

Encyclical Letter

OF

HIS HOLINESS POPE LEO. XIII.

LEO XIII., POPE.

TO ALL THE PATRIARCHS, PRIMATES, ARCHBISHOPS, AND BISHOPS OF THE CATHOLIC WORLD.

Venerable Brethren, Health and Apostolic Benediction.—Entering upon the twenty-fifth year of Our Apostolic ministry, and astonished at the length of the course which We have traversed, in the midst of continual and anxious cares, We feel Ourselves most naturally impelled to raise Our thoughts towards the ever-blessed Ruler of the world, Who, amongst so many other favors, has deigned to grant Us a length of years in the Pontificate almost without parallel in history. Therefore, to the Father of all men, to Him Who holds in His hands the mysterious secret of life. We utter Our hymn of thanksgiving, in obedience to the dictates of Our heart.

Assuredly the eye of man cannot fathom the depth of the Divine designs in thus prolonging Our old age beyond all hope; it is for Us only to bow down in silence and adore Him. One thing, however, We know well, that if He has been pleased, and if He is pleased still, to preserve Our existence, a great duty lies upon Us, viz., to live for the welfare and advancement of His immaculate Spouse, His Holy Church, and, far from losing courage in the presence of care and pain, to consecrate to His service what remains of Our strength, even to Our last breath.

Having paid the tribute of just thanksgiving to Our Heavenly Father, to Whom be honor and glory for all eternity, it is very pleasing to Us to turn to you in thought, and to address Our words to you, venerable brethren, who have been called by the Holy Spirit to govern the chosen portions of the flock of Jesus Christ, and thereby share with Us in the struggles and in the triumphs, in the sorrows and in the joys, of the pastoral office. The many remarkable

Proofs of Religious Veneration

which you have lavished on Us in the course of Our Pontificate and still multiply in the present circumstances with an eager devotion that is full of tenderness, will never fade from Our memory. Intimately united to you as We are already by Our duty and by Our paternal love, these testimonies of your devotedness, extremely dear to Our heart, bind Us now to you once more, less for their personal manifestations towards Ourselves, than for the inviolable attachment that they indicate to this Apostolic See, which is the centre and support of all the other Sees of Catholicity. If it has always been necessary that the children of the Church should jealously adhere to the different degrees of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, united in the bonds of reciprocal charity and in the pursuit of the same designs, so as to be moved only by one heart and one soul, this union is become in our time more indispensable than ever. Who, indeed, is ignorant of the immense conspiracy of hostile forces which aim to-day at ruining and obliterating the great work of Jesus Christ, which endeavors, with an animosity that knows no limits, to rob man in the intellectual order of the treasure of celestial truths, and in the social order to uproot the holiest and most salutary Christian institutions? But of all this you yourselves have experience every day; more than once have you expressed to Us your anxiety and distress, while you deplored the multitude of prejudices, false systems, and of errors that are being sown with impunity among the people. Are not snares being laid on all sides for believing souls? Are not obstacles being multiplied to enfeeble, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the beneficent action of the Church? And, in the meantime, as if to add insult to injustice, is not the Church herself reviled because she cannot recover her ancient power, because she is unable to restrain the torrent of wild passions that threatens to destroy all obstacles in their path?

We would wish, indeed, that We might address you, venerable brethren, on a subject less sorrowful and in greater harmony with the happy event from which We take occasion to speak. But however desirable such a discourse might be, it is not permitted by the grave trials of the Church which call urgently for assistance, and by the serious condition of contemporary society. The social world, already grievously astray in its moral and material aspects, is advancing towards a destiny still worse, owing to

The Abandonment of Christian Traditions:

for it is a law of Providence, confirmed by history, that one cannot strike a blow at the great principles of religion without shaking at the same time the foundations of order and social prosperity. In these circumstances, in order to refresh your souls, and to supply them with new faith and courage, it appears to Us opportune and useful to consider attentively the origin, causes, and multiplied forms of the implacable war which is being waged against the Church; and whilst exhibiting its fatal consequences to point out the antidote to them. May Our words, therefore resound afar, although they must recall truths which We have several times affirmed already; may they be heard not only by the children of Catholic unity, but also by those who dissent from Us; and even by those unhappy ones who no longer have the faith: for all are children of the same Father; all are ordained to the same supreme end; may they be received, in fine, as the testament which We, now removed but a short distance from the gates of eternity, wish to leave to the peoples as an earnest of the salvation We desire for all.

In every age the Holy Church of Christ has had to combat and to suffer for truth and justice. Instituted by the Divine Redeemer

Himself to increase the kingdom of God in the world, it is her duty to lead fallen humanity by the light of the Gospel law towards its immortal destiny—that is to say, she must bring them into possession of the endless blessings that God has promised, but to which man's unaided strength is not sufficient to attain. In the fulfilment of her heavenly mission she must of necessity come into collision with the countless passions which are transmitted from the pristine fall, and from the corruption begotten of it, with pride, cupidity, the unbridled desire of material pleasures, and with all manners of vices and disorders. True to her trust the Church has always exercised over these

The Most Powerful Restraint,

These persecutions ought not to astonish us. Have they not been predicted by the Divine Master, and do we not know they will last as long as the world? What did our Saviour say to His disciples when He sent them to bear the treasure of His doctrine to all nations? 'You will be persecuted from city to city, because of My name; you will be hated and despised: you will be delivered before tribunals and condemned to the extremity of punishments.' And to encourage them to bear such trials He gave Himself as an example. 'If the world hate you, know you that it hath hated Me before you.' *Si mundus vos odit scitote quia me priorem vobis odio habuit* (John xv., 18.) These are the joys, these the rewards, which the Divine Saviour promises us here below.

No one who considers the matter justly and impartially will ever discover a reason for such hatred. Whom, indeed, had the Divine Redeemer ever offended, or in what had He deserved ill? He had come down to this earth impelled by infinite charity, and there had taught a doctrine, pure and consoling, and beyond all others adapted to unite fraternally all men in peace and love. He had coveted neither the greatness of the world nor its honors. He had interfered with no one's rights; on the contrary, men saw in Him one moved by infinite compassion for the feeble, the sick, the poor; for sinners and for the oppressed. His life was spent distributing His divine benefits amongst men. It was then through sheer excess of malice on the part of those men, an excess the more lamentable as it was the more unjust, that the Saviour, in accordance with the prophecy of Simeon, became the sign of contradiction on this earth—'*signum cui contradicetur*' (Luke ii. 34) 'a sign that shall be contradicted.'

May we, therefore, be surprised if the Catholic Church, which continues the divine mission of Jesus Christ, and is the incorruptible guardian of His truth, has not escaped the lot of its Master? The world does not change. By the side of the children of God are always found the fanatics of the great enemy of the human race, the followers of him who, rebellious against the Most High from the beginning, is called in the Gospel the prince of this world. And there lies the reason why this world in opposition to the divine law and to him who presents that law to it in the name of God feels rising up and revolting within itself, in measureless pride, a spirit of independence to which it has no right. Ah! how often and often, in times of great disturbance, have the enemies of the Church with unspeakable cruelty, with shameless injustice, evidently aiming at the destruction of all society, banded their hosts together to overthrow the divine work!

If one class of persecution was found unsuccessful they tried another. During three long centuries the Roman Empire, by the abuse of brutal force, strewed all its provinces with the corpses of our martyrs, and purpled with their blood each sod of earth in this sacred city. Then hereby, sometimes masked, sometimes open, had recourse to sophisms and to perfidious artifices, in order to destroy the harmony and break the unity of the Church. Then, like a devastating tempest, the barbarians were let loose from the north, and Islamism from the south; and behind them everywhere were left ruins strewn over the deserts. Thus was transmitted, from century to century, the sorrowful inheritance of hatred under which the Spouse of Christ was opposed. Then came a Cæsarism, as suspicious as it was powerful, jealous of the greatness of others, no matter how far it had extended its own conquests, and began a series of attacks upon the Church in order that it might lay a cowardly hand upon her rights and trample her liberties under foot. The heart bleeds to see this mother so often afflicted with anguish and inexpressible sorrow. However, triumphing over all obstacles, all violence, and tyranny, she went on planting more and more widely her peaceful institutions. She saved from disaster the glorious patrimony of the arts, of history, of the sciences, of letters; and by making the Spirit of the Gospel penetrate deeply throughout the whole extent of society she created in all its elements Christian civilisation. To that civilisation the peoples, who have been subjected to its beneficent influence, owe equity of laws, mildness of manners, protection for the weak, pity for the poor and the unfortunate, respect for the rights and for the dignity of all men, and likewise, as far as the fluctuation of human affairs will allow, that peace in social life which comes from a wise agreement between justice and liberty.

These Proofs of the Intrinsic Beneficence

of the Church are as brilliant and sublime as they have been lasting. Yet, as in the middle ages and in the early centuries, we see this Church assailed in times more near our own, in some respects at least, more harshly and more cruelly than ever. Following a series of well-known historical causes, the pretended Reformation raised, in the sixteenth century, the standard of revolt; and, intending to wound the Church to her very heart, it boldly struck at the Papacy. It broke the precious bond of the ancient unity of faith and authority which had so often, through the harmonious pursuit of the same purposes, multiplied a hundredfold the power, prestige, and glory of Christian nations, which had united all the peoples in one fold and under one Shepherd, and it thus introduced into the ranks of Christians the fatal principle of disunion.

We do not, indeed, mean to assert that from the very beginning of this movement the object these so-called reformers had in