

THE CRISIS IN THE ROMAN CHURCH.

ACCORDING TO ABBÉ HOUTIN.

BY THE EDITOR.

SINCE The Open Court Publishing Company brought out the *Letters to His Holiness, Pope Pius X*, a good many answers have been received from Roman Catholic quarters that there is no such a thing as modernism, that the author of the book is a Judas, a renegade, a Lutheran, a Protestant, and that probably the whole book is a fake. We respect their standpoint although we would treat adversaries in a different way. A few of the protests, albeit emphatic, are gentlemanly. There is no need of answering every one of them, but we will in this connection call attention to a book of a kindred type written by Abbé Houtin, of France, entitled *The Crisis Among the French Clergy*, translated by E. Thorold Dickson, and published by David Nutt, London. The French abbot is very different from the American priest. While the latter is emotional the former is calm, and his expositions consist of impartial statements. He diagnoses a disease and considers the case extremely serious. In the face of the facts collected by Abbé Houtin it will be difficult to uphold the contention which our correspondents proclaim almost in unison that there is no crisis in the Roman Catholic Church. We present here a number of extracts.

In the preface Abbé Houtin emphasizes his belief "that light is the most powerful agent of health and progress" and having "something to relate about the clergy of France" . . . he will "attempt to give information to a certain number of his coreligionists who suffer profoundly in their own hearts and who argue without knowing very well what is the real question in dispute." He does not preach apostacy nor does he attack any dogma. He expects criticism only from those people, individuals or institutions, "who fish in muddy waters." He says, "Priests in large numbers each year

quit the Church to return to ordinary life," and it is common to explain their motives as apostasies, and the majority of ecclesiastics say disdainfully, "it is to go out by Luther's gate." According to Abbé Houtin "the special character of numerous special crises consists in their arising from the intellect, and not from character and morality; they are mental tragedies." He assures his readers that although his evidence is not as complete as it might be, everything "rests upon a solid basis." He had published the substance of the book in articles under pseudonym signatures, which, however, made no secret of the authorship to those who were posted.

He divides the priests who are disturbed in their faith into three classes. He says:

"Some, on leaving the seminary, have given their energies to good works, benevolent societies and associations, and orphanages, and they devote themselves unselfishly to a cause whose titles they do not investigate. . . .

"Others do not reflect, because at the seminary they have yielded themselves up so entirely that that faculty has been cut away. Objections rain down upon them in vain—these will not affect them. They do not appear to understand them, or, indeed, they see in them a temptation which they are happy and proud to despise, just like that of 'concupiscence.'

"From the intellectual point of view, they remain for ever big children, not knowing searching problems or bitter disillusiones. Their life is eminently respectable owing to their charity and their unselfishness. They do good simply and joyously. Inspired by the generosity of their hearts and the purity of their spirit, they repel as a disgrace everything which could detach them from the Church or even so much as diminish the filial confidence which they yield to her.

"Some know nothing because they wish to know nothing. When leaving the seminary they think that they have nothing more to learn, and with the exception of their breviary, which they do not in the least understand, they read nothing. . . .

"Some priests rest on it [faith] softly, as on 'a soft pillow'; others seek to advance their interests, as in a career giving an honest income. Do not speak to them of the rights of truth; for them it is either presumption or *naïveté*. They will take very good care not to know 'the fatal thought,' which Jouffroy cursed with so much bitterness. Sons of practical and cautious peasants, they understand what the hierarchy demands of them: a certain correctness of life; if it be possible, the outward evidence of some good work: the building or restoration of a church, the foundation or maintenance of a school or vicarage; after which there is every liberty to play, to drink, to kill the time as may seem well to them, and, above all, to save a little money. This is the character of their duties, and they conform to it. Faults are compensated by a noisy and militant orthodoxy.

"Such are the categories of priests who have hitherto, more or less, escaped the crisis. . . .

"The desertions which, for ten years, have arisen more and more frequently among the clergy show the extent of the crisis. To estimate it with

some accuracy, it would be useful to know the details. But, as many of those who depart retire without an open declaration, the diocesan authorities can alone furnish the statistics. They draw them up perhaps, they have excellent reasons for not publishing them.

"Moreover, such lists would give incomplete information as to the true situation. In one diocese where Liberal-Catholicism, Americanism, Loisyism count many partisans, the desertions are very few. People desire the reform of the Church, they think that it ought to operate from within. All work for it, while remaining at their post. In another diocese, however, where a bishop, during a long reign, or even a series of bishops, have fought with all their strength to preserve their clergy from modern errors, that is to say, from scientific knowledge, from five to eight apostasies are recorded every year. . . .

"But the priests of truly enlightened intelligence number only some hundreds. It is very little, relatively to the mass of the clergy, and nevertheless it is already much, relatively to the density of its benightedness. What otherwise renders the affair more interesting, and of serious consequence, is that their number increases."

Those who remain faithful to the Church are classified as the ambitious and the sincere. As to the former, Abbé Houtin says:

"Ambitious priests smother their true feelings, and take no pity on souls troubled and eager for knowledge, but seek solely to distinguish themselves in controversies in order to reap a reward."

When speaking of the sincere, the Abbot grows pathetic:

"The day on which the priest discovers this accumulation of ruins is a terrible day. Theologians have taught him that in matters of dogma he could not doubt without committing a crime, and now he feels himself on the road to lose his faith completely. He had been told that to reject a single dogma makes him heretical and damned, and now he discovers several points of error! Does not the system itself in its entirety explain itself on natural lines?

"Poor priest! In thus seeing all his beliefs overwhelmed, he seems to himself to be going mad. He throws himself back upon prayer, he implores of God a miracle. . . .if a miracle be possible. In the morning, at Mass, holding between his hands that which faith teaches him to be God made man, he tells Him that he one day believed that he heard His appeal, and that he replied by sacrificing his whole life. He begs Him not to permit his apostasy; he asks of Him a miracle to rekindle his faith, such as often happened, it would seem, during the Middle Ages, such as a drop of blood in the wine or on the consecrated wafer, which are the body and blood of Christ.

"Alas! his faith is no longer strong enough to produce the illusion, and it is still too strong for him not to tremble at the thought of profaning so great a mystery. . . .

"While the intellectual priest laboriously classifies his beliefs, the faith often dies without a crisis in the case of other priests, sincere indeed but incapable of learned researches. It dies like a lamp whose oil becomes exhausted day by day. They observe, they reflect. The observations which they make unceasingly on the clergy, and on the world, convince them that the theological system which they teach cannot be true. . . .

"The crisis may be prolonged, but in the present state of the sciences its result is henceforth certain for any one who sees the questions in all their severity.

"In so far as she assumes herself to be established by God incarnate in a man, in an infallible Jesus, 'orthodox' Christianity is contradicted by history. The principles and the methods of this science are sure enough, the explanations which it gives of the evolution of Christian society, and of the elaboration of its beliefs, are sufficiently proved to enable one to declare that doubt is no longer possible.

"He who knows the proof is no more free to turn away from it than to refuse acquiescence in the solution of a problem of mathematics."

Concerning doctrines which are impossible to accept, Abbé Houtin refers only to one single instance. He says in a footnote:

"The objections to all Christian dogmas may be more or less long or more or less clear. There is one which is brief and peremptory—the saying which the three synoptic gospels attribute to Christ in a discourse on the signs preceding the end of the world: 'Verily I say unto you that this generation shall not pass away until all these things are fulfilled.' These words are an explicit error, and this error is the very basis of the Gospels. Whether this prophecy was made by Christ, or only by the apostles who misunderstood Him, the conclusion for orthodox religion is the same. Never have orthodox theologians been able to extricate themselves from this objection, which is a matter of fact. See *Question biblique au XXe siècle* (chap. II)."

Discussing the psychology of those who remain, the Abbot cites the case of Professor Renan, who, though a liberal, held on to the Church in spite of his apostasy, as a remarkable instance which deserves to be quoted.

Renan says:

"Shame upon him who becomes converted to vulgar common sense after having tasted the divine madness. The vow of holy insanity is the only one from which one ought not to be released!

"There are people riveted, to some extent, to absolute faith; I am speaking of men engaged in holy orders or clothed with a pastoral office. Even then, a beautiful soul knows how to find an outlet. A worthy country priest, through his solitary studies and the purity of his life, gradually sees the impossibilities of literal dogma; must he therefore sadden those whom he has hitherto consoled, and explain to simple souls changes which they cannot well understand? God forbid! There are not two men in the world who have exactly the same duties. The good Bishop Colenso performed an honest act such as the Church has not seen since its foundation in writing down his doubts as soon as they came to him. But the humble Catholic priest, in a country whose spirit is restricted and timid, must keep silence. Oh! how many discreet tombs, around village churches, cover thus a poetic reserve, angelic silences! Those whose duty it has been to speak, will they equal the merit of these secrets known to God alone?"

At the same time we must consider that the fate of a priest who leaves the Church is sad, for he is mostly incapable of earning

his livelihood. "Spinóza was able to polish spectacle glasses while philosophizing. . . . the priest can do nothing. If he philosophizes, or wishes to continue to meditate upon religion without still living by the altar, he condemns himself to die of hunger." Thus many remain in the Church in spite of their tragic fate. Intellectual and moral constraint sometimes leads its victims to madness or suicide. Thus the priest who has lost his faith is in a bad dilemma. One of them bewailed his fate in these terms:

"The unfrocked priest is one who laments for ever the irreparable misfortune of having deceived himself; he is one who has only despair as his friend and eternal oblivion as his tomb.

"O! illusions of my youth, where are you? . . . O! golden dreams of my twentieth year, dreams of devotion and generous deeds, where are you?"

Lamennais, hoping for a reform, clung to the Church to the bitter end, and here is the confession of his plight:

"I am, and I can henceforward only be, extraordinarily unhappy. . . . Thirty-four years of my life are gone, I have seen life under all its aspects, and in future I could not be a dupe of the illusions with which people would seek to soothe me still. I do not mean to reproach any one as regards this; there are some inevitable destinies; but if I had been less confident and less weak, my position would be very different. Well, it is what it is, and all that remains to me is to arrange things for myself as well as possible, and if possible go to sleep at the foot of the stake to which they have riveted my chain, happy if I can bring it to pass that they do not come, under a thousand wearisome pretexts, to trouble my sleep.' (To Abbé Jean, June 25, 1816.)—'Of what use are books? I only know of one bright, consoling book, which one always sees with pleasure, it is a registry of deaths. All the rest is vain, and does not correspond with reality.' (To Abbé Jean, March 18, 1817.)—'Never in my life have I been so unhappy as during the last two years. What I suffer is inexpressible. Before that, I could still hope for a little peace in the world; now, never. I look at death, and embrace it with all my desire.' (To Abbé Jean, March 3, 1818.) That was the priesthood, with its 'painful duties,' most opposed to his 'character.' (To Benoit d'Azy, April 7, 1819.)—'Sadness weakens me and takes away all my energy. . . . Everything is hateful to me; I am bowed down by life.' (To Abbé Jean, August 14, 1818.)—'I drag along down here a mutilated life.' (To Benoit d'Azy, between February 11 and 14, 1819.)—'I have no longer any taste for anything on the earth; all my heart almost is already beyond the grave.' (To Mlle. de Trémereuc, April 5, 1822.)—'I confess to you that the earth weighs me down, I have need to look above. I am weary of this passing life which lacerates us in passing. Oh! you who do not pass away, you the only perfect good and for ever immutable, O! my God when shall I see you? when shall I enter into your holy joy and your eternal repose?' (To Mlle. de Trémereuc, April 26, 1822.) Cf. *Correspondance* (Edition Forges, 1863); *Œuvres inédites* (published by A. Blaize, 1866); Auguste Laveille, *Un Lamennais inconnu* (1898); F. Duine, *Lamennais écrivain* (1904)."

The hope of reform is in the hearts of many, and one of them

addressed himself to Professor Renan, who answered under April 20, 1884, as follows:

"The extremely honest tone of your letter makes it a duty and a pleasure to reply to it. I know by experience how painful are the states of mind such as that through which you are passing. But you can have one very consoling thought, namely, that when one suffers inwardly for the truth, it is the great sign that one loves it, the true mark of election. You are too good a theologian not to see that so many points upon which Catholicism has pledged itself, and which find themselves in contradiction to the development of modern science, are points of faith, so much so that a consistent Catholic cannot yield upon any one of these points. When one has gone through the theological course at Saint-Sulpice, one cannot admit so false a position as was, for example, that of the Jansenists, Catholics in spite of the Church, members of a religious community which rejected them. But the Catholic Church is so great a thing, its present situation is so extraordinary, so tragic, that our century will see perhaps one of those crises where the logic of the scholastics is at fault. I persist in believing that our old mother is still fruitful, and that from her, in spite of appearances, there will issue the form of religion in which the human conscience will find repose. The Catholic Church will never be able to confess that she changes, but she will be able to allow a good deal to lapse.

"It is from souls lofty and sincere like yours that the first cry will arise, and it will soon be followed by a thousand others. Two things are certain: Catholicism cannot perish; Catholicism cannot remain what it is. It is true also that we cannot imagine in what way it could change. These hours when all the outlets appear barred are the great hours of Providence; but the agony at such times is great, and the lot of those who are reserved for this hour is cruel.

"Accept, sir, the assurance of my kindest and highest regards."

The only chance of reform seems to be the surrender of the letter for the sake of retaining the spirit, and this view is expressed by Renan in a letter to Father Hyacinthe Loyson (March 15, 1872). He said:

"The most desirable issue for the religious crisis of our time would have been a broadening of Catholicism, sacrificing upon many points the letter, and the material dogma, in order to save the spirit, resigning the contest against the ultimate results of science, and proclaiming without fear that none of these results would touch it in its true sanctuary, which is the acquiescence of the heart. You are right to hope against hope, and to regard this solution as still possible. The future has in reserve for us so many unknown situations, and the Papacy by its latest exaggerations has prepared for itself a destiny impossible to forecast!"

But all attempts at reform were crushed by the Church. Abbé Houtin relates how efforts of the Abbé Duilhé and Mgr. D'Hulst were wasted by the intrigues of the operandist party at Rome. It is a peculiar fact that many priests who have left the Church feel homesick after the mysticism to which they have become accustomed and to the old surroundings. Says Father Houtin:

"Sometimes the mystic temperament of him who has left her makes him suffer from home-sickness. Lay society appears to him atheistic, materialist, or sceptical. Modern light hurts his eyes, accustomed to veils drawn before them. He does not know how to make use of liberty. Among the clergy he might pass for an intelligent man of advanced views. Put back into the contemporary world, he feels himself, and appears, behind the times upon a number of points. He is like one returned from the dead. Moreover, his heart and all the fibres of his being are still impregnated with belief. His sensitiveness takes its revenge and throws him back into the Church. He wishes to believe, and he can succeed in doing so—at least for some time."

And yet the most prominent men could not be enticed to return although the Church tried to win them back by promises and distinctions. In former centuries the Church could ruin an apostate priest, the state lent its hand and an apostate was an outcast who found it impossible to earn an honest living and was ostracized in society. During the last thirty years, however, the hierarchy has lost both power and social influence, and adds Abbé Houtin:

"In default of energetic measures, the Church uses mildness. She easily finds negotiators among parents or friends. The greater the value attaching to the person whom it is a question of bringing back, the greater the concession displayed. Assuredly one cannot cite a more important, or even a more honorable, example of its capacity in affairs of this kind than the proposition made on the part of the Vatican to M. Hyacinthe Loyson.

"Having learnt that he was passing the winter 1896-97 at Rome with his family, Leo XIII wished to profit by his visit to regain for the Church the orator who was one of its last glories, and who, while never ceasing to preach God, showed that he had always been, and was always, a true apostle. The Sovereign Pontiff therefore sent a mutual friend to approach him, Prince Baldassare Odescalchi, and a distinguished theologian, the Capuchin José Calanzancio de Llevaneras, since become the Cardinal Vivès y Tuto. Permission was offered to the old friar to resume his sacerdotal functions, while retaining his wife and his son, but, naturally enough, upon condition of recognizing the dogma of pontifical infallibility, the definition of which was the cause of the rupture. In order to regularize the union contracted by Father Hyacinthe, the Pope would have associated him with an Oriental Church where the priests are married. This proposed combination fell through in the face of the uncompromising and conscientious scruples of the friar."

Abbé Houtin does not preach apostasy, and he himself has so far remained in the Church, although he has been bitterly attacked in some Roman clerical papers, especially by Father Condamin and Father Fontaine, and we have looked in vain for a plan of reform or a mode of redressing the evil. He only suggests a return of the priesthood to simplicity and admonishes bishops to renounce pomp which neither Christ nor the Apostles knew. Christ was a carpenter and St. Paul made tents, and he reminds us that the duty to earn a living for themselves was imposed upon the clergy at the general

council of Carthage in 398. Yet even if the habits of the clergy were improved by the introduction of the simple life, would the crisis thereby be averted? M. Houtin concludes his chapter entitled "Money" in these words, "Will the Gospels thereby become more authentic? And the old faith, the faith which your reformed clergy will still wish to teach, will it thereby become more true?"

These samples suffice to characterize the book of a Roman Catholic Abbot of Paris. To one not acquainted with such conditions as pictured in this book, it may appear doubtful whether it is right to disturb the peace of a large Church by a reading of Abbé Houtin's book, which it seems to me proves the need of reform. Whether a reform will be accomplished is another question, but let the men who are discontented have a chance to speak their minds, and for the rest leave the outcome to that divinity which shapes our ends rough-hew them though we may.