

ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIESTS TODAY

- by -

L. H. LEHMANN, D.D.

(Former priest of the Catholic Church)

Author of "*The Soul of a Priest*"



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SPEC
CAPAM

The following is a personal critical analysis of the outlook of the Roman Catholic clergy of our time, four hundred years after the Lutheran Reformation.

It is written at the request of some interested clergymen of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, with a view to evaluate the prospects of a possible reform of the Roman Church in our twentieth century in line with the work of the Monk of Wittenberg.

The writer aims herein to present a dispassionate view of this great question. He leaves it to the discriminating reader to apportion the praise or blame of what is stated where it belongs. His analysis is based upon his own personal experience as a ministering priest of the Roman Catholic Church on three continents, and as the result of his studies as a graduate theologian of the Roman Church.

It is divided into two sections: one dealing with the outlook of priests still attached to the Church; the other with that of those who break away from it, and their consequent approach to, or further drift from, a truer interpretation of Christian soteriology.

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Roman Catholic Priests Today

SECTION I.

Outlook of Priests Attached to the Roman Church

There is no body of men in the world today about whom so little can intimately be known as the priests of the Roman Catholic Church. In the United States alone they number thirty thousand.

By their adherents they are lauded, unquestioningly obeyed—almost deified. By their enemies they are condemned, ridiculed—hated. As a consequence, true knowledge of their doctrinal beliefs and moral status cannot be had from either side. An air of mystery and excessive reverence, aided by the perfume of incense and flowers, cuts off a priest from intimate contact with his own congregation; hate and anger becloud the judgment of his avowed opponents in the opposite camp. His exclusive social status, forced celibate mode of living, and his disassociation from the ordinary life of other men, make it extremely difficult for even a fair-minded outsider to guess what the mind and outlook of the Roman Catholic priest really is. On the one side, there is a credulous acceptance of impossibilities, on the other, over-esti-

mated reports of flagrant deception and immorality.

What then is the true mind and religious outlook of Roman Catholic priests today? What do they really believe? How do they actually live? What is their attitude towards Protestantism? Does their attitude in all these differ in any way from that of priests in Luther's time?

BACKGROUND

Priests of the Catholic Church may be divided roughly into two classes: those educated in Catholic European countries, and those reared and trained in countries of the modern Protestant world. This difference of geographical background has an important bearing upon their religious outlook later as priests.

Generally it may be said that priests with an entirely Catholic background seldom can be induced to renounce the priesthood and the practices of their Church—even if serious doubts assail them. The fear-conditioning of their early training forces them to remain as ministers of the Roman religion even when personal faith and sanctity disappear. This is especially true of Irish priests, and those of exclusive Irish extraction.

On the other hand, those reared in a Protestant atmosphere frequently express dissatisfaction with many of the beliefs and practices of the Church, and are seldom steadfast in their obedience to all the demands of their superiors in disciplinary matters. This is so well known to Church

officials, that many bishops in Protestant countries refuse to accept boys for the priesthood who have not had a completely Catholic background, both as to country and family.

Furthermore, priests from Protestant environments, especially with a taint of Protestant blood in their families, are generally not without an inkling of desire for belief in salvation by a more personal acceptance of Christ than is offered them by the authoritarian method of the external law system of Rome. It is this class that succeeds in quietening the minds of Protestants today concerning the menace of Romanism in the modern world. They even go a long way when making apology for their Church in agreeing with Protestant critics—will even admit that salvation in the long run depends, not upon the legalistic stipulations of the Pope, but upon individual acceptance of salvation from God. These priests are responsible for the present apparent desire for understanding between Catholics and Protestants. Officially, however, they are bound to uphold the exclusive claim of Rome to monopoly of salvation—a fact which all their handshaking and specious good fellowship cannot hide.

Among the preponderant Irish and German priests in the United States, however, there is no trace of this apparent conciliatory attitude towards Protestantism. They insist with their congregations upon the exclusive Roman teaching that salvation and damnation depend directly upon strict obedience to the laws and regulations laid down by the Church in Rome.

BELIEF

Few priests take interest in the Bible as something of personal, spiritual value. The few texts, in defense of the Church's organic structure, which they learned in seminary, suffice to bolster up their defense of the Church in their Sunday sermons. Irish priests, in particular, invariably retain their distaste for the Book which is connected with their childhood aversion to everything Protestant. While such priests remain in office, therefore, there is little hope that they would be induced to accept and proclaim the Gospel teaching of salvation as Protestants understand it.

During the years of their seminary training they are not urged to take an interest in the Scriptures for their intrinsic, personal worth. All that is taught them is the required sections dealing with the defense of the Church's historical and doctrinal development. A course in Exegesis is added in defense of Papal doctrine against the attacks of the Modernists concerning the historicity of the Bible and its incompleteness for present-day needs. In their own personal difficulties, no priest of my acquaintance ever took refuge in the guidance and admonitions of the Bible. And in my own case, I must confess that it never occurred to me to search the Scriptures to solve my doubts about the claims of the Catholic Church until the last moment, and then only because I discovered that others had done so before me, and consequently I sought only the passages they made mention of.

Summing up, therefore, my estimate of the beliefs of my former brother-priests

with whom I have worked on three continents, I can safely say that fully fifty percent of them are either unbelievers in the Gospel teaching of salvation as understood by Protestants, or are ignorant of it. Of the other fifty percent, many do not bother themselves in the least about a better way of salvation. About twenty-five percent accept the regulations of the Church wholeheartedly and blindly and, as a consequence, find a peace that comes of a perplexed resignation. These are the good, conscientious and well-meaning priests generally met with. A few attempt to adjust their acquiescence in Rome's legalistic doctrine of salvation to a private interpretation of the Gospels. On the other hand, many priests who are most energetic and successful in the outward work and administration of church matters are godless in their private lives.

Most priests I have known and worked with, however, would consider a reform in their Church at large, especially in the matter of clerical celibacy, were it not for the almost insurmountable difficulties, economic and sentimental, that stand in the way. There are some who have confessed this to me even after I resigned from the priesthood and had gone out from amongst them.

DISCIPLINE

A matter of prime importance to nearly all priests is the difficulty of finding escape from the stringent regulations imposed upon their own consciences and mode of life. I would say that the majority of those who take the matter under advisement do not consider strict adherence to these legal

regulations as essential for their personal salvation hereafter. To satisfy their consciences, they sharply distinguish between laws which are purely ecclesiastical, and those imposed by their Church as the custodian of the eternal, divine laws of God. Since the latter are included in the simple ten Commandments, priests are ready to acknowledge their obligation to adhere to them. In some instances, however, they excuse themselves even in breaches of the Decalogue by indulgent interpretations which practical considerations of Church policy seem to make necessary. For example, in the case of adultery in their own lives, they will attempt to extenuate their sin by appealing to the harsh law of the Church which forbids them legal marriage. Likewise, any seeming injustice in the handling of money can always be thrown back upon the Church as responsible. This is evident in the matter of accepting money for the saying of masses, donations, and also bequests given them by dying persons either through fear or by inducement of priests themselves. Again, the overlooking of public injustice, graft and corruption in government officials and friendly business men, can also be debited to the necessity of the Church. For they say it needs the influence of powerful men in public life to favor and safeguard its interests in a hostile modern state.

CELIBACY

In the matter of celibacy, Roman priests today differ in no wise from those of Martin Luther's time. This needs no personal testimony, since the sex urge in humans is

no less aggravating now as then. What slight difference there may be is one merely of a manner of acting. There is less sex collusion between priests and nuns today in modern Protestant countries. This is due to stricter regulations, and less secrecy, in the conduct of convent life. On the other hand, advantage is taken of the greater freedom available to priests in their contacts with women and girls of the world, which is helped by their almost civilian mode of dress¹, automobiles, and greater freedom in going from place to place. The advanced age of high ranking officials in the Church renders sex scandals in high places less likely in our day; though of late the trend seems to be again towards selection of bishops from men in their early thirties. Most Cardinals and all Popes, on the other hand, are now advanced at an age that usually precludes sexual potency. This fact has helped to clear the Catholic Church in modern times of the historic accusation of sex corruption among its hierarchy.

THE PRIEST'S BREVIARY

The obligation of the daily recitation of the Breviary book is another source of annoyance and sin to priests. Each day of their lives the threat of mortal sin and consequent damnation hangs over their heads should they omit to mouth the prayers therein commanded to be pronounced with their lips. They style this obligation

¹ Official Rome regards the dress of priests in modern countries as laical and due to Protestant influence. Their ideal is to have all priests wear the soutane and tonsure even on the streets as they do in Latin countries.

"The Pope's Debt", and its daily burden is bitterly resented by even the best of them. They ridicule its crude Latinity and the doubtful veracity of its contents. Its virtue lies in the actual repetition of the words with the lips; any understanding of their meaning or spiritual significance being unnecessary.

A great many priests, especially of the younger generation in America, soon relegate its four volumes to the dusty shelves of their libraries. They swallow the sin of it as but one of many others, imposed upon them by their state of life, which, under the circumstances, can scarcely be avoided.

FUTURE HOPES

The breaking up of Protestantism into a multiplicity of warring sects is put forward by many priests of the Church of Rome as excuse for their continued hostility to everything Protestant. They regard continued support of the Papacy as the lesser of two evils in the conduct of Christianity when faced with a choice between the Church of Rome and any of those brought into existence after Luther's Reformation.

Some look upon Protestantism as a well-intentioned effort that has failed as predicted. And the idea is being accepted by outstanding priests in America that the present trend to Communism is a revenge of history for the repudiation of centralized Papal power in the sixteenth century. It is further taken by them as proof of the total repudiation of Protestantism with its doctrine of individualism in theology, which has led to the evils of rugged in-

dividualism in civics and economics. In the main, Roman Catholic priests dismiss Protestantism with a shrug of contempt, and unworthy of serious consideration as a force for the solution of the ills of our century. They regard it as a rootless system, doomed to pending extinction.

SECTION II

Outlook of Priests Who Forsake the Church of Rome

WHY THEY LEAVE

No better indication can be had of the general outlook of the clergy of the Roman Church than that evinced by those who leave its ranks. Contrary to the unfair opinion forced upon Catholics since Luther's time, few Roman Catholic priests forsake their ministry for base reasons. A safer cloak for irregularities can be had by remaining within the fold than by deliberately leaving and getting married. The chief reason for defections is the sincere conviction that the individual, and the race at large, cannot be aided to a more progressive way of life by the application of Papal dogmas and practices. There are many who remain in the priesthood who also hold such convictions, but by no means all of them consider it obligatory to do anything about it. The dire consequences that follow the renunciation of their only means of subsistence deter many who

would otherwise act up sincerely to their convictions. Again, there is the specious excuse that the responsibility rests entirely with the Church—that impersonal creature of ecclesiastical law which can easily be made the scapegoat for all the shameful things that Rome has perpetrated throughout the centuries under the banner of Jesus Christ.

LOST SHEPHERDS

No more suitable name can be coined for ex-priests of the Church of Rome than this—for those who were once shepherds of souls, and now themselves utterly lost and at sea as regards any religious belief or policy of guidance for themselves. Seldom can any of them arrive by their own accord at any haven of spiritual peace through evangelical enlightenment. For they carry with them out of the Roman Church their distaste for the religion of the Reformation. Unaccustomed to seek solace from Bible teaching, they are without personal incentive to inquire for help from the Protestant Churches.

Of the one hundred-odd former Roman priests whom I have known, either directly or indirectly, scarcely a dozen accepted permanently the tenets of Protestant belief and policy. Of the remainder, some became utterly indifferent to all religious notions, others avowed atheists.

The outstanding effort to reclaim the wrecked spiritual lives of former Roman priests of our generation was the work of Father James O'Connor, himself an ex-priest of the Roman Church, and founder of Christ's Mission in New York City. He

was instrumental in rehabilitating close to 150 of his former brethren as they left the priesthood. Some of these have since served as pastors of Protestant churches; others he succeeded in placing in business positions. This Mission still survives under the same name in New York City, but has lost its primary object in being of practical help to men who once served the altars of Rome.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

It may be said that an institution like the Roman Church, so deep-rooted in history, so iron bound and regimented in externals, and so lacking in true Christian spirit internally, may be completely uprooted but never again reformed — that when attacked, its great shell will crack and crumble to dust. Mexico, Spain and Russia might be quoted as examples of what will happen to the Church at large.

But if use be looked for from priests who forsake the altars of Rome, a sympathetic and understanding approach must be made to the problem both of their spiritual rehabilitation and their economic needs. Through them much could be done to awaken the laity of the Catholic Church to a truer interpretation of Christian teaching. From within the ranks of the priesthood it can hardly be accomplished. Economic security and a center of operations would have to be offered in order to induce those within the priesthood to come forth to proclaim the Christ of the Gospels, and those who have already broken with it to devote themselves to the completion of the work in our time of the great Monk of Wittenberg.

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