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The Modern Indictment of Catholicism—V

Is the Church a National Asset?

By
WILLIAM I. LONERGAN, S.J.
Associate Editor, "America"

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Is the Church a National Asset?

WE of the United States are a people of slogans, catch-words and shibboleths. Of these, written broad across the story that makes the pageant of America is the word *efficiency*. Though practically the youngest of the great World Powers, our country already stands at the forefront of achievement. The rest of the nations know us as a people who, once we have conceived a purpose doggedly pursue it and strain ourselves to the utmost until we attain it. And they give us credit for accomplishing things, and for successful accomplishment.

Efficiency with us connotes success. Success is one of our popular idols. Honest effort counts for little in the public mind unless it be crowned with victory. Speed, too, is implied in our current notion of efficiency, and is another of our idols. We have small patience with anything of slow, painful, laborious growth. The goal must be attained in the shortest possible time. The transcontinental journeys that took toilsome months for our grandfathers to make, we can cover in a few days; yet we are not contented, and the younger generation is hoping for the time when air-traffic will make it a matter of mere hours. We are, moreover, of of all things, pragmatic. We want results, visible results, that the statistician can record and tabulate.

And we want them big, too. This bigness is another of our contemporary American idols. Size talks. Everything must be done on a grand scale and in a businesslike way, and to the accompaniment of plenty of noise in the marketplace and front-page publicity in the daily journals. Some call it the Babbitt way. Our bent is markedly materialistic. That explains in part why the United States ranks high in commercial and industrial pursuits, and in the field of useful arts. We are not unappreciative of the finer things of the mind, but mostly we leave their cultivation to others. They are not for us.

Unfortunately, while efficiency with all that it signifies in this country is not to be sneered at, there is a tendency among us, and very unwise it is, that would make American efficiency a universal standard whereby to gauge all men and movements. Unless overnight, so to say, they can show results palpable and big and impressive, mentally we register them failures. They are not worth while and just don't count. They have no special significance.

EFFICIENCY

Now under such a critical norm many things of merit have suffered, and seriously suffered, in the past, and are still suffering, and, not least, religion. The efficiency complex that has only one criterion for what is worth while has upset many a man's perspective. Blinded by the idea and not finding Christ's Church measuring up to their distorted notions, not a few have come to label Christianity, and especially Catholic Christianity, a colossal failure. In consequence, the question of the efficiency or inefficiency of Catholicism which used to be purely speculative has become a very practical one.

A thing is efficient when it does what it is supposed to do and as far as depends on it accomplishes its end. Success in the popular sense, speed of attainment, bigness in results, may be desirable, but they are only the frills of efficiency. One may teach very efficiently, yet the pupils may be too "dumb" to profit by the instructor's skill. A lawyer may conduct a case or defend his client very efficiently, yet a jury that has been tampered with may decide against him, and we know that sometimes happens.

One may not rightfully be charged with inefficiency simply because he never achieved what he never set out to achieve. The ball-player who merely bunts, if that is what he was sent to the plate to do, is playing his game as efficiently as his colleague who knocks out a home run. A clock is efficient when it tells time and a pen when it writes. Only a crazy man would expect either of them to serve any other purpose. A proper concept, then, of efficiency is imperative if one would test Christ's Church and get a cor-

rect answer to his query, "Is the Catholic Church efficient and worth-while? Is she a national asset?"¹

THE CHURCH TESTED

The charge of inefficiency against Catholicism, though more often it is only a hidden suspicion, assumes various aspects according to the source from which it flows. The radical Pacifist, for example, alleges that the Church is a failure because the Great War saw Christians brutally slaughtering each other. The Anarchist considers her an incubus on the world because she has not made him a law unto himself, but keeps him subjected to legitimate authority. She is branded inefficient by the Communist because she has not effected a redistribution of the earth's wealth and made a capitalist of him. The business man complains that she doesn't, to use his expression, "sell her stuff"; she has no sky-scrapers, no display, no up-to-the-minute, go-getter methods. The banker charges that, despite all the money invested in her, she continues bankrupt and the men and women in the pews never draw any dividends on their investments. The economist challenges Catholicism because we still have the poor with us, and the sociologist because there are as yet so many demands for welfare work, so much crime, so many broken homes, so much suffering and misery and wretchedness.

It is odd, but it would seem as if responsibility for all the disorders and misery of mankind were to be saddled on Christ's Church. Is there chaos in Mexico, religion has failed; is there Bolshevism in Russia, religion has failed; is there ignorance among the peasantry of Latin Europe, religion has failed; is there a famine in India or China, religion has failed; is there an industrial conflict in England or America, religion has failed; are our large cities, New York, Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco overrun with gunmen and bootleggers and grafters, religion has failed. Catholicism, it is alleged, cannot guarantee political concord and civil pros-

¹This is the fifth of a series of pamphlets by the author on the general topic, "The Modern Indictment of Catholicism." The others are: I. Is the Church Intolerant? II. Is the Church Arrogant? III. Is the Church Un-American? IV. Is the Church Officious?

perity; she cannot ward off sickness and suffering; she cannot effect a millennium: she has failed.

FALSE STANDARDS

Thus, and along similar lines, the indictment reads. To some my presentation of the charges against Catholicism may seem ridiculous and exaggerated, yet equivalently, if not explicitly, all of them and countless others have been made within the last decade against Holy Mother the Church. The fallacy in the argument of those who make them is twofold. They forget, in the first place, the real definition of efficiency and expect the Church to do what her Divine Founder never intended her to accomplish. In the second place, they deliberately close their eyes to all her glorious achievements for individuals and nations, and to what she has meant to the world for 1,900 years and still means, especially in the United States of America.

When Our Blessed Saviour organized His Church He did not start a political society, a banking house, a business firm, a welfare bureau, a chamber of commerce, an industrial plant, a social club, a fraternity, or anything of the sort. His purpose was to teach men truth, to help them to live according to that teaching, and ultimately to land them safely and securely in heaven. The aim of Christ's Church is to make men holy and happy here and hereafter. Her work is primarily spiritual and supernatural, not material. She deals directly with men's souls, not with their temporal interests, though she is not indifferent to these. Her efforts and influence center, moreover, not so much on society as a whole as on individuals, and the one medium that she employs for the accomplishment of her Divine mission is moral suasion, not physical force, though she is often slandered in this regard.

This being so, it is a fatal mistake to test the efficiency of Christ's Church by purely visible and materialistic standards. True, Our Lord Himself advises that "by their fruits you shall know them," and the good effects of His religion on mankind are bound to be externalized and far-reaching. But they cannot be adequately tabulated like deposits in a bank or profits on merchandise.

Christ died for all men. He desires all to be saved. The mission of His Church is to all. But both He and His Church are well aware that mankind's sanctification and salvation depend on the free will of those with whom they have to deal, often a wicked and perverse will, as much as on their efforts. And so Catholicism has no delusions about turning this world into a Paradise or about hoping to attract all mankind to the practice of Christian virtue. Original sin is too deeply rooted for that.

In view of these facts the one genuine test of the efficiency and worthwhileness of Catholicism is whether she saves souls. Ultimate success or failure is to be measured by that norm and only the Book of Life, which is hidden to human ken, adequately carries the story.

SPIRITUAL ACHIEVEMENT

Now, what is the Catholic Church actually doing today for souls and with souls? What, especially, is she doing in this country?

To begin with, of the total population of the world, Catholics form the largest single religious body, about 331,500,000. While the Church is ever spreading out for new conquests with her countless missionaries in every part of the pagan world, bringing others into the Fold—in China and Japan, in Madagascar and the Congo, in Ceylon and Java, in Syria and Egypt, in India and Alaska, in the barren wastes of Oceania and among the bushmen of Australia, and elsewhere—for those three hundred and thirty-one and more millions who are actually with her, she is doing all that they will enable her to do. She puts at their disposal the means of knowing the Divine truths, of worshipping God as He wants to be worshiped, and of sanctifying themselves through the life-giving graces of the holy Sacraments.

And what marvels does she not thus attain in the supernatural and spiritual order! To say nothing of her splendid achievements when she lifts the pagan savage out of his barbarism and unfolds to his vision the story of God and fills his soul with the hope of a blessed eternity,—a little

infant is brought to her with the stain of Adam's sin upon its soul and she sends it away rich with sanctifying grace, a child of God and heir of heaven. Try to appreciate the reality of that. If we had an agency in the country for making the poor materially wealthy, we would certainly think it was doing a great work. But what about making our spiritual paupers supernaturally rich? Because we do not see a change in the newly baptized babe, that does not mean that nothing has taken place. He is as truly God's heir with a right to heaven as the Prince of Wales is the heir of the King of England with a right to his father's throne and authority.

Again, the penitent prodigal comes to Mother Church for mercy and pardon and hope, and in the secrecy of the sacred tribunal of Penance his sins are washed away and a new life begins in his soul, and there is peace there, and happiness and trust. This is real efficiency. Do not say this is a mere figment of the imagination. It is a physical fact, though it takes faith to recognize it. The soul cures that go on in the Catholic confessional are immensely more significant for the world than the cancer and leper and tubercular cures that science so palpably effects and that win universal admiration.

Catholicism is working efficiently when Sunday after Sunday she crowds her churches with generous men and women who come to pay homage to their Creator; when she feeds her children at the altar rail with the Bread of Life; when her priest is at the beck and call of passing souls in their dying agony to comfort and strengthen them for the journey. Indeed, one might say that it is in this last crisis most of all that her efficiency stands out, and it makes man in that trying hour appeal to her as to his only source of consolation. This is the explanation of why so many who have lived carelessly, even criminally, turn to the Church in their last moments seeking strength and comfort and consolation.

There is a good deal of sordidness in the world, and a good deal of sin. But withal, there is also a sunny side to the picture, and paralleling the depravity everywhere prevalent is much heroic exercise of virtue. It is Christ's

teaching and the work of His Church that are largely responsible for this. Recall the men and women of your own limited acquaintance whom Catholicism is helping to live by Christian principle, and then you will have an answer to the query, "Is the Church a real asset?" You are all witnesses yourselves of just how your Faith influences your own lives and causes you to be better men. Catholicism makes no pretense of being able to change human nature and the biography of every individual is the story of the struggle of the flesh against the spirit, of the battle between good and evil, between self-love and the love of God. But though at times there may be regrettable, even disgraceful, falls and sins, Catholics are aware that whatever mastery they have over temptation is due almost entirely to the inspiration and help their Christian Faith and its teachings gives them.

CATHOLIC ORGANIZATIONS

Obviously the Church's work is chiefly with the individual and of a nature and in a field that has no material reckoning. It does not admit of qualitative or quantitative measurements. However, the salvation and sanctification of her individual members is far from limiting the scope of her achievements. Look abroad in the land today and see how groups also are welded together for nobler living because of Catholicism. How else are we to account for the thousands of men and women, our nuns and Brothers, who are banded together in the United States alone, for charitable and educational work, in our hospitals, in our schools, in our orphanages, in our asylums, sacrificing home and friends and comforts, and consecrating their time, their energies, their very lives, under the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, to the service of their fellows, of every creed and color and class? Are not the Knights of Columbus, the Holy Name groups, our various Sodality centers, our Saint Vincent de Paul councils, our Catholic Scouts, with all their activities for God and country, living witnesses of the efficient and worth-while character of the Church? From her they all get their ideals, their impetus, their stability and their effectiveness.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVILIZATION

Nor while Catholicism emphasizes her work with and for souls, individually and collectively, in the spiritual and supernatural realms, does she altogether neglect man's material well-being. Indeed the whole record of Christian civilization is a chronicle of the efficient workmanship of the Catholic religion, and of her accomplishments for men and nations in the social order. Review the past 2,000 years in its broader aspects and there you have the answer to those who question the worth-while nature of your religion and whether it is an asset to a nation.

Surely it was a splendidly efficient achievement when Catholicism triumphed over the philosophy and immorality of pagan Rome, when she tamed the barbarian world and replaced savagery with her culture, when she elevated womankind from the degradation to which antiquity subjected her, and when she alleviated the misery of suffering humanity by her stupendous charities. All Europe is dotted with the cathedrals and universities and hospitals and orphanages and asylums that she reared for the inspiration of men's souls, the enlightenment of their minds, the well-being of their bodies. Her philosophers, her artists, her scientists, her educators, her scholars, have all made their contribution to that marvelous legacy of civilization which has come down to our day.

Take from Europe, from Italy and Spain, from England and Ireland, from Germany and France, from Austria and Hungary and Poland, from Jugoslavia and Czechoslovakia and Belgium, and the rest of the States of Europe, what Catholicism has bequeathed to them and you will rob them of their best in learning, in moral ideals, in material progress. The great universities of the Continent with their famous halls of learning, Freiburg and Bologna and Padua and Paris and Salamanca and Louvain, are all her foundations. Even a cursory enumeration of Catholic men and women who have served the arts and the sciences would consume pages. She gave Dante to the world, and Michelangelo, and Raphael; she gave us Thomas Aquinas and

Charlemagne and Alfred the Great; she gave us Daniel O'Connell and Blessed Thomas More and Baron Windthorst. Volta and Galvani and Ampère and Pasteur were all her children. So too, Mercier and Marshal Foch and countless others. Take the Church's impress from modern European civilization and you would have little substantial left.

IN THE UNITED STATES

Even in our own country what a debt does not the nation owe the Catholic Church? Not to mention the fact that Catholics stand at the forefront of the navigators who discovered her, her missionaries are linked inseparably with our early history both on the eastern and the western coasts. The stories of Jogues and his companions in the Mohawk Valley, of Marquette in the Mississippi, of De Smet in the Northwest Territory, of the martyr-friars who evangelized Florida and Georgia, of Kino and Salvatierra in the Southwest, and of that heroic group of Franciscans who under the leadership of the venerable and intrepid Junipero Serra established that great chain of Catholic missions on the California coast along El Camino Real, the King's Highway, from San Diego to Sonoma, which is still the admiration of the world,—all these are too well known to need repetition here. Each was a giant's task yet each was a worth-while venture gloriously achieved. Each meant much for our country.

CATHOLIC GROWTH AND INFLUENCE

Catholics were numerically few 150 years ago in this country; their churches were scattered and insignificant; they lacked even the organization that marks the beginnings of a staple ecclesiastical foundation. Today we are grown to 20,000,000, with a Hierarchy of over 100, four of them Cardinals, and some 25,000 priests to minister to the Faithful. We have built up a school system whose 8,000 schools and colleges care for over 2,000,000 pupils, at an incalculable economic saving to the State. Our charitable institutions cover every section of the land. What is more, and we say it with the certain conviction of its truthfulness

ness though in no spirit of belittling other organizations constructively working for the welfare of the Republic, Catholicism today stands out in the United States as the single force consistently opposing the spread of a philosophy of life and a group of principles which, were they universally accepted tomorrow, would spell ruin for the nation. Apropos of this the Rev. Lloyd C. Douglas of the First Congregational Church, Akron, Ohio, wrote some years ago:

The Roman Catholic Church, has, during the last twenty-five years, rendered America a service that is utterly beyond the estimation of the ordinary citizen. The strong material influence exercised by Roman Catholicism over our unassimilable foreign population, which has been coming into this country by the millions in the last twenty years, has protected this country from the general attitude of revolt and disaffection against institutions, organization and government which is so strongly marked in a great deal of our European immigration.

One of the strongest forces at work in this country today to hold an attempted Socialism in restraint, and reduce to a minimum the sporadic efforts to encourage Bolshevism in this country has been the Roman Catholic Church; and whatever may be the difference of opinion between Catholics and Protestants in matters of doctrine, Protestantism should be unprejudiced enough to admit the high-grade service rendered to this country by Roman Catholicism in its dealings with a large class of people for whom Protestantism has no message.

We do not maintain that everything is perfect in the Catholic Church or that all Catholics are necessarily doing what they can and should for God and country. As a fact we have in the Church some who, sad to say, are positively hindering God's glory by their religious indifferentism and by their failure to live up to the ideals of conduct they profess. But what we do hold is, that in spite of the personal shortcomings of Catholics, the Church herself may not justly be branded as inefficient or Catholicism charged with not being an asset. She is a dynamic force in the world and in America that must be reckoned with. If she does not accomplish all that she aims at, if men will not hear her voice, if proud minds will not submit to her authority or the obstinate will not recognize in her Christ's handiwork, this is no reflection on her Divinity, her sanctity, her value, spiritual or material.

JUDGING THE CHURCH

People sometimes sit in judgment on the Catholic Church and ask why she doesn't do this, that, and the other thing, and they never reflect how of all institutions on earth she has the hardest struggle to perpetuate and propagate herself. There is practically no country in the world that has not at some period or other witnessed her persecuted; that has not demanded hostages of her for the right to go and civilize them and bring them the peace of Christ and the love of Christ.

Indeed her achievements throughout the ages are so much the more remarkable for the very fact that she has had to fight her way at every step against wealth and power and ignorance and brutality and positive bad will. In fact, she should long since have collapsed as the empires and the pagan religions which witnessed her birth, were she not Divinely supported. What she builds up, her enemies will attempt to drag down. They hamper her every effort. Anti-Catholicism is one of the stubborn realities of world history during the last twenty centuries. It is the one thing that always seems to unite certain types of men together, and it often makes strange bedfellows.

But in spite of persecution, in spite of the sword, in spite of the machinations of powerful enemies and of all that hostile forces have done openly or covertly to check or spoil her endeavors, she has marched down the centuries glorious and triumphant, carrying on Christ's work, and carrying it on magnificently and successfully. These things do not disturb her, for her Divine Founder warned her of their coming. The world would like to brand her a failure as it branded Him a failure, but it cannot. On Good Friday all Jerusalem mocked the dying Christ because He did not measure up to their notions of what He should have done, but His subsequent resurrection turned that apparent failure into the greatest triumph of history and made His sacred Passion the most worth-while event in all creation. So the Church continues confident that notwithstanding men expect much from her that she was never supposed to give them, and blame her when their expectations are not real-

ized, she is achieving the purpose for which she was instituted, she is sanctifying and saving souls, the while she also improves the world in which she works socially, politically, economically, educationally, industrially, scientifically, artistically and morally.

MEETING OUR ADVERSARIES

If the Anarchist has a grudge against the universe today, it is not the Church's fault. If there are economic problems and physical sufferings and social maladjustments in the world today, it is not the Church's fault. These things are because people will not listen to Christ's Church, because governments will not rule justly, because the forces of capital and labor forget Christ's golden rule, because men and women are determined to follow their vicious inclinations. And the Church cannot force the wills of men, and God will not.

It is frequently alleged that the presence amongst us of war after 2,000 years of Christian Catholicism is a proof that the Church has failed. However, extreme Pacifists to the contrary notwithstanding, as long as the world lasts there will be wars because men and governments will be swayed by passion, not by virtue. Witness Russia, Mexico and China today! But at the same time the nearer they come to regulating their policies by the principles Catholicism has enunciated about statesmanship and government and warfare, the less likelihood there will be of national or international peace being disturbed.

It is a significant thing that in the making of world peace Christ's Vicar was not asked to have any voice and yet when compacts and treaties builded on merely natural motives of humanitarianism fail Christianity will be blasphemously damned as it was during the World War because men and nations are not at one, but are slaughtering each other like dumb cattle. These judgments, however, will not affect either the Church or the worthwhileness of her mission. Empires and kingdoms and republics will fail as they have in the past; only she has the germ of immortality, for only to her was the Divine guarantee given that the gates of hell should not prevail against her.

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