

LACORDAIRE:

Liberal Yearnings

Within Catholic Orthodoxy

Paul Philibert, O.P.

IN THE FALL of the year 1830, the outspoken champion of Catholic liberty, Père Lamennais, was joined by a young French priest named Henri Lacordaire. Lamennais was still remembered as the ardent defender of Catholicism during the fierce days of the early quarter of the century; his *Essai sur l'Indifférence* had attacked the apathy which attempted to naturalize religion by considering it as a purely human institution, whose Revelation was the product of men's imaginings and whose existence was merely a political necessity. Now this wild stallion of a man, whose pen had incised countless enemies of the Church, was joined by an eloquent and equally ardent disciple.

Lacordaire shared Lamennais' thirst for a liberal revolution which would be not so much a turn of government as a grant of liberties. Even from the first, however, he hesitated joining forces in consideration of Lamennais' erroneous philosophical system and his disdain for higher ecclesiastical support. But convinced of the need for drastic changes, and admiring the forcefulness of his new master, Lacordaire spent thirteen months on the projection of the journal, *L'Avenir*, which had the purpose of proclaiming a new political order. During this period the two men seemed to see eye to eye on the needs of France: for reasons of political expediency, the only hope for the Church would lie in the complete separation of Church and State; the goal of freedom would have to be extended to a free press and freedom of education. If the vitriolic attacks of *L'Avenir*, whose success was largely due to the smooth pen and sensational jour-

nalistic style of Lacordaire, were bitter, so were the hearts of those who had seen successive revolutions of government proclaim "Liberty" while they produced only a new kind of tyranny.

As the months passed and *L'Avenir* established itself as a threat to the outworn policies of the French bishops, who clung to their hopes for state protection, denunciations from the hierarchy became frequent. It was Lacordaire who suggested submitting the work of Lamennais' small group (whose ranks included the illustrious Montalembert) directly to the Holy See for approval. The result of this test, the encyclical of Pope Gregory XVI *Mirari Vos* (August 15, 1832), ended the work by condemning its policies. Lacordaire had no choice but to abandon Lamennais, whose insincere submission yielded to apostasy. Since Lamennais' attack on scholastic philosophy and his own erroneous philosophy were in no small part the basis for Gregory's condemnation, Lacordaire had to bear through the rest of his life the stigma of association with one who was to be almost as great an enemy of the Church as he had been her champion.

The youthful enthusiasm Lacordaire spent on this unfortunate project was in some measure inherited. He was the son of a lawyer's daughter and a physician of liberal views. He retained as personal characteristics an eloquence natural to the French barrister and a sensitiveness for liberal politics. At the conclusion of his studies at the Lycée in Dijon, he went to Paris determined to become a lawyer. Already his gifts for oratory and persuasiveness had been recognized. At the age of twenty he often found himself the object of the attention of all of legal Paris. His rationalist education, imbibing large draughts of Voltaire and Rousseau, had smothered his religion. It remained a forgotten thing, until in the legal vocation to which he attached all his energies he found a strange companion, solitude. The studies which became for Lacordaire an approach to the success for which he strove required time and attention. His serious mind realized that he must seclude himself from the distractions which are a usual part of Paris student life. And this solitude, intended to be the broth in which his godless ambition would ferment, became instead the elixir which reawakened the real force of his personality. He found God in the quiet searching of his soul, and this discovery was to remain the center of the remaining thirty-seven years of his life. He was ordained priest in 1827, converted to the one ideal of giving his life completely for the needs of the Church.

From this ideal of dedicated service issued forth varied types of work. The first of these, his collaboration with Lamennais on *L'Avenir*, has already been outlined. The submission which the young

priest yielded to the Holy See became a symbol for him of his future policy: he found his greatest strength in obedience to authority lightened with a patient hope. Lacordaire knew that in practice the policy for which *L'Avenir* strove, separation of Church and State, was still a necessary one. In addition he now realized that his zeal must be tempered by prudence.

The beginning of the year 1834 found Lacordaire initiating a series of lectures at the Collège Stanislas, a Paris secondary school for boys, in which he reiterated some of the policies of *L'Avenir*. Immediately, he was denounced by conservatives as a rabid republican. There came from the Archbishop a silencing of these conferences to be followed somewhat mysteriously by Lacordaire's presentation in the pulpit of Notre Dame Cathedral in the Lent of the following year.

This Archbishop, Msgr. de Quélen, was not in the least a liberal or a republican. But he recognized the urgent need to put into the pulpit of his cathedral a preacher to whom the irritated citizens of Paris would listen. The agnostic and the irreligious had to be made to listen to the words of Christ's Church; and Lacordaire having been both irreligious and agnostic could sympathize with them. Moreover, the Archbishop was truly struck by Lacordaire's complete submission to him in the matter of the sermons at the Collège. His trust was not to be disappointed.

There are two very significant factors in the work of Lacordaire in the pulpit of Notre Dame which can be seen in these first sermons and in those which followed in later years. First, the tactics of apologetics which Lacordaire employed were the very ones which had drawn him out of his own estrangement from the Church. He had become convinced of the necessity of the Church by seeing the imbalance of a society without it. The revolutions of nobility and bourgeoisie had not been revolutions in any radical sense. The same tyranny, the same intolerance, and the same insipid deification of humanity accompanied Robespierre as had poisoned the world of Louis XIV; merely their objects had changed. Beyond ambition and the mighty misfortune of all the ages, there must be a permanent and absolute goal: Christ in His Church.

The second important feature of this work was its synthesis of liberal yearnings and the social teachings of Christianity. Does the State promise Brotherhood? So does the Church. Does the State promise civil rights for all men? The Church has striven for centuries to assure men these rights which only she can teach them how to exercise properly. Law must be protected, Lacordaire claimed, against the encroachments of a terrorized multitude:

Rousseau has said: "If the people will do harm to themselves, who has the right to hinder them?" I answer, everybody. . . . It is against the multitude that law is necessary, much more than against any one individual; for number has the inconvenience of giving to material power the sanction of apparent justice.¹

But the mere multiplication of forces oppressing the Church does not justify their united action; men are destroying themselves in destroying their link with their Creator. If they search for a freedom without God, they will only destroy each other with hungry ambition.

One continuing note of these sermons, as well as of the rest of his conferences, was aimed at showing the need of society for both Church and State. Religion was not to be looked upon any longer as the helpmate of political tyranny. The absolutist princes had passed; the hierarchy must realize and the people must recognize that political freedom, universal political freedom, is the new soil for planting a strong Christian community.

For the young preacher the need for free schools was obvious. So long as Voltaire poisoned the minds of youth, religion would seem a mockery. The Church must be allowed to feed the pure, impressionable minds of the young before they became soiled with the tired cynicism of the disappointed rationalist. Indeed, the need for Catholic schools remained to the fore in Lacordaire's mind until he himself was able to see the dream realized in his own academy at Soreze.

Another liberty which Lacordaire earnestly desired for his nation was freedom for the monastic religious orders to return openly to the soil of France. This liberty he set about to obtain personally. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment was the re-establishment of the Order of Preachers within the French nation. In preparing his countrymen for his project, he addressed to them these burning words which demonstrate the energy of his dialectic:

And when we, the enthusiastic lover of this present age, born in its very bosom, when we asked permission of it to believe in nothing, that permission was given us; when we claimed the privilege of aspiring to every trust and honor, it was granted us; when we sought the liberty of influencing its destinies, by dealing with the gravest questions, and that in early youth, it was allowed us; when we asked wherewithal to live in affluence, this too was granted; but now, that penetrated by those divine elements . . . (we ask) to follow the inspirations of our faith, to abandon every pretension, to live in poverty with a few friends similarly disposed, we are at once stopped short, put under the ban of I know not how many laws, and should have all Europe in combination to overwhelm us if it were needful.²

The laws in question were rendered harmless as Lacordaire returned to France to preach in 1840 from the pulpit of Notre Dame dressed in his religious habit, and subsequently established houses of the Dominican Order throughout various sectors of France. His actions were greeted with protests from the government, but no physical restraint. The years of care and labor which he expended in providing for the needs of these new houses and new French religious have been rewarded with a lasting memorial in the existence and work of an active, energetic province of French Dominicans—men who labored in turn to revivify the entire Order of Preachers.

It is interesting to note the reason why Fr. Lacordaire chose the Dominicans, of all the religious orders, when he was looking around for an instrument in his task of winning France back to the Faith. The reasons he himself gives in his *Memorial to the French People* show the close link there was between Lacordaire's work for liberty before becoming a Dominican and after :

If we be asked why we have chosen the Order of Preachers, we shall make answer—it is the one most in harmony with our nature, our mind, and our views. . . . We have chosen the order which best meets our ideas, and in which we hope to succeed best. . . . Were God to give us the power to establish a new order, we feel sure, that after all due reflection we could discover nothing newer, nothing more suitable to our time and its wants than the rule of Saint Dominic.³

After the work of re-establishment was on solid footing, Lacordaire returned to Notre Dame during the years 1843 to 1852. Always his objective was the same: to return Christian hearts to the safe harbor of the Church and to encourage, prod, and inspire men to love true freedom. In 1848, from the pulpit of the cathedral he greeted the Revolution which established the Second Republic. While not a convinced republican, he saw in the Republic a government which could assure the rights of religion. In May of that year he took a place in the Constituent Assembly as the elected delegate for Marseilles. This was his first, and last, taste of practical politics. When the Assembly was invaded by rabble, he became convinced that his dream of a free Catholic republic would not be realized. He must remain the controversialist, the voice and inspiration of those who hoped for Christian liberty. He would not commit himself to a government or party or political system; his work would be to admonish his century not to lose their freedom through imprudence.

Significantly, Lacordaire's last sermon in Paris was another effort to guide the Church away from political entanglements. It contained

a thinly veiled denunciation of Napoleon III, who came to power in 1852. Henceforth it was impossible for Lacordaire to preach in Paris.

The sad, but fascinating period of French Revolutionary history is perhaps too little known. It is difficult now to appreciate how Lacordaire's life, as outlined here, was eminently significant. However, what has been called "the Revolution" was in reality a series of *coups* which were like a giant tug of war. Through the turmoil which accompanied them, Lacordaire set about warning his countrymen that no matter what type of government they utilized, they must have aim and order in approaching their goal of freedom.

Lacordaire saw that the strength of society must be found in the Church, for thus Christ had established it. But the clergy of the Church were centuries behind the times in their views. They clung to a hope that the monarchy would be restored in a reunion of Church and State. They could only conceive of the past as orthodox; anything new could only be suspect.

Thus the policy of renouncing all State protection and assistance in order to demand religious freedom as a right, not a favor, was the major political goal of the preacher whose first objective was the re-Catholicization of "Holy France." Lacordaire was by no means unaware of or unsympathetic to the teachings of the popes that the State cannot govern without concern for religion, and that the Catholic religion; nor can it proclaim freedom of conscience or worship. But Lacordaire did realize, where many others did not, that these ideal concepts must yield, according to the expediency of the times, to a toleration of Protestantism and even atheism within the State. By this realization and his support of a universal freedom of conscience, he played no small part in preventing a Protestant or atheistic State from liquidating Catholicism in France altogether.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Lacordaire, *Political and Social Philosophy*. Edited by Rev. D. O'Mahony. St. Louis, Mo., B. Herder Book Co., 1924.

² Rev. Fr. Lacordaire, O.P., *An Historical Sketch of the Order of St. Dominic; or A Memorial to the French People*. New York, P. O'Shea Co., 1869, pp. 13-14.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69, and 71.