



'To promote the cause of Religion and Justice by the ways of Truth and Peace.'

LEO XIII. to the N.Z. TABLET.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 1901.

'A RELIC OF BARBARISM.'

A FEW rags and tatters of the penal code still cling to the British statute-book. Members of several Catholic monastic Orders are, for instance, to this hour deprived of some of the ordinary rights of British subjects. We are reminded of another Catholic disability that cumberers the statute-book by the announcement of the probably early coronation of King

EDWARD VII. We refer to the Declaration against Transubstantiation, etc., which still retains its place as an offensive tag to the coronation oath. The Declaration is hopelessly out of joint with the spirit of the times. And it is a humiliation and an insult to any enlightened ruler of our day to compel him to solemnly inaugurate his reign by singling out for special opprobrium, from among his subjects of every color and creed—Christians of eight hundred varieties, Brahmins, Mahommedans, and the rest—eleven millions of Catholics, and officially fixing upon them—and, through them, on Catholics of all times and climes—the stigma of rank idolatry.

The following is the full text of this vile declaration which—unless Parliament intervenes—the new Sovereign will be required to make on the occasion of his coronation:—

I, EDWARD the Seventh, by the Grace of God, King of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, do solemnly and sincerely, in the presence of GOD, profess, testify, and declare that I do believe that in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper there is not any Transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of CHRIST at or after the consecration thereof by any person whatsoever; and that the invocation or adoration of the Virgin MARY or any other Saint, and the Sacrifice of the Mass, as they are now used in the Church of Rome, are superstitious and idolatrous. And I do solemnly, in the presence of GOD, profess, testify, and declare that I do make this declaration and every part thereof in the plain and ordinary sense of the words read unto me, as they are commonly understood by English Protestants, without any evasion, equivocation, or mental reservation whatsoever, and without any dispensation already granted to me for this purpose by the Pope or any other authority or person whatsoever, and without thinking that I am or can be acquitted before GOD or man, or absolved of this declaration or any part thereof, although the Pope or any other person or persons or power whatsoever should dispense with or annul the same, or declare that it was null and void from the beginning.

This boisterous no-Popery blast is the product of an age of coarse manners, of gross ribaldry, and of fierce sectarian storm. The very terms in which it is couched sufficiently indicate that it was formulated in a period when small regard was paid to the sanctity of an oath. It was, in fact, the period whose oath-breaking was so caustically satirised by SAMUEL BUTLER in the lines which he puts into the mouth of the English SANCHO PANZA:—

Oaths are but words, and words but wind,
Too feeble implements to bind,
And hold with deeds proportion so,
As shadows to a substance do.

The declaration quoted above dates from the year 1688—a time when, as FATHER BRIDGET points out in his valuable little book on the coronation oath, 'the question was not merely of securing a Protestant heir to the throne, but of total suppression of Catholic worship. Some fanatics would have it suppressed because they judged it idolatrous; some politicians called it idolatrous because they wished it to be

suppressed.' The outline of this Declaration against Transubstantiation was first framed by the Puritans during the great rebellion which ended in the shortening of the stature of CHARLES I. by a head. In 1673 it appeared tricked out in a new dress in the Test Act, which was designed to keep Catholics out of every office, both civil and military—it did not exclude atheists and infidels. Five years later, in 1678, it was made more virulent and comprehensive and was imposed on all members of Parliament. In this aggravated form it was extended to wearers of the crown by the Bill of Rights in 1688.

Queen ANNE was the first British Sovereign who uttered the shameful words of the Declaration quoted above. They have been repeated by every wearer of the English crown since her day. On the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act, this and the similar oath of the Test Act were abolished for Members of Parliament and for all civil and military functionaries except the Lords Chancellor of England and Ireland, and the Chancellors of the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and Dublin. An Act of Parliament passed in 1867 relieved these of the need of subscribing to the offensive Declaration that was invented by the Parliaments of CHARLES II. and WILLIAM of Orange. The supreme ruler of all the realm is now alone compelled to officially fling evil epithets at a large and peaceable body of his subjects.

The coronation oath has been the subject of a dropping fire of protest from both Catholics and Protestants ever since the time of first serious movements for equal religious rights in the British dominions. During the agitation for Catholic Emancipation Dr. DOYLE—the celebrated 'J.K.L.'—wrote learnedly and with vigor upon the subject in his reply to Dr. HENRY PHILPOTTS, afterwards Anglican Bishop of Exeter. In refusing to take the 'old oath' at the Bar of the House of Commons, O'CONNELL said: 'In this oath I see one assertion as to a matter of fact, which I know to be untrue. I see a second assertion as to a matter of opinion, which I believe to be untrue. I therefore refuse to take this oath.' The oath was taken by the late Queen VICTORIA—then a maiden of eighteen summers—at the opening of her first Parliament on November 20, 1837, and again at her coronation on June 28, 1838. In connection with the 'cruel and indecorous' infliction of this oath upon a young girl of eighteen, the great historian Dr. LINGARD addressed a letter of dignified remonstrance to the Lord Chancellor. It contained the following words:—

It will not be denied that before a man may safely and consistently affix the stigma of superstition and idolatry on any Church it is incumbent on him to make the doctrine and worship of that Church the subjects of his study; to be satisfied in his own mind that he understands them correctly, and not merely as they have been misrepresented by their adversaries; and to weigh with impartiality the texts and arguments by which they may be assailed and defended. But who can expect all this from a young woman of eighteen?

And who, we might add, could expect it from a man of sixty, the course of whose studies has, in all probability, never yet led him into the vexed fields of theological controversy?

On the same occasion the distinguished naturalist CHARLES WATERTON described the coronation oath as 'abominable.' 'It is,' said he in a published letter, 'a satire on the times; it is a disgrace to the British nation; it ought to be destroyed by the hand of the common hangman.' In 1867 Sir COLMAN O'LOUGHLAN referred to it in the British House of Commons as 'a relic of barbarism.' And in the House of Lords in the same year Lord KIMBERLEY, who had been Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, spoke of it in the following uncompromising terms:—

He had himself [he said] been called upon to make that declaration before the Irish Privy Council, in the presence of a large number of persons of the Roman Catholic faith; and he must say that he had never in his life made a declaration with more pain than when he was required before men holding high office, and for whom he had the greatest respect, to declare the tenets of their religion to be superstitious and idolatrous.

We have incidentally referred to one other aspect of the coronation oath; the insult which it is to the monarch who is asked to take it. 'A Christian king,' says FATHER BRIDGET in his book on the subject, 'should most certainly