

NOTES

THE GATES OF HELL (MATT. 16:18)

In the traditional interpretation of this *incisum*, the phrase, “the gates of hell” is taken as a metaphorical designation for “the powers of hell.” These include all of the destructive powers of Satan and the demons, plus all the human forces of evil he can muster and incite. They are represented as constituting an aggressive force, united in ceaseless attack on the Church in its relentless effort to destroy it. The Church is represented as the resisting force, the impregnable citadel that stands firm against these unending assaults because of the unconquerable endurance she derives from her Petrine foundation. This interpretation of the text has strongly conditioned our habitual ways of thinking of the Church and of picturing her in our imaginations. It is the idea usually developed in sermons on this text and in the literature that it has inspired. It has received its most popular expression in English in Macaulay’s famous passage on the visitor from New Zealand.

Exegetes however have always felt some obscurity in this interpretation. If this is the idea that the text means to express, there seems to be some little distortion or at least unusualness in the way of saying it. At first sight, “gates” does not seem to be a familiar, or even warranted, metaphor for “Powers.” And it is a little bit puzzling to see how “gates” can be conceived as an aggressive force. This difficulty has been frequently urged in the history of the exegesis of this text: “Gates do not attack; they do not invade.” Knabenbauer mentions this difficulty to dispose of it.¹

For this reason Hamack rejected the traditional interpretation and substituted another that made the text merely a prediction of the immortality of Peter.² He bases his exegesis on the Greek version: τῶναι οἱ κατισχύουσιν P αυτι}. In this version, τῶναι does not stand for “hell” in the theological sense, i.e., the detention place of the damned, ruled over by Satan and his cohorts. Rather it has the classical sense of “Hades,” the asylum of the dead, and becomes in the text merely a metaphorical designation for “death,” secondly, τῶναι is pleonastic; it has no function at all in the text and can be dropped without any loss to the sense, thirdly, κατισχύουσιν is used in its intransitive sense and means, “is stronger than.” Finally, αυτις in its grammatical form can modify either τέρρα or ἰχκλησίαν and can

therefore designate either Peter or the Church. But since immortality cannot be predicated of an institution but only of a person, it must here refer to Peter. Hence Hamack translates the text: “Death shall not be stronger than he,” i.e., Peter will be in some sense immortal.

A French Catholic critic of Hamack’s interpretation, Schepens,³ accepts his reasoning to the extent of reading the passage as a prediction of immortality. But this immortality is predicated not of Peter personally, but of the Church. Institutions, as well as individuals, can be immortal. It is therefore a declaration of the indefectibility of the Church.

Lagrange criticizes and rejects each of these opinions and declares in favor of the traditional interpretation.⁴ By figure of metonymy, he argues, the word “gates” is not infrequently used in Holy Scripture to designate the whole citadel or fortress or city. Furthermore, the underlying reasons which suggest the metonymy are clear. The gates are initially the weakest part of the fortress or surrounding wall; but for this very reason they were normally fortified and reinforced to such an extent that they became the strongest part. Consequently to take the gates was to conquer the enemy. From this it is but a short step, by a natural extension of the metaphor, to assume the “gates” as a figurative designation of the “powers,” the “military strength” of the city or citadel. Hence in the text “the gates of hell” is rightly understood as “the powers of hell.” These are represented as taking aggressive action against the Church; but they will not prevail because she is firmly established on the rock of Peter. Hence her indestructibility results from her victorious resistance to the aggressive action of satanic forces.

Lagrange supports his reasonings with his usual scholarship, and for the most part his conclusions seem to be decisive. But in one respect he seems to have gone a little beyond what his citations warrant. From these it is clear that the “gates” of the city are frequently used in Holy Scripture metaphorically to designate the “powers” of the city. But in all the places cited the expression seems to stand for the resisting powers of the city, rather than its aggressive powers.

The metaphor is obviously drawn from ancient siege-warfare, in which the resisting powers of the city were commensurate with the strength of her gates. If these could hold out, the city was safe; if they were battered down, she was conquered. Consequently the gates of the city become a natural and easily understood metaphor for the power or might of the city, only if

¹ “L’authenticité de saint Matthieu XVI, 18,” *Recherches de science religieuse*, I (1920), 269-302.

² *Op. di.*, in A. I.

¹ *Comm. in Mali.*, in h. I.

² *Apud T. Agrange, Evangile selon S. Matthieu, in h. I.*

these are understood as the resisting powers of the city. It becomes forced and puzzling if understood as a metaphor for her aggressive might.

In this interpretation the picture presented in the text is reversed. The Church is represented as the invading force, taking aggressive action against the beleaguered citadel of Satan. The world would be represented as under the dominion of Satan. Christ entering into the world would first organize His forces in His Church and then attack with the purpose of breaking the power of Satan. The text therefore becomes a guarantee that the Church will take the offensive, carry the warfare to the enemy, and besiege his fortified domain. In this attack she will be victorious, for "the gates of hell will not prevail against her," i.e., they will not stand up under her battering assaults.

If this interpretation could be substantiated it would have some implications especially useful for our day. We have become habituated to thinking of the Church as tightly resisting, holding her own against the unending attacks of various hostile forces. This type of thinking cannot help but result in a weakening of the spirit of conquest. Certainly we hear it repeated often enough that the Church is always on the defensive. This was not the attitude of the primitive Church. The little band that went forth to attack and finally overthrow the consolidated might of the pagan world, did not think of itself as a resisting force. Perhaps a few sermons on our text representing the Church as the aggressive force battering down the gates of hell would result in promoting the attitude so strongly advocated in the Christopher movement: "That's the magic of the Christopher idea—the shift from selfish defense to unselfish offense."

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THE ORTHODOX CHURCHES ON ANGLICAN ORDERS

On the occasion of the celebration of the fifth centenary of the autocephaly of the Russian Church, July 8-18, 1948, there was issued by the Moscow Conference a "Resolution of the Committee regarding the validity of the Anglican Hierarchy, approved by the Moscow Conference of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches." The text is given here; it was translated by a priest of the Patriarchal Church in America; only minor changes of orthography or punctuation have been made.¹

After hearing the reports "On the Anglican Hierarchy," we, the Conference of the Heads and Representatives of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches, with a feeling of good-will and brotherly love towards Anglican Christians in their attempts to secure recognition of the validity of the Anglican Hierarchy, have decided that:

1) The doctrine contained in the "Thirty-nine Articles" of the Anglican Church differs sharply from the dogma, doctrine, and tradition professed by the Orthodox Church. Therefore, in order to arrive at a decision on the recognition of the validity of the Anglican Hierarchy, there must first be, as a basis, an agreement with the Orthodox teaching on the Mysteries (Sacraments). Individual opinions that the Anglican Hierarchy can agree to change the teachings of the "Articles" regarding the Sacraments in order to approach Orthodoxy cannot serve as a basis for a decision in the positive sense. Therefore, if the Orthodox Church cannot agree to recognize the correctness of Anglican teachings regarding the Sacraments in general, and in particular, the Sacrament of Holy Orders, it cannot recognize as valid the derivations of Anglican ordinations. If the Churches of Constantinople, Jerusalem, Cyprus, Roumania, and other autocephalous Churches have given their positive reply regarding the recognition of valid Anglican Orders, we are informed that these recognitions were conditional.

2) The question of recognition of the validity of the Anglican Hierarchy can be considered only in conjunction with the question of the Unity and Confession of Faith with the Orthodox Church, and having in existence an authoritative Act regarding this from the Anglican Church, which should be derived from a *Sober*, or a Conference of clergy of the Anglican confession, and presented with the approval of the Head of the Anglican Church. Such an Act we do not have at the present time. In this connection, we express our desire that the Anglican Church will change its doctrine from the dogmatic, canonical, and ecclesiological point of view, and in particular, its original understanding of the Holy Sacraments, and more specifically, the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

3) With all due sympathy and consideration to the contemporary movement among representatives of Anglicanism towards us, directed to resume ties and

¹A resolution concerning the Vatican and smacking of the old polemical style is cited in *Eludes*, Nov. 1948, pp. 256-67.