

THE EXPECTATION OF THE CHURCH

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FROM THE VANTAGE POINT of history, it is not difficult to recognize the saints as instruments of Providence, raised up by God to fulfil some special mission or need. Just one hundred years ago—in 1858—two such providential figures were launched into careers which were to have profound significance for the Church in our day. One comes to mind almost immediately in this Lourdes centenary year: it is Bernadette, the little peasant girl, who started out one cold February morning on a lowly, routine errand of gathering firewood—only to be caught up in that providential series of adventures which is still echoing throughout the Christian world. Bernadette became the instrument, the mouthpiece, of the Immaculate. In 1858, Lourdes came as an unmistakable, miracle-confirmed testimony of the supernatural to a world beguiled by rationalism and materialism. It has remained in our day a constant re-affirmation of Christian hope: Mary's message, proclaimed and witnessed by the little shepherdess, will draw an estimated eight million pilgrims this year to the grotto of the apparitions.

Bernadette's dramatic entrance onto the stage of history will be the subject of much comment this year. Less notice, perhaps, will be taken of another beginning—the quiet inception of a second vital career, which occurred about two months after the last of the Lourdes apparitions. Among the young priests ordained that September, 1858, for the diocese of Treviso, Italy, was one named Joseph Sarto. Though he had proven himself an accomplished and brilliant seminarian, the young cleric showed unmistakably the characteristic traits of his peasant origins. And indeed, the inhabitants of his little native village of Riese were at the time about the only ones who took much notice of the joyous occasion. Yet hindsight enables us to discern in the

sacerdotal beginnings here recounted the first lines of Joseph Sarto's strikingly providential role as country pastor, Sovereign Pontiff, and now as St. Pius X.

To say that the Pope of *Pascendi* (that moving encyclical which cut at the roots of Modernist heresy) was called to guide the Church in hazardous times is, to be sure, an understatement. Pius' mission, again, as Pope of the Eucharist has had a profound and noticeable effect on the Church in the twentieth century. But a third title due to St. Pius X, as a study of his life will clearly show, is that of "Pope of the Priesthood." Ever present in all his works was the consciousness of one of Christian society's most critical needs, that cornerstone of the Church's present and future spiritual prosperity—a holy clergy. He saw intuitively the direct proportion between the well-being of the Church as a whole and the sanctity of its priests. It is not difficult, therefore, to understand St. Pius' lifelong efforts to sanctify the priesthood of the Church he loved. Significantly, he began with himself.

A LIVING TESTIMONY

Father Sarto was an exemplar from his first years in the priesthood. Such words as "zeal" and "piety" come easily to the pen of his biographers, as they describe this early part of his ministry. It might be simpler to say that he was an embodiment of that exacting formula of priestly perfection found in the ordination rite, as the ordaining prelate calls upon the Father to infuse the spirit of holiness into the candidate to the priesthood that the example of the priest's life might be a "norm of conduct" for the faithful. Father Sarto was precisely that: his life was a measure and a guide for his people. They saw in him virtue in action and could not help following his example, for it is difficult to shake off the effect of such a "living sermon."

PASTOR AND BISHOP

This characteristic of Pius X, which showed itself in the beginning of his ministry, stayed with him throughout his career: he was always exactly what his state required him to be. This characteristic seems to strike all who have made a study of his life. As one of his biographers says:

The diversity of offices which he had held during the course of fifty years of priestly life made it possible for him to stand as an example

for all. His life was the norm for all priestly activity: his every act and word was a lesson to be studied and imitated by those who wished their ministry to yield the greatest fruit.¹

But if he lived up to the demands of his calling, he expected the same of others. One of his first documents as newly-appointed Bishop of Mantua was a pastoral letter to his clergy. Speaking of the fear inspired in him by this exalted position, he wrote:

Believe me, if there is anything to calm this fear, it is the confidence that you will live up to my expectations.²

Subsequently he made more explicit just what these expectations were:

A priest must bring his every action, every step, every habit into harmony with the sublimity of his vocation. . . . Wherever he is, or in whatever work he engages, he must never cease to be a priest, accompanied by the dignity, gravity and decorum of a priest. He must therefore be holy; he must be saintly, so that his words and his works express his love, impress his authority and command respect.³

As Cardinal Patriarch of Venice, Pius continued to manifest this devotion to appointed duty. In his first sermon at St. Mark's, he told the Venetians that in his new office he had no other ambition than "the defense of truth and the welfare of his flock." This duty did not rest lightly upon him.

How I tremble to think that souls can be punished for all eternity on account of the negligence of their pastor. . . . I have a sacred duty to defend the truth openly, for God will ask me to render an account for all those souls who have strayed into the ways of perdition; even though they hate in me the Bishop and pastor, their fate is my responsibility.⁴

His solicitude for the proper training of the clergy made the diocesan seminary the special object of his attention. At Mantua, in Venice, and finally in the chair of Peter, he adhered strictly to the norms laid down by the Council of Trent for the formation of a holy and virtuous priesthood.

He wanted to know his clerics more intimately, to have exact information as to their talents, their diligence in study and progress in piety, for he realized that the fruit of their future ministry depended very much on this. He would not confer Orders until he had taken the greatest care to ascertain that the candidate showed signs of having a genuine vocation.⁵

At last the erstwhile peasant priest and zealous prelate was elected to succeed the illustrious Leo XIII as Supreme Pastor of

the universal Church. Is it any surprise that Pius X should continue to live and preach the theme of priestly holiness which had guided him for almost half a century? In his encyclical *Pieni l'animi* of 1906 he took up again the refrain "as the priest, so the people."

In it (*Pieni l'animi*) he wished particularly to recall priests to discipline and obedience, knowing well that when the clergy is infected, all are infected. Hence he adjured and commanded that bishops would ordain only those aspirants to the priesthood who gave unmistakable assurance of discipline and mental docility. Particularly he urged vigilance over seminarians.⁶

THE EXHORTATION TO THE CATHOLIC CLERGY

An integral part of Pius X's sweeping program to "restore all things in Christ" was a reform of the clergy—a clergy into which Modernism had made deep inroads. As a culmination of these endeavors he left to us the ultimate expression of his priestly spirit—*The Exhortation to the Catholic Clergy*. This was to be a written testimony destined to complement and complete the living testimony which he had given during half a century of priestly ministry. This document, written on his Golden Jubilee, is actually and unwittingly a spiritual autobiography.

The old parish priest, the old spiritual director of seminarians, knew well the essential and irreplaceable value of a good priest for an orderly and healthy society. For the formation of such a priesthood he determined to write a brief treatise along the lines of St. John Chrysostom's *Dialogue on the Priesthood*. He wrote every bit of it himself, in summer heat so crushing that audiences at the Vatican were suspended. The exhortation came right from his soul, an unconscious picture of himself. He knew what the priest should be because he himself was such a priest.⁷

The plan of the *Exhortation* is simple, and the author himself insists that its message is not new.

The priest is not a man who can be good or bad for himself alone; it is impossible to realize what an influence his manner and habit of living have on the faithful.⁸

Because of this, the priest must ever seek to configure himself to the perfect Priest—to be an "Alter Christus." This is the essence of priestly holiness; if it is lacking, all is lacking. And why?

Because—without holiness—a vast store of the finest learning (which We Ourselves are trying so hard to cultivate in priests), keenness and efficiency in management, while they may occasionally be of some service to the Church or to individual souls, are much more frequently the

deplorable cause of harm to the Church and to souls. How much a priest, even the lowliest, can do if he be holy!⁹

The reader is unfailingly pleased by the clear order with which the saintly Pontiff sets forth his ideas. With scholastic precision he first establishes the end—holiness is the end to be sought. The remainder of the *Exhortation* is devoted to recalling the means through which this end is attained. These means are principally prayer, meditation, examination of conscience, spiritual reading, the practice of virtue; but “more than ordinary virtue; virtue that may be a model for others.” A close analysis of Pius’ mode of expression shows something of the singleness and clarity of his mind. Take for example the way he orders the relationship of sanctity to the human will, grace and prayer.

Since . . . sanctity of life results from proper exercise of the will, provided that it is supported by the help of God’s grace, God Himself has provided for us abundantly, lest we should lack at any time the help of His grace, if we desire it, and this we obtain especially through prayer.¹⁰

The *Exhortation* is an invaluable work of synthesis; not only is it redolent of St. Paul’s pastoral doctrine and that of great sacerdotal writers like St. John Chrysostom and St. Charles Borromeo, but it also crystallizes a half century of the ministry of a Saint.

THE JUST EXPECTATIONS OF THE CHURCH

St. Pius wrote his *Exhortation* in terms of eternal truth and eternal values; time cannot change such standards. Cardinal Merry del Val emphasized this fact when, many years after the death of St. Pius he wrote:

What is the lesson which Pius X sought to inculcate in his *Exhortation* and of which all that he wrote was the development? It is this: that we who are consecrated to God’s service, we who have been set apart for the sublime office of the priesthood, more than others and in a special manner are bound to cultivate the spiritual life, to live on supernatural principles, to look at things from a supernatural standpoint. . . .¹¹

This is to expect a great deal. But the Church does expect much of her priests, and justly so. St. Pius X’s providential guidance and example for all priests in living up to their priestly duty was rather prophetically expressed by himself when he wrote:

We shall point out the way by which each priest should studiously strive day by day to become, as the Apostle has so well said, ‘a man of God’

(I Tim., VI, 2), and to correspond to the just expectation of the Church.¹²

He did just that. He pointed out in his own life and virtues the way by which the priests who follow him should travel, for the Holy See by canonizing him has said, in effect, that Pius X did indeed fulfil all the "just expectations" of the Church.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Dal-Gal, Hieronymo, *Pius X*. Westminster, Md., Newman Press, 1954. p. 163.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- ⁶ Giordani, Igino, *Pius X, A Country Priest*. Bruce, 1954, p. 160.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- ¹⁰ Yzerman, Vincent A., ed., *All Things in Christ; Encyclicals and Selected Documents of St. Pius X*. Westminster, Md., Newman Press.
- ¹¹ Montoli, Robert, trans by Thomas J. Tobin. *Priestly Perfection*. New York, Benziger Brothers, 1934. p. xv.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 3.



" . . . Divine Providence itself requires that in calling back the peoples to the paths of faith and salvation advantage should be taken of human science also—an approved and wise practice which history testifies was observed by the most illustrious Fathers of the Church . . .

"In the first place, philosophy, if rightly made use of by the wise, in a certain way tends to smooth and fortify the road to true faith, and to prepare the souls of its disciples for the fit reception of revelation; for which reason it is well called by ancient writers sometimes a stepping-stone to the Christian faith, sometimes the prelude and help of Christianity, sometimes the Gospel teacher."

(Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*)