



THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

CENTURY SINCE LOURDES

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“**T**HE POPE! How many divisions has the Pope?” Stalin may have later reconsidered these scornful words. For only three years after he delivered them at Teheran, the Communist juggernaut was poised for the attack, prepared and confident that it would conquer Western Europe—with votes. The Pope’s outspoken yet fatherly voice rang out. The juggernaut was stopped in its tracks. That was the Italian election of 1948.

Such has been the history of the Church since Lourdes. Her lands and legions are negligible. Yet her moral influence and internal strength have gradually grown. The point may soon be reached (it may be already) which future historians will compare to the glorious days of Innocent III, and his successors of the 13th century. For the Church continues her mission despite all obstacles, confident in the divine assurance of her stability until the end of time. The past one hundred years are a witness.

In 1858, as if to give the lie to those who were proclaiming the “impossibility” of miracles and, indeed, to confirm a papal definition of dogma made just four years earlier, the Blessed Virgin appeared to the young peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous, in the grotto of Massabielle, near Lourdes, France. To understand the mood of that decade we must recall that it was in the very wake of movements that changed the face and heart of Europe: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the general upheavals of the continent in 1848; the struggle of the papacy to stem the tide of revolution in the Papal States themselves. The temporal power of the Church is gradually undermined. Lost to Napoleon, it was regained at the Congress of Vienna. And now the Holy See was beginning to feel the unrest of revolt and the intrigue of the Piedmontese Cavour. And yet from this position of apparent weakness, only four years apart within the same

decade, a Pontiff—Pius IX—declares at Rome a dogma, and a heavenly voice confirms at Lourdes: "I am the Immaculate Conception." It is the reassuring answer of faith.

In 1864 Pius IX resolutely published the famous *Syllabus*, a collection of 80 propositions which reiterated the condemnation of pantheism, naturalism, socialism, communism, But the greatest spiritual triumph of Pius IX was the holding of a new Church Council, the first since Trent was closed in 1563.

When the Vatican Council was called in 1869 by the bull *Aeterni Patris* the times were so troubled that few believed it ever could meet. But on December 8, 1869, almost three-fourths of the entire episcopate assembled at the Vatican. In the first sessions the fundamental truths of Christianity were discussed: God's existence, nature and providence; the possibility and the fact of Revelation; the harmony between reason and faith. Atheism, materialism, rationalism, pantheism, which were the principal errors of the day, were condemned. This was the Church in her teaching role, manifesting herself to be immune, indifferent to all the material damage inflicted on her, conscious always of her superior mission to lead souls to Christ.

The eyes of the world were on the Council when its fourth session met. The question of the day was papal infallibility. There were those, even within the Council, who urged that such a declaration would be inopportune. The dogma, however, was precisely defined and approved, and these fears proved ungrounded. In all but isolated instances the definition was received throughout the Church with enthusiasm.

This spectacular spiritual triumph of the Vatican Council was followed only two months later by a spectacular temporal disaster. A sad epoch in the history of the papacy was to begin. The Pope was to become "The Prisoner of the Vatican."

Since the year 1859 Piedmont had begun to enlarge its territory at the expense of Austria, the northern duchys of Tuscany, Parma, and the papal Romagna. Umbria and Ancona followed. The small army of the Pope was crushed at Castelfidardo, leaving to the Pontiff only Rome and its immediate surroundings. When, in 1870, France withdrew its garrison from Rome at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, and the Empire of Napoleon III crumbled to pieces after the battle of Sedan, the Piedmontese troops entered Rome. The Italian king took up his quarters in the Papal Palace of the Quirinal and with an insufferably condescending air, permitted the Pope to retain possession of the Vatican. Pius IX refused the proffered an-

nual allowance of three and a quarter million lire; instead he protested vigorously against the flagrant injustice committed against the Holy See, and remained a voluntary prisoner—depending for his support mainly on the contributions of his children all over the world.

Proof that the end of temporal power had not diminished the spiritual influence of the Church was soon forthcoming. The scene was Germany; the setting was the so-called "conflict of civilizations" between Bismarck and Rome. Infamous laws were passed seeking to bring the education, appointment, and discipline of the clergy completely under State control, and to regulate the use of spiritual penalties such as suspension and excommunication. When the German Bishops refused to obey, the government resorted to force. Teaching orders of men and women were expelled, Bishops were imprisoned or exiled, salaries for the clergy were suspended. But German Catholics remained firm in their adherence to the Church and its Head. The Catholic Party in the Reichstag, under the leadership of splendid laymen became a powerful force in German politics. The abrogation of the May Laws was gradual, but the Catholic victory was clear.

Towards the end of the 19th century the Church faced old enemies, and new. There was again in France the problem of anti-clericalism, the dangers of socialism, attacks on the sanctity of marriage. The pressing questions of liberty and authority and the rights of labor called for clear and prompt answers. A blueprint for future social action was given in the famous social encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII. But the constructive undertaking of the successor of Pius IX did not stop at the social question (*Rerum Novarum*). Attention was given also to the revival of Thomism (*Aeterni Patris*), the duties of Catholics towards the state (*Libertas Praestantissimum, Sapientiae Christianae*), the constitution of states themselves (*Immortale Dei*), the fostering and direction of Biblical Studies (*Providentissimus Deus*). It was a rich new era of papal teaching, a logical progression from the strengthening of the hand of the papacy by the Vatican Council. (Or, more properly, to the testimony of the Vatican Council to the inherent strength of the hands of the Vicar of Christ on earth).

The "eldest daughter of the Church," France, persisted in anti-religious campaigns. In 1901 the Associations Law was passed which ordered all religious associations to solicit special authorization as the price of their existence. Only a few were granted. Congregations were suppressed, schools were closed. In 1905 the rupture of the Concordat consummated the separation in France of Church and state. Yet looking back now we can see that in these "darkest days"

there began a profound, if not yet widespread, spiritual revival among French Catholics.

"To restore all things in Christ" was the rallying cry of Pope St. Pius X, the reigning Vicar in this first decade of the 20th century. In discerning and condemning the errors of Modernism as an attempt to remodel Christianity along the lines of rationalistic philosophy, he showed practical insight and dynamic resolution. As "the Pope of the Eucharist" he quenched the last dying embers of Jansenism and opened the inexhaustible channel of Eucharistic grace to all, even children, through daily Communion.

1914 marked two tragic events: the outbreak of a continental war in Europe that was to assume world-wide proportions, with Christ's flock on both sides, and the start of a religious persecution in Mexico. Pope Benedict XV's proffered hand as prospective peacemaker was turned aside. Towards the end of that first World War the Bolshevik Revolution began in Russia. In that same year—1917—the Blessed Mother appeared again, at Fatima in Portugal, calling men to prayer and foretelling the spread of errors. She warned, indeed, of the very evils that are the boast of atheistic communism, against which the lone and eloquent prophetic voice of Pope Pius XI would soon be heard.

In the post-World War I period we witness the ever-increasing interest of the layman in his duties within the Mystical Body. There begins to loom large a new bulwark of Catholicism in the face of infidelity and persecutions: it is Catholic Action, the cooperation of the laity in the hierarchical apostolate of the Church. It is recognized even by the long hostile Italian government in the Lateran Treaty. This Concordat closed the books on the Roman Question with the sovereignty and independence of the Pope at last accepted by the Italian State. Catholic Action also worked and suffered in Spain under the bitter persecution which followed the proclamation of the Spanish Republic, and the Revolution which overthrew it in 1936. Similarly it thrived in Germany under the hostile Nazi yoke.

At the end of the Second World War the western world was at last prepared to accept the reality of the threat posed by expanding Communism. It was by now generally accepted that the lines of conflict were not merely territorial or economic, but extended to the ideological order as well. Communism enslaves nations and the Church, but it was seen how those alive to truth within those nations might, if only hope were kept alive, shake off the Red yoke and liberate the Church. The moral errors of the day—secularism, indifference, situational ethics—have felt the sting, as well as the

warming light of papal teaching, the encyclicals and constitutions of the ordinary magisterium of the Church. Their repeated use by Pope Leo XIII was continued by his successors. The power and flexibility of this papal role was made keenly evident by Pope Pius XII in *Humani Generis*, and in the sweeping chords of his encyclicals on the Mystical Body, (*Mystici Corporis*), on the liturgy (*Mediator Dei*) and on Catholic biblical studies (which had reached a plane of excellence undreamed of 40 years before) (*Divini Afflante Spiritu*).

In this pontificate we have seen a Marian year commemorating the centenary of the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, and the promulgation of the Assumption dogma, in happy affirmation of the faith of centuries, as well as the papal pronouncement of the Queenship of Mary. These may be called proofs, if proof were needed, that in time of affliction the Church resorts to Our Blessed Mother. The Immaculate Conception proclamation, Lourdes, Fatima and the Assumption dogma are points of contrast between the efforts of evil to prevail against the Church, and the promise of Our Lord to Peter: *Non pravalebunt*.

1858-1958, one hundred years of intense animosity against the Church, a century of progressive realization of her superior mission. Amidst the wars for political or territorial gains—petty things when compared to eternal values—the Church points to the ultimate decision:

"Either for God or against God—that is once more the point at issue, and upon it hangs the fate of the world. For in every department of life, in politics and economics, in the sciences and the arts, in the state and in domestic life, in the East and in the West, everywhere the same issue arises.—For God or against God" (Pius XI, Caritate Christi Compulsi).

Might we ask if temporal weakness in His Church was the divine prerequisite to this marvelous spiritual resurgence. Was Christ speaking also to this Century of Lourdes, when he said to St. Paul:

"My grace is sufficient for thee: for power is made perfect in infirmity."

II Cor. 12:9