The American Ecclesiastical Review

A MONTHLY PUBLICATION FOR THE CLERGY

Cum Approbatione Superiorum

VOL. CXXII

JANUARY—JUNE, 1950

Ἐν ἑνὶ πνεύματι, μιᾷ ψυχῇ
συναθλοῦντες τῇ πίστει τοῦ εὐαγγελίου
Phil. 1:27

Published by
THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA PRESS

THE DIRECTION OF CATHOLIC POLEMIC

What we may call a methodology of Catholic polemic is a badly needed article in our country today. We have come to expect that after every war in which the United States takes part movements and writings against the true Church of God in this country will increase in number and in intensity. The rash of virulent anti-Catholicism, scheduled to make its appearance after the second world war has already broken out. It has come in a much more sinister form than the outbreak which followed the close of the previous world conflict. The pronouncements and the activities of groups like the Ku Klux Klan, however venomous they were in themselves, always carried with them a strong suggestion of the ludicrous. The present anti-Catholic movements and expressions are definitely more dangerous. For the guidance of their flocks and for the edification of God's Church within this country of ours, American priests are bound to take cognizance of these movements. As a group, our priests are bound in conscience to enter into a polemic about the Church, obviously not against individual ranters and bigots, but against the erroneous teachings these men seek to impose upon the American people. For various reasons, however, the art of polemic has not been cultivated to any great extent by American Catholics for a considerable time.

We are sometimes prone to forget that our American Catholic literary tradition had a pre-eminently controversial beginning. Four years before he was consecrated Bishop of Baltimore, John Carroll, the Father of the American hierarchy issued his book, *An Address to the Roman Catholics of the United States of America*, a highly effective refutation of charges made against the Church by the apostate Charles Wharton. Several of the bishops of the early American Church devoted themselves to the task of exposing errors against Catholicism spread abroad by the bigots of their own day. Within this group we find such outstanding ecclesiastical leaders as Bishops John England, Francis Patrick Kenrick, Martin John Spalding, John Baptist Purcell, and John Hughes. The chief literary activity of priests like Fathers John Thayer, Jeremiah O'Callaghan, and Demetrius Gallitzin was likewise consecrated to the defence of the true Church against its

enemies in this country. There is likewise a notable polemic element in the literary production of Orestes Brownson.

From the time of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore down to our own day, however, the defence of the Church and of its teachings against anti-Catholic attacks has not formed by any means a predominant part of our writing and preaching. During that period diatribes against the Church never ceased, but they ceased to find any open support among the leaders in American life. The individuals who wrote and ranted against Catholicism acted as advocates of a doctrinal Protestantism which was already patently bankrupt. They attempted to show that American Catholics were wanting in patriotism and that they pledged political allegiance to a foreign power. By reason of their very ineptitude and because of the manifest futility of the religious concepts they expressed, anti-Catholic polemic during the last years of the nineteenth century and the first years of this one proved to be comparatively innocuous. At any rate it received no great attention from Catholic publicists during this period.

As a result, now that the teachers of the Catholic truth in this country are faced with the necessity of dealing with present-day attacks against that truth and against the Church itself, many of their utterances seem to lack something of the incisive controversial effectiveness which usually marked the controversial works of their predecessors in the priestly office. This, after all, was only to be expected. A group which has for years taken no serious interest in controversy will certainly not, at the very outset at least, manifest a polemic skill equal to that of their predecessors who lived and moved in an atmosphere of religious debate.

There are and there have been certain Catholics who look with marked distaste upon the body of controversial writings and statements issued in favor of the true Church of Jesus Christ. This attitude was rationalized, if not motivated, in some cases at least, by the absurd "state of siege" theory which held that the Church had placed itself in a primarily defensive position since the time of the Council of Trent and which taught that this position was essentially unnatural and disadvantageous to the Church. Actually this anti-controversial bias is as unwarranted as the theory with which it is connected.

Actually it is difficult to see how those who sincerely believe Our Lord's teaching that the world and "the prince of this world" are constantly opposed to Him and to His Church can fail to appreciate the need for a very considerable portion of Christian teaching devoted to the examination and refutation of the contradictions to Christ's message current in the world. It is similarly hard to understand how those who know that Christ rebuked Saul of Tarsus for persecuting Him can fail to realize that the men who devote themselves today to anti-Catholic polemic are likewise persecuting Our Lord. Basically it is the love of charity for Christ which impels the children of His Church to react against attacks made upon it.

Conversely a bias against or even a disinclination towards Catholic responses to anti-Catholic utterances, when found among members of the true Church, is inevitably indicative of remissness in loyalty to Our Lord. People are never disinterested about attacks on things and causes to which they are powerfully attached. It is definitely the business of the Catholic to love his Church so wholeheartedly that he will resent and wish to repel every assault made against it.

A love for the Church, strong enough to impel a man to react against anti-Catholic polemic, is not enough, however, to qualify a man to act as a controversialist in favor of God's kingdom on earth. There is a definite art of apologetic, a skill which a man must study and learn before he can successfully and effectively answer attacks against the Catholic Church. It involves a method described with marvelous accuracy and clarity by the Church's *Doctor Communis*. It has been practiced with magnificent results by the great champions of Catholic truth and orthodoxy since the earliest days of Catholic history.

The most important element in the study of Catholic polemic is obviously the knowledge of the ultimate direction of the controversy itself. No Catholic publicist can hope to deal adequately with attacks against the Church unless he understands very clearly the definite purpose he should strive to attain in his answers to these attacks. That purpose is the work of charity itself. The Catholic publicist achieves that purpose when he works for the same objective which guided St. Thomas Aquinas in the writing of his *Summa contra gentiles*, his greatest polemic writing. St.

Thomas designated this ultimate objective when he said, *"propositum nostrae intentionis est veritatem, quam fides catholica profitetur, pro nostro modulo manifestare, errores eliminando contrarios."*[1]

The great Peter the Lombard envisioned his *Libri sententiarum* as a work of Catholic polemic. In describing the intentions which motivated the production of this work, Peter speaks first of his desire "to defend our faith against the errors of carnal and bestial men *(carnalium atque animalium hominum)* with the shields of the Tower of David, or rather to show that it is thus defended." Peter the Lombard describes his work as motivated by the *"zelus domus Dei,"* and by "the charity of Christ."[2]

The work of Catholic polemic is dictated by charity for Our Lord precisely because it is a part of the charitable and apostolic function of giving men the message of Jesus Christ. The Church, as a living teacher of the divine message, cannot present this doctrine in a vital and adequate manner except in so far as it points out the current and popular errors opposed to it. Thus, for example, the people of Christ would receive only an inadequate statement of the divine teaching about the true Church of Jesus Christ were the champions of Christian truth to allow to pass unchallenged and unrefuted widespread assertions that association with Our Lord is to be found in some invisible society. A living statement of God's revelation implies and involves a recognition of and a response to any errors contrary to that revelation which might be current among those to whom the faith is being preached.

Such is the basic attitude of the traditional Catholic polemic. The Catholic controversialist enters the field, not merely to discredit attacks against the true Church of Jesus Christ, but ultimately to set forth the particular portion of Catholic truth which the attacker has misstated and denied. Successful Catholic polemic, that which is pleasing to Our Lord and which alone is valuable to the Church, is not a merely negative thing. It is a part, and a necessary part, of Catholic teaching.

Obviously, under these conditions, it is a matter of primary moment to analyze the specific attack being leveled against the Church and its doctrines. Frequently this analysis proves to be a

[1] *Summa contra gentiles*, Lib. I, cap. 2.

[2] *Libris IV sententiarum prologus.*

somewhat difficult affair. The current charges against the Catholic Church, as found in the non-Catholic religious press and often, too, in ordinary newspapers, are not remarkable for their logical coherence. Yet, through them all there runs a definite set of accusations and pseudo-grievances. It is definitely the business of the teacher of Catholic truth to take cognizance of these.

Thus, merely to choose a few examples at random, many of the anti-Catholic agitators of our own day attack the Church because, they say, our hierarchy exercises a control over our lives, Catholic moral forbids certain procedures which are encouraged by some competent medical practitioners, and Catholic schools tend to bring Catholic children into closer association among themselves and to separate them from others. Each one of these assertions is being employed in a campaign to spread hatred of the Church among the people of our own country. So it is that each of these, and others as important, should be the concern of those who are charged with the privilege and the responsibility of teaching Catholic truth.

The Catholic publicist who sets out to answer attacks made against the Church in terms of these assertions must, if he is to be faithful to his own vocation, be interested primarily in the task of expounding the truth of which the anti-Catholic statement is either a caricature or a denial. For this reason he should answer anti-Catholic charges that the hierarchy seeks power by an accurate statement of the authority Our Lord entrusted to the Pope and to the bishops in His Church. Assertions that the Church is opposed to "progress" in its rejection of such moral monstrosities as abortion and the murder of the sick should be opposed by firm and clear statements of the natural law on these points. Charges that Catholic schools tend to develop a close social union among Catholic children should be met with an explanation of the kind of association Christ Himself instituted and commanded among His disciples.

Attention to individual charges against the Church in no way implies any explicit notice of individual bigots. Most of these individuals are notorious publicity-seekers. Their unsavory business thrives on the attention they receive from Catholic publicists. Furthermore these individuals show a striking lack of originality. Except in the rare case where a person of national importance turns against the Church in open attack, no particular good is to

be gained by noticing the individual attacker. The anti-Catholic utterances are definitely standardized products.

The art of Catholic polemic, however, demands that attention be called to the intent of the charges themselves. The current crop of anti-Catholic writers and lecturers work towards a precise objective. They are not merely content with pointing out what they imagine to be wrong in Catholic teaching or practice. They strive to unite non-Catholic Americans against their Catholic fellow-citizens. They seek some sort of repression or persecution of the Catholic Church in this country. Regardless of the subjective attitudes of individual attackers, their work itself tends definitely in that direction. It is the business of the Catholic publicist to take cognizance of this fact.

One of the most vociferous and hence one of the best known among the sorry crew of anti-Catholic agitators is reported to be preparing a somewhat novel attack on the Catholic priesthood. He has assembled a formidable array of quotations from the literature of moral theology. These quotations deal with material on the sixth commandment and on the sacrament of matrimony. Apparently he hopes to bring people to imagine that our priests show an unhealthy interest in these subjects.

Such a book can, if it is ever published, be an occasion of immense benefit to the cause of Catholic truth. It will enable the Catholic controversialists who will be called upon to take notice of the attack to give a very complete and effective statement of the nature and the content of Catholic moral teaching. The Catholic publicist will first have to point out the existing perspective, to show that the sort of teachings to which the bigot refers form a rather small but a quite important part of Catholic moral theology. He will have a magnificent opportunity to show that this teaching is part of the training given to Catholic confessors, training to be used in the administration of the sacrament of penance. He can employ this occasion to bring home with great clarity the fact that the sacrament of penance deals with real sin. In short, he will be in a position to bring out that lesson which Gilbert Keith Chesterton expressed so forcefully in *The Chief Mourner of Marne*. The incomparable Father Brown says:

For it seems to me that you only pardon the sins that you *don't* really think sinful. You only forgive criminals when they commit what you don't regard as crimes, but rather as conventions. So you tolerate a conventional duel, just as you tolerate a conventional divorce. You forgive because there isn't anything to be forgiven. . . . Go on your own primrose path pardoning all your favorite vices and being generous to your fashionable crimes; and leave us in the darkness, vampires of the night, to console those who really need consolation; who do things really indefensible, things that neither the world nor they themselves can defend; and none but a priest will pardon.[3]

The Catholic who is privileged to defend the Church and its teaching against a book such as our anti-Catholic agitator is said to be preparing will have the opportunity to show how the Church works consistently with its own divine teaching to the effect that sins are forgiven in the sacrament of penance through a definite juridical absolution. The confessor must know what a sin is in order to exercise his absolving power. The Church does not exempt its confessors from the study of any material which they will need to know in order to perform their sacerdotal works for the glory of Christ.

There are certain faults which almost completely nullify the value of those works of Catholic polemic which they infect. The most glaring of these is the tendency to use the polemic itself as an instrument to score a point against some rival viewpoint within the Catholic Church itself. Thus Newman's *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* was ostensibly a defense of the Church against the charges leveled against it by the English politician, Gladstone. Unfortunately, however, Newman himself fashioned it also as a kind of side attack on his Catholic fellow-countrymen who had worked for the definition of papal infallibility in the Vatican Council.[4] As a result the booklet lost most of its effectiveness as a statement of Catholic doctrine and as a defense of the Catholic Church. Occasionally, even now, we see this procedure repeated, and always with disastrous results for the presentation of Catholic truth.

[3] Chesterton, *The Secret of Father Brown* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1935), p. 803.

[4] *Cf.* the article "John Henry Newman and the Vatican Definition of Papal Infallibility," in *AER*, CXIII, 4 (Oct. 1945), 300-320.

Another weakness in some contemporary Catholic polemic is the tendency to interpret every outburst against the Catholic Church as an attack against all religion. Some non-Catholic groups have used a variation of this tactic as a highly effective debating procedure. The Catholic controversialist, however, is not primarily concerned with cleverness in repartee, but with truth. An attack against the true Church of Jesus Christ should be looked upon and dealt with for what it is. The defender of Catholic truth will only weaken his position if he gives the impression that the struggle for Christ in this world is in some way a joint concern of the Catholic Church and of other religious societies. The Church and the Church alone is Christ's kingdom, His Mystical Body on earth. Any effective defense of the Church or of its teachings must take explicit cognizance of this paramount truth.

In his paper, "Elements of Modern Religious Controversy," Bishop John Cuthbert Hedley, O.S.B., considered Catholic polemical writings chiefly from the point of view of converts who might be brought into the Church by means of it.[5] This, of course, will always be an important aspect of this type of work. There is, however, still another function of this labor which must be kept in mind. The Catholic polemist, in setting forth the truth about points which have been misstated by enemies of the Church is likewise defending and protecting the faith of those within the fold of Christ. These children of God's household will profit also from a vigorous and accurate defense of Catholic truth.

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[5] In *AER*, XVI, 3 (March, 1897), 241-53.

MISSION INTENTION

"Mission, Threatened by Atheists" is the Mission Intention for the month of January, 1950.