

THE CHURCH AND THE WELFARE
OF NATIONS¹

By their own unaided efforts neither individuals nor nations can attain the last end of man on this earth—union with God. Now the duty of governments is twofold: to make every provision that their subjects may lead good and virtuous lives, and to prepare them for their eternal destiny. Hence it is one of their chief tasks to see that religion should hold its rightful place in national life. The task directly committed by God to the rulers of nations is to provide for the physical and temporal welfare of the citizens; to promote their spiritual and eternal welfare is the indirect task of governments, in so far as they are bound to assist the Church in carrying out her work in the State. The Church comes to terms with every form of government or political institution, provided that 'the rights of God and of conscience are safeguarded' (Pius XI). It is the mission of the Church of God to teach the nations the principles of religious and moral life, to inculcate and to ensure them. For this is the field entrusted to her for cultivation by Christ, the absolute ruler in the kingdom of truth and love. Nothing contributes so effectively to the welfare of nations as loyal co-operation between ecclesiastical and civil authorities, whose distinctive spheres of action, with due regard to the special circumstances prevailing in each country, have been made to harmonise. In this the Church has to accomplish a task as responsible as it is exalted.

The Faith transcends all differences in national character. In ancient times the nations fashioned their religions according to their own lights; by human means they established national religions, which often enough lead to self-worship. Their cult sprang from their own narrow conceptions, and was not inspired by God. Therefore, 'the position of those who, by divine light, have found the way to Catholic Truth is by no means the same as the position of those who, following human opinions, adhere to a false religion,' as the Vatican Council says.

By no means the last reason why Christ founded the One Church was to put an end to the multiplicity of heathen national religions. Even where these rise above idolatry, and contain glimpses of God's omnipotence and paternal love, they are full of darkness, error and

¹ Translated from *Die Eine Kirche* by Benedikt Momme Nissen. (Benzinger: Einsiedeln, Switzerland, 5.80).

distortion. Though in every type of sincere religious worship, original revelation has left traces, so to say reflections, of the one true Faith, yet it is utterly false to hold, as many to-day hold, that all religions are of the same value and therefore, provided that one lives a just life, it does not matter to which of them one belongs. The truth of the matter is this: all religion proceeds from God and is ordered to God. This God 'hath made of one all mankind, to dwell upon the whole face of the earth, determining appointed times and the limits of their habitation' (Acts xvii, 26). Our father, father of all nations, as it is written in Heliand. This one true God, who gave to all men the same nature with the same spiritual faculties, has appointed and revealed only one adequate form of divine worship. That is the self-same that Christ brought on earth and planted in his Church. For Christ is, and remains, the only light of the world (John viii, 12), the true light which enlighteneth every man (John i, 9). Only one Redeemer—there can be no second Christ—descended upon earth to save the nations. By divine dispensation only one people, the Chosen People of Israel, aided by the constant supernatural inspiration of its patriarchs and prophets, handed down the light of primal revelation undimmed through the days of Christ until his advent. Men of this race became the pillars of the one supranational Church with Rome as its centre for the whole world.

'Many nations—one Church. How foolishly has this divine order been destroyed; how completely have the nations relapsed into pre-Christian conditions, dividing themselves again, even after Christ's coming, into new national religions such as Islam, or straying into hundreds of more or less nationally determined sects. 'Truth unites, error separates,' says St. Thomas Aquinas.

Therefore it is of vital importance for the healthy development both of nations and of individuals that they should know and profess the one true religion. For it can be seen in every modern State; wherever the religion of Jesus Christ is not faithfully practised, the tares of superstition spring up in ever new forms; spiritualism is rife, clouding the intellect and fraying the nerves, the educated as well as the working classes falling an easy prey to irreligion. The Church alone can check this development.

What is the fate of men, when they become absorbed in worldly pursuits, with business, factory and cinema as the pivot of their lives? Unhappiness and sterility is the fate of every nation that falls away from religion. Though the nation may for a time remain united merely to safeguard its temporal existence, it has been created by God for a much higher destiny than the formation of a mere

business concern. Its origin and goal raise it above mere utilitarianism. But since the sensual nature of fallen man is always prone to lower things, it must be raised to the original nobility of men and nations by the higher impulse of grace, which is offered by the Church. She lays down guiding principles for a religious and moral life, to be lived in spirit and in truth. From the noblest motives known to the world, she enjoins all the faithful to serve their country loyally. A Protestant prince once said about his Catholic subjects: 'True Catholics are not revolutionaries.'

The Church teaches the nations a higher way of life, which she continually fosters by her worship. It is the Church who has established the Sunday before the six working-days, who has introduced the great Christian feast-days into the sober working year; and by their celebration calls the spirit of the Triune God down upon the people. It can be seen again and again in truly Catholic countries how the life of the people is made rich, colourful and happy, and —what is more—is sanctified by the Church. To the faithful, labour becomes worship, recreation praise of God. Since the beginning of the Middle Ages the Church has made use of every healthy instinct and harnessed it to the service of Christ. Thus the love of song developed into choral and sacred chant, giving rise to the most solemn music in the world. Thus in painting and sculpture, the Church appealed to the creative power of the people, to offer the thirsty eye at every turn symbols of the sublime and the divine. Thus she fills and spiritualises the open country, the village and the town, uplifting the soul by the senses, through the wayside crucifix, the shrine in the home, the unrivalled majesty of her cathedrals. Thus the Church has made the nations realise how much they can achieve in the arts of peace. Even to-day the world stands amazed at the abundance of the treasures of art, which date from the times when a single creed reigned over the countries of Europe. Like Goethe hundreds of great minds have confessed that the ages of faith were the periods of greatest fruitfulness for the nations.

The Church did not always fulfil her exalted mission to the nations in loyalty and simplicity. It was when a considerable number of priests and religious no longer lived as followers of Christ that the nations became estranged. Nor did Catholic countries always submit to the salutary yoke of the Church; princes were arrogant, citizens licentious. But we will not consider what might have been; we will consider facts; what can the Church achieve on the one hand and the nations on the other, if both remain faithful to their divine mission; we will consider the forces that make for a re-union with the Church, where such a union has been lost.

In proportion as the modern State is estranged from the Church, it proves unable to cope with moral degeneration, and falls an easy prey to all kinds of experiments. Forsaking true religion, even in open rebellion against God, spell-bound by the spirit of competition in technical things, the nations become victims to that factory atmosphere of grinding drudgery, a veritable hotbed of callousness, vice, brutality, boredom and despair. How can the nations be regenerated, unless they recover their trust in God and His ministers upon earth? To be without religion is to be without hope. Together with Christian faith, the Church implants Christian hope in the nations. By such holy hope the citizens are enabled to bear hardships with patience, and calmly to endure times of stress. Hope prevents the nations from committing racial suicide, and inspires them to enter the way of eternal life. If with hope the other religious virtues develop, the vitality of the nations will also grow again.

Like man, the nations too have fallen from grace. Every people has its national faults, its selfish national pride. These faults lead to hostilities between the States. It means much if nations, through their own unaided efforts, manage to live even for a short time in peace. But they cannot find in themselves those strong impulses that can make them unite in spirit. Real unity of nations can only be effected, if they become willing members of a higher spiritual order which embraces them all. Real unity is not achieved when, as has happened time and again, powerful empires consider themselves the centre of the world, and therefore to a certain extent the standard for the rest of the nations to follow, but only when all nations, acknowledging their limitations and imperfections, acknowledge the God of all nations and His religion. The one and only institution upon earth capable of preserving the spirit of unity among the nations is the One Church. 'Thou unitest citizen with citizen, nation with nation . . . in short man with man, when they remember their first parents, not only in fellowship, but in a kind of brotherhood,' says St. Augustine.

The Apostle of the Gentiles spoke the great words: 'In you that have put on Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek; neither bond nor free; neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. iii, 28). It would, however, be a mistake to believe that in bestowing her membership the Church, as an instrument of Christ, could cancel all natural differences or at least the tensions they imply. She can only advise and warn the nations, and teach them right principles. Differences of sex, race, culture, language and class will remain in the order of nature, and occasion dissensions

in the life of nations, as long as the earth exists. It is the chief concern of governments to cope with the practical tasks thus caused. It cannot be denied that nations and races with their diverse gifts have the right and the duty to pursue their own lawful interests within the common life on earth. But the best way to prevent the interplay of natural forces from degenerating into internecine strife and mortal hatred, and to ensure a peaceful settlement, is for the Church of Christ to effect that union of minds and souls in the State, in which, according to the words of the Apostle, all members are equal. The only true starting point for reconciling the inequalities of men in civil life, as far as this can be achieved on earth, is the realisation that all men are one before God. For nothing but union with God can unite souls with each other.

What is the driving force by which the Church unites the nations (from within), and fills them with the spirit of peace? It is Christian charity which she joins to Faith and Hope. These other two are perfected by charity alone. Without charity the Church would labour in vain. 'The union of the Church is effected by charity,' says St. Thomas Aquinas, and in the same way the union of mankind is brought about. For charity alone teaches men to avoid everything that makes for discord. It would be a vain attempt to replace charity by any other motive force. Hatred makes men quarrelsome, cruel and wicked; the spirit of cold calculation dehumanises them; charity alone teaches man to overcome evil by good, to make sacrifices, on occasion to bear injustice for the sake of peace. For two thousand years the Church has sent forth apostles of peace and love; up to the present day she has made stupendous efforts to allay the strife among nations, and to create Peace in the Spirit of Christ. It is true her ministers have sometimes failed, but their achievement by far outweighs their failure. The world does not heed this. In 1900, two South American States made peace under the sign of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, under the sign of Christ Spain ended her terrible civil war. Again, lately, the whole of Portugal has turned to the Church. What has happened in distant parts of Europe and of the world may equally come to pass within the heart of civilisation.

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