

TEMPTATIONS AGAINST THE CHURCH*

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THE Church of Christ is our mother: the true mother of the living. It is through her that we have life, it is she who nourishes life within us, it is she who gives us access to the living God. None the less, concerning this Mother for whom we should have only love, how many temptations beset us! Some of them are fierce, yet recognisable; others are obscure, hence more insidious. Some temptations are perennial and others are peculiar to our age. They are too many-faced, indeed, even mutually contradictory, to allow any of us to feel safe from their threat.

There will always be some individuals who perfectly identify their own cause with that of the Church and end by subordinating, in good faith, the Church's cause to their own. In their desire to serve the Church they actually put her to work for themselves: 'a dialectical turn about', which changes friend into foe, and takes place with as much ease as subtlety. For them the Church is, in fact, a certain familiar social order to which they belong. She is a certain state of civilisation, a definite number of principles, a certain ensemble of values which her influence has more or less made Christian, but which for all that, remains for the most part still human. Whatever disturbs this order or endangers this equilibrium, whatever upsets or merely startles these men, appears to them as an attack upon a divine institution. In such confused thinking, it is not always a case of the usual forms of clericalism which would judge the honour accorded to God by the benefits bestowed upon his ministers, or which would measure the advance of the divine government over souls and the reign of Jesus Christ in society according to the influence, direct or indirect, of the clergy upon secular affairs.

One can acquire this state of mind from the most honourable motives. The great Bossuet, for example, during his

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declining years had the entire Catholic order meshed to the temporal order of Louis XIV, and saw only peril for religion in the mingled forces which were beginning to break up a synthesis, truly brilliant but questionable in many of its components, contingent to be sure, and in essence doomed to perish. Against this break-up Bossuet struggled with all his might.

The old bishop was not only an intrepid warrior, he was a shrewd one—but not consistently. As Moliere describes him: 'Along with his imperious will he possessed a naturally timid mind'. He would have liked to maintain for ever—reserving the right to attack certain abuses vigorously—the mental and social world within which his genius could roam. Bossuet thought that the faith could survive only within that world: like the old Romans, among them some Fathers of the Church, to whom the crash of the empire could mean only the end of the world. But in dreaming his impossible dreams, he was compromising the Church with that world already stricken mortally—the Church which had to shake herself free from such entanglement so as to bear life to other generations of men. In his impotent efforts to stem the tide of history, whose flow he deemed evil, he was banking up angry waters bearing the seeds of the future. At every level of society where he applied his stop-gap strategy, he was apparently successful; but in such wise that the force which emerged triumphant was irreligion.

So it can happen that we become all the more self-assured and stubborn in our judgments in that the cause we are defending is the more mixed. Though we realise it in theory, perhaps there are times when we actually forget, in our eagerness to impose our ideas and our personal tastes upon others, that inflexibility in one's faith does not mean a fanatical rigidity, that calcifying obduracy betrays the supple firmness of the truth, instead of safeguarding it; that a Christianity which deliberately and completely shelters itself behind barricades, disclaiming all advance and assimilation, would no longer be Christianity; that a sincere attachment to the Church cannot serve to canonise our prejudices, nor make our personal bias share in the absolute of a faith which is universal. It would, then, perhaps be of some value

to remember that a certain confidence and a certain detachment are part and parcel of the Catholic mind. Although she is deeply rooted in history, the Church is in bondage to no dimension of time, nor to anything whose essence is temporal. She is not founded upon any other base than that of Peter's faith which is faith in Christ Jesus. Moreover, she is not a faction. Among flesh-and-blood humans, who all are her children, at least virtually, she desires not the least adversary. Her wish is to free them all from every kind of evil while giving them to their Redeemer.

Let us, then, make our own her sentiments which are those of Jesus Christ. For this purpose we should, if need be, impose upon ourselves the necessary self-discipline. Let us relax not a whit in our zeal for the Catholic truth but let us learn to purify this zeal. Let self be suspect. We should dread a certain form of humility which is akin to pride itself. We should be fearful of sacrilege in usurping the truth. Let us take from St Augustine the words he addressed to his fellow crusaders at the height of the struggle against the Donatists: 'Be bold in fighting for the truth, but without haughtiness'.¹ And following Newman's example, instead of conducting ourselves as if the Church were our private domain and property, and more or less making the Church one with ourselves, let us eliminate the selfish element and labour to make ourselves one with the Church.

Beyond doubt, the contrary temptation is more frequent today; in any event, it is more evident and often more startling because of all that it stirs up. What is it? Briefly: the temptation to criticise. This temptation, too, can insinuate itself under the guise of good. It readily presents itself to the apostolic soul as an indispensable concern for clarity. Often it would not be detected except for a previous exercise in the 'discernment of spirits'.

The very word *critique* means 'discernment'. There does then exist a critique, and especially an 'auto-critique', as it is currently called, which is an excellent thing. It is an effort at realism in action. It is the decision to renounce completely whatever cannot be justified as authentic. It is an exam-

¹ *Contra Litteras Pelibiani*, I, I, II.

ination of conscience humbly made, in knowing how to recognise the good one accomplishes but likewise motivated by an apostolic unrest and a spiritual urgency which is ever alert. A dissatisfaction with work accomplished, an ardent desire for improvement, honesty shown in one's judgment concerning techniques, independence shown in the desire to break with customs not justified and to remedy abuses, and far above everything else, an exalted idea of the Christian vocation and faith in the Church's mission—these are some of the attitudes from which 'auto-criticism' proceeds and which provide nourishment for it. It calls forth then a redoubled activity, a spirit of enterprise, research and experiment which, no doubt, at times must be kept in check and which often jars rather excessively the even tenor of our ways. Although it is severe with the illusions which it ferrets out, the auto-critique can become complacent with other illusions which will soon make of it, too, subject matter for a similar critique. Yet how much better this would be than the naïve self-complacency which permits no reform, no salutary transformation. How much less dangerous than a certain self-satisfaction which little by little walls itself up in a dream-world.

It would be wrong to desire, on principle, the suppression of all publicly expressed criticism. When the Church is humble in her children, she is more attractive than when a too human anxiety for respectability is predominant in them. Jacques Maritain once made the remark, not without a just nuance of raillery, that to many modern Christians every avowal of our shortcomings seems 'somehow indecent'. 'One could say', he added, 'that they dread the trouble they will cause the apologetes by such an admission. . . . The ancient Jews and even the Ninivites were not so squeamish.'² And the saints of past centuries still less so. One has only to reread, for instance, the famous address of St Jerome to Pope Damasus, the diatribes of St Bernard against evil shepherds and his programme of reform outlined in the *De Consideratione*, or an indictment such as St Catherine of Siena enunciated against certain high dignitaries in the Church: 'O men, no not really men, but rather devils in

² *De Règime Temporal*.

human form, how you are blinded by the deranged love you bear for the corruption of the body, for the pleasures and plaudits of the world!³

Recall to mind St Bridget, Gerson, St Bernardine of Siena, St Thomas More, and more close to our own time, St Clement Hoffbauer. Let one reflect on the struggles of Pope Gregory VII and his successors to detach the government of the Church from the system which had enslaved it; the fearlessness of a Gerson of Reichersberg addressing to high places, as did St Bernard to Pope Eugene III, his work '*On the Corrupt State of the Church*', the boldness of a William Durandus in publishing his treatise '*De Modo Concilii Celebrandi et Corruptelis in Ecclesia Reformandis*', or again of the Carthusian monk, Pierre of Leyde, begging the Roman Pontiff to undertake the task of reform in the preface to the edition, which he published in 1530, of the works of his confrère, Denis the Carthusian.

These latter examples should serve to remind us of the whole of the great Catholic reform movement, rather inadequately designated under the name 'counter-reform'. Such a task could not have been undertaken without the practical resolution to make use of the 'auto-critique' and of this procedure history has recorded more than one outstanding example.

Nevertheless, for every worthwhile complaint or clear profitable examination, there are many excesses! How frequent a lack of temperance! For each resolute act how much fruitless agitation! Sanctity is not a common phenomenon, and the most sincere good will cannot claim either the same rights or the same privileges. Competence and timeliness can also be wanting in our criticisms. Even if a charge be true, one is not always for that reason justified in making it. We must recognise also, and this remark is important; that today's conditions are no longer those which existed in the centuries we call Christian. Everything took place then, if we can use the expression, within the family circle. The forces of irreligion were not continually poised to turn everything into matter for controversy. Today when the Church is forced to stand as the accused before the

³ Letter 315.

world's gaze, today when she is misunderstood, when her existence and even her holiness have become objects of scorn, every Catholic should be circumspect in not allowing to be exploited against her, words that he wanted to express only with a mind to serving her better. He should take care not to occasion mortal misunderstandings. This is a son's sense of delicacy, completely other than the approach of the prude or the pharisee. No cut-and-dried rule can here be laid down. However, toward the man who is really one with the Church, such as we have already tried to depict, toward this man who alone is the truly spiritual type, the Holy Spirit will not be niggardly with his gift of counsel.

In any event we should separate carefully all that would be pointless complaining, all that would stem from the loss, or even weakening of trust in the Church, from healthy auto-criticism, even that which is clumsily or excessively made. It would be impious to disparage, under pretext furnished by certain *faux pas*, 'all that praiseworthy, silent work of contemporary Christianity which makes an issue of its shortcomings, seeks to understand, love and preserve the values which arise outside its direct influence, and hurries into the storm to start assembling basic materials for a new structure'.⁴ In order, however, that such an effort be consistent and profitable, one must be alert not to let it be poisoned by the breath of any other inspiration than that which it had at its genesis.

At certain times one observes symptoms of an evil multiplying and spreading like an epidemic. This is a fit of collective neurasthenia. For those who are afflicted, everything becomes matter for disparagement. It is not only a case of giving vent to irony, opposition, or bitterness from which, in every age, certain characters cannot abstain. But everything takes on a pejorative meaning. Every hint of evil, even when true, increases the malady. The life of the spirit begins to grow faint, so much so that nothing is henceforth seen in its true perspective: one imagines himself all-discerning and can no longer discern the essential. To evaluate things in the spirit of faith now seems an illusion. Then, in a thousand ways, discouragement creeps in. What could have

⁴ Mounier: *Un surnaturalisme historique*, p. 113.

occasioned a leap forward has now for its effect only paralysis. Sincere faith can still be present but it is hollowed out on all sides. One begins to look upon the Church with the eyes of a stranger in order to sit in judgment upon her. The holy groaning of the Spirit in prayer now has become purely human grumbling. By this pharisaic process, a kind of interior secession which is not yet an open break but still deadly, one has already put his foot along a path which can lead to full apostasy.

Would that one could wake to his condition in time and take immediate countermeasures! It is not a question of blinding one's self to all sorts of shortcomings, too real for such pretence. It is no question of not being pained by them. A total and fervent loyalty in our allegiance does not demand on our part a puerile admiration for all that can exist or be thought of or take place within the Church. This Bride of Christ whom her Spouse desired to be perfect, holy and immaculate, is such only in her principle. If she shines with a spotless brilliance it is as Pope Pius XII wrote:

The loving Mother is spotless in the sacraments, by which she gives birth to her children and nourishes them, she is spotless in the faith, which she has preserved inviolate always, in her sacred laws imposed on all, in the evangelical counsels which she recommends, in those heavenly gifts and extraordinary graces through which, with inexhaustible fecundity, she generates a host of martyrs, virgins and confessors.⁵

If her soul is the Spirit of Christ, she is none the less made up of human beings. And as we well know, men have never attained the heights of the divine mission which has been entrusted to them. Never have they been completely malleable and docile to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. If men are not successful in corrupting the Church because the source of her sanctifying strength is not from them, she is no more successful, while their earthly state endures, in drying up in them the opposing wellspring of corruption. The better among them unceasingly set up a thousand obstacles to thwart the good that God could work through them. We should understand thoroughly, then, and in

⁵ *Mystici Corporis.*

advance—and here history is a sound pedagogue—that nothing which stems from man's heart should ever disconcert us.

But which of us is not a member of the human family? Is not each of us aware of his own misery and lack of ability? Is it not an open contradiction for a man to serve a holy cause with questionable means? Should not such a one say to himself that the most serious faults are the ones which escape notice? Has he not just a faint realisation, or only a glimpse of the fact, that he is unable to understand the mystery to which his life is dedicated? Why, then, at that stage, think of separating ourselves from the flock? Why this secession which is what a man does when he sets himself up to judge others? We fall thus into the same illusion as the misanthrope who takes a dislike to the human race, as if he belonged to some other species, while 'in order to realise our basic identity with humanity, all we need do is to be a part of it, to adhere to the whole mass, and to mingle with all its members'. Then 'our grievances, our schism, our role of judge, our odious comparisons all vanish'.⁶ Then the evident contrast existing between the human misery of all who make up the Church and the grandeur of her divine mission, hard-won knowledge gained first from our own experience, will no longer scandalise us. It will be rather a spur forward. We shall understand that a certain 'auto-critique', completely aimed at the world outside of ourselves, would only be a subterfuge for shunning the duty of examining our own consciences. The humble acceptance of Catholic solidarity will make us perhaps love anew, in a new light, that very part of our Church's wisdom, of her institutions and traditions and exigencies which we had difficulty in comprehending.

Today, however, discontent often takes more precise forms in order to gnaw at the soul. An apostle, the most humble one, doesn't escape them. He begins to wonder in anguish if the Church's activity is really adapted to our times. Does not our experience, worthy of respect, show that she is tragically ineffective? During the past few years in particular such question have been posed everywhere. Let

⁶ Paul Claudel.

us not fool ourselves in regard to their seriousness. We should not dismiss them too speedily by a refusal to face them. We should be only adding to the difficulties of those persons who, perhaps because they are less lethargic than we, toss restlessly throughout the night through concern for these problems. But here, too, we must force ourselves, without going to extremes, to practise the 'discernment of spirits'.

One is inclined, then, to ask himself about the present value, not of course of Christianity itself, but about many of the elements which make up, as it were, the ancient religious machinery, such as the centuries have moulded it. He decides that the yield is too paltry. He declares that the mechanism is worn out, that the mainsprings are loose. He gauges its lack of adaptability. He charges it with being in a rut. It would hardly be astonishing if there were found in such a battery of accusations several traces of extremism, nor would it surprise anybody if, in the diagnosis of evil as well as in the choice of remedy, a few errors were to slip in. A keen intuition for new requirements can be the companion of a study which is too cavalier and fanciful. There is no need to take undue alarm. If the inspiration is honest, one will have no difficulty in rectifying what needs to be changed, or in correcting a lopsided effort with the necessary counter-balance.

But it is precisely this inspiration which must be watched. The worst inspiration can go hand-in-hand with the best. It can cleverly introduce itself in the garb of good. What is the real source of this hunger for adaptation, or what amounts to the same thing, the real origin of the need felt of what is called a more efficacious 'incarnation?'—a solicitude, in itself very proper? Is it purely an overflow of charity, akin to that of St Paul, who in his pursuit of Jesus Christ, wished to become all things to all men? Is not this an admixture of that illusion—overly natural to this professional critic who inevitably edges close to the role of the priest—that a change of method is all that is needed, just as in purely human enterprises, to obtain results which before all else supposes a change of heart? Realistic views, objective investigations, formulation of 'sociological laws', the

preparation of elaborate plans, departures big and little from the apostolic methods of the past, the designing of brand-new techniques: an unalloyed and scrupulously proper zeal can make use of all these means, and he who would sneer at them can himself be too readily assuming the hero's role in holding them up derisively, in opposition to the means of a Curé of Ars. Yet necessarily, we must ever keep in their proper rack the tools we intend for the exclusive service of the Holy Spirit.

Still more serious is another point, which in more or less subtle doses is mingled with our discontent: a kind of fearfulness, a lack of deep-rooted conviction, a secret disgust with the tradition of the Church. In yielding to this, would we not be setting ourselves up as judges of this tradition, according to superficially 'modern' criteria? Would not this mean that the mundane values of the world paraded before our eyes had begun to dazzle us? Would we not gradually be permitting ourselves to shrink into the shell of an inferiority complex in the presence of those who proclaim such values? Regarding matters which should be most sacred to us, would we not be in a fair way to thinking according to the same pattern which belong to the type of man whose blindness we should be lamenting? Would we not be foolishly allowing ourselves to be impressed by the pomp of the pride of life? In brief, while remaining unswerving in the faith itself, would we not be beginning, so to speak, to let our faith in the Church's tradition swerve?

This would be the moment to recall more explicitly certain eternal truths. 'When I shall be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all things to myself.' It is clear that these words of Jesus are not intended as a description of what should be our tactics for spreading his gospel. St Paul, crucified to the cross with Christ, roamed the wide world, the prototype of a legion of apostles, and the Church will ever remain a missionary Church. Still Christ's words indicate to us the proper frame of mind. In other words, we are right in desiring not to be 'separated' from men, when it is a question of leading them to Christ, if by that we understand that we must lift the barriers which certain obsolete forms of life and thought would put between them and

us, *a fortiori* practices which only a life of indolence can justify. We are right in not consenting to let ourselves be shut up in any sort of ghetto erected either by ourselves or by others. But we must take equal care not to misunderstand the condition essential to those who are set 'apart' which relative to this world is the lot of every Christian and much more every priest. (*Sanctus = segregatus.*) If the world see us truly alive in our sanctified withdrawal from it as well as in our keen scrutiny of all that such a dedication entails, there will be no lack of others who will be drawn by this manner of life, and will no longer want to be separated from us. And by our means the miracle of the attraction of Christ will be perpetuated.

Let us not be afraid, then, to sympathise profoundly with the feelings of our fellow men. Let us be completely human: a sincere conscience plus fraternal charity oblige us to it; or, to put it better, such a disposition should be so natural, so congenital, that we should not have to labour at it. We should not assume an attitude which confuses fidelity to the eternal with a meaningless, even morbid, attachment to the past. At the same time, however, let us be cautious of the twentieth century's all-sufficiency. We should be careful not to make our own the weaknesses, the fads and the narrow-mindedness of our milieu. We do well to guard against opening the door to worldliness—be it of the poor or the rich, of the vulgar or the refined. Or rather—for unhappily we always share in some measure in it—we must not cease disentangling ourselves from it. Briefly, we should always be ready to adapt ourselves and as spontaneously as possible: but without ever allowing the principles of Christianity itself, in our behaviour or thought, to be adapted, that is, made purely human or in the slightest degree debased. Let us love our century but without succumbing to the spirit of the century. May the salt of the gospel never become unsavoury in us!

[To be concluded]