



On The Religious Question In France

Nobilissima Gallorum Gens

Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated on February 8, 1884.

To Our Venerable Brethren the Archbishops and Bishops in France.

Venerable Brethren, Health and the Apostolic Benediction.

The most noble nation of the French, besides many splendid achievements in peace and war, has deserved from the Catholic Church praise for special services, gratitude for which will never die, and the glory of which will never grow old. Having embraced Christianity at the initiative of its King, Clovis, it was rewarded by this most honorable testimony to its faith and piety, the title of eldest daughter of the Church. From that time, Venerable Brethren, often have your ancestors been the helpers of Providence itself in the performance of great and salutary works, and especially has their valor been illustrated in defending Catholicism throughout the world, in propagating the Christian Faith among barbarous nations, in delivering and protecting the more sacred places in Palestine, so that it is not without cause that the ancient phrase, "Gesta Dei per Francos," has become proverbial. And thus it has been their happy lot, through faithful devotion to the Catholic cause, to become, as it were, associated with the glories of the Church, and to found many Public and private institutions marked by a singular strength of religious faith, charity, and greatness of soul. And these virtues of your fathers the Roman Pontiffs, Our predecessors, have been accustomed greatly to commend, and, with the favor due to desert, have more than once heaped praises upon the French nation. Great indeed are the commendations which Innocent III. and Gregory IX., those great lights of the Church, awarded to your ancestors; the former, in his letter to the Archbishop of Reims, saying: "We love the Kingdom of France with a kind of special and pre-eminent love, inasmuch as it has always been obedient and devoted to Us and the Apostolic See, before all the other kingdoms of

the world;" and the second, in a letter to St. Louis IX., declaring that in the Kingdom of France, "which could never be torn away from its devotion to God and the Church, ecclesiastical liberty has never perished, and Christian faith has never at any time lost its proper vigor; and that for the preservation of these blessings the Kings and subjects of the said kingdom have not hesitated for a moment to shed their blood and expose themselves to many dangers." And God, who is the Father of nature, from whom States receive on earth the reward of their virtues and good deeds, has conferred much prosperity on France, fame in war, the arts of peace, national glory, and imperial power. And if France, forgetful, as it were, of herself, and neglecting the office conferred on her by God, has sometimes chosen to assume a hostile attitude towards the Church, yet, by a special mercy of God, she has not for long, or as a whole nation, remained in these evil dispositions. And would that she had escaped altogether unhurt from those disasters to religion and the State which times not far distant from our own have brought forth! But when the human mind, filled with the poison of new opinions, had begun, in the pride of an untempered liberty, to reject the authority the Church, its downward course has been rapid and precipitate. For when the mortal poison of false doctrines had penetrated manners and customs themselves, society, to a great extent, came to fall away from Christianity. And in France the propagation of this plague was not a little promoted by certain philosophers in the last century, professors of a foolish wisdom, who set themselves to root up the foundations of Christian truth, and started a system of philosophy calculated the more vehemently to inflame the desires after unlimited license which had been already enkindled. Nor was the help of these wanting whom an impotent hatred of religion binds together in unhallowed bonds, and daily renders more eager in the persecution of Catholics; and whether emulation in this evil work was greater in France than anywhere else, nobody, Venerable Brethren, can be a better judge than yourselves.

2. For these reasons, therefore, the fatherly love We bear to all the nations of the world, and which impelled Us to recall the peoples of Ireland, Spain, and Italy to their duty, when the need arose, by Our letters to their Bishops -- has induced Us to turn Our attention and thought to France. The designs of which We have just spoken are injurious, not only to religion, but are also harmful and fatal to the State; for it is impossible that prosperity should follow a State in which the influence of religion is extinguished. The moment man ceases to be in fear of God, he is deprived of the most necessary basis of justice, without which -- even in the opinion of the Pagan philosophers -- society cannot exist; the authority of rulers will lose its weight, and the laws of the land their force. Selfinterest will weigh more with every man than high principles, and the integrity of rights will be threatened, for the fear of punishment is but a bad guarantee for the fulfillment of duty; those who rule will easily be led to exceed the proper limits of their authority, and those who obey seduced into sedition and revolt. Moreover, as there is nothing good in nature which is not to be referred to the Divine goodness, every human society which does its utmost to exclude God from its laws and its constitution, rejects the help of this Divine beneficence, and deserve, also, that help should be denied it. Rich, therefore, and powerful as it appears, that society bears within itself the

seeds of death, and cannot hope for a lengthy existence. It is, indeed, with Christian peoples as with individuals; it is safety to follow the counsels of God, it is danger to fall away from them; and it often happens that when nations jealously retain their fidelity to God and the Church, they arrive, almost naturally, at the highest pitch of natural prosperity; but that when they fall away from it they perish. These facts are to be found in history; and We could cite to you more recent instances, even in your own country, had We the time to recall the events seen by a previous generation, when the impiety of the mob shook France to its very foundations, and Church and State perished in the same destruction. But, on the other hand, these certain causes of the State's ruin are easily removed, if, in the constitution and ruling of the family and of society, the precepts are observed of the Catholic religion, for these are most eminently fitted to preserve order and the welfare of the State.

3. And first, as regards family life, it is of the highest importance that the offspring of Christian marriages should be thoroughly instructed in the precepts of religion; and that the various studies by which youth is fitted for the world should be joined with that of religion. To divorce these is to wish that youth should be neutral as regards its duties to God; a system of education in itself fallacious, and particularly fatal in tender years, for it opens the door to atheism, and closes it on religion. Christian parents must, therefore, be careful that their children receive religious instruction as soon as they are capable of understanding it; and that nothing may, in the schools they attend, blemish their faith or their morals. Both the Divine and the natural law impose this duty on them, nor can parents on any ground whatever be freed from this obligation. The Church, guardian of the integrity of the Faith -- which, in virtue of its authority, deputed from God its Founder, has to call all nations to the knowledge of Christian lore, and which is consequently bound to watch keenly over the teaching and upbringing of the children placed under its authority by baptism -- has always expressly condemned mixed or neutral schools; over and over again she has warned parents to be ever on their guard in this most essential point. To obey the Church in this is to obey the requirements of social utility, and to serve in the most excellent manner the common welfare. Those, indeed, whose early days were not enlightened by religious instruction, grow up without any knowledge whatever of the greatest truths, which alone can nourish in man the love of virtue, and repress in him his evil passions; such as, for instance, the ideas of God the Creator, of God the Judge and Avenger, of the rewards and punishments in another life, of the heavenly help offered to us by Jesus Christ of the conscientious and holy fulfillment of our duties. Where these are unknown, all intellectual culture will prove unhealthy; young people, unaccustomed to the fear of God, will not endure the restraint of an upright life, they will not venture even to deny anything to their passions, and will easily be seduced into troubling the State.

4. Next, as regards those most beneficial and real principles relating to civil society and the reciprocal rights and duties of the sacred and the political powers. For, as there are on earth two principal societies, the one civil, the proximate end of which is the temporal and worldly good of the human race; the other religious, whose

office it is to lead mankind to that true, heavenly, and everlasting happiness for which we are created; so these are twin powers, both subordinate to the eternal law of nature, and each working for its own ends in matters concerning its own order and domain. But when anything has to be settled which for different reasons and in a different way concerns both powers, necessity and public utility demand that an agreement shall be effected between them, without which an uncertain and unstable condition of things will be the result, totally inconsistent with the peace either of Church or State. When, therefore, a solemn public compact has been made between the sacred and the civil power, then it is as much the interest of the State as it is just that the compact should remain inviolate; because, as each power has services to render to the other, a certain and reciprocal advantage is enjoyed and conferred by each.

5. In France, at the beginning of this century, after the previous public commotions and terrors had subsided, the rulers themselves understood that they could not more effectually relieve the State, wearied with so many ruins, than by the restoration of the Catholic religion. In anticipation of future advantages, Our predecessor, Pius VII., spontaneously acceded to the desire of the First Consul, and acted as indulgently as was consistent with his duty. And when an agreement was reached as regarded the principal points, the bases were laid, and a safe course marked out for the restoration and gradual establishment of religion. Many prudent regulations, indeed, were made at that and at subsequent times for the safety and honor of the Church. And great were the advantages derived therefrom, which were all the more to be valued in consequence of the state of prostration and oppression into which religion had been brought in France. With the restoration of public dignity to religion, Christian institutions manifestly revived; and it was wonderful what an increase of civil prosperity was the result. For when the State had scarcely emerged from the tempestuous waves and was anxiously looking for firm foundations on which to base tranquillity and public order, it found the very thing which it desired opportunely offered to it by the Catholic Church, so that it was apparent that the idea of effecting an agreement with the latter was the outcome of a prudent mind and a true regard for the people's welfare. Wherefore, if there were no other reasons for it, the same notice which led to the work of pacification being undertaken, ought now to operate for its maintenance. For -- now that the desire of innovation has been enkindled everywhere, and in the existing uncertainty as to the future -- to sow fresh seeds of discord between the two powers, and by the inter-position of obstacles to fetter or delay the beneficial action of the Church, would be a course void of wisdom and full of peril. And yet we are troubled and grieved to see that perils of this kind are at the present time arising, for certain things opposed to the well-being of the Church have been and are being done, in consequence of the aroused mistrust and hatred of hostile minds against Catholic institutions, which have been wont to represent them as the enemies of the State. We are also no less concerned and anxious at the designs of these who, with the object of dividing the interests of Church and State, would wish to break, more or else rapidly, the salutary compact concluded with the Apostolic See.

6. In this state of affairs We have neglected nothing which the times seemed to call for. Each time that it has appeared necessary to Us, We have ordered our Nuncio to make representations to the rulers of the State, which they declared they received in a spirit disposed to do justice. We Ourselves, on the law being passed for the suppression of the religious orders, made known Our sentiments in a letter addressed to Our dear Son, Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church and Arch-bishop of Paris. Similarly, in a letter of June last, to the President of the Republic, We complained of certain acts injurious to the salvation of souls and infringing the rights of the Church. We have acted in this manner for the double reason that it was the duty of Our Apostolic office, and that we ardently desire that France should preserve, with pious and inviolate fidelity, the religion it received from its fathers and ancestors. In the same manner, with the same firmness and the same steadfastness, We will never cease to defend the Catholic interests of France. In the carrying out of that just and strict duty, You have all, Venerable Brethren, been Our strenuous supporters. Compelled to deplore the lot of the religious orders, You have nevertheless done all that lay in Your power to prevent the fall of those who deserved as well of the State as they had done of the Church. At present, as far as the laws allow, You are applying your most earnest care and attention to procure for youth numerous facilities for a good education, nor are You backward in demonstrating how pernicious to the State itself are the plans which some men entertain against the Church. No one, therefore, will have the right to accuse You of yielding to human considerations or of warring against the established order of things; for, when God's honor, when the salvation of souls are endangered, the duty of your office is to take up the protection and defense of all such matters. Continue, therefore, to fulfill with prudence and firmness, the duties of your episcopal ministry; teaching the precepts of heavenly doctrine, and pointing out to Your people the path to follow amid the great wickedness of the times. There must be a perfect union of mind and will, and where the cause is the same, the mode of action should likewise be the same. See that schools are never wanting in which the young may be carefully imbued with the ideas of the rewards of heaven and of their duties to God; and in which they may obtain accurate knowledge of the Church and learn submission to her teaching, so that they may understand and feel that they should be ready to brave all risks for it.

7. France is rich in instances of eminent men who have not feared to face, for the Christian faith, all misfortunes and even the loss of life. In the social upheaval of which We spoke just now, many men of unconquerable faith were to be met with who maintained the honor of their country with courage and their blood. We see virtue worthily maintaining itself, with God's help, in the midst of snares and perils. The clergy are attached to their duty, and fulfill it with the charity ever ready and apt to help our neighbor, which is proper to the priest. Large numbers of laymen openly and boldly profess the Catholic faith; they rival one another in the multiplication and variety of the testimonies of their devotion to the Holy See: they provide, at great cost and at great trouble, for the education of youth; and they come forward in aid of public needs with admirable liberality and munificence.

8. All this good, which affords the best hopes for the future of France, must not only be preserved, but increased by united efforts and constant watchfulness. Above all, care must be taken that the ranks of the clergy shall be more and more filled with worthy and capable men. Let the authority of their Bishops be sacred to the priest; let the latter be convinced that their ministry will be neither holy, nor profitable, nor respected, if it be not exercised under the guidance of their Bishops. The prominent laymen also, those devoted to Our common Mother the Church, and who are able to render useful service to the Catholic religion by their word and by their pen, must multiply their efforts in the defense of the Church. To obtain these results, it is an absolute necessity that wills should be in harmony, and the action unanimous. There is certainly nothing more wished for by Our adversaries than dissensions between Catholics, who should avoid nothing with greater care than any disagreement, mindful of the Divine words: "Every kingdom divided against itself shall be made desolate."

9. But if any one is compelled, so that union may be preserved, to renounce his own private opinion, let him do it cheerfully for the common good. Catholic writers must spare no effort to preserve this harmony in all things; let them prefer that which is of general utility to their own private interests. Let them favor common action; let them willingly submit to those "whom the Holy Ghost has set as Bishops to rule over the Church of God;" let them respect their authority and never undertake anything against the will of those they should look on as their leaders in the battle for Catholic interests.

10. Finally, following the invariable custom of the Church in times of difficulty, let all the faithful, under your direction, unceasingly pray and beseech God to look down on France that His mercy may overcome his wrath. The unbridled license of speech and of the press, has many times outraged the Majesty of God; men are not wanting who not only ungratefully repudiate the benefits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, but even go so far in their impiety as to glory in not believing in the existence of God. To Catholics will fall the duty of making reparation by a great spirit of faith and piety for these perverse aberrations of mind and deed, and of publicly proving that they have nothing more at heart than the glory of God, nothing dearer than the religion of their forefathers. Those especially, whose life is passed in more intimate union with God in the cloister, should excite themselves to more and more generous charity, and strive to appease the Lord by their humble prayers, voluntary self-denials, and offering of self. And thus, with the help of the Divine Mercy, we are confident that the strayed will come to repentance. and the name of France will regain its ancient greatness.

11. In all that We have hitherto said, Venerable Brethren, You will see the fatherly love and deep affection which We bear to the whole of France. We doubt not that this testimony of Our most keen anxiety will tend to strengthen and tighten the necessary bond between France and the Holy See—a union which has ever been at all times a source of mutual, numerous, and important advantages. -- Gladdened with this thought, Venerable Brethren, We implore for You and your faithful the

greatest abundance of heavenly graces; and We grant You most lovingly in the Lord as a pledge and testimony of Our especial good-will, to You and to the whole of France, the Apostolic Benediction.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter's the 8th day of February, 1884, in the sixth year of Our Pontificate.