

THE REASON WHY ABBÉ CHARBONNEL FAILED.

BY THE EDITOR.

VICTOR CHARBONNEL, the enthusiastic advocate of a Religious Parliament to be held at Paris in 1900, has left the Church. He is no longer an abbé. He is now bitterly denouncing the men to whom he formerly looked up with reverence and confidence. He accuses them of duplicity and condemns their conduct in strong terms.

The former Abbé is said to be an orator of great power. He puts his heart into everything he does, and his heart is warm and large. No wonder he is impatient, and this disposition, although he must be a lovable character and a charming man, renders it difficult for him to bide his time with patience, which is indispensable to an organiser. There can be no doubt that Abbé Charbonnel is deeply religious, and in addition he has been, and perhaps he is still, a fervid Roman Catholic, only his view of the Roman Catholic Church differs considerably from the policy of his superiors, and in convening a Parliament of Religions he apparently intended to influence the future development of the Church and to commit it to the broad liberalism which he himself represents. No wonder that the leaders of the Church, having at first encouraged his zeal, withdrew from the field and disavowed the Abbé's plans.

The secret of the success of the Religious Parliament at Chicago lies in the policy rigidly insisted upon from the beginning by the President of the World's Congresses, that the purpose of the Parliament should be presentation pure and simple. The great religions of the world were invited to state their doctrines and to explain them through duly appointed delegates, without attacking others, without being expected to endorse any principle or opinion of the committee of the Parliament, its president, its chairman, or

any one of its officers. Thus the Roman Church, which was represented by one cardinal, several bishops and archbishops, many clergymen and a respectable number of laymen, was nowhere in the least compromised or committed to any new maxim or theory. The Church, being assured of her independence, His Holiness the Pope sent his blessing through Cardinal Gibbons; and he was ready to confer his blessing also upon the proposed Paris Parliament. But here Leo XIII. himself insisted on the principle that a Religious Parliament should not be committed to any Church; therefore, while giving his "absolute approbation," he added that "he did not think it wise to give it his direct patronage lest the Parliament of Religions, which should be independent and open to all, should give the impression of being a "Congress of the Pope."¹

We do not intend here to criticise either the Roman Church or Victor Charbonnel; our purpose is to explain, for thus alone shall we be able to understand the situation. We can appreciate the noble nature of the former Abbé, although we regret the vehemence of his impetuous language when he accuses the American prelates of duplicity and inconsistency. It is true that Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop Ireland, and Bishop Keane, took part in the Chicago Parliament, and it appears that they would undoubtedly be glad to have another Parliament take place at Paris in 1900; but they, as a matter of course, must see to it that the new Parliament is so inaugurated that the dignity of their Church is preserved.

In Chicago the Roman Catholics were guests, the dominant religion of the country being Protestant Christianity, but in France the Roman Church would have been the hostess. Considering the claims of the Roman Church as the sole Catholic institution, this circumstance rendered the situation more difficult than in America. When those who are in power call a Parliament, it may easily appear as a concession, and the world will be inclined to interpret the step as a surrender of the traditional policy. Apparently the participation of the Church in a Religious Parliament in America is different from directly holding a Religious Parliament in a Roman Catholic country.

In Chicago, where the bracing air of American liberty swept through the variegated assemblies of the World's Fair, extravagances could occur without compromising any one. The very conditions invited the free utterance of opinion. Everybody knew that equality on the platform did not involve any other identification:

¹Literally quoted from the report published in various French newspapers.

it was parliamentary equality, based on courtesy and brotherly love. It was an exchange of thought where everybody offered the best he had, and we listened to those who differed from us in the hope of understanding their position and learning from them as representatives of their religion the arguments of their faith. This exchange of thought was beneficial, as it did not level religion down to the low-water mark of indifference, but rather tended to raise those who stood on lower ground to the level of those who had attained a deeper insight and nobler convictions. It would have been very difficult to repeat the Chicago Parliament in Paris, for in conservative Europe the conditions are different. A free exchange of thought under the ægis of Rome might, in the opinion of many, have meant something more than under the stars and stripes, and the same thing in different places is no longer the same thing.

The Roman Church is well aware of the difference between a Parliament in Chicago and in Paris. The Church as such is not opposed to the Parliament idea itself. The Pope has plainly expressed his sympathy, but his consent naturally depends upon the fulfilment of conditions which guarantee the Church against misinterpretations.

Whether or not the Roman Catholic Church is in a position to hold a Parliament is not for us, nor for any outsider, to decide. The leaders of the Church alone can know whether the time is ripe for it. Probably the scheme is premature. The Roman Church is the Church of France, but this does not necessarily imply that the Roman Catholic faith is firmly rooted in the minds of the thinkers of the nation. This much is sure: Only a religious institution which is strong can afford to convene a Parliament; the refusal to compare notes with others is always an indication of weakness. Protestantism in America is not endangered by a Religious Parliament; it can hold its own when compared with other faiths. Almost all Protestant Churches sanction free inquiry and are open to progress. And here exactly lies the blessing of the Parliament idea. If you are confident that the faith that is in you is the truth, you will come forward and let its light shine. Says Christ:

"Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

"Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

The light is the faith that is in you, and the Religious Parliament is the candlestick.

We regret exceedingly the failure of the plan for holding a second Religious Parliament in Paris. We watched with sympathy, but not without anxiety, the zealous efforts of Abbé Charbonnel and were deeply affected when the news reached us that he had left the Church. One reason why he failed is undoubtedly his rash temperament which, although it does honor to his heart, betrays a lack of patience and self-control, so indispensable for the accomplishment of a difficult undertaking where one untimely word may forever ruin the prospect of success.

It is probable that the leaders of Church politics in Europe do not as yet realise what a glorious chance they have lost to prove to the world that definiteness in doctrine does not mean intolerance. We must frankly confess that Roman Catholicism is not credited with good intentions among the large masses of the population of the United States. On the contrary, there is a deep-seated distrust against Rome and her representatives in the minds of many people, so much so that any affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church would render a man unfit to figure as a mere candidate for the highest office of our country. Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop Ireland, and Bishop Keane have done much to remove these prejudices, but their influence is almost neutralised by the rumors that their views are disapproved of in the Vatican. It is unfortunate for the Church that the failure of Abbé Charbonnel will naturally be interpreted as a condemnation of the Parliament idea by the Church. This, however, is not so. Considering the Pope's friendly attitude during the Chicago Religious Parliament, we claim without fear of contradiction that he is not opposed to the Parliament idea as such. The conditions which make it advisable for the Church to hold a Parliament in Europe may or may not be lamentable; they may or may not be due to the immaturity of the people or their leaders, or both, or to any other factor. Not having any reliable information on the subject, we abstain from forming and uttering an opinion. We only regret that since Abbé Charbonnel has ceased to be a Roman Catholic priest, the plan of holding a Religious Parliament at Paris in 1900 has been wrecked, and large numbers of mankind may thereby be excluded from participating in the new light which will show religion in a higher and nobler glory than before.

The Parliament idea itself will not suffer, for the Parliament idea is a movement that no man, no institution, no reactionary policy can hinder or check in its evolution. It has come as a test to try the metal of men's hearts; it is a touchstone which will dis-

solve the baser amalgams, but leave the pure gold intact. Even though the very builders reject the stone that will become the head of the corner, the ideal of true catholicity will be realised, and only such truths are catholic as can be placed upon the candlestick. If in Christ's time the people had shown such an extraordinary longing for religious information, to hear all sides and to let every preacher be heard, would he not have gone himself to deliver the message of his heavenly Father? And when he bade his disciples preach the doctrine, did he tell them to stickle about authority or to stipulate conditions before they spoke in any assemblage? No! He did not. He sent them out into the world to preach the Gospel to all people. If a light can at all be kept under a bushel, we may rest assured that it is no light at all.

We regret the occurrence for several reasons, among which our sympathy with M. Charbonnel himself is by no means the least. How much he suffered before he saw himself compelled to take so serious a step as renouncing his allegiance to the Church which in former years had been the most sacred tie of his life, those alone can appreciate who have passed through a similar conflict with the same harassing soul-struggles. Mr. Theodore Stanton's article will throw much light on the whole affair. To be sure, it is an *ex parte* exposition. Mr. Stanton is a friend of M. Victor Charbonnel; he sides with him without waiting for further explanations on the part of the Church authorities. While we are fully convinced of the honesty of the former Abbé and the nobility of his heart, we cannot help thinking that a grain of discretion might have averted the conflict; and, at any rate, we believe that the accusation of duplicity which he lays at the doors of some high dignitaries of the Church are mainly conditioned by the disparity of his own sentiments. First he interpreted the Cardinal's words in the light of his sanguine optimism and now he is embittered by the pessimism which naturally results from his disappointment.

It sometimes happens that a man's very enthusiasm renders him unfit to accomplish the cherished ideal of his life. The very consciousness of his own good intentions makes him careless and he becomes himself his worst enemy; not from any moral fault or intellectual shortcoming, but through the very eagerness and impatience with which he struggles for the realisation of a noble aim. It appears that Abbé Charbonnel's very love of the Church and his anxiety to reform it according to his ideals, render his personality undesirable as the chairman of a Religious Parliament.

Abbé Charbonnel could have succeeded in his great enterprise

only if some friendly counsellor had been his constant companion to lend him his advice in matters of grave importance and occasionally to check the impulsive nature of his ardent soul. While the advocate of a great enterprise, such as a Religious Parliament would be in Paris, must be a man of enthusiasm, he must at the same time be possessed of a calm judgment and of discretion which will enable him to move slowly where the field is not as yet prepared.

Victor Charbonnel is not yet at the end of his career. In his intellectual development he is at present under the influence of the religious mysticism which is quite fashionable in certain liberal circles. He may pass through it to more matured and clearer views. But those who know him personally will alone be able to foretell whether he will remain outside of the Church like Father Hyacinthe, or return to its fold as did Dr. M'Glynn. Whatever may be the ultimate result, we cherish the confidence that the afflictions and soul-struggles of a man who is serious in his convictions will not have been in vain.