

THE CATHOLIC HOUR

THE CHALLENGE TO DEMOCRACY

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THE CHALLENGE TO DEMOCRACY

Throughout the world the Catholic Church celebrates today the feast of the Kingship of Christ.

Beneath that simple statement, which will mean very little to many of our people, there lies the whole tragic story of the past quarter century—the story of a man who was ahead of his time.

By 1925, it had become clear to the late Pope Pius XI that the whole civilized world lay in mortal danger. With a wisdom born of the church's long experience—an experience that stretched back twenty centuries—he saw rising on the horizon a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. And in the cloud he beheld the threat of a second and more terrible war: a vision of cities bombed to rubble and millions dying and civilization smashed to pieces. He saw even more: he saw the frail flower of human freedom bend and break before the blast. He saw the return of slavery and the tyranny of the absolute state.

In December of that year the Pope began his great campaign to save the modern world from the consequences of its folly. He established the Feast of Christ the King. During the next four-

teen weary years, with superb courage and astonishing insight, he carried on the good fight for peace and human liberty. The climax came in the dangerous spring of 1937. Within five days, five days that will live for ever in history, His Holiness condemned by name the two sources of infection that were poisoning the world and leading it to war and slavery: he condemned atheistic communism and the nazi tyranny of Hitler.

As we celebrate for the twentieth time the Feast of the Kingship of Christ, we know, of course, that Pope Pius XI lost the great battle of his pontificate. For an answer to its agonizing problems the modern world refused to turn to Christ. It turned instead to dictatorship and war. But the truth which His Holiness spoke was not interred with his bones. It lives on still, as pertinent and challenging as when he first spoke it to a skeptical world. It has been taken up by his successor, Pope Pius XII, and trumpeted to the four corners of the earth. As the days go by a constantly increasing number of earnest and thoughtful men find it an answer to their doubts and questions.

Pope Pius XI lost a battle to

restore all things to Christ. He may yet win the war.

For the war rages still and will continue to rage until the great issue of our day has been decided one way or the other. Hitler has gone and with him the tyranny he spawned, but the final choice has not yet been made. The modern world must still choose between liberty and human dignity on the one hand, and coercion and collectivism on the other; between freedom and slavery; between democracy and the totalitarian state.

For many of us the grim reality of this choice is not easy to appreciate. Here in the United States we live in a kind of fool's paradise. We have become so accustomed to the exercise of our civic rights and democratic freedoms that we take them for granted, like the air we breathe, and the water we drink. Who among us can even imagine life in any other way?

Too easily we overlook the gloomy records of the past. We forget that before the coming of Christianity the usual form of government was dictatorship, and slavery was the normal condition of the vast majority of the human race. That the pre-Christian era reached its highest development in the ancient empires of Greece and Rome, we

remember well enough; but we do not sufficiently recall that "the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome" were built on the ugly foundation of human slavery.

If we remembered the past, we would understand more clearly the great problem of the present. We might still be shocked, and perhaps discouraged, by the re-appearance of slavery and the return of the totalitarian state, but we would not be surprised. Indeed the history of western civilization would lead us to expect exactly what is happening today.

The institution of slavery and the absolute state were destroyed in the western world by one force and one force alone; and that force was Christianity. These ancient evils did not disappear overnight, for they were deeply entrenched, but once western society accepted Jesus Christ, it was only a question of time before they would disappear. How could men believe that every human being had a personal dignity which stemmed from his creation by God and his redemption by Christ, and at the same time defend a political order which subordinated the individual to an absolute state?

The birth of Christianity was the death of ancient tyranny, for from the natural law as un-

derstood by Christian tradition, there grew the precious doctrine of inalienable rights. Now men knew that they possessed rights which came from God, and that since the state had not given them, the state could not take them away. The Founding Fathers of this country learned the lesson well. On the doctrine of God-given, inalienable rights, they reared the structure of American democracy.

How strange, you may hear people say, that after all these years of progress, the modern world should be challenged by the blackest kind of reaction! We have discovered the most hidden secrets of nature; we have conquered space and annihilated time; we have routed illiteracy and taught the masses to read and write. How surprising, then, that after all these triumphs we should find ourselves locked in mortal struggle with the reviving institution of the slave state. How odd that in the full light of the twentieth Century we should have to wage once more the age-old fight for human liberty—for the right to live our lives as free men.

But there is nothing strange or surprising about this. That democracy should be dead these days in large parts of the western world and under severe at-

tack in others, is no more surprising than it is that a tree should die when its roots have been destroyed. For democracy arose in the fertile soil of Christian culture, and now that this culture has become cold with the chill of paganism, now that Christ is so widely ignored and denied, it is the most natural thing in the world that democracy should be tottering.

There is, then, nothing wrong with democracy that Christianity cannot cure. We are where we are, not because the totalitarian state is particularly strong or attractive to people, but because we have sold our glorious heritage of human dignity and freedom for a mess of sensual pottage. Whatever we may believe in our hearts, we have said in practice that we will not have This Man to rule over us. As a result, instead of the Kingdom of Christ, with its respect for right and justice and its spirit of brotherly charity, the modern world has its Neroes and Diocletians trampling on our historic freedoms and bathing the globe in blood. For the gentle rule of Jesus Christ, the modern world has made the terrible exchange of gangster rule and concentration camps.

In this dark moment of history, does not our course lie

straight and clear before us? If we are to save the ideals of democracy, we must bend our knees and pledge again whole-souled allegiance to Jesus Christ: "for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The sweep of the barbarian, which has now reached the heart of Europe, can be stopped in no other way.

In a notable address last summer, in which he voiced the sentiments of all God-fearing men, Pope Pius XII said bluntly that the choice today lies between "the champions or the wreckers of Christian civilization" (Allocution to the College of Cardinals, June 1, 1946). Why is it that the wreckers of our civilization seem to realize this so much better than its champions? They are going about their destructive work with an energy, an enthusiasm and clarity of purpose which all of us might well envy and imitate. In the face of our common danger the champions of Christian civilization appear, alas, fearful and uncertain of their course. On one thing only do they seem united: that the new barbarism is the worst form of slavery the world has ever seen, and that people must be steadily warned against it.

That is well and good as far as it goes. But it does not go nearly far enough. If the champions of Christian civilization are going to save freedom in the modern world, they must do more than criticize and raise alarms. They must offer a positive program of their own, a program of social and political reform that will cut to the heart of the evil and lay it bare. Against the threat of slavery, the best defense is to make freedom work.

Right in the beginning we must frankly recognize and boldly proclaim the rule of Christ over public life. Let there be an end once and for all to the shameful fiction that we can observe the Christian code in our private lives and disregard it in our public lives. In the Christian tradition there is no room for a double standard of morality.

The individual citizen who believes in the Kingship of Christ will accept wholeheartedly all the duties of democratic citizenship. It will not be a matter of indifference to him what laws are passed or what men are elected to office. He will be interested in public affairs and strive to the best of his ability to understand the issues of the day. Before taking his stand on any question, he will weigh the arguments

carefully and judge them in the double light of human wisdom and Christian truth.

The office-holder who admits that Christ rules over public life will strive to see that the laws of the land promote the general welfare and not merely the economic interest of clamorous pressure groups. He will be at all times scrupulously honest, as becomes a servant of the people, and on a matter of principle he will stoutly refuse to compromise. Speaking the truth as he sees it, he will make it clear that, concerned as he is with election to office, he is more concerned with doing his duty to God and country.

The years that lie ahead are certain to be dangerous and difficult, but we can make them glorious years as well. At the present moment, the forces of

slavery are on the march and they seem very powerful; indeed. But the forces of freedom are more powerful still, if only the champions of freedom will realize it. The same Jesus Christ Who died for us on the Cross, and dying doubly dignified our human nature, remains with us still. By turning to Him who first taught us the freedom of the children of God, we can find the strength and inspiration to make our democracy work.

The answer to dictatorship and secret police and concentration camps is very simple and overwhelmingly convincing. It is the loyal acceptance of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ—"a kingdom of truth and life; a kingdom of holiness and grace; a kingdom of justice, peace and love" (Preface of the Feast of the Kingship of Christ).

THE CATHOLIC HOUR

1930—Seventeenth Year—1946

The nationwide Catholic Hour was inaugurated on March 2, 1930, by the National Council of Catholic Men in cooperation with the National Broadcasting Company and its associated stations. Radio facilities are provided by NBC and the stations associated with it; the program is arranged and produced by NCCM.

The Catholic Hour was begun on a network of 22 stations, and now carries its message of Catholic truth on each Sunday of the year through a number of stations varying from 90 to 110, situated in 40 states, the District of Columbia, and Hawaii. Consisting usually of an address, mainly expository, by one or another of America's leading Catholic preachers—though sometimes of talks by laymen, sometimes of dramatizations—and of sacred music provided by a volunteer choir, the Catholic Hour has distinguished itself as one of the most popular and extensive religious broadcasts in the world. An average of 100,000 audience letters a year, about twenty per cent of which come from listeners of other faiths, gives some indication of its popularity and influence.

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