaunted courage of the Holy Father is evident from his words, "I thank God that He made me live in this present day, in the midst of a crisis so universal, so profound and unique in the history of the Church. A man may justly be proud to be a witness and, up to a certain point, an active witness of this sublime drama in which good and evil are joined in one gigantic struggle. No one, at this present hour, has a right to take refuge in mediocrity, and I am certain that from this formidable upheaval the Church will arise more resplendent and better adapted to the necessities of the actual hour."⁵

⁴ Quoted by Seldes. *Op. cit.*, p. 350.

⁵ Quoted in *Wisdom: The Catholic Front*, II, No. 9. (October, 1937) p. 1.