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POPE LEO XIII.

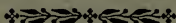
A Character Study

By Vicomte E. M. De Vogue.
Member of *The French Academy*



San Francisco:
Catholic Truth Society
Room 87, Flood Bldg.

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Pope Leo XIII.

[The following article is a Character Study of Pope Leo XIII. contributed to the "Pall Mall Magazine" by an eminent French Academician. The writer has studied the personality of the Pope rather than his office. He calls attention to the qualities of mind and heart which have won the confidence and respect of the world. The Catholic Truth Society reproduces the study in the hope of making Leo XIII. better known and loved by Catholics and non-Catholics.]

Events, words, and acts, which are now in all men's minds, have made the Vatican the center of contemporary interest.

In the countries which are separated from Catholicism, in the atmospheres which are unresponsive to all religious faith, public opinion lies in wait for the acts of the Pope with a concentration equal to that of the flocks who look to him for spiritual direction. Nothing is more significant than the absorption to which distinguished visitors, heads of states, diplomats, publicists, or agnostic thinkers, succumb the moment they arrive in Rome. Whatever may be the motive that brings them there, they all have only one wish—to see and to hear the Pope; they all go and knock first at the *portone*, at those heavy bronze gates which are shut upon the voluntary prisoner. Men of action or men of thought, those who make history and those who write it, are warned by a sure instinct that the Vatican is still one of the great workshops of history. In climbing up the interminable steps which lead to that height, to those aerial dwelling-places whence all the spectacle of the world may be embraced, the most powerful monarch skirts the edge of silent shadows,

which have, in spite of him, the power to extend or to limit his authority. If he reigns over an empire where Goethe is in every man's recollection, these shadows recall to him the words of Egmont: "Ich sehe Geister vor mir, die still und sinnend auf schwarzen Schalen das Geschick der Fürsten und vieler Tausende wagen" (I see before me dumb and pensive spirits, who weigh in black balances the destinies of princes and of peoples.)

I will not stop to describe it—this magnificent frame which sets off the great man whom I would wish to paint here. It is known to every travelled foreigner. The gigantic and venerable palace of the Vatican, heavy with its burden of ages and of memories, has grown under the shadow of St. Peter like the monumental form of the Church. It sends its roots down into the tomb of the Apostle; its deep foundations, mingled with those of the Basilica, extend to the Crypt of the Fisherman. From these Catacombs the buildings have risen step by step until they dominate the whole city with their topmost storey, where are distributed to-day the apartments of the Sovereign Pontiff and the Secretariat of State. A continual impulse of history seems to have carried the Pope to this height. In the evening, from the depth of the interior courts, his lamp may be seen shining like a beacon. But between the successor of Peter who lives high up there, and the hidden bones from which he derives the reason of his existence, communication has never been broken. The chain of the ages stretches from its origins to this summit; it is perceptible to the eyes, and the mind discovers it on each of the steps by which one mounts upwards in this labyrinth of marble and of travertine.

The traditional rites of the Vatican ordain that the Pope who has just died should pass one night in the Sistine Chapel. Suspended in the case of Pius IX. from force of circumstances, this ceremony will without doubt reappear. Let us transport ourselves in imagination to that coming night of funeral watchings,

before the "Last Judgment" of the sublime Florentine. He who wore the tiara lies at full length beneath the gaze of the sibyls and the prophets, on the most august altar whence a last vision of the world could be outspread. The history of humanity, painted by Michael Angelo, surrounds him. Above him our globe is outlined in space; sadly Adam emerges at the foot of the mountain which he must climb, the symbolic scenes in which the life of the sons of Adam is summarized, cover the arches and the walls, up to Christ the Judge, who calls the multitudes out of the tombs. Piety, genius, the accumulated emotion of men of every race—everything conspires to create in the Sistine Châpel an atmosphere which enlarges and fertilizes the thoughts.

I recall him, this personage, twenty-one years ago, in this same Sistine Chapel, at the moment when the cardinals brought him there on the *sedia gestatoria*, the chosen of the conclave of 1878. I was there. Outside the Sacred College no one knew this septuagenarian, who had been imprisoned for thirty-two years in the mountains of Umbria. He passed from his bishopric of Perugia to the seclusion of the Vatican like a fugitive shadow among shadows; among those other aged men who celebrated his elevation with little ado, with obsolete ceremonies, in the narrow enclosure and the half light of the Sistine; timid and enfeebled under the evil of the time, they had not dared to bring forth their chosen in the basilica of St. Peter, with the concourse of the people and the accustomed pomp. The darkness of the place, the limited company, that air of effacement and almost of mystery—everything led the thoughts back to the first enthronements of the Popes in the Catacombs. A lowly beginning, foreshadowing little. Pius IX., whose life had been so eventful, left an abounding fame and a great void; the despoiled Papacy seemed to have been engulfed with him. The heir without a heritage who was shown to us had a look of weakness, and his title to fame was still discussed. His coronation seemed to us a simula-

crum of vanished realities, the elevation of a phantom. And these were the years when the shadow of the cross on the world was growing less. How deceptive is a hasty judgment! We took away from that ceremony the impression of a thing that was coming to an end. The early years of his pontificate, condemned to an attitude of discreet protest, did nothing to correct our mistake.

Leo XIII. did not reveal himself by precipitate action, like other sovereigns one could name who have fascinated men's minds at the first blow. His lofty stature rose gradually on the horizon with the calm of great forces. Little by little his form became clearer and more precise. I found it already very clearly marked when I returned to Rome in 1886. However, it had not even then reached its true pedestal. The new Pope had been recognized as a masterly philosopher, and a diplomatist of rare versatility, it was enough to give him a great place for his papal letters and in the *Almanack de Gotha*,—too little to give him the first place in the world. At this moment the Curia was the centre of very active negotiations, which recalled the fine old times of ecclesiastical policy, but which did not presage a new epoch. The dominant influences at the Vatican were seeking the independence necessary to the Holy See in a restoration of the ancient territorial sovereignty; they were putting their hopes in another policy, the accord with Germany, the effective intervention of Prince Bismarck. It is well known what disillusion awaited the Roman negotiators on that score.

Insensibly the axis of the Pontiff's action shifted in proportion as Leo XIII. gained confidence in his own strength. His personal ideas, readjusted and ripened by experience, prevailed over Foreign Office routine; he governed alone, and relegated to the background the diplomacy of the cabinet; it was social questions which he brought to the front. Without doubt the protest of principle against what was done in Rome in 1870 is always maintained at the

Vatican, and it could not be otherwise ; we shall hear of the protest for a long time to come ; but the prodigious success of a wider policy must have produced a fundamental change at heart. It is now known in what direction lie the great hopes of the future of the Papacy.

Leo XIII. understands that the basis and the true guarantee of the Holy See are in the hearts of Catholic peoples and in the involuntary respect of non-Catholics. The Pope continues to negotiate with Governments, he deals with them prudently ; but the mainspring of his policy, more evident every day, is in his appeal to the peoples. Each of his acts reveals his increasing absorption in the task of conciliating the French and American democracies in order to base his action on those two wide foundations.

From the day when Leo XIII. inaugurated this policy he became the first man of Europe. Since the death of William I. of Germany, little by little, in the popular imagination, he took the place which that other old man had occupied. Twenty years ago no hesitation would have been permissible to a conscientious and intelligent painter, commissioned to group in a picture the leading personages of Europe. He would have set up in the centre the colossal figure of the old German Emperor. Ten years later the same painter again would not have hesitated : his composition would have arranged itself round Pope Leo XIII.

Whence comes this general consensus of imagination ? First, from the incomparable prestige of that position : a king without a kingdom, yet more powerful than territorial sovereigns. Next, it comes from a proof of intellectual force of which the very expression seems a guarantee. This old man had only made one brief appearance in the outside world—during his Nunciature at Brussels more than half a century ago. After that he lived for thirty years in the retirement of his bishopric of Perugia, and for twenty years in the walled solitude of the Vatican ; where he was surrounded by a little society unresponsive to any innova-

tion. Of the strangers who come to him some are dumb out of awe, while the others have every interest in distorting the truth. No condition can be imagined better adapted for concealing from a man the changes of his epoch; and no epoch has seen changes more profound or more radical!

Nevertheless, this is what happened: the recluse of the Vatican, now a nonagenarian, knows, understands, directs, and sometimes anticipates, these changes; he is as well informed and as quick to take in at a glance, he has as free a mind and as sound a courage, as the editor of a great London or New York newspaper. We all know how many of the ablest politicians, after they attain extreme old age, shut themselves out from the knowledge of contemporary need: their outlook remains wide and piercing all in vain; it is directed behind them, because these survivors turn their backs to the current of the stream. The exceptions are so rare in a century that they prove the rule. With Leo XIII., in the conditions which I have recalled, this phenomenon of active clairvoyance partakes of the marvellous. Believers see in it the effect of a Higher Assistance, unbelievers the sign of genius; both explanations surround his forehead with a halo of glory.

Think what decision he needed to walk deliberately in the new ways! At the age of eighty, Leo XIII. came out of his retirement and threw himself into the world of the living, to dispute with his adversaries who thought to possess that world without any one to say them nay. He heard the word of his Master: "Let the dead bury their dead." Nothing could have stopped him. The expressions of the Holy Father's thought followed one after the other with a redoubled vigor and clearness, which is absolutely amazing when we think of his age. In the Encyclicals to the French Catholics, he attacked political problems with an equal measure of doctrinal boldness and practical moderation. He aroused among us terrible storms, and there was a moment when it might have been thought that the Pope was risking, in this dangerous course, his

spiritual power over the French Church; so much trouble had he to make his intentions understood by the spirits in prison in their old conceptions, by the hearts panic-stricken in their most estimable relationships. He persevered, and he won almost all along the line. In the Encyclicals on the condition of the working-classes he did not solve the problem—who will solve it?—but he put it more clearly than it had ever been put before, while connecting it with the deep-seated causes from which spring all the evils of humanity; and he took up his position frankly on the side of the weak.

There will probably be no immediate effects of this good will on the world, which is for the most part soured, rebellious, and prejudiced against every religious interference; on a world in which each individual demands a precise solution, adapted to the particular case of which he complains. The Pope can only give general directions, designed to prevent conflicts and subordinated to a reform of morals. It is, however, a great point that there is no mutual longer ignorance between the Vatican and the workshop. There is an observation, a looking of facts in the face, and an investigation with a paternal solicitude on the one side, and on the other with a distrustful curiosity; there is sometimes a discussion in the workman's cottage,—sceptical, but still a discussion. The masses know that an oracle, reputed to be infallible, is taking up the defence of their interests. Henceforth he will be less suspect in their eyes, since he has been robbed of his sovereignty and of his property; robbed of that, strange to say, at the very hour when all sovereignties were furiously attacked, when most of them were undergoing a change of nature and of origin; at the hour when the idea of private property, submitted to a careful examination, is in danger of losing some portion of its absolute character. Whether the social crisis goes from bad to worse without coming to an end, or whether it is solved by disasters, after which it will only be banished to the rubbish-heap of vain chimeras,

the moment may come when a portion of the working world bethink itself, in spite of its deeply rooted prejudices, that there is in the Vatican a disinterested arbiter to judge its conflicts with capital, an advocate to plead its cause, an architect to aid it to reconstruct destroyed societies. And it is to Leo XIII., and to him alone, that the honor of this beneficent reconciliation will be assigned.

The Encyclicals, the canonical documents, are not the most significant demonstrations of this Pontificate; acts not less remarkable, both fundamentally and formally, have been the communications given by the Pope to newspapers, to popular journalists like those of our own *Petit Journal*. The more we reflect upon those conversations, the more we find there, in every word, the wish to enlarge, as much as the Pope can do so, the range of free movement for the societies of our time. The Church had not used this language at all since the great days of the Middle Ages. If I have employed in this study the word "innovations," it is that I may fall in with the current point of view; in reality Leo XIII. takes up to-day the traditions which were sleeping for several centuries. He follows the general movement; all the living forces of our time are aroused towards this past which comes to life again: the Pope like the Russian and German emperors, and the heads of the workmen's organizations like other disinterested thinkers. Those who are shocked at an "Interview with the Pope," ought first of all to ask themselves how a Hildebrand, an Innocent, a Sixtus V., would have acted to-day. Like this successor of theirs who becomes their equal, they would take the weapons of their time, they would descend into the public arena and speak directly to the peoples, to plead their cause, to gain souls, to serve humanity. Whatever has seemed daring and new in the Pope of the nineteenth century is only a return to the ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas, the mighty philosopher who gave,

so far back as the thirteenth century, the same directions for the conduct of societies and of the human mind. Leo XIII. sets forth their natural consequences, with the gentle obstinacy and the calm prudence which form the basis of his character.

No one will refuse the epithet of liberal to a Pope who has stretched the rigid Roman unity to the utmost possible limits every time that a particular right demanded satisfaction. This large liberalism is above all perceptible in the relation of the Pontiff with the Oriental and the American Catholics. Under the reign of Pius IX., the Oriental communities were alarmed at the centralizing movement which threatened their secular privileges, aimed at bringing back all the members of the Church to strict Roman observance. Leo XIII. made that strictness bend. In everything that concerns liturgy, ceremonies, the employment of a national tongue, and independent administration, he confirmed and extended the ancient usages of which the Oriental Christians are so jealous; the Slavs in particular were accorded all the facilities that could be desired to bring them into conformity with their traditions without breaking the tie with Rome. Every one knows how the Pope, when face to face with America, broke down around him the resistance of the Sacred College in order to leave to the Catholics of the United States that liberty of movement which they need in the New World. No one understands better than Leo XIII. the American spirit, the proud independence which is as necessary to that spirit as the air which it breathes. And in all legislation for the United States the Holy Father never missed an opportunity of showing to other Christian communities his comprehension of their conditions of life, his respect for and his charity towards them. In his Encyclicals the choice of terms is carefully calculated, in order that not a single word may wound the separated brethren. Gentleness in strength—that is the dominant characteristic of this

great figure. That is what one feels strongly in talking with Leo XIII. Twice of late years I had the honor of conversing with him for a long time together. I should like to set down here my impressions with perfect frankness.

When the visitor is introduced by the private chamberlain in the chamber of special audience, he is first of all struck by the ascetic emaciation of this white phantom, by the transparent attenuation of this delicately sculptured face. Recalling the age of the Pontiff, he expects to find in him all its weaknesses. The Pontiff speaks, his eyes brighten, and the visitor's first impression soon gives place to a delightful astonishment, in presence of the youthful vigor which persists in this weak frame. All his vital energies are concentrated in his voice which is so strong, and in his look which is so piercing; he is like a lamp, the flame of which continues to shine without any perceptible reservoir to feed it, or mechanism to hold it up. You have scarcely crossed the threshold of the chamber, when you feel yourself put at your ease by the intelligent kindness of this look, which calls you and entertains you from the end of the room. Seated in his arm-chair, with both his hands firmly resting on its arms, the Holy Father signs the visitor to a chair by his side; with a simplicity which in no respect diminishes his natural dignity, he suppresses most of the formalities of the Protocol, quickly raises his visitor who is bending at his feet, and enters immediately into conversation, like a friend happy at seeing his friend again. After some affectionate questions on the details of his guest's family, career, and work, the Pope questions him eagerly on the country from which he comes, and on the movement of ideas and the condition of public affairs there. His voice grows louder and more eager; sometimes it is hard to edge in an answer, so far does that ardent speech outrun objection, and so eager is it to develop the master-thought which Leo XIII. is working unceasingly to render

clearer and more persuasive to each person. He speaks French easily, with a slight Italian accent; occasionally he uses neologisms strange to our tongue, but always formed by an excellent Latinist, and drawn so naturally from their Latin source that one is surprised that they are not actually French.

The information of this voluntary recluse is surprising; the foreigner does not find him at fault in a single detail of the life of his nation; the traveler and the diplomatist recognize in his first words a mind informed about all the problems which have arisen all over our planet. Never a bitter word against his adversaries in the conversation of Leo XIII., and never a doubt of the effectiveness of his action; he has an impregnable basis of confidence and of optimism. When one respectfully observes to him that his hopes on such and such a subject will have a somewhat distant realization, he answers tranquilly that he knows it, and that he is working for the century that is to come. It is like talking with an historian rather than with a statesman; to such an extent does he possess the calm gaze of the historian, the far-sighted outlook which seeks the object of vision over the mountains and over the years. And when he grows eager over questions which affect each one of us in our capacity as citizens of our respective countries, he conveys the impression of a father attentive to the interests of his family, rather than an individual who is bound to his own interests; however prejudiced one may be against the Italian acuteness, it is impossible not to surrender oneself to the frankness and sincerity of this tone, drawn literally from a father's bowels.

On going out from these audiences—I shall be allowed to give this testimony here—I endeavored to correct myself, to cross-examine myself mistrustfully; I remembered how in every country the friendly protestations of sovereigns and of their ministers had always given me an impression of feinting, which was nevertheless perfectly justifiable in the case of men who

only sought for their own advantage, even when they seemed to be espousing the interests of my country. Well, I shall go to my grave with the absolute conviction that there is something different in the language which Pope Leo XIII. uses to his interlocutors ; without doubt he has always present in his mind his burden and his duties as Roman Pontiff, the high ambitions of the head of the Church and of the dispossessed monarch ; but apart from these Roman preoccupations, there is one portion of his heart in which is burning a true and disinterested sympathy for the Frenchman with whom he is speaking of the things of France ; and similarly, so I am told, for the American or Englishman of whom he makes himself for the moment the fellow-citizen with an equal open-heartedness. The universal father—that is just the impression which he left on me, and which triumphed over my invincible scepticism engendered by my experience of mankind.

The most pessimistic and the most discouraged leave this old man with a soul cheered up ; with a reinforcement of youth and of warmth. Unforgettable is the moment when one goes out of the little chamber. The voice and the look which called the visitor at his entrance accompany him while he retires, according to custom, backward, making the usual salutations. The words of the Pope fasten themselves on the departing guest, and, if I may say so, envelop him with encouragement ; while he puts his hand on the handle of the door it retains him, still supported by a gesture of those emaciated fingers stretched out to bless ; the words rush forth always the same, joyous and affectionate : “ Courage ! work ! do good ! Explain to them my thought ! Come and see me again ! ” This vivid speech seems to persist in its pursuit of you, while you go down the hundreds of steps of the great silent staircase of the Vatican,

I shall not dilate upon the private life of Leo XIII. It is known to all by the accounts which people have

given to it. Methodical and well ordered, it is entirely expended in overwhelming toil; the audience granted to the pilgrims who have come from every quarter of the globe; the transaction of the business of Catholicism; the drawing up of the encyclicals and of the briefs, of which his pen was so prodigal and which remain among the finished monuments of Catholic literature. The only recreations of the Pontiff are his walks in the gardens of the Vatican, his Latin studies to which he remains devotedly attached, and the composition of those Latin verses in which he excels.

During the twenty years of his pontificate Leo XIII. has accomplished a work which seemed to demand the effort of a whole century. Men will judge it as a whole, when for that indefatigable worker the hour of sleeping his last night in the Sistine Chapel shall sound, in that same place where I saw his humble and timid beginnings. No historian will deny that he had need to have a singular genius to grasp that work in its variety, in the interlocking of its parts, and in its distant consequences. The future will say whether the head of the Catholic Church really understood the necessities of his time, when he directed the political and social evolution of Catholicism in the spirit of a return to the exigencies of great modern democracies. Whoever may be the successor of Leo XIII., and however different a man he may be supposed to be, it is difficult to conceive how the next Pope could arrest that evolution, could make the Church retrace her steps from the path laid down by the persistent determination of his predecessor.

Even among those who will criticise the thought or the political action of Leo XIII., no one will have the right to accuse the heart of the man. I have never heard it said that he voluntarily did an injury to any one, that he was ever hard to one of his servants. Born with an authoritative temperament, this man knew how to master it; inflexible in his ideas, he was gentle and humane in his personal relations. To have genius

is a fine thing ; to have goodness is better. Leo XIII. has both. That sufficiently explains the sentiments of affection and of respect with which he inspires all those who come near him, believers or unbelievers. To that I bring here my disinterested testimony ; I hope that he may win the appreciation of those who will read these pages with their free and judicial spirit.

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