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The Spread of the Church a Proof of Her Divinity

A Study in the Philosophy of History

By

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Chaplain of the Catholic Students of the University of Illinois



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OF the many considerations which show forth the Divine character of the Catholic religion, there are few which do so more strikingly or more conclusively, than the story of the marvelous propagation of this Faith. The more light that is cast upon the conditions surrounding its birth, and the obstacles to its growth by the calm white searchlight of historic research, the more vivid and spectacular becomes the dramatic story of its rise and conquest of the world. The more clearly we discern the true character and magnitude of the obstacles, the more strongly are we convinced that they were insurmountable by human ingenuity alone. Only by constant supernatural assistance and unfailing succor from on High, could a band of illiterate, ignorant fishermen, go forth and literally change the faith of the earth by effecting the mightiest moral revolution that this world has ever seen.

It is a story that has in it all the rich color of romance and the thrill of adventure and achievement. There is the sombre pathos of indescribable human suffering; there is the quickening touch of unparalleled bravery and indomitable courage; there is the tingling thrill of superhuman courage that rose to the loftiest heights of heroic moral grandeur. In the long annals of recorded human history, the story of the daring and the heroism of the early Christian stands out as the one story that has never ceased to move the hearts and thrill the souls of unending generations of men. It not only moves and thrills them, but it compels them at the end to exclaim as with a single voice: "This is not the work of man, but of God!" For, amidst all the minutiae of human phenomena, there is discerned the Finger of God as clearly and as luminously as the sun, shining in the noon-day sky.

Let us go back to the very beginning of the sublime story. The opening scene is set in the land of Judea, in the thirty-third year of Our Lord. In a world that was plunged in the darkness of polytheism and pagan idolatry, the inhabitants of Judea had for centuries held aloft the torch of monotheism—the worship of the One True God. Through the centuries they had been awaiting the coming of the long-heralded Messiah, Who was to restore them to their former glory and to a lofty pinnacle of national greatness and world empire.

These¹ "people claimed an old history, dating back 2,000 years; they spoke a rude and unpolished language of the olden times; they had a religion repulsive for its austerity, and whose ceremonies were despised. It was the land of Judea—a fossil land—a mock and a jibe among the nations. In Judea men spoke with contempt of its rudest part, Galilee. On the sandy beach of the sea of Galilee, beneath towering mountains, stood One, Who gathered about Him twelve poor fishermen of this little secluded lake, and unto them He said: 'All power is given to Me in heaven and in earth. Going, therefore, teach ye all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world'" (Matt. xxviii. 19, 20).

THE DIVINE COMMISSION.

In these words, Christ commissioned twelve Galilean fishermen to go and teach whom? Not a few individuals, or groups of individuals, or even a few nations, but *all nations*. Teach them what? A few maxims or a few rules? No. They were to teach them "all things whatsoever I have commanded you." The more carefully one studies the character of this command, the more clearly does he realize that this is the most gigantic, the most

¹P. N. Lynch, D.D., *The Miraculous Existence of the Church*, p. 63. London: Burns & Oates. 1868.

colossal, the most stupendous task ever placed upon the frail shoulders of men. Twelve illiterate Galilean fishermen were commanded to go out and change the faith of the world. Without the backing of powerful armies or the might of human learning, or the force of persuasive eloquence, they were charged to effect the mightiest, the most radical, and the most far-reaching revolution in thought and conduct, which the human race has ever known. Well might they have quailed under such a charge! Well, indeed, might they have faltered and demurred!

To understand more clearly the character of that tremendous change which they were charged to effect, let us now turn our eyes upon that world into which they were sent. With the single exception of the Jewish people, idolatry held supreme sway among the nations. Imperial Rome had reached the zenith of her military power and martial glory. In the course of eight centuries, she had grown from a little stone fort on the Palatine into a world empire. She had made herself the Mistress of the seas, the Conqueror of the world, the Eternal City. Paths led to her from all the corners of the habitable globe. Her empires stretched from the Atlantic on the west to the Euphrates on the east. From the banks of the Danube and the Rhine to the Cataracts of the Nile, her will was the supreme law. Gaul, Spain, and Britain, as well as the vast Oriental empires of Egypt,

Assyria, and Parthia, besides a hundred minor kingdoms, fell before the irresistible might of Roman arms. The Eagles of Rome became the one symbol of universal dominion. "All the golden streams of the world's commerce flowed now to one political center, bearing Romeward with equal thoroughness all the confluents of art, literature, and luxury. The glorious dreams of Alexander the Great were translated into realities when Roman '*Conquistadori*' sat at Antioch, Alexandria, Carthage, Saragossa, Lyons, and York."² Rome had now become the greatest empire that the world had ever known.

THE AUSTERITY OF CHRISTIAN TEACHING.

But scarcely had the crash of empires falling beneath her victorious arms died away; scarcely had her task of enslaving the universal world become complete, when there is set up in her own bosom a process that begins to spell her doom. Victorious over all foes from without, the fatal chains of her enslavement are being forged at her own domestic hearth. The cancer of vice and immorality is slowly but surely gnawing into her very heart, sapping her vitality, weakening her moral fiber, and sending its noxious poisons through her whole body politic. The home, the foundation

²Thomas J. Shahan, S.T.D., *The Beginnings of Christianity*, p. 13. New York: Benziger Bros. 1903.

stone of all national greatness, had been undermined by the dread evil of divorce. The waters of the stream of social life had been corrupted at their very source by the domestic evils of abortion, infanticide, and conjugal infidelity.

Over that teeming city of three million people, vice, immorality, debauchery, licentiousness, swept like a devastating plague, leaving ruin and destruction in its wake. The most shameful Bacchanalian orgies were performed even in the name of the pagan gods. From Rome the cancer of immorality spread quickly throughout the empire. The nation, which for eight centuries had stood as impervious as a wall of adamant against the onslaughts of every foe, fell at last beneath the weight of her own corruption. For, as water can rise no higher than its source, so the power of a nation can rise no higher than its source—its national conscience or the plane of its moral life.

Into a world, then, plunged into the darkness of pagan idolatry, half-buried in the swamp of moral foulness, shameful licentiousness, and bestial immorality, the Master sends these twelve Galilean fishermen to teach a doctrine of angelic purity, virginal chastity, and self-control. For domestic infidelity and promiscuity, there is to be substituted the indissoluble bond of matrimony; for the uncurbed indulgence and license of the passions, there is to be substituted restraint and self-control. This was a flying in the very teeth

of the deep rooted raging passions of lust. Unlike Mahomet, who preached greater sensual indulgence, these Galilean fishermen preached less—demanding that the pagans give up their daring and inveterate passions. To a world steeped in the mire of gross sensuality and carnal indulgence, nothing could be stranger doctrine than this. Humanly speaking, therefore, the austerity of the teachings of the Apostles, of their demands for mortification, self-sacrifice and self-denial, reacted unfavorably against their ready acceptance by the sensual, carnal minded pagans of the Græco-Roman empire.

IDLATRY A STATE RELIGION.

On top of this stumbling block, there was the additional one, arising from the fact that the pagan worship of idols had been made the national cultus or the state religion. It had become woven into the warp and woof of Roman law. The practice of the Christian religion therefore was a civil offense. In the minds of the Romans every misfortune became attributable to the Christians. For it was their failure to propitiate the pagan gods that prompted the deities thus to show their anger. If the Tiber overflowed its banks, the cry immediately arose: "Christiani ad leones!" "The Christians to the lions!" Forthwith hundreds would be carried to the Roman amphi-

theater to become the prey of hungry lions. Almost inconceivable was the brutal torture inflicted upon the Christians. Sometimes their tongues were cut off, their eyes burnt from their faces, while many of them were coated with pitch and tar and burned alive as torches to illumine the gladiatorial contests in the Roman amphitheater. Even gentle women and little children were not exempt from such frightful tortures.

Some of you may perhaps recall the story of Agatha, a little girl of Sicily. Born of rich and noble parents, she was justly famed for her virtue and her beauty. Quintanus was governor of Sicily at the time the Roman emperor Decius launched his violent persecution against the Christians. Learning through spies and informers that Agatha was a believer in "Christ and Him Crucified," Quintanus summoned her from Palermo to Catania, where he was then sojourning. Agatha knew full well the meaning of the summons and the terrible fate which lurked beneath it, if she remained true to the religion of Christ.

Undaunted, the youthful Agatha set out on her journey, exclaiming, "Oh, Jesus Christ! All that I am is Thine; preserve me and steel me to resist the threats of this tyrant!"

When Quintanus beheld her, he was struck by her beauty and innocence. So instead of ordering her to offer incense to the idols, the lustful governor commanded her to renounce her faith in

Christ by committing a sensual immoral action. She refused, saying, "Christ is my life and my salvation." When imprisonment failed to break her will of iron, Quintanus again summoned her before him. "If thou wilt do what I command," said he, "and thus renounce this God of the Christians, I will give thee not only thy life and liberty, but everything that the heart of a little girl craves." But all to no purpose. That frail young girl, beautiful and fair as the angels that minister before the all-white throne of the Eternal King, stood before Quintanus and his court and challenged the power of mighty Rome and the allurements of pagan vice to shake her faith in the Crucified and her unflinching adherence to His laws.

At last, in a rage of passion, Quintanus ordered her breasts to be cut from her body. Finding her still unyielding, he commanded her to be rolled naked upon pointed potsherds and sharp rocks, which pierced deep into her tender flesh. As the warm life blood slowly ebbed from a hundred deep wounds in her body, crimsoning the rocky ground, this brave little Christian girl, with one last desperate effort, turned her face, still illumined by the trace of a gentle smile toward the heavens and with her arms upraised, cried out, "Jesus, now I am all Thine!" With these words upon her dying lips, her head fell back on the ground while her soul, too precious for the sordid world of pagan vice, winged its flight back into

the outstretched arms and the tender bosom of her God and Savior, Jesus Christ. With the beautiful white robe of her baptismal innocence still unsullied, she returned to her heavenly home to receive from the hands of her Master, Jesus Christ, the glorious crown of martyrdom. To this day, during volcanic eruptions of Mt. *Ætna*, the people of Catania have sought protection in the veneration of her veil.

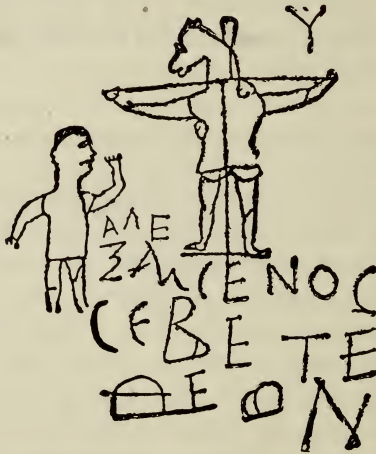
This incident of the brave little girl, whom we honor on our altars as St. Agatha, is mentioned only because it is typical of hundreds and thousands who defied the power of Mighty Rome and braved death in a hundred forms rather than give up their faith in Christ, and Him Crucified. Emperor after emperor, from the imperial throne of the mighty *Cæsars*, hurled forth their anathemas against this new religion. "It must be wiped," they declared, "from the very face of the earth." All the tortures which the marvelous ingenuity of imperial Rome could devise, all the tortures which pagan cruelty and barbarian brutality could prompt were marshalled against the Christians. They were seized in their homes at night, and during the day time while they were at work. Even down into the dark recesses of the catacombs, under the hills of the Eternal City, the powerful hand of the persecutor reached, to bring them from the celebration of the Holy Mysteries, to be torn apart by wild beasts in

the Roman amphitheater or to be burned alive before jeering, howling mobs. In the frantic effort of the pagan emperors to stamp out this religion, so many hundreds and thousands of Christians were sacrificed, that it is said that the streets of Rome ran with blood, and the waters of the Tiber along the shores of the city were dyed a crimson hue. Ten separate persecutions exhausted their force and sayage brutality, in the desperate effort to destroy forever the menace of the Christian Faith.

CALUMNIES AGAINST THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

Not only did imperial Rome use the grosser weapons of brute force and savage violence, but with her characteristic cunning, she employed the more subtle weapons of slander and calumny. The most absurd reports were circulated broadcast against the Christians. They were charged with coming together at secret places in the night, and butchering an infant and then eating its bloody members. This was the manner in which the pagans perverted the Christian doctrine of Holy Communion. The Christians were represented as stupid, credulous fanatics, whose chief object of worship was an ass's head nailed to a cross. Archæologists exploring among the ruins of ancient Rome discovered a graffito or scratching upon the walls of the Palatine Hill which re-

veals in a vivid and graphic manner, the ridicule and calumny heaped upon the Christians. The cartoon, which is now in the Kircher Museum in Germany, depicts a man with the head of an ass fastened to a cross, while nearby stands a Christian in prayer. Down below the drawing are inscribed the words: "Alexamenos cebete Theon." "Alexamenos worships his God."



GRAFFITO OF THE CRUCIFIXION.

(From Marucchi's *Elements d'Archéologie*, Desclée De Brouwer et Cie.)

We are surprised when, during those waves of religious bigotry which periodically sweep over this country especially at election times, we find the sacred and beautiful doctrines of our Church violently distorted and perverted. Our schools, convents, hospitals, homes of the friendless, and

houses of the Good Shepherd for the care and regeneration of the unfortunate ones in human society—even these beneficent institutions, with which the Church has blessed society and furthered the cause of civilization, are attacked and misrepresented as houses of corruption and dens of iniquity. Even the gentle Sisters, ministering angels to suffering humanity, are not spared from the vile, black hand of the defamer.

But it is nothing new. Back in the fourth century we find the pagan emperor, Maximinus Daza, in his attempt to discredit the new religion in the eyes of the Roman Empire, placarding the walls and buildings of Rome with vicious cartoons and calumnies, and having these libels circulated throughout the masses and taught to the children in the schools. They had their Maximinus Daza in the fourth century as we had our notorious and unspeakably vile *Menace* in the twentieth.

THE ONSLAUGHTS OF PAGAN PHILOSOPHY.

Combined with attacks of calumny and libel were the onslaughts of pagan philosophers. The attempt was made to undermine the foundation of the Christian Faith by showing that the belief in the Resurrection rested upon the hallucination of Magdalene. The Apostles were represented as ignorant fishermen, victims of a great deception. Celsus, who has been aptly styled “the Ingersoll

of the second century," attempted to explain away the miracles as the result of magic. But that which has been termed "the most ample and thoroughgoing treatise which has ever been written against Christianity" came from the pen of the pagan philosopher Porphyry. His attempt to overthrow Christianity by showing the mystical character of its doctrines, fills fifteen large volumes. St. Paul especially is attacked as an unstable, rude, insincere rhetorician. In short, all the dialectical acumen and force of pagan philosophy, were leveled at the rational bases of the Christian faith in a last desperate effort to undermine it.

INSUFFICIENCY OF THE MEANS USED TO SPREAD CHRISTIANITY.

When to these gigantic and apparently insurmountable obstacles from without is added the appalling weakness of the very agency chosen to overcome them, our wonder that the Christian ever survived at all becomes unbounded. What were the means used to overcome the gross sensuality and licentious profligacy in which the whole of the pagan world was steeped? What was the wisdom selected to vanquish the proud philosophy of haughty Greece and Rome? What was the power chosen to lower at last the standard of the Eagles which betokened the universal sway of the Imperial City—the power that was to

conquer her who had conquered the world and won for her the proud title of "the Eternal City, the Mistress of the world?" Was it a group of great scholars whose learning would cause all to bow their minds in ready acceptance of their teachings? Was it a band of brilliant, silver-tongued orators whose persuasive eloquence would move and sway and thrill the minds and hearts of men as so much plastic putty in the potter's hand? Was it a great and mighty host of warriors who were to compel for the first time the hitherto invincible legions of warlike Rome to bow their proud heads in the bitterness of defeat?

No! It is a band of ignorant illiterate Jewish fishermen, without learning, without human eloquence, without a single soldier, without human power—they are sent out to conquer the world! Could anything appear more impossible, more ridiculous, more bordering on insanity? With the prestige of human learning and the moving force of impassioned eloquence, and the might of great battalions of soldiery, the task would still have been a gigantic one. But with none of these, who, humanly speaking, would not say that it was hopelessly foredoomed to inevitable failure?

This conviction is further deepened when we realize that the Apostles and Disciples were not only ignorant, untutored fishermen, but were drawn from the Jewish race—the most despised race on the face of the earth. To the proud Roman

and the cultured Greek, the Jew was an object of obloquy and loathing. Everywhere he was reviled. Then, as now, he was the social outcast, the pariah among the nations of the earth.

Among the Jews there was one section that was looked down upon with particular contempt, even by the Jews themselves. This was the tribe of people living in Galilee, the rudest part. Yet, strange as it may appear to human eyes, Christ chose His Apostles and Disciples not only from the most despised race, but from the most despised section of this despised race—the scorned Galileans, a mock and a jibe even among the Jews and far worse among the other nations of the earth. Could any choice appear blinder, more out of sorts with every instinct of human expediency? Could Christ have chosen, if He had tried, any agency that could have been weaker, feebler, or more conspicuously unsuited according to every standard of human calculation, to accomplish the most difficult of all undertakings ever committed to mortal hands? Judged by every earthly standard, it would seem as if he could not. Measured by every worldly criterion, Christ seemed to have exhausted every possibility of choosing the weakest, the most ineffective, the most appallingly feeble instrument to encompass that achievement which provokes to this day the ceaseless wonder and the undying admiration of the world.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE APOSTLES.

Yet when the Pentecostal fire had descended upon them, this band of ignorant, illiterate Jewish fishermen went out into the dark night of heathen idolatry and the maelstrom of pagan debauchery and literally changed the face of the earth. The mighty empire of the Romans is parceled out among them for their conquests. Beginning at the very heart of the Jewish world, the Prince of the Apostles, preaches in Jerusalem and by his first sermon converts three thousand souls, some of whom had doubtless but a short time ago assisted in the crucifixion of Christ. Then St. Peter journeys to Antioch and finally to Rome, where he establishes his see and gains the glorious crown of martyrdom.

Through Europe into Asia penetrates the great Apostle of the Gentiles, burning with zeal for souls. Into Syria and Greece goes Andrew; into Ephesus and Asia Minor goes John; even to the far away Indies, according to tradition, journeys Thomas, planting the mustard seed of the Kingdom and holding aloft the glowing torch of the Gospel of Christ that was destined to burn forever. The voice of these Apostolic fishermen was heard on the plains of Arabia and in Scythia, reaching to the Indus, the Ganges, and into Spain, penetrating to the very pillars of Hercules. Everywhere was heard the preaching of Christ and Him

Crucified. Well indeed was St. Paul able to explain in the words of the Prophet, "their sound hath gone forth to all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the whole world" (Rom. x. 18).

They went forth on their mission speaking in foreign tongues and in accents strangely new. Without flinching they met the crafty fanaticism of the reactionary Rabbi, the polish and subtlety of the cultured Greek philosopher, the blind fury and cruel persecutions of imperial Rome, and they overcame them all. For the words of their Master were still ringing in their ears: "If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John xv. 20). "But have confidence, I have overcome the world" (John xvi. 33).

THE TRIUMPH.

The success which attended the labors of the Apostles is the most phenomenal in all history. During their own lifetime they witnessed the birth of the Christian Church in practically every land in the civilized world. Despite the furious storms of persecution seeking to extinguish it, the Gospel of Christ spread like wild fire among the nations, until it became a great glowing flame in the heavens, banishing the darkness of pagan night and ushering in the dawn of a new day. There in the heavens it shone as a mighty beacon light to guide the tottering footsteps of a redeemed hu-

manity in the new and enlarged horizon of human life. With such striking kaleidoscopic rapidity was the evangelization of the pagan world effected, that Tertullian, a convert to the new religion, living in the second century, was able to address these words to the Roman emperor: "We are but of yesterday, and we fill all that is yours; your cities, your islands, your military posts; your boroughs, your council chambers and your camps; the palace, the senate, the forum; your temples alone we leave you."³

The story of the conquest of the pagan world by a band of illiterate Galilean fishermen reads like a page from a mighty drama. "First, the Jewish synagogue," says Otten, "still stained with the blood of the God-man, measured its strength with the weakness of the Galilean fishermen, but succumbed in the conflict. Then the world-embracing power of Rome threw down the gauntlet, wholly determined to crush the infant Church. Three hundred years that contest lasted; many thousands of followers of the Crucified Nazarene sealed their Faith with a martyr's death. But when the one-sided conflict ceased, the blood-stained sword had fallen from the mailed hand of pagan Rome and the successor of St. Peter sat upon the throne of the Cæsars. The sign of the redemption once raised upon Calvary's heights, rose

³Tertullian, quoted by B. J. Otten, S.J., in *The Reason Why*, ¶ 189. St. Louis: B. Herder. 1912.

over the seven hills of Rome, proclaiming to the world that an empire had been founded which would proclaim its sway over all nations, not by the power of the sword, but by the omnipotence of God's own word. The temples of idols yielded their place to the One True God. The gospel of peace brought sunshine into the lives of men that had but known the darkness of death; churches and schools and charitable institutions arose everywhere as so many manifestations of the spirit of God, which had gone forth to renew the face of the earth."⁴ "The purest among the strong, and the strongest among the pure," says Richter, "Christ lifted with His wounded hands, empires from their hinges and changed the stream of ages."⁵

THE IMPRINT OF THE DIVINE.

This changing of the stream of ages, this subjugation of the pagan world, this conquest of the unconquerable Rome stands out as the mightiest moral and social revolution which the world has ever known. But every effect demands an adequate cause. To say that such a stupendous achievement could have been accomplished through the unaided efforts of a band of Galilean fishermen is to deny the evidence offered by all

⁴B. J. Otten, S.J., *The Reason Why*, pp. 190, 191.

⁵Richter, quoted by B. J. Otten, S.J., in *The Reason Why*, p. 190.

the laws of history and human experience. As we have already seen, the human agency chosen was the weakest and the most unsuited that could possibly have been selected. Illiterate fishermen of the most despised strata of the universally despised Jewish race, without learning, without eloquence, without military power, overcoming the proud philosophers of Greece, victorious over the might of Roman arms! Christ chose these men because of their very lack of all the human capacities necessary to gain the victory. For if Christ had chosen profound philosophers or silver-tongued orators of moving eloquence, or mighty generals with innumerable soldiers to propagate His religion, men would have justly exclaimed: "Lo! there is no miracle here. This religion has been spread by human power." To prevent just such a possibility, Christ chose the agency which, humanly speaking, was the most unsuited that men would be compelled to exclaim: "Lo! this is not the work of men, but of God!"

In the great yawning gulf that stretches between the means used and the effect accomplished, the power of God shines forth most luminously. According to every human calculation the religion of the Crucified Christ should have gone down in the most ignominious of failures. Its conquest of the world, in spite of the lack of practically every means needed to attain that end, stamps upon its brow the unmistakable imprint of the Divine.

The same keynote is struck by St. Paul when he exclaims: "The foolish things of the world hath God chosen that He might confound the wise; and the weak things of the world hath God chosen that He might confound the strong. And the base things of the world, and the things that are contemptible, hath God chosen, and things that are not, that He might bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in His sight" (1 Cor. i. 27, 28, 29).

Alexander the Great conquered nations by wading through a sea of blood. In later times Napoleon Bonaparte changed the map of Europe at the price of the uncounted soldiery of France. But the Apostles conquered the world without taking a drop of innocent blood, but rather by the willing shedding of their own blood. It has no parallel, therefore, in all the achievements of the world. For it was a victory wrought not by human hands, but by the power of God. In many respects, the propagation of the Catholic religion, which is historical Christianity, was a miracle more marvelous and wonderful than the raising of the dead to life. For the latter affected but a single person, while the former operated in millions of souls. From whatever angle the great drama be viewed, the student of history, with an eye single to the facts and with a vision unjaundiced by prejudice, is compelled to cry out: "This religion must be born not of man, but of God. For

it has triumphed, where, according to all the laws of history, it should have failed. It bears upon its brow the indelible imprint of the Divine, and in the moving drama of its birth and propagation there is evidenced to all men, as clear as the sun in the noon-day heavens, the guiding finger of the Most High!"

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