

THE MARRIAGE OF FATHER HYACINTHE.

AN OPEN LETTER DATED AT PARIS, JULY 25, 1872.

The determination which I have taken belongs by its nature to private life; it belongs to the most intimate, the sweetest and most sacred things that private life contains. My character as a priest, which I neither can nor will renounce, imposes upon me in spite of myself a clamorous publicity, I would even say a terrible solemnity. If my marriage were to be only a personal satisfaction for myself, I would not consider the step for an instant. I am well aware that the pure and humble home which I am establishing will be insulted by some, avoided by others, and that anguish will be mingled with its joy.

My greatest sorrow is that I should have offended—entirely against my will, to be sure—but that I should have indeed offended many of these little ones who believe in Christ, and for each of whom I would give my life. I am furnishing to wicked and to trifling men—two large classes who lead the human race—a new and powerful weapon not only against me personally but against my cause. “He wanted to marry,” they cry on all sides, “but he did not have the courage to say so.” “He has been talking of infallibility and it was only an excuse.” “This fine drama has ended in a comedy!”

Resolved in advance to keep silent in the face of the attacks which will be directed against me, I shall now once for all give to the thoughtful public, and more particularly to the Christian public, some explanations which are compelled to assume the character of a confession, but which seem to me to be a duty towards those consciences which my example must necessarily confuse or enlighten.

If I had left my convent for the purpose of marrying—which is not the case—I would admit it without hesitation, for I would have done nothing which could not be acknowledged aloud before those who place natural law with its inalienable rights and duties above human laws, and especially imaginary contracts. It is blame-

worthy and disgraceful to wear without conviction and too often without morality the chain of obligations to which one is no longer bound except by the prejudices of the world, and by personal interest. What ought to excite censure, and what for my part I have always considered with horror, is not marriage but sin! Stubbornly faithful to the principles of the Catholic church, I do not consider myself bound in any way by its abuses, and I am persuaded that perpetual vows range among the most disastrous of these. Luther's error did not lie in the chaste and pious marriage which most of those who curse him ought to imitate; it lies only in his break with the legitimate traditions and essential unity of the church.

Therefore I repeat that if I had left my convent in order to marry, if I had sacrificed the glorious pulpit of Notre Dame de Paris to a great and legitimate affection of the soul, perhaps to a duty of my conscience, I would not believe that I needed to defend myself. But if I had not the courage and the frankness of my conviction, if in order better to arrange my secret designs I had covered them with the cloak of dogmatic questions, I would have been to blame, very greatly to blame, and I would deserve to see myself disowned and scorned by all honest hearts.

And yet, if I may be permitted the observation, this shameful course would at the same time be a foolish one. In the face of the prejudice rooted for centuries and all-powerful among the Latin peoples and especially among the French, I could not really hope that some writings against papal infallibility and against enforced celibacy would change as if by magic the current of public opinion. By stating (as I have not ceased for an instant to do and as I continue to do this hour) that I intend to remain a Catholic and a priest, I would not in any way improve my practical position with regard to marriage; on the contrary I would aggravate it, and I would create to some extent a position which would appear to the majority to be illogical, untenable and without effect.

Oh, if I had made such a sport of my conscience and the consciences of other people, if the most formidable religious problems were to me only pretexts for my own interests or my own passions, I would have done Protestantism a wrong it does not deserve, and deceiving the good faith of the eminent friends whom I count in its ranks, I would have found among them the justification which I vainly sought in my opposition to the council and to infallibility.

No, my marriage has nothing to do with my religious convictions, nor with my action of September 20, 1869, or rather I am mistaken—it is intimately connected with it, but in that general and

liberal manner in which all the steps of progress accomplished by one's soul in light and liberty are connected.

I shall explain my position with perfect frankness. I owe to religious celibacy some of the most exquisite joys, some of the most profound and positive experiences of my life. Since I made my choice at the age of eighteen years I have observed it with a faithfulness for which I praise God. If then to-day at the age of 45 years, in calmness and in the maturity of my judgment, of my heart and of my conscience, in fact of my whole being, I deem it my duty to renounce it, it is because I am impressed that marriage is one of those laws of the moral order which can not be resisted without violating the will of God. I do not say that this law is imposed upon all—I believe in celibacy as in a sacred and glorious exception; I simply say that this law is now imposed upon me. When a man has borne within his heart, as it were, another exception just as rare, just as holy, just as glorious as that of celibacy, namely, that great and chaste love in which the world does not believe because it is not worthy of it, this man, whether priest or monk, possesses an absolute proof that he is not one of the number of voluntary victims of which the Gospel speaks. Such a man am I, and again I praise God for what he has wrought in me. His works appear contradictory but he knows wherein their harmony consists. When I was about to be abandoned, denied by my friends, and by my near of kin, exiled in turn by my church, my country, my family, he sent upon my solitary and desolate path a noble and holy affection, a sublime devotion, poor in the goods of this world, rich in those of intelligence and heart; and when everything has fallen away, this support alone, or almost alone, has remained to me. Indeed this support would not be what it ought to be—I would not recognize the gift which God has given me—if I hesitated any longer to seek its consecration in Christian marriage.

And why should it be otherwise? I see no reason to prevent the marriage, for I can not accept ecclesiastical law as such and still less the prejudice of my fellow citizens.

I shall always submit to the laws of the church when I am not presented under this name with what Jesus Christ, when speaking of the Pharisees of old, called "the commandments of men which make of none effect the commandments of God" (Matt. xv. 6, 9). It must be confessed that celibacy is not a dogma; we must recognize that it is not even a Catholic discipline, but simply a Latin discipline. Even to-day the Catholic clergy in the Orient marry with the full approbation of the Holy See. It is true that such mar-

riages must precede ordination and not follow it; but this restriction besides being inconvenient is without value in the eyes of sound reason, and contradicts the principle that in the judgment of the church there is no real incompatibility between the two great sacraments, holy orders and matrimony.

The contrary prejudice proceeds from a perversion of moral ideas which may justly surprise Christian people. How have they come to contrive this base and shameful conception of marriage which is repugnant to all the finer and generous instincts of the heart as well as to the teachings of revelation? Oh, if marriage were only a concession to the weakness or the passions of our nature I confess that it would be a degradation and a stain for the priest, but I do not see how then it is in accord with the dignity conferred by baptism, with the sanctity that it requires, and to be logical, we ought, like Tatiens, to forbid it to all true Christians. But no, a thousand times no! Christian marriage, the only kind of which I speak, is not a concession to our weakness, it is not even merely a means to perpetuate the race. It is, if I may be permitted to quote myself, "the fullest, the most intimate, and the most holy of all unions which can exist between two human creatures." This is the way I defined it five years ago in the pulpit of Notre Dame, and I added with St. Paul and all Catholic tradition, that since the time of the Gospel it has become the mysterious and radiant image of the union of the Word with our flesh, of the union of Christ with his church: *Sacramentum hoc magnum est, ego autem dico in Christo et in Ecclesia* (Eph. v. 32). It is because we no longer understand the teachings of the apostles nor the examples of the primitive Christians, that we have ceased to see in the union of husband and wife a thing which is honorable in all people, *honorabile connubium in omnibus* (Heb. xiii. 4); that it is looked upon as incompatible with the state of the perfect life, and that one thinks only with horror of the proximity of the eucharistic altar and the family hearth, which ought also to be a sanctuary, and in one sense the most important of all.

Another error no less fatal and no less widespread consists in regarding the state of celibacy as capable of becoming the object of a perpetual contract. Just because it touches upon what is most intimate, most delicate, and, I may add, most critical in the relations of the soul with God, celibacy ought to remain at each moment of its duration the work of grace and liberty. The Holy Spirit alone can draw into celibacy and retain there the small number of exceptional beings whom it renders capable of it. But no human authority

either of councils or of popes can impose as an eternal commandment what Jesus himself did not wish to do except merely by advice. "Now concerning virgins," wrote St. Paul to the Corinthians, "I have no commandment of the Lord; yet I give my judgment" (1Cor. vii. 25). It is the mission of the church to transmit this judgment to all people down through the centuries, but without imposing it upon anyone; and to speak my whole mind there is not a single case in which it could prevent the marriage of its priests where there is not a thousand in which it ought to command it of them.

The individual himself has not the power absolutely to renounce a right which is susceptible of changing at any instant and in so many ways into a duty. Once when I questioned one of the most scholarly and the most pious bishops of the Roman church on the liberty of the priests and monks with regard to marriage—it is easily understood why I do not give his name—he wrote me these words: "Such a step is always permitted, often necessary, and sometimes holy!" There are similar convictions in the minds of the most enlightened, especially of those who have the light of experience and who are familiar with the real state of the clergy and the practical conditions of human life. If they do not express themselves so freely, the blame must lie with the iron yoke which rests upon bishops as upon priests, and also with the culpable connivance of public opinion.

I have mentioned public opinion. I respect it in its manifestations and in its legitimate demands as much as I scorn it when it rests only upon prejudice. To be restrained by prejudice is to be restrained by what does not exist, and at the same time to give body and strength to this vain phantom. And yet is not this done daily from a mixture of childish fear and hypocritical deference by the best minds, who ought to correct the errors of their time? Fatal power of the lie which has been and still is the ruin of our unhappy country! It is this which obliges me to-day to seek in a foreign land the consecration which the law, or to speak more accurately the magistracy of the France of 1872, would refuse to my marriage, because I have both the honor and the misfortune to be a priest. But further than this I will not yield to it. I will come back holding high my head, with a calm heart, without fear and without anger; and nothing will prevent me from dwelling on this soil, from breathing this air, which are and will remain dear to me in spite of the evils with which they are defiled. Nothing will prevent me from entreating for each of my brethren in the priesthood the legal right to mar-

riage—that elementary right whose violation, not only in an entire class of citizens but in the person of a single man, should suffice to put the legislation of a nation under the ban of truly civilized countries.

Yes, I am convinced that France, as well as the church, needs the example I am setting and of which the future instead of the present shall reap the fruits. I know the true condition of my country, and whenever it wished to listen to my voice I have never ceased to preach to it salvation through the family. Remorselessly tearing aside the sumptuous and deceptive veils of the prosperity of the time, I laid bare the two sores which consume it and breed each other, “marriage apart from love and love apart from marriage, which means marriage and love apart from Christianity.” (*Conférences sur la famille*, 1866). I am also acquainted with the true state of our clergy. I know the devotion and the virtue contained within it, but I am not unaware how great is the need for large numbers of its members to be reconciled with the interests, the affections and the duties of human nature and civil society. Only by tearing down the traditions of a blind asceticism and a theocracy more political than religious, will the priest, once more a man and a citizen, find himself at the same time more truly a priest,—“one that ruleth well his own house,” as St. Paul says, “having his children in subjection with all gravity; for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?” (1 Tim. iii. 4, 5).

This is the reform without which, I make bold to say, all others will be vain and fruitless. May the spirit of God, if we believe in its power, maintain in our midst a select number of priests and sisters of charity whose celibacy will always be free and always voluntary, in truth a state of purity, a state of joy, or at least of peace in sacrifice! But at the same time let us hasten the day when the law of the church and the law of France will establish in liberty, in chastity and in dignity the marriage of the priest, that is to say, the union in a model home of all the forces of family and all the forces of religion.

I myself am nothing, O God, but I feel called by thee to break asunder the chains which thou hast never wrought and which weigh with so much heaviness and often alas! with so much shame upon the holy people of thy priests. I am but sinful, and yet thy grace has given me the strength to brave the tyranny of opinion, the firmness not to bend before the prejudices of my contemporaries, and the right to act as if there were naught in the world but my conscience and thou, O God!

HYACINTHE LOYSON, Priest.