

CATHOLICISM IN ITALY.¹

BY G. FIAMINGO.

WE FREQUENTLY HEAR the expression of Voltaire that "no man is great in the eyes of his valet." This observation corresponds very closely to the truth, but Voltaire was not the author of it. Jesus Christ himself recognised that a prophet is not without honor except in his own country, and Voltaire only paraphrased this expression of Christ.

What is true of men is true also of an institution like the Catholic Church. This Church, which has its seat in Rome, must naturally present itself to Italians, and that independently of other factors, in a manner quite different from that in which it appears to other Catholic populations. These other populations, distant from Italy, and especially from Rome, see in Catholicism its less real phases. All the functions and life which are manifested in St. Peter's, and in the Vatican, reach them through general ideas which, like all other things at a distance, exaggerate their ideal and mystical character; and all the lesser and meaner things of the papacy and the curacy of Rome do not reach them at all.

To the Catholics living at a distance from Rome and Italy, their religion necessarily appears in an ideal form, and among them the mystical features of Christianity prevail. Roman historical tradition has little by little impersonated the Catholic religion in a pope who not only represents, but almost personifies, God himself, as is shown by proclaiming his infallibility at the end of a century which has criticised everything, and has found error everywhere, and also by the fact that St. Peter's has become the great temple of this Roman Catholic Christian religion. On account of this view of the Pope and of St. Peter's the Gospel has been forgotten, or,

¹Translated from the manuscript of G. Fiamingo by I. W. Howerth of the University of Chicago.

at least, neglected. But while this is obvious to the Catholics of Rome and Italy, almost in contact with the Pope and with St. Peter's, it is not so to those who have never seen either, and who know them only from tradition, and from the stories of pilgrims who have gone for a few days to Rome, urged by their extreme mysticism. Consequently, to these distant Catholics the Pope and St. Peter's must present themselves in an ideal and semi-mystical form, as two grand institutions like the religion which they serve to symbolise.

Even to-day the Catholic who is not Italian and who goes to Rome and has sufficient intelligence to form a clear idea of things as they are, gets a very different impression of the papacy, the Vatican, and St. Peter's from that which he had formed at a distance. Le Sar Peladan, a sincere Catholic, had to make that confession; even he had to recognise the profound difference which exists between these great institutions of Catholicism as they are idealised in the minds of the people at a distance, and as they are in reality. As a matter of fact, they badly conceal the narrow-mindedness, the faults and vulgarities common to men, and are represented by men far from exempt from human weaknesses. And all this narrowmindedness and weakness, all these intrigues and vulgarities which are not wanting in the neighborhood of the Vatican, and in the election of a Pope, and which are not visible for the most part to distant populations, constitute a great part of Italian life and activity. How much moral and mystical authority, for instance, could have inspired Bartholomew of Naples, Archbishop of Bari, elected Pope under the name of Urban VI.? He succeeded Gregory XI., who died in 1378. At the death of this Pope the clergy, and especially the common people of Rome, collected in great numbers under the windows of the cardinals, and made a demonstration beseeching them, for the welfare of the Roman Church, and for the glory of the Christian name, to choose for Pope, especially for those troublous times, an illustrious Italian personage. They were afraid that if the choice should fall upon a Frenchman he would remove the court to France, thus entailing enormous damages upon Rome, and upon the whole of Italy. In fact during the absence of the pontiff, they had seen the control of the Church fall into the hands of tyrants, Rome and Italy afflicted by continuous evils, and the churches of Rome abandoned and for the most part ruined.

Concerning this, Berthelet says: "The Holy See being seen
"to be thus reduced, the convents and sacred places having be-

“come the lair of wild beasts, religious zeal which had formerly brought great masses to Rome was chilled, and none came any more to visit the tombs of the martyrs. It is necessary, therefore, that the Pope should reside in the city which St. Peter had chosen for his dwelling-place, and that he should guard and preserve the patrimony of St. Peter’s which had expanded itself into Tuscany, Sabina, Campania, Umbria, Marchés, and Romagna, and which during the absence of the Popes had been conquered by various tyrants.” Very few cardinals ever lived at Rome, and in the absence of the pontifical court the economic evils which afflict the city are terrible; especially among the common people, the misery is very great. The remedy for all these evils was the election of an Italian Pope. This is why the Romans wished the Pope to be an Italian. Religious sentiment had nothing to do with it.

Impressed by these circumstances, the cardinals replied that they would elect a worthy man, who, without making individual or national distinctions, would govern the Church according to the example of the Saviour, and attract to Rome the affluence of the faithful and thus better its conditions. The clergy and the people were thus pacified, believing that nothing would be done by the cardinals that was not for the honor of God, and for the welfare of the Roman Church and Christianity.

But, as a matter of fact, something very different happened. The conclave had assembled in St. Peter’s, and the doors of the Vatican were closely guarded by a great number of soldiers ready to put down any uprising of the people which might interfere in the election of the Pope. But when they began to count the votes, a serious contest arose among the cardinals on account of the fact that there were thirteen French cardinals who wished one of their number chosen, and four Italians, one of whom, Orsini, hoped to be elected. At the same time a still more bitter contest arose among the French cardinals, who were divided into two parties each of which wished the Pope to be selected from itself.

This contest, this personal struggle for the See of St. Peter’s, was carried on with an unparalleled audacity and shamelessness, and without any possible reconciliation, until the sacred clergy were forced to nominate for the papacy a prelate who was absent, and who, moreover, was not a member of the college, Bartholomew of Naples (or, as some say, of Pisa), Archbishop of Bari.¹ The rabble crowding around the Vatican was already shouting, “A Ro-

¹G. Berthelet, *Si le pape doit être italien*, Rome, 1894, p. 18.

man! We wish a Roman, or, at least, an Italian!" When Bartholomew Prignano, Archbishop of Bari, by fifteen votes out of sixteen was elected, it was necessary, before announcing the new pontiff to the crowd, to know whether he was acceptable to it. A cardinal called to the people from a window to go to St. Peter's to hear the proclamation, but the crowd understood that the cardinal of St. Peter's, Tibaldeschi, was elected Pope, and ran, as is the custom, to his house (*a saccheggiane la casa*). In vain others were told that the Archbishop of Bari was elected. They understood de Bar, John de Bar, whom they did not like. That part of the crowd which had already surrounded St. Peter's was about to invade the conclave. Then the cardinals, against his wish, took old Tibaldeschi and forced him to sit down in the pontifical seat. They put upon him the mitre, and the stole, and sang the *Te Deum*. Tibaldeschi protested, but Cardinal de Marmontiers forced him to remain in the pontifical seat, holding him down by the shoulders, and his own grandson, Tibaldeschi, helped to keep him there with his fists. This disgraceful scene lasted for some time. Six days afterwards, however, all the cardinals of this strange conclave assisted at the coronation of Prignano, who took the name of Urban VI.

Urban VI., being a violent, insulting, and intolerably cruel man, aroused the indignation of the cardinals who, remembering the extraordinary and far from liberal conditions under which he had been elected to the papacy, soon re-assembled in the castle of Anagni, not far from Rome, and with a vote of twelve cardinals out of thirteen who participated in this second conclave, elected to the papacy Robert of Geneva, who took the name of Clement VII. Tibaldeschi, who was too old to leave Rome, remained with Urban. The king of France proclaimed the second election valid, that is, that of Clement VII. It is pretty sure that the Holy Ghost did not inspire either of these two conclaves.¹

It is such things as those which have just been described which caused the people of Rome to see in the Pope not a representative of a supernatural God, mystical and impersonal, but simply a useful economical institution. They demand an Italian pope, even a Roman, not that he may take care of their individual souls, for that is not even distantly thought of, but in order that he may satisfy Roman and Italian economic interests. And this people witness and even participate in the most vulgar intrigues and loudest demonstrations, lest the See of St. Peter's be assumed by one per-

¹Le Sar Peladan, *Le Prochain Conclave*. Paris, 1896. Page 68.

son rather than another. How much moral authority, much less mystical, can an individual have in the eyes of his people, who has obtained the Holy See only because he has outdone the other cardinals in audacity and cunning, or by illegal and violent means, or by a combination of all these circumstances?

Machiavelli, like his contemporaries who saw the Chair of St. Peter successively assumed by Sixtus IV., Innocent VIII., Alexander VI., Julius II., and Leo X., was compelled to say that "it is Rome which has taken away our faith;" while Vettori, who lived at Rome, the secretary of a cardinal, wrote of Leo X.: "It being seen that the Pope broke his oaths and made a constitution one day which he violated the next, he began to lose the very name of Good, and while he made many prayers and fasted often, he was no longer believed in. It is certainly a great task to undertake to be at the same time a temporal lord and a religious man, because whoever considers the evangelical laws will see that the pontiffs, while taking the name of the Vicar of Christ, have really created a new religion which possesses only the name of Christ; for they command poverty and wish for themselves wealth; they urge humility and themselves follow pride; they demand obedience and will suffer themselves to be commanded by no one." A modern critic could not have put the matter better than Vettori, who lived in the midst of the Roman life of the sixteenth century, and who was unable, therefore, to see all defects.

But this sixteenth century, which took the name of the century of Julius II. and Leo X., of those two Popes who were the negation of any truly mystical spirit, and who represented a God who is the negation of all that is described in the Gospel, these Popes, I say, and the century in which they lived do not stand alone. The whole history of the papacy after the early centuries is a chronology of popes who, with a few exceptions, are similar to Julius and Leo, without, indeed, having their genial qualities; and the other centuries of the Vatican differ from the sixteenth only because they lack its artistic splendor. All the popes, with a few exceptions, as well as not a few centuries of the history of the Roman Catholic Church, are alike in the complete want of a genuine sentiment of Christian and mystical faith. And the whole people who lived in contact with the Church of Rome, not only those who lived in immediate contact with it, like the Romans, but all Italians, necessarily lack these mystical and religious characteristics.

Moreover, the Italian mind from a purely psychological point

of view and as a result partially of the natural environment in which it has been developed, is powerfully fascinated by the beauty of the external world. So true is this that in Sicily where the beauty of nature and the abundance of the tropical flora are still more beautiful than in the remainder of Italy, the Sicilian is almost overwhelmed by the superiority of nature, and in presence of it recognises his own inferiority. In the character of the Sicilians there is therefore developed a taciturnity and a contemplativeness which is generally found only among the people of northern Europe where the population is affected by the imposing grandeur of its natural environment, although it is quite different from that of Sicily. Therefore, in the Sicilian, as in all Italians, there is developed a tendency to enjoy and to reproduce the beauty of nature. In fact, among Italians there is a strong and general inclination to enjoy and to portray the beauty of the physical world, hence the tendency to prefer an outdoor and active life to the indoor and thoughtful one; to follow the practical instinct in its manifestations, sometimes artistic and poetical, sometimes scientific or civil; and, as a consequence, the Italians are wanting in the energy and force necessary to penetrate deeply into an abstract subject, and have an almost absolute lack of originality and of systematic philosophic doctrines. Concerning this, Ferri a few years ago pointed out that the Italian mind, on account of being warmly attached to the objective world, seemed never to have approached metaphysical speculation, except to restrain it with an eclectic sense and an instinct of measure, which illustrates on the one side its artistic tendency, and on the other its constant adhesion to classic tradition, but with this distinction, that our nature, allied in origin to the Greek and Roman stocks, has not inherited to the same degree the faculty of ideal synthesis of the one, and the organising power in politics of the other.

There has always been wanting in Italy, especially since the Reformation, a lively interest in things of the conscience, as well as all spirit of discussion and examination in matters of religion; and this has been one of the causes which, with the violent restraint of all speculative liberty following the Council of Trent, has brought it about that philosophy has always had a very small place, and a value subordinate to that of all other disciplines, in our literature. Philosophy as rational comment in the examination of the religious conscience, and as bold, speculative integration of religious ideals, as is the philosophy of the German type, even among the most independent thinkers, has never been able to take root in

Italy as a permanent product of national thought. The way in which it has sometimes entered into the researches of the moral world has never been that insinuating way, a sort of continuous compromise between the two extremes of absolute and open liberty and of respect for tradition, which Bacon, Locke, Hume, even Mill, the greatest English thinkers, have always followed. The Italian mind, drawn as it is by its own instinct toward all that has distinctness of form, and that does not lose itself in vagueness, even in matters superior to sense has either accepted wholly the content of religion as tradition has handed it down, or has rested with the scholastics, and then with Rosmini and Gisberti and their followers, or, if it has not acquiesced in them, has gone into open rebellion, like the philosophers of the Renaissance, and has overturned altars and priests in whom it no longer believed, and cursed the God which it had formerly worshipped in silence.

The great preoccupation, the fixed idea of the Italian mind, the one to which it holds most passionately, has always been a political and social idea entirely of Roman and Latin origin and tradition, an idea of internal adjustment and of the independence of the State and the Nation. The love, the anger, the implacable hatred aroused in numerous civil discords, although they have many times grown out of motives and sentiments religious in their nature, have never had these as their sole and determining cause. The tumults, the bloody revolts in which the newly-formed Italian communes of the second half of the eleventh century engaged, and in which the clergy were usually mixed up, like that, for instance, of Patarini, although they took their name and occasion from heresies, were chiefly civil and political in their nature and were waged over municipal interests and disputes. And this is noteworthy, that the Italian mind has never of itself produced a single heresy out of the pure spirit of controversy about a dogma, or, at least, none of historical importance. All those which have put foot in Italy, like the heresy of Catari,—and note that they have been usually imported and almost entirely into that part of Italy where there is the largest infusion of foreign blood,—came from abroad, or have in every way an origin not Italian, and have scarcely appeared upon our soil before they were changed from theological and doctrinal, which they were originally, into political. An example is furnished by the followers of Arnaldo da Brescia, a disciple of Abelard, who, like all our great independent thinkers, was opposed to the Church of Rome and its doctrines, who really revolted against the temporal power of the papacy, corrupt itself and the

corrupter of Christianity. To wish to "bring back the Church to its own principles" has always signified to the Italians from Pier delle Vigne, from Dante and San Francesco to Machiavelli, and even to our time, to wish to reform the "rich poverty of the Gospel" (*ricca povertà del vangelo*). On the other hand that which has given to the temporal power of the Church such an important place in our civil history has been a combination of motives and moral causes which grew out of the Church and operated upon the religious character of the entire nation. The people, it is true, have felt and have said by their greatest representatives that they owe to the papacy and the priests the fact of their having become irreligious. While there has always remained in the Church from the inheritance of Roman tradition a portion of its great spirit, it has only served to stamp upon the papacy an imprint of worldliness and a political tendency never inseparable from its history.¹

The papacy has thus slowly but surely rendered to the Italian spirit all that was purely and classically Italian and Roman in what it received from it with the tradition of the empire which it has continued. The faith which Machiavelli claims is destroyed in our minds I would say has been changed in great part by the faults of the Church, and has been made little by little more exterior and secular, withdrawing itself from the mystical spirituality and faith of the early Christian communities, and has become what it has always been to the Italians and which perhaps it was in Etruria and certainly at Rome, the most solemn among the functions of public life, as well as the most dignified and, therefore, the most needful of show and of magnificence and ritual pomp. The old Roman conceived morality as an agreement of conduct with social laws, and superficially placed it above everything in that external dignity by which virtue presents itself to the administrator of the public conscience. The observance of religion, which was the first of all laws and social obligations, stood for him, therefore, above everything else in respect and in the public fulfilment of rights and usages of his native land. It was in substance only a custom of sacred legality. And this is what religion has been, as it has been understood and practised by the majority of the Italians in every age, especially among the common people. It has always been chiefly a *ritual observance*, the legality of which was constituted by the code of precepts of the Roman Church. It has given and gives, therefore, in fact, if not in maxim and in theory, more value, as

¹ Giacomo Barzelotti, *Italia mystica ed Italia pagana*, in *Nuova Antologia*, Rome 1890, p. 266 et seq.

measured in credit and in sanctification, to *works* and to their performance *in public* through the ministry of the priests than to the intimate personal inspiration of faith which speaks from the heart, and is sufficient unto itself. This has always been, and is to-day, the *fact* concerning the faith of the great majority of Italians.¹

An impartial judge who should observe attentively the most significant manifestations of Italian piety and Christianity could not express a judgment different from that of Barzelotti. As far back as 1860 Taine, in his letters to the *Revue des deux Mondes* upon Italy and Italian life, remarked: "In the matter of religion "the Italian imagination grasps only the ceremonies. The celestial powers, like the civil powers, are to it dangerous personages "to be feared, and whose wrath is to be appeased by genuflections "and offerings, and by nothing else. On passing before a crucifix, "these people make the sign of the cross, and mutter a prayer. "Twenty steps away, when they think Christ no longer sees them, "they begin to swear."

The character of the Italians, disinclined as it is to profound meditation, and strongly attracted toward the contemplation of natural beauty, and animated by a strong desire to reproduce this beauty, is marked in consequence by a profound artistic sentiment, which has always flourished in Italy, even in the darkest centuries of the Middle Ages. The Italians accepted, it is true, for a brief period the theories of the Gospel, which at the time constituted a reaction against the social evils which Cæsarism had produced. And at that time Christianity responded to a true social need, and was diffused without any fomentation produced by active propaganda. So that historically it is well known that in Rome the new religion was diffused before any of the apostles had come there to preach it, a thing which happened in a few regions of northern Africa. But as soon as it was born and began to develop, the Italians adopted only its external and ritual manifestations, and did not perceive the social importance of the new religion. They found in Christianity only a subject for artistic manifestation, and they made this religion almost an object of artistic worship, and went to the temples to refresh their spirit eager for artistic beauty. The religious sentiment was overpowered, or rather it did not exist, annulled as it was by a lively desire for contemplating externality.

The Church of Rome has shown a great ability in making use of and in satisfying this artistico-religious need of the Italians. And by satisfying this pseudo-religious sentiment, it has been able

¹G. Barzelotti, *Art. cit.*, p. 29.

to do without mysticism and true religious sentiment, and to give itself to worldliness and to the cultivation of physical force for the conquest of political power and temporal splendor. The Catholic Church thus continues the traditions of imperial Rome, although at the beginning it arose by supplanting it. In other words, the Catholic Church is perfectly adapted to the religious needs of the Italian population, a need, however, *sui generis*, which does not go beyond the image painted more or less skilfully, and the statue roughly or artistically modelled, and remains satisfied with religious ceremonies more or less grotesquely performed. The infamies committed by many popes, the unbridled corruption which infests the Vatican, do not strike them, do not offend their religious sentiment, because this sentiment lacks every characteristic of mysticism and true piety. But, instead of being offended at these infamies and corruptions, it is offended by some spirit who happens to possess the true religious sentiment, like Catharine of Sienna, for instance, who said "God demands that justice be done toward these iniquities which are committed by those who feed and pasture in the garden of the Church, while proclaiming that the animal nature ought not to be nourished (*non si debba nutrire del cibo degli uomini*) . . . you may obtain peace by casting out the perverse edile pomp of the world, preserving only the honor of God and the duties of his Church."

The Church of Rome has occupied itself neither with souls nor the future life, nor with precepts mystical or truly religious. St. Thomas Aquinas or Egidius Colonna, who were among the clearest thinkers of the Guelph school, never occupied themselves with these questions. On the contrary, they maintained that everything ought to be subject to the Church and to its priests, to whom both the authorities and the laity ought to be obedient, and upon whom they should depend. What man can do in this world is of no value if it does not in some way prepare him for the future life (of which they say nothing except what may serve as a kind of scarecrow for giving force to the wishes of the Church), of which the history and the secret are confided to the Church. History, like nature, is a work of God, whose hand guides and conducts the people to triumph or to ruin, and without whom the will of man cannot arrest or change the predestined course of events. What the body is to the soul, what matter is to spirit, the temporal power is to the spiritual. In substance, the two swords which symbolise the two different powers ought to be wielded by the vicar of Christ, whose authority comes directly from God, and to whom even the

emperor, who is the representative of law and of purely terrestrial force, ought to be subject. The authorities, they say, are like the moon, which has no light of its own, but receives its light from the sun, which may be compared to the Pope. And in all the writers of the Middle Ages you may find this singular comparison repeated and given the force of a valid argument or a rigorous demonstration.¹

But, if this curious comparison is no longer found in the writers of the Church of Rome, they maintain the same principles and come to the same conclusions. Leo the XIII., well versed in modern studies, soon after he assumed the chair of St. Peter, issued an encyclical in which he recommended the study of St. Thomas Aquinas, and the purest Thomism inspires his speeches and all his encyclicals. Taking up at random one of his later encyclicals, this fact is amply illustrated. Having fixed upon the unity of the Church as a point of departure, he advances from this idea to all the other conclusions. He begins by saying that the unity of the Church, like that of Christ, is of a double nature, corporeal and spiritual, and this unity is eternal, as Christ wished it and established it; and he excludes the plurality of communions because even in the physical body without unity there is no life. If there is not a unity of faith, there is not sufficient to establish a church. There must still be a unity of interpretation of doctrine, of which the Church is the guardian; and hence, its paternal authority, etc. In fine, St. Thomas himself could not have better interpreted his writings and his logic than Leo the XIII. has done. And as mediæval Cæsarism rules in the Vatican, so the blindest obedience is rendered to the wishes of the great pontiff. Mgr. Talamo, one of the most cultured men of the curacy of Rome, simply because he wished to reconstruct Thomism in accordance with the progress of modern science, fell into disgrace at the Vatican. Confronted by this attitude of the Vatican, the Italian philosophers, who, reflect, however, the insignificance which has always been attached to philosophy in Italy, and which indicates one of the chief characteristics of the mental attitude of this people, either continue to repeat monotonously the dogmas of the metaphysics of St. Thomas, or by reaction fall, like some of the writers of the Renaissance, into the opposite excess and become naturalistic and materialistic, and deny all function to the spirit and to religion which they ridicule or neglect altogether. These, quite numerous, too, are all followers of Darwin and Spencer. Even the laity are almost without exception

¹P. Villari, *Nicolo Machiavelli*. Milan 1895. Vol. 2, p. 239.

led to such extreme materialistic consequences by the influence which their ideas undergo from the struggle carried on between the State and the Vatican. No new spirit animates the Vatican. The Catholic religion remains even in its greatest representatives perfectly consonant with the traditions of the spirit of the Italian people, always averse to profound, meditative and abstract thought, and only eager for and satisfied by external manifestations, however fallacious, of a religion which has no truly religious content. The Pope and the Vatican continue to struggle for a temporal power which they hope is only temporarily lost, and seek to attach the people to themselves more and more in order to have their support in reconquering that show of power which a few square kilometres are able to give to the Church of Rome, while the Italian people are absolutely uninterested in the *Thomistic* theories which the fathers of the Church continue to preach without understanding them. And yet these people continue to carry about their necks a little crucifix and salute more or less respectfully the holy images which are frequently found painted on the walls of the streets, and go to hear the mass, of which, however, they do not understand the meaning. But this people, I repeat, is entirely wanting in all religious sentiment. It continues its religious practices, and finds in its images and in its religious functions a satisfaction of its artistic sentiment, and worships God, the saints, the Church, and is respectful toward them, because they are imposed upon it by tradition, because they are afraid of the Church's power, of its hell, and of the evil fortune which it may bring upon them. Modern Italians pray to God and to the saints, just as their pagan ancestors did two centuries ago. There is no new spirit whatever in the modern Catholic religion of the Italians and of the Vatican.