

CARDINAL MERCIER TO HIS PEOPLE

THE SUPPRESSED PASTORAL

MY VERY DEAR BRETHREN,—I cannot tell you how instant and how present the thought of you has been to me throughout the months of suffering and of mourning which we have passed through. I had to leave you abruptly on the 20th of August in order to fulfil my last duty towards the beloved and venerated Pope whom we have lost, and in order to discharge an obligation of the conscience from which I could not dispense myself in the election of the successor of Pius the Tenth, the Pontiff who now directs the Church under the title, full of promise and of hope, of Benedict the Fifteenth.

It was in Rome itself that I received the tidings—stroke after stroke—of the partial destruction of the Cathedral church of Louvain, next of the burning of the Library and of the scientific installations of our great University and of the devastation of the city, and next of the wholesale shooting of citizens, and tortures inflicted upon women and children, and upon unarmed and undefended men. And while I was still under the shock of these calamities the telegraph brought us news of the bombardment of our beautiful metropolitan church, of the church of Notre Dame au delà la Dyle, of the episcopal palace, and of a great part of our dear city of Malines.

Afar from my diocese, without means of communication with you, I was compelled to lock my grief within my own afflicted heart, and to carry it, with the thought of you, which never left me, to the foot of the crucifix.

A FUNDAMENTAL TRUTH.

I craved courage and light, and sought them in such thoughts as these: A disaster has visited the world, and our beloved little Belgium, a nation so faithful in the great mass of her population to God, so upright in her patriotism, so noble in her King and Government, is the first sufferer. She bleeds: her sons are stricken down, within her fortresses and upon her fields, in defence of her rights and of her territory. Soon there will not be one Belgian family not in mourning. Why all this sorrow, my God? Lord, Lord, hast Thou forsaken us? Then I looked upon the crucifix. I looked upon Jesus, most gentle and humble Lamb of God, crushed, clothed in His blood as in a garment, and I thought I heard from His own mouth the words which the Psalmist uttered in His name: 'O God, my God, look upon me: why hast Thou forsaken me? O my God, I shall cry, and Thou wilt not hear' (Psalm xxi. 1). And forthwith the murmur died upon my lips: and I remembered what our Divine Saviour said in His Gospel: 'The disciple is not above the master, nor the servant above his lord' (Matthew x. 24). The Christian is the servant of a God who became man in order to suffer and to die. To rebel against pain, to revolt against Providence, because it permits grief and bereavement, is to forget whence we came, the school in which we have been taught, the example that each of us carries graven in the name of a Christian, which each of us honors at his hearth, contemplates at the altar of his prayers, and of which he desires that his tomb, the place of his last sleep, shall bear the sign.

My dearest brethren, we shall return by and by to the providential law of suffering, but you will agree that since it has pleased a God-made-man who was holy, innocent, without stain, to suffer and to die for us who are sinners, who are guilty, who are perhaps criminals, it ill becomes us to complain whatever we may be called upon to endure. The truth is that no disaster on earth, striking creatures only, is comparable with that which our sins provoked, and whereof God Himself chose to be the blameless victim.

Having called to mind this fundamental truth, I find it easier to summon you to face what has befallen us, and to speak to you simply and directly of what is

your duty, and of what may be your hope. That duty I shall express in two words: Patriotism and Endurance.

PATRIOTISM.

My dearest brethren, I desire to utter, in your name and my own, the gratitude of those whose age, vocation, and special conditions cause them to benefit by the heroism of others, without bearing in it any active part.

When, immediately on my return from Rome, I went to Havre to greet our Belgian, French, and English wounded; when, later, at Malines, at Louvain, at Antwerp, it was given to me to take the hands of those brave men who carried a bullet in their flesh, a wound on their forehead, because they had marched to the attack of the enemy, or borne the shock of his onslaught, it was a word of gratitude to them that rose to my lips. 'O valiant friends,' I said, 'it was for us, it was for each one of us, it was for me, that you risked your lives and are now in pain. I am moved to tell you of my respect, of my thankfulness, to assure you that the whole nation knows how much she is in debt to you.'

For in truth our soldiers are our saviours.

A first time, at Liège, they saved France; a second time, in Flanders, they arrested the advance of the enemy upon Calais. France and England know it; and Belgium stands before them both, and before the entire world, as a nation of heroes. Never before in my whole life did I feel so proud to be a Belgian as when, on the platforms of French stations, and halting a while in Paris, and visiting London, I was witness of the enthusiastic admiration our Allies feel for the heroism of our Army. Our King is, in the esteem of all, at the very summit of the moral scale: he is doubtless the only man who does not recognise that fact, as simple as the simplest of his soldiers, he stands in the trenches and puts new courage, by the serenity of his face, into the hearts of those of whom he requires that they shall not doubt of their country. The foremost duty of every Belgian citizen at this hour is gratitude to the Army.

If any man had rescued you from shipwreck or from a fire, you would assuredly hold yourselves bound to him by a debt of everlasting thankfulness. But it is not one man, it is two hundred and fifty thousand men who fought, who suffered, who fell for you so that you might be free, so that Belgium might keep her independence, her dynasty, her patriotic unity; so that after the vicissitudes of battle she might rise nobler, purer, more erect, and more glorious than before.

Pray daily, my brethren, for these two hundred and fifty thousand, and for their leaders to victory; pray for our brethren in arms; pray for the fallen; pray for those who are still engaged; pray for the recruits who are making ready for the fight to come.

In your name I send them the greeting of our fraternal sympathy and our assurance that not only do we pray for the success of their arms and for the eternal welfare of their souls, but that we also accept for their sake all the distress, whether physical or moral, that falls to our own share in the oppression that hourly besets us, and all that the future may have in store for us, in humiliation for a time, in anxiety, and in sorrow. In the day of final victory we shall all be in honor: it is just that to-day we should all be in grief.

To judge by certain rumors that have reached me, I gather that from districts that have had least to suffer some bitter words have arisen towards our God, words which, if spoken with cold calculation, would be not far from blasphemous.

Oh, all too easily do I understand how natural instinct rebels against the evils that have fallen upon Catholic Belgium: the spontaneous thought of mankind is ever that virtue should have its instantaneous crown, and injustice its immediate retribution. But the ways of God are not our ways, the Scripture tells us. Providence gives free way, for a time measured by Divine wisdom, to human passions and the conflict of desires. God, being eternal, is patient. The last word is the word of mercy, and it belongs to those who