

LACORDAIRE, APOSTLE OF YOUTH

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LIVES of great men now long since dead are often quite forgotten until contemporaneous events, by some similarity, remote perhaps, with the events or activities of their life stir up revered memories of them. The J.O.C. movement in the field of Catholic Action today awakens memories of a priest who, a century ago, dedicated a great part of his life to the task of restoring God and religion to the youth of France. That priest was Henry Dominic Lacordaire. The spiritual ideals of the Jocists and the religious principles which inspire their action are the ideals for which Père Lacordaire lived and the principles which animated his preaching, his writing, and his heroically unselfish life.

In his own youth, the victim of an age that attempted to mold a society without religion, an age in love with a false liberty which would have enslaved it, Père Lacordaire taught that age that society could not exist without religious belief, and held out to it true freedom and liberty—the freedom of Truth and the glorious liberty of the sons of God. From his own misfortune he learned to help the unfortunate. Converted again in 1824 by the mysterious workings of God's grace to the Christianity which he had lost after his first Communion, he tells us the thoughts that then filled his mind: "Once a Christian the world did not vanish from my sight; it grew with myself. Instead of the vain and transient theatre of disappointed or satisfied ambitions, I regarded it as a great man stricken by illness who needed succor, an illustrious unfortunate uniting all the evils of the ages past and to come; and therefore I knew nothing comparable to the happiness of serving it under the eyes of God with the Gospel and the Cross of His Son."¹

These long years of unstinting service began after his ordination to the priesthood at St. Sulpice in 1827. When the cholera broke out in Paris in 1832 it found him in the hospitals ministering to the sick. After two years of comparative solitude he was asked to give a series of conferences to the students of the College Stanislaus, one of the smaller colleges for

¹ *Thoughts and Teachings of Lacordaire* (London, 1902, 2nd ed.), p. 373.

boys in Paris. "Some day," he had said, "I may be called to some work for reclaiming young men, devoted solely to them. If I can ever make use of words on behalf of the Church, it will only be in the way of an Apology; that is to say in the shape of gathering together beauty, grandeur, history and polemics to the exaltation of Christianity and the fostering of the faith."² Now that call had come! It found him ready, eager to respond. During his seminary days and his years of quiet seclusion when chaplain at the Visitation Convent in Paris, he had worked out in his mind a definite plan of Christian apologetics, a plan designed to prove the divinity of the Catholic religion by its effects on society. Around this he built his conferences. These first conferences, of which only a few brief outlines remain, were at once an indication of the high caliber of Lacordaire's mind and of the irresistible appeal of his eloquence. Their influence upon his youthful hearers was so powerful and so obvious that they aroused immediate antagonism. He was denounced to the government as a fanatical Republican, likely to upset the minds of French youth. To his Archbishop he was accused of being a preacher of novelties, a man whose example was dangerous. It is not surprising, when we consider the perilous existence of Christianity in France at this period, to find such opposition. With religious and social conditions as they were, the Archbishop thought it best to stop the conferences.

But the voice of Lacordaire was not to remain silent for long. Through the influence of M. Affre, Canon of the Cathedral, and the petitions of a group of young law students headed by Frederick Ozanam, he again resumed his conferences, this time at the Cathedral of Notre Dame. That Ozanam, one of Lacordaire's dearest friends, should be in great measure responsible for his return to the pulpit is not without its deep significance. The work of the St. Vincent de Paul Society which he had recently founded and Lacordaire's preaching were destined to play a united rôle in the task of restoring Catholicism to France. "The Conferences of Notre Dame and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul," says Père Chocarne, "formed the germs of that magnificent tree which now extends its boughs over the length and breadth of France."³

² Lear, H. L., *Lacordaire* (London, 1882), p. 95.

³ Chocarne, *Inner Life of Père Lacordaire*, trans. by A. T. Drane (London, 1917, 10th ed.), p. 159.

Around the pulpit of Notre Dame gathered a remarkable body of men, young law students, orators, scientists, soldiers, Republicans and Royalists, believers and unbelievers, atheists and materialists—all France, especially young France, was represented in the Cathedral of Paris. Before them stood a priest with the sole desire of contributing what he could that God might re-enter into the faith and life of his age. He was keenly conscious of his God-given mission, to go before the face of the Lord like another St. John the Baptist, to prepare these souls to receive the faith. "The old state of society," he said, "perished because it expelled God; the new is suffering because God has not yet been re-admitted."⁴

He spoke to them of the Church, of the necessity of the Church, and of her distinctive character, her constitution, authority, teaching and power. He explained her doctrine, tradition, Holy Scripture, reason, faith, and the means of attaining that faith. Young Frenchmen imbued with rationalist principles, scions of the revolution of '89, children of an age still groping in the darkness of revolt and incredulity—how he longed to rescue them from error and bring them back to the light of truth which he had lost in his own youth and found again not long since!

He knew well the nature of the illness that afflicted their minds and hearts. Like a skilled physician he applied the remedies, often wounding deeply for the sake of the greater good he foresaw would follow. No one understood better than he their needs, their difficulties, and their doubts. He supplied for all their needs from the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel; he banished their doubts by his own sincere conviction; he answered their difficulties by solid arguments from authority, reason, and history. He set before them noble ideals of honor, patriotism, self-sacrifice. He appealed to their love of beauty, loyalty, virtue, liberty.

Endowed with a lively imagination, clearness of thought, freshness of style and expression—all those qualities which attract youth, he enkindled, by the fire of his eloquence, the highest aspirations of their ardent young hearts. No words can better describe the effect of these conferences on Lacordaire's audience than those of Msgr. de la Bouillerie in his funeral oration over Lacordaire. "The conferences of Notre Dame form an epoch in the history of Christian eloquence, and one from

⁴ Chocarne, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

which dates the commencement of an immense religious movement among the youth of the time. The vaulted roofs of the Cathedral of Paris now yearly behold the spectacle of thousands of men kneeling at the Holy Table to fulfill their Easter duties. Ask them who made them Christians and many will reply that the first spark of returning faith was kindled by the lightning flash of this man's eloquence."⁵ The Conferences went on for two years. Then suddenly Lacordaire announced his intention of stopping. He felt, as he himself said, that he was not yet ripe enough for the work. It was part of his finely tempered genius that in the midst of situations, great successes and great failures, which would have whirled a man less great to his ruin, he could choose calmly, dispassionately, the course that he ought to pursue. Subsequent events unfailingly proved the wisdom of his choice. He was not to return to the pulpit of Notre Dame until he ascended it again seven years later clothed in the black and white habit of the Order of St. Dominic.

Convinced during a visit to Rome that the greatest service he could render Christianity in his time would be to do something for the restoration of the religious orders, Lacordaire had chosen the Order of St. Dominic as the one best suited to his nature and purpose. The Master General of the Order in Rome had entered wholeheartedly into his plan and after he had completed his novitiate at Santa Sabina, Lacordaire returned home to spend the next twenty-one years of his life rebuilding that Order which had once so flourished in France. Here again Lacordaire's solicitude for his beloved youth revealed itself. With their religious education in mind, he asked and received permission from the Master General to establish colleges for youth in connection with the Order.

"As there is in every great soul," he had said of his friend, Ozanam, "a sort of necessity of finishing the monument the idea of which it has conceived and which is to bear its name, so in the great soul united to God there is felt the need of finishing the work which has been begun for Him and wherein its name is to be engraved beneath His own."⁶ To the restoration of the Dominican Order in France Lacordaire was to unite the Christian education of youth and in this double apostolate he was to finish his life's work. When in 1852 the college of Oullins was made over to the Dominicans, four young diocesan priests, pro-

⁵ Chocarne, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁶ Chocarne, *op. cit.*, p. 451.

fessors at the college, were received by him into the Third Order. They then returned to take up the direction of the college and continue the work of education. Lacordaire himself went to take charge of the college of Sorèze, a former Benedictine abbey and school, which had recently come into the possession of the Order. Here he was to spend the remaining years of his life. "It will be the tomb of my life, the asylum of my death, and to both a benefit."

There are no more beautiful and attractive years in the life of Père Lacordaire than his years at Sorèze in the midst of a crowd of schoolboys. Provincial of his Order in France, headmaster of Sorèze, he bore the cares and burdens of two families. He had no elaborate system of education. His sole aim was to mold the minds and wills of his young charges into that sound and sturdy virtue which makes intelligent and devout Christians, useful and loyal citizens. The whole secret of his method can best be summed up in his own words: "I can only define the sentiment which we feel for our pupils by one word, a word that is very famous and yet very simple—*we love them!* What will touch the heart of a man if the soul of a child does not touch it! What will ever soften him if not the soul of youth wherein the mortal struggle is going on between good and evil? We have no merit in thus loving them! Love is its own recompense, its own joy it brings its own riches and benediction."⁸

Over a period of seven years he gave a regular series of talks once each week. There was nothing at random about them. As a general rule he spent a week in their preparation. He thought too highly of his audience, felt their needs too keenly, to be careless in their regard. Yet more important was the work he accomplished among the students of Sorèze in the confessional. Here he was a combination of gentleness and firmness, wisely guiding the young souls who came to him along the positive path of increase in virtue. The door of his room and the door of his sympathetic heart were always open to them. They found in him the kindness and care of a prudent father, the warmth and sincerity of an old friend. At their disposal he placed the accumulated wisdom and experience of his years of study, reflection, manifold activity and intercourse among men. Although he insisted on the supernatural love of Christ as the vivifying force and perfection of the spiritual life, he took care

⁷ Chocarne, *op. cit.*, p. 471.

⁸ Chocarne, *op. cit.*, p. 476.

that they should place a proper value upon their natural gifts. He was interested in all their problems, their likes and their ambitions. In regard to these he had invariably some sage advice to offer. Count de Montalembert tells of him that once when at Paris he undertook a journey of two hundred leagues that his children might not miss confession. His illustrious friend tried to detain him on some business matter, "No, I cannot stay," he replied after a slight hesitation, "it would perhaps make some of my children miss confession who have been preparing for the next feast. We cannot calculate the effect of one Communion less in the life of a Christian."⁹

He loved to spend the evening recreation with the students and he liked it to be and helped to make it a real recreation, animated by simple, cheerful conversation without stiffness or formality. It is a tribute to the greatness and versatility of Lacordaire's character that after so many years devoted to the more serious things of life, he could enter so freely and unreservedly into the talk and play of boyhood. Often he would take them on long walks in the countryside over the hills or through the forests. After dinner, seated by a tree, he told them stories until overcome with fatigue he would rest his head on the shoulders of the one nearest him and take a quiet siesta. What could be more typical and characteristic a picture than this of the great preacher of Notre Dame, the man with the truly brilliant mind and the childlike heart?

During all the unceasing labors of his ever busy life he never failed to keep in touch with the youthful souls whom he had once met. His letters to young men are a veritable mine of wise counsel and solid spiritual instruction. In them we find the sincere friend, the loving father, the good shepherd, tenderly caring for his sheep, warning them of danger, spurring them on, gathering them, scolding them when necessary, running after and bringing them back to the fold when they are about to go astray. Even today these letters, translated from their native tongue, have an irresistible appeal about them. In their candor and sincerity, in their deep knowledge of human nature and in the apostolic spirit pervading them there is mirrored the great soul of Père Lacordaire. The same immortal qualities that endeared him to the youth of his own day cannot fail to attract even now.

⁹ Chocarne, *op. cit.*, p. 475.

The influence for good exerted by Lacordaire over the youth of his own day has not died out in their posterity. It remains and will always remain a living testimonial to his work and the spirit of Christian charity that enabled him to carry it through. Born to fight and to love, richly endowed by nature with the finest gifts of soul and body, enlightened, strengthened, perfected by Divine Grace, single-minded, calm, sure in his unbounded confidence in Providence—such was Père Lacordaire; in his conferences, the teacher, clear, sound of doctrine, seeking only God's glory; in his letters, the friend, sincere and true; in his life the faithful priest and religious, humble, zealous, a man of penance, a lover of the Cross and the Passion of Christ, a man chosen in his generation with the special mission of winning the minds and hearts of youth and riveting them in Christ.