

## THE CHURCH MILITANT — THE CHURCH PERSECUTED

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ONE OF THE MANY THINGS about the Catholic Church that puzzle non-Catholics is the constant recurring succession of persecutions which seem to stalk its steps. No sooner is the Catholic Church established in some new mission field than bold hostility, ranging in its efforts from discomforting annoyances to violent bloodshed, attempts to destroy its life. In countries where it has been long established, even in so-called Catholic countries, a period of comparative peace for the Church is succeeded by a period of persecution, in a never ending cycle. Not long ago a Protestant clergyman in England, discussing the recent disorders in Spain, and seeing in these disorders a symptom of the world-wide revolt against the Catholic Church, even on the part of members of that Church, declared that the institution capable of arousing such bitter, fierce, and widespread hatred among men must indeed be a very wicked thing.

The principle on which he based this judgment is the unfounded assumption that what men hate must be evil. This would certainly be true if this thing which men hate were also hated by God. But is this the case? History will show that there have been persecutions of the Catholic Church in the past, violent and bloody ones, and when their instigators were glutted with blood, and satisfied that they had destroyed the hateful thing, the Church has risen from the ruins so fresh and vigorous that it seemed as if persecution, far from annihilating it, had infused new life into it.

The question then arises: If the Church is beloved by God, why does He allow it to be thus afflicted? And with this question answered, a further one presents itself naturally to our minds: What secret source of strength in the Church does persecution liberate, that causes it to become revitalized, as it were, like the legendary phoenix?

Let us see what future Our Saviour promised to the Church which He founded. It is clear that persecution was foretold by Christ. Time and time again He impressed upon His followers

the inevitability of adversity. He Himself had experienced it from His birth. The Jewish priest Simeon, holding Him in his aged arms, foresaw with prophetic vision that His life and works would be a sign of contradiction. And Herod, as soon as the joyful news of the birth of the true King of the Jews was announced to him, sought Him out, not to venerate, but to slay Him. At first it was the political power, and later it was the religious power, which attempted to do away with Jesus. "Herod sought the child to destroy Him," because he feared His kingdom was to be of this world, the Sanhedrin, because He declared that His kingdom was not of this world.

The beginning of Christ's public life was a signal for the initiation of the onslaught of the leaders of the Jews against Him. He taught the people not as the Scribes and Pharisees but as one having power (Mt. 7-29). He was the Son of God, (Mt. 22-41 and had come to bring salvation to the Jews (Mt. 10-5 to 7). He performed miracles in support of His teaching. The religious rulers of the people were forced to act. They could no longer afford to ignore the influence He exercised—they had either to accept Him or reject Him entirely. The Gospels and the Acts tell us which course they followed. They sought to discredit Him by ensnaring Him in His words (Mt. 22-15), on religious questions (Mt. 11-10), and failing in this they attempted to prove Him a disturber of the State (Luke 23-2). And as evil always seems to prevail over good, they had their way, and seized Christ, and after a farcical trial they brutally murdered Him in the name of the Jewish religion, and with the benediction of the Roman authorities.

In the course of His public life, Christ had spoken many times of the persecution which awaits all those who sincerely strive to follow Him. Mindful of His loving-kindness, we can expect an unfolding of the reason for opposition, and of the use we can make of it. We find it in the Gospel according to St. John, related to the Apostles under exceedingly fitting circumstances. It was at the completion of the first Eucharistic Banquet, after they had received Him into their hearts, on fire with love for Him. Judas had fled from this holy place, and Jesus poured into these enraptured hearts the secrets which only lovers share.

"A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you." The gospel of Christ is a gospel of love. "And he that loveth Me, shall be loved by my Father: and

I will love him and will manifest Myself to him." But love in action is a hard thing for men to understand and those men whom our Blessed Lord groups collectively as "the world" can never remain indifferent to its challenge. At first they are vexed by it, for they understand selfishness, not selflessness, but gradually their vexation gives way to hatred. The reason is simple: the Apostles are not *of* the world, and the world loves only what is its own (John 15-19), only those who conform to its standards. But these men are never content to be hostile merely in words. They will expel the Apostles as unbelievers from the synagogues; more, the hour will come when anyone who kills them will think that he is doing a service to God. As confirmation of these words it is recorded in the Acts (9-1) how Saul went about with fanatical zeal dragging the Christians in chains from the provinces to Jerusalem—and, at the memory of these things, from his soul is wrung the anguished cry, "I persecuted the Church of God." (1 Cor. 15-9)

The Apostles, and in them we see the likenesses of all true Christians, are to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. Yet even though they be living in the supernatural life they will still be subject to all the vicissitudes to which the flesh is heir, they will suffer heat, cold, hunger, and thirst. But they will no longer suffer these things as individuals, but as branches of the Vine that is Christ. Like the wise husbandman, God will prune the branches in order that they may bear much fruit for He knows the strength of the Vine and the power of the sap of Grace to bring forth a rich harvest, if He is allowed to treat the branches as His Wisdom directs Him. His wish is the sanctification of our souls, and thus He permits the Church to be scorned, to be hated, to be beaten, to be slain in its members. For Christ did not desire His Heavenly Father to take His followers out of the world, but that He keep them from evil. They are not to flee the world; rather Christ sends them as "sheep among wolves" to confront men with the uncompromising teaching of the gospel of salvation, and to lead them to His feet. "That they all may be one, as Thou, Father, in me, and I in Thee: that they may be one in us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me."

But with His frankness in announcing the evils to come, Christ invariably unites solemn assurances that nothing can hurt us. He seems to take a delight in this contrast, the mountainous form of the evils and their complete powerlessness to do His followers any harm. It is not only the general watchfulness of

God's providence; it is a direct dispensation that is the cause of this preservation in the midst of such trials, the immunity of the elect that is part of Christ's own immunity from evil. Though Christ conquered Satan, sin, and death, He succumbed externally to His enemies. So the elect may be overcome, but they cannot be hurt in their souls. Above all, the transient success of the powers of darkness is unable to shake the faith of the elect in Christ's cause for they see with clear vision the coming of the judgment of this world.

History bears out the fact that the Church grows more vigorous as soon as persecution rears its head. This is evident from the very beginning of the Church when the Apostles, as men drunk from new wine, began to preach the doctrines of Christ once more, and so great was the force of their preaching that "there were added that day about three thousand souls." The growth of the Church thereafter was remarkable. "The blood of Christians is a seed," but one which does not produce a mushroom growth, quickly arising and quickly passing away, but rather one like that of yeast in the dough, slow yet permanent in its effects. Tertullian, writing to a hostile Rome, is astonishingly aggressive: "If we desired, indeed, to act the part of open enemies, not merely of secret avengers, would there be any lacking in strength, whether of numbers or resources? The Moors, the Marcomanni, the Parthians themselves, or any single people, however great, inhabiting a distinct territory, and confined within its own boundaries, does it surpass one spread over all the world? We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum—we have left to you nothing but the temples of your gods. For what wars should we not be fit, not eager, even with uneven forces, we who so willingly yield ourselves to the sword, if in our religion it were not counted better to be slain than to slay? Without arms even, and raising no insurrectionary banner, but simply in enmity to you, we could carry on the contest with you by an ill-willed severance alone. For if such multitudes of men were to break away from you, and betake themselves to some remote corner of the world, why, the very loss of so many citizens, whatever sort they are, would cover the Empire with shame; nay in the very forsaking, vengeance would be inflicted. You would be horror-struck at the solitude in which you would find yourselves at such an all-prevailing silence and that stupor as of



a dead world. You would have to seek subjects to govern. You would have more enemies than citizens remaining. For now it is the immense number of Christians which makes your enemies so few—almost all the inhabitants of your various cities being followers of Christ."

The great prophecy of St. John, the beloved disciple, is a fit conclusion to the Scriptures, not only through the splendor of his vision, but chiefly through the profound lesson it inculcates, the persistence of Christ's triumph in spite of every adversity and every hostility. In the Apocalypse, as in the Gospels, the external condition under which the elect live is put before us with merciless frankness. There are dark passages like this: "And it was given to him (the dragon) to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And power was given to him over every tribe and people and tongue." (13-7)

Yet with all those concessions to the powers of darkness the real issue is never doubtful; the evil powers will fight the Lamb with one accord, but it is all in vain; "These will fight with the Lamb. And the Lamb will overcome them, because He is the Lord of Lords and King of Kings: and they that are with him are called and elect and faithful." (Apoc. 14-4)

This was the fruit of the blood of martyrs, spilled, not in vain struggles for earthly riches, but in the conquest of self and of neighbor for God. Behold the truth hidden behind history: "Unless the grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it remains alone. But if it die, it brings forth much fruit." (John 12-24) And in the light of it may it not be said that the blood of Christians shed today will be the foundation of a remarkable rebirth of faith tomorrow?