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Meet the Catholic Church !

By REV. MICHAEL X. FRASSRAND, C.S.P.

TO the above title you may respond that it was your pleasure to meet the Catholic Church long ago and you were not impressed by the introduction. In answer to this hearty response I would like to say that in all probability you did not see enough of the Church to do it justice, or perhaps you did not see the real Catholic Church at all.

At any rate you may find another meeting such as we propose worth while and profitable. It shall be no more than an introduction, however, but if it provokes some interest or curiosity we will investigate whenever you are at leisure.

A LARGE CHURCH

As the Catholic Church comes into view you will notice its expansive proportions—that it is something of enormous size. It towers high above all competitive institutions around it. The effect is soul-stirring if you get a glimpse of the whole. Like the Grand Canyon of the Colorado it is overpowering and majestic. The whole displays color, atmosphere and strength that an individual part may not reveal. A Catholic man, since he may be good, bad, or indifferent, may present nothing peculiarly Catholic; a particular parish may reveal nothing striking or outstanding in its pursuits; a single activity may show nothing especially interesting. But a view of the whole Church with its variety of persons, its thousands of parishes, and its diversified activities overawe the adventurous onlooker who approaches close enough to see.

In certain quarters the importance of the Catholic Church in our social structure and as a religion is scarcely known. Some have the mistaken impression that this is a very poor, scattered and miserable sect comprising an insignificant portion of mankind. This error is found even among Catholics in out of the way places where they are few and their Church poorly represented. Timidity and a certain shame indicate they are unaware of the greatness of that religious society of which they are a part. The truth is that the size of the Church alone gives it a significance which must be reckoned with in any accounting of human affairs.

MEMBERSHIP

We will see something of this importance if we first glance at the membership which of itself compels attention. Looking at our own country we see more than eighteen thousand Catholic churches, attended by nearly thirty thousand priests, with membership somewhat above twenty millions. The approximate national population is one hundred and twenty millions. This means that at least one person out of six is a Catholic. No other church or organization of any sort can produce so many members. It is true that the distribution is very unequal, with high percentages in some places and extremely low ones in others. Yet, in thirty-five States and in the twenty-five largest cities, with the exception of New York City, where the Jews have numerical command, Catholic membership leads that of all other religions.

If time permitted us to visit the various countries of the world our survey would find the Church constantly growing larger and larger. It would not take first place in every nation, but it would resume the lead in the count of Chris-

tians on every continent. I purposely say in the count of Christians because in the eastern countries where western influence has penetrated slowly both Catholics and other Christians are much in the minority. In their respective places Mohammedanism, Confucianism, Buddhism remain supreme.

Just now let us be satisfied with the approximate membership of the whole Church. A conservative figure would be around three hundred and fifty millions. Some estimates run as high as a hundred millions more than this, but whatever the precise total may be it is clear that here is an organization of tremendous proportions existing within our modern society and obviously coloring it in some way.

This feature of the Church may strike us more convincingly when we discover the relative smallness of other Christian bodies, the largest of which has a membership under seventy-five millions. Actually some of the more prominent sects of our country number no more than ten to fifteen millions of members in the whole world.

Now do not consider that I hold size to be a proof of truth, that it proves the Catholic people to be the chosen people, that their religion is the best religion. No, Catholic beliefs and Catholic practices must be judged upon their own merits and should be examined accordingly. But the size of the Church does prove that it is entitled to the attention of every person who is interested in religion or even in human society generally. Here is something that in our day of devastating liberalism does persuade men to go along with it.

BECOMING LARGER

Lest you should feel that the Church has reached its full stature I should like to remind you that its growth has by no means ended. It continues to grow year by year, slowly in one place and rapidly in some other. New houses of worship are going up, priests and leaders are being multiplied to meet the needs of an increasing membership. We may investigate this and as surely as we find a fairly tolerant government there we will find progress and expansion. We cannot expect growth where churches are confiscated, priests hounded, and activity forbidden as though it were treason.

In our own country the Catholic Church is the one religious organization that more than holds its own. Considering members only, official figures published yearly show an annual increase of fifty to sixty thousands. These figures, although generally admitted to be so low as to make them unreliable, represent real growth, especially since rigid enforcement of immigration laws has effected many Catholic countries and thus prevents increase from other sources.

You may see continued development more clearly if you look to some other part of the world. Let us take Protestant Germany. Four hundred years ago some German States broke away from Catholicism. For three hundred years following that breach the Church in Germany was in ruin. So thorough were the devastating powers of the Reformation that one hundred years ago the Church could boast of only one parish in the great city of Berlin. During these last hundred years while Germany was fashioning itself into one of the foremost nations of the world, and where sprang up also a flock of philosophers and leaders of thought whose deadly

pens struck at all religion, the Church found new life and growth. Twenty new parishes were added in Berlin, and a Bishop's See has been established there.

Quite regularly we receive reports of new developments and conversions among the heathen and along the outposts of civilization. That Apostolic spirit which started the Church on its long march to all nations perseveres.

ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE

Let me now bring to your attention the almost endless variety of individuals and groups which make up this vast army of believers. Careful observation will reveal types from the highest to the lowest points of culture; from the genius to the primitive; from the saint to the sinner. How all these can mingle within the same house is a mystery baffling to the outsider but rather clear to those who know the secret of Christian unity.

You see here a poor laborer who knows how to work only with his hands; some environment has robbed him of the opportunity to acquire learning and its products. But even though his circle is limited he gets a great satisfaction out of living. There you see one who with greater opportunities has reached the highest place that learning can afford. But with all his attainments he is not too proud to kneel at his bedside to pray nor to mix with the general congregation at church on Sundays. In the distance you see a group of men, women and children who seem to be newcomers in this house of harmony with the rest of the household. The Church is heathen land; their queer customs seem to throw them out of the nations: they are primitives just reclaimed in some tolerant toward them realizing that culture and pure Chris-

tianity cannot be reached overnight. Directing your attention again we see groups dominating some of the highest places in our modern world: in economics, literature, government. You may observe in these an apparent satisfaction at being where they are. Surely they do not remain here through compulsion; and moreover, their very presence within the Church indicates that citizenship here has its rewards.

No line drawn between races, colors or cultures can meet with approval. Even though certain social and racial prejudices, contrary to both the letter and the spirit of the organization, creep in, the intermingling is quite general. Having the necessary qualifications, no one is barred from the high places of leadership. Even this brief inspection will reveal men of all races and from all points along the social scale standing at the altar as priests where they participate in the sublimest functions of religion.

THE SECRET OF SOCIAL STRENGTH

Some say that within this veritable house of the nations may be found the one and only remedy for the evils of modern society, the one and only formula for race harmony and international peace. This does not mean that Catholic society is perfect. Catholics are human and often among them the worst in man arises to assert itself. But the Church is forever on the alert to suppress evil tendencies arising from within and dangerous influences coming from without. However, I might say that Catholics challenge anyone to find imperfection in their constitution. The perfect constitution with an everlasting insistence upon each and all of its articles has saved Catholic society from that disaster which has come upon so many other institutions.

Were we to forget momentarily its main purpose among men—the saving of souls—we would find the Church a giant social thing defying and resisting fairly successfully all encroaching evils. It should be a fascinating study to acquaint yourself with this phase of history; here is a drama of human nature versus the Church; the one struggling for the ascendancy which must end in total collapse, the other recognizing the natural powers of man striving to direct rather than to break them.

AN OLD CHURCH

Many persons feel that to be modern they must despise things that are old. They can look upon a medieval castle crowning a high river cliff and only wonder how people could live there without conveniences of automobile or street car. These waste their time in the presence of the reminders of the past. But people who have that keen appreciation which comes from a knowledge of the circumstances under which old things were produced—the labor, the sweat, the tears—look respectfully upon the things that have survived.

Now you are looking upon an old Church. You may not suspect its age since so much of it seems to be new. It is new enough for all its conveniences are modern but actually there is a long past and much history behind it. It stands like Gibraltar because it was well built. Fourteen hundred years before America was discovered it had its beginning in Alexandria, in Ephesus, and in Rome. The challenge to paganism had gone forth. The great house of the nations was under way. The Church was started in Palestine nineteen hundred years ago by Jesus Christ, Whose vision embraced the whole world and all mankind. In comparison to

this remarkable age most governments and religious and social institutions around us are still in their infancy.

These long years and centuries are filled with interesting history; there are records of phenomenal successes and what appeared at the time to be tragic failures; of the glories of peace time and of the horrors of war; of saintliness that reached up to heaven, and of sin that pounded at the door of the Church with the fury of hell.

During this long life the Church has made no concessions to its adversaries; it has tolerated no tampering with its sacred treasures; in some way it has kept itself unsoiled and intact. Of course, we believe that the secret of this long and constructive existence is to be found in its teaching program, which like the multiplication table, never lies to man. That the Church has a right to function among men is proven from the records; from long records that tell the story of small beginnings, of struggle for life and growth in the midst of countless obstacles.

For these nineteen hundred years it has shared the hardships of the people and won its place not by royal edict, as so many other institutions have, but by the force of its own persevering will to succeed. Its power has been from within like that of the oak that is not placed upon the earth full-grown and mighty, but which has to win its place in the forest by its own power.

This may help explain why the Church, even though old in years, is by no means in its declining age, and why it is not just a big thing in our society but a living and persuasive thing that manages to succeed.

THE INTERIOR

So far your view of the Church has been from without. You have seen its massive towers arising in all parts of the world, you have examined briefly the structure with its challenge to the wear and tear of time; you have had a glimpse of the races of people with their diversity of color and tongue and culture who dwell within. Now, you must enter and see what is going on there. I cannot promise you a very complete inspection for this would require a lifetime. At least we can look and listen.

Everyone seems to be busy at something; the place is alive with activity, so much of which may be meaningless to a stranger that I must explain as we move along.

Worship

In spite of all that has been said to the contrary Catholic people are desperately sincere; their religion is devoid of hypocrisy. Believing in God, they are crowding into thousands of churches to worship Him. We cannot escape the fact that here is one place where the Lord's day has a meaning and where it is kept. In this great throng of Sunday worshipers we find the men, both young and old, taking their part, a spectacle that stands out in our age when so many consider religion to be a thing for only women and children.

These vast congregations are adoring before the Altar where a religious service known as the Mass is in progress. Faith has not perished. They believe that Jesus Christ is being offered up to His eternal Father on their behalf. This is their mystical Calvary; the crucifixion and all it meant to a sinful race goes on. Hence the posture of respectful worship; they kneel as this drama of salvation passes before

them. The one thing you carry away is that these people have faith and their Sunday proves it.

Other Practices

We find some engaged in marvelous acts of self-abasement which preclude the presence of hypocrisy or make-believe. They are confessing their sins to their priests, thoroughly satisfied that they are receiving God's forgiveness. Surely, the virtue of humility is found here, even though man of our day is quite proud and boastful of his achievements. If we must pass over the many reasons for this unique practice I may at least direct your attention to the assurance and composure of spirit so clearly manifested in those who have confessed.

We observe the fulfillment of so many of Christ's commands. Here infants and newly-received converts are being baptized with water and the Holy Spirit to meet the conditions laid down by Jesus Christ for eternal life. "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God" (John iii. 5).

Matrimony, we discover, receives much attention in the Catholic struggle for a healthy society. Their marriages are celebrated before the high altar with all the solemnity of a religious rite. Believing in the sacredness and indissolubility of marriage according to the teachings of Christ everything possible is done to surround this sacrament with the protection a thing so binding and so far-reaching deserves.

You may observe now how priests of the Church hasten to the homes of the sick and the dying. There is a command in the Scriptures that the comforts of religion be brought to the sick bed. St. James tells us of it: "Is any man sick among

you? Let him bring in the priests of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick man: and the Lord shall raise him up: and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him" (James v. 14, 15).

Not Mere Outward Ceremony

Just how these ceremonies and religious services fit into the divine plan of salvation may not be clear to you. To the casual observer much of what he sees may appear to be empty form, and lest you go away believing that these Catholic people adhere to faith only outwardly, taking part in mystic ceremonies and rites about which they know nothing, I must remind you again that here is desperate sincerity. Let someone in authority, without sufficient cause, refuse to baptize one of their children, deny one of them the absolution of his sins; dismiss one of them from the Sacrifice of the Mass or from the altar rail where Communion is distributed if you would test that sincerity! The protest would be loud and long.

Catholics believe that the grace of God flows through these external signs just as the living Christ dwells in the external church. These ceremonies and signs are the outward expressions of a faith that lies in the deepest recesses of the heart. I believe you will be impressed by the honesty with which these people render their worship to God. They take their religion seriously even though they are generally light-hearted and probably the jolliest of people.

Missionary Zeal

The Catholic Church far from refusing the comforts of its home to the spiritual wayfarers of this earth invites them

in. This invitation goes forth in the apostolic fashion. The missionary journeys of St. Paul would be no strange undertaking today; journeying and catechizing, preaching and exhorting among both the civilized and the uncivilized are still the useful instruments of this broad invitation. The oral mission is augmented by an apologetic literature destined to answer all questions arising on matters of belief and practice. This missionary zeal is not confined to non-Catholics and unbelievers but reaches the Catholic to bolster up his faith and save him from moral chaos or outright apostasy. Lukewarm Catholics are urged to return to their original fervor, while all others are invited to examine the merits claimed for this house of temporal and eternal peace.

I trust that you will notice a lack of compulsion or other unethical persuasion. In spite of a feverish missionary spirit that dishonest proselytizing sometimes indulged in by the sects, has no parallel here. The Church teaches; it opens its doors but offers no bribes. The only inducements are those rewards which spring from its religious and social philosophy.

TEMPORAL CONCERNS

The salvation of souls is the first concern of the Church since it is pledged to carry on the saving works of Christ. But like Christ it realizes that man is entitled to the ordinary comforts of life. True to this conviction the Church assumes a certain leadership in social affairs. Wherever there is human misery there you find the Church not as a mere sympathetic onlooker but using whatever means it has at its command to stop the suffering. Wherever the race can be improved you find the Church eager to aid and encourage.

In carrying out its social programs the Church is told to mind its own business, to preach the Gospel and let temporal

things alone. We cannot argue now over that short-sighted view of religion but I will simply remark that the Church looks upon the whole man as its sphere, his concerns as its concerns, and interests itself in both his spiritual and temporal welfare. You may notice in passing how loyal it is to this claim.

The Poor

Perhaps there is no place where this temporal interest is so evident as with the poor. Here are people whose circumstances have denied them the comforts of life; the aged poor are outcasts of society, the orphans it has never accepted. Surely both these classes owe something to the Catholic Church.

Let me point out the orphanages and the old people's homes; they stand as great memorials of love. They tell the story of charity as God would tell it, a story of heroism and sacrifice that these poorest ones might be spared some of the sorrow of their misfortune. Charity here is a sympathetic something administered with the touch, the voice, the feeling of Christ; it finds no close comparison in the State or federal institution. Our homes differ radically from the traditional poorhouses.

To understand this charity you must see the sacrifices that make it possible. Most of the burden is carried by the rank and file of people. In our day when States and cities have found it necessary to enter into the field of public welfare on a large scale Catholics carry a double portion of charity costs. They contribute generously toward the maintenance of their own programs and institutions and share equally with other citizens in carrying on public charities.

In the United States there are three hundred and thirty

Catholic orphanages and one hundred and fifty homes for the aged. This activity, however, represents only a fraction of that huge Catholic welfare program which operates wherever the Church has gone.

The Sick

Discover now the hospitals surmounted by the Cross. These are Catholic hospitals and like institutions for the poor they also tell their story of love. They represent a specific tenderness that arose with the Church's beginning; and a leadership in medicine that has scarcely been surrendered to this day.

Encouragement of the science of medicine; expansive hospital building, receiving the religious vows of young men and women desirous to nurse the sick, are all taken for granted in the Church's busy day. And to give a rough idea of the extensive work carried on for the alleviation of pain, let me remark that there are six hundred and fifty of these hospitals in the United States. Surely modern hospitalization and medicine have received much from the Catholic Church.

Education

Catholic schools have both admirers and critics among the non-Catholic public. Some are convinced that religious education is essential to a vigorous society; others contend that it is productive of the spirit of clannishness. We cannot discuss the merits of the controversy here since we are merely watching the Church pass in brief review. The fact is that schools occupy a telling place in this great institution. Wherever you find a church you usually find a school. Over these schools may be seen two banners, one raised for God and one for country.

Should you find time to visit these institutions of elementary learning you will be impressed with the high standards generally reached. Some of them may be poorly equipped in comparison with the State-supported public schools but, in spite of the handicaps arising from the terrific financial burden, they are not inferior if results count. In tests and competitions the children carry away more than average honors.

At the present time the parochial schools of the United States have an enrollment of over 2,224,000 pupils. The sacrifices entailed in this work speak eloquently of the Church's vision. Our children will one day be men and women, and that the fullness of good citizenship may be theirs no sacrifice is too heavy. We must pass over just now those great Religious Orders of women who make all this possible. Briefly here is a story of heroism the like of which can scarcely be found in the world.

The Social Question

This brief introduction will reveal something of the Church's interest in the welfare of society at large. The Social Question presents a good example. Here all society is concerned; the struggles of the poor; the greed of the rich; the rights of the working man; the dominion of big business. Practically all mankind is involved in the question. The Church has one solution: Justice; justice for all.

But Justice does not come by a mere suggestion; an open battle is waged between the great and the small, the great with their wealth, and the small with their numbers. The Church is no mere idle spectator.

Capital functioning honestly would find an ally in the

Church, but capital as it has functioned has no adversary quite so unyielding. Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical on *The Condition of Labor* sounded perhaps the first warning that big business has ever had. His words were a merciless attack on injustice in the industrial world. He proposed a remedy, but the remedy was refused. At any rate his encyclical, ignored by industrialists, remains as the workers' platform. Forty years later Pius XI, now reigning from the chair of Peter, finding that conditions were growing worse, issued that epochal document called *Reconstructing the Social Order*. It is an indictment of industrial capitalism which in its unbridled form has turned society into a slave system.

Catholic Action is pledged to help establish a better system. With the forces at hand the Church has entered the battle against injustice and the Pope, the highest leader, has taken command.

Radicals have taken up the social question presumably on behalf of the worker. They injure rather than support his cause. They have entered pledged to destroy regardless of the rights and wrongs involved; they would tear down a bad system and build up one a thousand times more inhuman. The Church would not destroy society but reconstruct it with a single instrument: Justice. Far-reaching programs in this field all seeking a reasonable distribution of this world's goods tell better than words the story of Catholic interest in the cause of the working man.

Government Attitude

This high regard for social security is reflected again in the Church's attitude toward government. As far as form goes it makes little difference what the system is. It is

with the rights of the people that the Church is concerned; when these are violated the Church is again at hand to protest.

There is no party or political organization anywhere in the world whose misdeeds are sanctioned even though the offenders may be Catholics themselves. A casual glance at the Church may not reveal its stand on that provoking subject: State and society. But there is a stand far more effective than a mere attitude. It was only recently that the present Pontiff declared that martyrdom was preferable to submission to certain State policies limiting the natural rights of a people. It was nineteenth century liberalism which exaggerated State rights and opened the door of rebellion, just as it had laid the foundations of industrial slavery. The result is revolt. Communism is the worst expression of that revolt.

What I want you to notice therefore in this hasty visit is that the Church stands in the thick of the fight between individualism and communism; between the tyranny of the one and the madness of the other. The preservation of human rights will depend upon the ability of the Church to hold its place. In this triple struggle it is evident that the Church is on the side of the defenseless man. Communism, taking advantage of an outraged people, is sworn to destroy governments; the Catholic Church is determined to save them from themselves.

The Family

Much of the strength of the Church can be traced to its healthy ideals with regard to the family unit. Social health is determined largely by the health of the family. We know

from history that civilization has responded to the prevailing home ideals. Irreproachable homes are indicative of vigorous life; irresponsible ones reflect a social weakness.

In the world of today the family has no champion comparable to the Catholic Church. Strangely, it is precisely some of our family traditions which we will not surrender that brings liberal teachers to their feet with much shouting about "out of date." When the Church cries: Be honest, only the dishonest complain. When it teaches the law of charity only the uncharitable object. When it enters the fight for justice only the unjust have a grievance. The scope of the protest against Catholic family traditions and teachings is indicative of the disintegration of society in general. The protests reflect widespread family weakness.

We cannot go into those teachings and traditions here, but observe that among Catholic people the home and family are generally secure against those prevailing evils of divorce and irresponsibility. The Catholic home is still a place of promise; those tragic possibilities and fears which hover over marriage today, the result of a liberal moral code, are not so terrifying within the Church. In the home therefore is to be found one of the secrets of Catholic stability. And of course the Catholic Church is the only stable thing in the world today.

Progressive

From some things that we have seen and heard you may have the impression that the Church is so stable that it is not progressive. On the contrary, wherever progress and advancement of any worth while sort is going on the Church is there to assist or at least to encourage. For example let us observe its attitude on matters of science.

Fearlessly the Church has its scholars at work in every department of research. It has nothing to fear from the earth's secrets. Some are decoding the hieroglyphics of ancient races; some are investigating the remains of early man and the age of the universe; others are scouring the heavens for information that only the stars can give. In a word if more knowledge can be had the Church is anxious to see it brought forth, that man's life upon the earth may be richer with the blessings of created things.

The fact that Catholic scholars are active in the fields of research is evident to you already; what you may not be aware of is that the Church is quite well represented among those who rank highest in the scientific world.

The amazing conclusion that one draws from this is that the Church is so absolutely sure of itself that it has no fear of anything that can stand the tests of proof.

A Joyful House

Now there is one more thing which I wish to bring to your notice before you depart. It concerns the very nature of the household; these are a happy people. Notice the light-heartedness, the healthy mirth; also the absence of sombre puritanical faces. This is by no means a blue-law institution.

A wholesome social life is encouraged; they dance, they sing; they have their festivities; they have their games even on Sundays. Excesses only are forbidden. And it is not excess but moderation that makes for joy. This is then perhaps the happiest place under the sun; happiest because foreign to it is both the narrow legislation of blue code authorities, and the devastating excesses of the liberal extremists.

SUMMING UP

Your experience with the activities of the Church should convince you that all man's problems are solved here. His mind, his heart, his soul and his body feel at home. His heart and soul may exact most attention yet his mind and his body are not neglected. The Church takes the whole man into its keeping; it prepares him for the future, while directing his steps along the present.

This experience will offer you an explanation for the vastness of that imposing edifice you beheld from without. Seldom do those who come here to make their home depart.

CONCLUSION

Looking back over the Church again, we see it rising from every part of the world; solidly planted, too, while all else seems to be shifting crazily. But bear in mind that it is the product of labor as well as of inheritance. No new generation in taking it over can sit by and glory in its past. In toil, in sweat, in blood, each must carry on the tasks of the preceding one; tasks that have demanded life itself of some, the homes and friends and dearest things in life of others. Great successes have not been wished upon the Church, but have been won by effort and heroism. The glory to which the Church has attained is the glory of sacrifice.

By example we may refer again to missionary conquests: conquests, yes; but only the conquerors knew the earthly price that was paid. And there were no laurels for the heroes. Also we have pointed out thousands of churches, schools, hospitals on American soil; no one will ever know the complete story of this building program, the sacrifice, the worry, the broken hearts along the way. In a word, the Church today

is the result of endless energy and an absolute fearlessness in carrying out the instructions of its Founder in the face of all odds.

This spirit prevailing as it has for nineteen hundred years is our guarantee of the future. It gives of itself a dramatic negation to the prediction of petty prophets who arise to tell us that the Church has finished its course. If this spirit of Catholicism means anything at all it means that the glory of the Church has only begun.

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