

THE CATHOLICITY OF THE CHURCH

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HENRY in one of his imitable stories sketches the hero in big, broad lines, for as the hero tells us himself, he is a citizen of the world, not tied down by the least little heart string to his native town. In his extensive travels he boasts that the world is his home and that he is impartial to all cities and countries; he would not be so rustic as to bore others with a tireless vaunting of his hometown's merits. But the climax comes when he overhears someone disparaging his *own* native village. And the 'Cosmopolite' rises up in its defense, heaping opprobrium on the unlucky one. O. Henry shows up the braggart to be as provincial as a small-towner can be, but he does not tell us whether the cosmopolite goes back to the elm-lined Main Street of his birthplace to spend his declining years.

The inference might be drawn that we are all at bottom provincial, and none of us true cosmopolites. But, we think, there is a true cosmopolite, who without losing his love for his native town or country, nor yet breaking contact with his fellow countrymen can yet sympathize with the sufferings of mankind and rejoice in their good fortune. He sees that there is no incompatibility between national patriotism and a concern for all mankind, but rather that his love for his countrymen is conditioned by, and in proportion to, his love for all men. Mankind, to a Catholic, is not something abstract but a group of human beings possessing the same nature and general aspirations, a body and soul, like himself, and the same parent, Adam. Nothing human is alien to him. He recognizes that all have a common Father, God, Who made men to His likeness and image, thus creating a bond among men that is superior to racial or national differences.

This bond of love attains its perfection in the union of the Catholic with his coreligionists spread throughout the world, for all are bound by the deepest of ties—union with Christ in the Mystical Body of Christ, His Church. And so wherever he goes, the Catholic is at

ease, for he finds himself among kinsfolk. He can feel at home when attending Mass in any of the far-flung dioceses of the Church, whether it be in this country or in Europe, in Asia or in Africa. He is a citizen of the world, a true cosmopolite, because his Church is cosmopolitan, world-wide in its extension.

It is this universal extension that we shall consider, showing what it is and what it means. Proposed as the most obvious note of the Church it signifies a universal and united expansion of her members—a world-wide Society, compact and integral. Unity is essential to the Church because she is the Mystical Body of Christ, and Christ is not divided. "As there is only one natural Christ, it is impossible that there should be more than one mystical Christ."¹ Catholicity is the universal extension of Christ's Mystical Body and so has a fundamental relation to the Unity of this Body. Catholicity presupposes and can only be built upon unity. This intimate relation of the two notes does not fall within our present scope; we shall consider only the Church's universal expansion in itself, and as an indication of Christ's Church.

The universal propagation of the Church manifests the Church of God because His blessing is upon her giving her a numerous offspring. This magnificent increase of children born to Holy Mother Church was graciously promised by God as far back as Abraham, three thousand years ago. God promised Abraham children as numerous as the stars of the heavens. "I have made thee a father of many nations."² St. Paul commenting on these words³ says that this promise of inheriting the world was not to be fulfilled by those keeping the Law, nor even by natural issue, but by those who would be children of Abraham through faith in Christ, namely the Christians. The Prophets likewise foretold the universality of the Messianic Church. Isaias says: "in the last days the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be prepared on the top of the mountains . . . and all nations shall flow into it."⁴ David hears God the Father saying to His Son: "Ask of me and I will give thee the Gentiles for thy inheritance and the utmost parts of the earth for thy possession."⁵ Here David prophesies the universal rule of the Messiah.

Jesus Christ, the Messiah Himself, says that His rule was to be, not temporal, like those in this world, but a spiritual one: "My king-

¹ Abbé Anger, *The Doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ*, p. 305.

² *Genesis xvii, 4.*

³ *Romans iv, 13.*

⁴ *Isaias ii, 2.*

⁵ *Ps. ii, 8.*

dom is not of this world."⁶ His kingdom was from another world, but it was destined to embrace all men within its fold. "Go," He said to His Apostles, "Teach all nations, teaching them all that I have commanded you."⁷ Thus was sown the tiny mustard seed that was to develop into the great tree in which all the birds of the air would come and dwell. There can be no doubt that Christ meant His kingdom to be universal.

His Apostles were to teach mankind about its Savior, for "the Son of Man came . . . to give His life a redemption for many."⁸ They must bring to all men the fruits of the Redemption, and teach them the way to salvation. So from Christ's mission on this earth, and from His purpose in instituting a Church, we see that this Church will extend to the whole world. For Christ did not die for the Jewish nation alone, but for all nations, all men; He was not merely the Son of David, but the Son of Man.

There is only one Church carrying out Christ's precept of teaching all nations. The Church preaching Christ to the world, His Church, is the Catholic Church. All the world unites in giving her this title. She counts her children in every land, and the sun never sets on her domain. Truly is the promise to Abraham fulfilled, her children are as numerous as the stars of the heavens. God's hand is with her for it is grace which wins souls to Christ. St. Paul tells us that "he planted, Apollo watered, but God gave the increase."⁹ And the Catholic Church has gained such an astounding increase that no one can doubt that God's grace is with her.

History shows clearly that the Catholic Church has been the missionary of the Gentiles. Paul made many converts in Greece and the surrounding countries. Peter taught the faith to many in Rome; all the Apostles preached to different nations. Preachers of the Gospel, many of whom were sent directly from the Pope, won over the barbaric tribes that swept down upon Southern Europe in the fifth and following centuries. From the fifth to the eighth century the Irish, the Franks, the Hollanders, the Germans, the Russians and the Poles were converted and brought under the civilizing power of the Church. To such a testimony of missionary zeal and God's blessing only one Church can lay claim.

This teaching of the nations took many centuries and is even now going on. But this does not mean that the Church is not yet Cath-

⁶ John xviii, 36.

⁷ Matt. xxviii, 19, 20.

⁸ Mark x, 45.

⁹ 1 Cor. iii, 6.

olic. Catholicity only requires that the Church be spread to most of the countries of the world and embrace many members in these countries, after the Gospel was sufficiently diffused. The Church, even before she was spread throughout the world, possessed the note of Catholicity, but only in its germ, only in potency. She was capable of being universal; she had the right and duty of teaching all men. The Church grew to its great stature only gradually. She is a living organism, and like other living things, she progressed and developed in a natural manner, not abruptly, but smoothly through successive stages, from infancy to maturity.

There is another reason why the Church's growth should not be instantaneous, namely, from the viewpoint of man's reception of her teaching. There are many things to explain why sincere men have not heard the Gospel, or having known the Church, do not know her as she really is. While we stress the aptitude and the appeal of the Church for all men, we must admit that men must be in a receptive mood to listen to the Church. Salvation is a free gift of God, and can not be imposed upon men against their will. So it would follow that the extension of the Kingdom of Christ would not include each and every human being, but many persons, and likewise that the propagation of the Church throughout the world would not be sudden but progressive. The Church, then, grew to full maturity by degrees. At what precise time did this take place? A quarter of a century after Christ sent His Apostles to teach the nations Paul asserted before all that the magnificent prophesies of the Old Testament concerning the universal dominion of the Christian religion were already on the eve of being completely fulfilled: "But I say; have they [the nations] not heard? Yes, verily, their sound [the Apostles,] hath gone into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world."¹⁰

By maturity we do not mean that the Church reached her peak and could advance no farther. She is rather like those few giant oak trees of California which continue to grow after three centuries of life. Neither does maturity mean that she must continue to embrace new members without losing any to heresy or schism. St. Paul in the first century prophesied the coming of heresies and schisms, when he warned Timothy that "in the last times some shall depart from the faith."¹¹ The Church has always looked upon heresies as an opportunity of developing and explaining her doctrine. St. Augustine says "heresies profit much, not by teaching the truth for they know it not,

¹⁰ *Romans x, 18.*

¹¹ *I Tim. iv, 1.*

but by exciting the worldly minded to seek the truth and the spiritually minded Catholics to disclose it."¹²

The Holy Spirit living in the Church and helping her to profit by the advent of heresies was the same power that enabled her to shake off heresy's hands tearing at her foundations so she could rise up victorious and full of life. Neither heresies nor schisms have destroyed the Catholicity of the Church, because these defections of her members, though sometimes great in number, were confined to a few definite sections or countries. They did injure Catholicity, but not mortally. And the Church intensified her missionary work in other nations and finally repaired the injury she had received. Of all the defections, most have fallen into oblivion; the rest are insignificant in numbers, with the exception of the Orthodox Church and the Protestant Churches.

Both claim the note of Catholicity; the former, because it is Christ's Church, the latter because *it* is universal. The Schismatics of the Orthodox Church were members of the Catholic Church until the ninth century when Photius, patriarch of Constantinople and ambitious of further honor, claimed the title of Head of the whole Church. Since then the Orthodox Church has been separated from Rome, except for four periods, one lasting one hundred and fifty years, when it was reunited in the Catholic Church. At present it embraces slightly over one hundred million members, about eighty-five percent of whom lived in Russia before the Revolution. The Russian Church before the Revolution was under the complete control of the Czar. Under the present Communistic regime it seems destined for the disunion which was partially held in check by the former government. Even then dissenters could be counted by the millions. Whether this Church survives the present deadly attack or whether great numbers seek the stability and shelter of the Catholic Church, one thing seems certain, it will never again attain its former eminence.

Even at its most auspicious times the Orthodox Church could not maintain its right to Catholicity. It had no definite unity, no single head to preserve unity, and so gradually broke up into the fourteen nationalistic Churches, each autonomous and independent. They have evidenced a too easy willingness to settle down and be a church of the nation, making no effort to teach the nations. What a sharp contrast to the command of Christ and to His own universal spirit!

The Protestant Churches, on the other hand, have made a strong

¹² *De Vera Religione*, viii, 15.

effort to convert others to their belief, but the results have been much out of proportion to the labor and money enlisted in the work. ‘Protestant’ is a generic name for Christians belonging to more than two hundred different sects. John L. Stoddard, while admitting the list to be incomplete, enumerates one hundred and seventy-five Protestant sects mainly of England and America.¹³ Sometimes it is maintained that these groups, harboring diverse and often opposite doctrines, make up the Catholic Church because all their members are Christians and are spread throughout the world. But such a composite is far from including as many members as the Catholic Church. But even if it were much more numerous than at present, it would still be devoid of Catholicity because it is not one Church, but many.

Their fundamental principle, private interpretation of the bible, is a disintegrating one, fostering division of the Protestant bodies. History points to the birth of innumerable new sects ever since the sixteenth century. It could not be otherwise; the surprising thing is that there were not more, with individual opinion the rule—which is no rule. In consonance with this principle there can be no central authority enforcing discipline or unity. Catholicity is the strength of the Church, and all the Protestant bodies together can not make for Catholicity, for only “in union there is strength.”

We have tried to get below the surface of this note of Catholicity and we have seen that the Catholic is a citizen of the world because his Church is universal, and that this world-wide diffusion is a sign of Divine sanction and manifests the true Church of Christ. What practical conclusions follow from these considerations? The Catholic should imitate this characteristic of his Church by a broader and more charitable view towards all men, for this is the Second Great Commandment. He should also do all in his power to further the mission of the Church in teaching all men to know and love God; thus he will be fulfilling his duty as a real Cosmopolite.

¹³ *Rebuilding a Lost Faith*, p. 82.

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