

THE CHURCH IN SOUTH AMERICA

Notwithstanding the enormous development of business relations with South America in recent years, popular ideas about the actual situation in the great southern continent are very vague. One sometimes hears people speak as if revolutionary disturbances were common features of South American life, although, as a matter of fact, there has now been unbroken peace in its ten republics for many years. Indeed, South America's recent history is much more peaceful than that of old Europe. And again—thanks largely to the impressions derived from the non-Catholic press and the writings of Protestant travellers—there is a widespread impression (shared by many Catholics) that the Church in South America is in anything but a flourishing condition, and that infidelity, carelessness, or mere formal observance with no real life in it, is characteristic of the people.

To many, therefore, the account of Catholic life in various countries of South America given in a lecture at Gumley House by Lieut.-Colonel D'Alton will come as a welcome surprise (writes a correspondent of the *Catholic Times*). The lecture was given in the new concert room of the convent, and the audience were the community, the girls of the high school, and a few friends. The lecture included such a mass of interesting evidence as to the position of the Church in South America that it deserves to have a much wider publicity. Colonel D'Alton is one of the most eminent of our electrical engineers, and during the last six years has spent a considerable time in South America in the work of planning and carrying out important engineering undertakings. Unlike so many travellers, who claim to speak with authority on South American matters after a flying visit to a few of the great ports on the seaboard, he has penetrated far into the interior, visiting not only cities and towns, but doing pioneering work along the rivers and in the forest regions, where he lived among the people in remote villages. He can therefore speak with familiar knowledge of their life and ways.

Within the compass of a brief report it would be impossible to do more than touch upon a few of the interesting points that the lecturer put before the audience in a pleasant familiar style. He pointed out that

The Civilisation of South America

was the creation of the Church. Its people are Catholic. Protestantism is found only among immigrants and business men from other countries. Modern infidelity has not touched the mass of the people:—

'The South American does believe in God, not simply as a far-away ideal, but as a living personality. . . . I saw this faith, I knew it, during many visits to a country permeated with ideas of Almighty God, of the Blessed Sacrament, of the Sacrifice of the Mass, of our Divine Lord, of our Blessed Lady, of Confession, of Absolution, of all holy things, all of which are taken by all men, rich and poor, young and old, bad and good, in the nature of facts, uncontested, unquestioned, undoubted.'

One saw this living faith in the great cities, said the lecturer, but still more vividly among the simple folk of the interior. He told how on a river journey the boatmen never failed to kneel for prayer at morning and evening, and to say grace before each meal; how a forester at work in a clearing of the woods, on being asked the way, would say, 'God has sent you to give me a chance to help you.' How everywhere rich and poor offered friendly hospitality to the traveller, and how in every one of the republics he found a spirit of helpful charity binding men together.

In the Argentine, with a population largely affected by immigration, out of a total of six and a half millions there are four and a quarter million Catholics. Buenos Ayres has twenty-two parish churches and more than a hundred churches and chapels belonging to religious communities and charitable foundations. 'Pious associations for men and women abound, particularly those devoted to charity, upon which the people of

Buenos Ayres spend immense sums.' Church and State are separate, but work harmoniously together. By law the President of Argentina must be a Catholic. Each year Congress votes a large sum which is handed over to the Church to be spent in meeting its expenses. The Constitution obliges the Government to promote mission work for the conversion of the Indian tribes, and requires Catholic teaching to be given in the schools.

The Laws are Based on Catholic Principles, and the doyen of the diplomatic body in the capital is the Papal Nuncio. There is the same harmonious working of Church and State in Brazil. Few realise that this is a country larger in extent than the United States. Of its twenty millions of people eighteen millions are Catholics. Protestants do not number more than 200,000. In Rio one sees crowds in the churches at every Mass from 5 a.m. to midday, and thousands receiving Holy Communion. There are no less than 63 Catholic associations. The most important are the Brotherhood of St. Vincent de Paul and the Brotherhood of the Blessed Sacrament, the latter founded as long ago as 1669. These have branches in every city, town, and village in Brazil. The separation of Church and State on the proclamation of the Brazilian Republic has really meant complete freedom for the Church.

Its Vigorous Life is a Revelation

to anyone who has heard only the accounts of Catholicity in South America that appear in Protestant newspapers in England and the United States. To quote the lecturer's words:—

'Anti-Catholic prejudice is deeply rooted in the soul of the Protestant Britisher, and he cannot, he certainly does not, look upon us with that fairness which is in all other things a characteristic of his quality. It is to this prejudice, of which I could give many an example, that the false ideas of the state of religion in South America held in England are due. One hears wonderful, marvellous, often scandalous stories of the priests and people of Latin America, which are as entirely false, as unsupported by any semblance of evidence, as are the stories which you sometimes hear in England of the "Escaped Nun," the "Converted Priest," and the like. There are good and bad in every nation, and truth, honor, integrity form no exclusive quality of those who speak the English language. The Catholic priesthood, all the world over, stands marvellously, miraculously above the faults, the foibles, the sins of mankind. There may be now and then a rare black sheep in the great flock, but believe me that the micro-percentage of these is as microscopic in Latin America as any one of you knows it to be even in these so-called more enlightened countries.'

What one sees of the vigor of Catholic life in Rio is to be witnessed everywhere else in Brazil. Bahia is perhaps the most essentially Catholic of the great cities. In the city and the province of which it is the capital there are two and a half million Catholics, with 750 churches, numerous religious houses, and a multitude of charitable institutions. One finds

The Same Catholic Life

in the minor republics. The lecturer told how in Colombia, where the Church, after a long and trying time, had emerged triumphantly from its troubles, he found evidence of the faith of the people in every part of the interior which he explored. Sometimes popular devotion took forms that were unfamiliar to the European. He was at the town of Honda at Christmas, and the people had their 'crib.' But it was on the high altar. There was no figure of the Divine Infant, no manger, but the kneeling figures of our Lady, St. Joseph, the Shepherds, and the Kings all looked towards the door of the tabernacle. The figure of St. Joseph was dressed like a Colombian peasant, but that of our Lady was arrayed in a wonderful costume, which included a straw hat with feathers, a blue opera cloak, and high-heeled white satin shoes.

'I confess,' said the lecturer, 'I was startled when I saw the group. But one could see with what loving devotion these incongruous properties had been assem-