

IRELAND AND THE HOLY FATHER.

THE following pastoral letter was addressed to the priests and people of the diocese of Meath by the most Rev. Dr. Nulty on the eve of his lordship's departure for Rome:—

I think I see the strongest reasons for anticipating from the conferences of the Irish bishops with the authorities at Rome large and exceptionally beneficial results for our country as well as for our religion. The obligations and duties which Irishmen owe to the Holy See have of late been a little unsettled and thrown into a state of painful uncertainty, in which they would seem apparently to clash with the fulfilment of the duties we owe to our country. One of the results of these Roman conferences will be to ascertain—to define and settle with clearness, precision, and uncertainty—all that the Holy See expects from us; and to prove that it demands nothing which is not well calculated to foster and promote the growth and development of loyalty and love to our country.

No nation on this earth ever yielded to the Holy See a larger, a more generous, or a more self-sacrificing obedience, and in terribly trying ordeals in which our loyalty was very severely tested. Our allegiance to the Chair of Peter has for more than three centuries been written, and is still recorded, in letters of blood, and has won for us the admiration and esteem of the whole Christian world. Foreign ecclesiastical writers during these centuries of persecution used to occupy themselves in making subtle and impossible hypotheses over which they wasted a deal of idle and useless speculation. They used to ask could the Pope take one side on any important question whilst the Church actually took the other? Could the Church act independently of the Pope? Did treachery and disloyalty to the Pope of necessity imply Apostasy from the Church and forfeiture of her communion? But the actual behaviour of the Catholic Church in the death-struggle in which she was then engaged in this island could have easily enlightened these theorists. The Irish Catholic nation and the heretical nation that oppressed and persecuted it never thought of such subtleties; neither of them ever doubted that wherever the Pope was, there of necessity should the Church be along with him. It seemed self-evident to both that treachery to the Pope and apostasy from the Church meant one and the same thing. To abjure, therefore, the authority of the Pope was practically an act of open revolt and rebellion against the Church, and of complete and final separation from her.

The simple, the practical, and the fundamental issue that divided them, and on which the heretical nation insisted, was to renounce the authority of the Pope and to acknowledge the spiritual supremacy of the Queen or King of England. It required no more. This was the issue submitted 300 years ago to Dr. Walshe, who, like myself, was a parish priest of Trim before he became bishop of Meath. And we see the answer he gave to it in the eighteen years he spent immured in a dungeon in Dublin Castle; in the wounds worn into the very bones in his hands and feet by the manacles that bound him; in the adventures of his subsequent escape; and, finally, in his death as an exile in a foreign land. When O'Connell presented himself at the bar of the House of Commons as the first elected Catholic representative of Clare, the same issue exactly was again submitted to him. As a preliminary condition for taking his seat he was required to swear that "the Pope hath not, nor ought to have, any jurisdiction or authority in the realm of England." His answer was, that the first of these statements as a matter of fact he knew to be false; and that as a Catholic he believed, and was bound to believe, that the second of these statements was false also. In the long and mournful interval from Dr. Walshe to O'Connell, in defence of the great issue and in testimony of the Divine authority of Peter, depths of frightful suffering were fathomed in the country such as had never before been witnessed in any land under heaven.

Fines, imprisonments, and tortures were inflicted upon thousands and thousands of agonising victims of our race and nation, which had no parallel or precedent in the annals of human suffering. They robbed us of our reputation; they plundered us of our property; they confiscated our estates; they demolished our homes, extinguished our hearths and drove us mercilessly as helpless, impoverished exiles into every land under heaven. We lost everything we possessed on this earth save the precious jewel of the faith, exactly the very thing which above all others they longed and laboured most to wrest from us. And yet all the time we never once wavered or vacillated in our loyalty or allegiance to the See of Peter. Our sufferings only served to invigorate and to confirm our faith; and, what was if possible more important still, to elevate, to strengthen, and consolidate the religious feelings, sympathies, and affections in which faith itself is ultimately rooted, and from which it derives all its merit and value. The larger, the severer, the more painful the sacrifices exacted from us for our faith in the prerogatives and supremacy of Peter, the dearer, the tenderer, and the better beloved by us became the Divine doctrinal truths for which we bled and suffered. The perfection of a nation's faith, and its preservation, too, are influenced immensely by the religious feelings, sympathies, and affectionate leanings which it cherishes for the Holy See. A nation's faith, like the faith of the individual, is fostered, nourished, and stimulated into the fulness of maturity and perfection, principally by the feelings and sympathies from which it first sprang, and from which it must always grow.

To extinguish, therefore, the faith of a nation you must first extirpate and tear out of the nation's heart all the religious sympathies and feelings that nourish and preserve it. In the fierce and terribly persistent effort made to wrest its faith from the Irish nation by brute force and bloodshed, it must be admitted that the enemy assailed us exactly on the side on which the national character was strongest—in fact, on which our faith was invincible. But though ignominiously vanquished, he has managed to acquire from his very defeats and failure dangerous and formidable experience. For if there be an undoubtedly strong side to our national character there is an undoubtedly weak side to it, too, and it is against this he

how threatens to direct his vast and terrible energies. Let us consider the situation carefully, especially its most disagreeable features. It would be nothing less than dangerous self-deception to question the fact that we Irishmen are naturally haughty and excessively sensitive. We are awfully impressionable to insult, contempt, and scorn. A sneer, an affront, a well-barbed sarcasm, sinks into the very depths of our souls, and at once begins to fester and ferment there. We foster it, we nourish it and brood over it till it has not only soured and spoiled our feelings, but until it has to some extent infuriated them. Smarting and writhing under the anguish of wounded or lacerated feelings, we surrender ourselves up to feelings of aversion, of abhorrence and hatred; and we look out impatiently for opportunities for retaliation and vengeance. It is very hard for the Christian feelings of charity, mercy, and forgiveness of injuries, to make head against paroxysms of passion which sometimes deprive us of the full use of reason, and which render us partially delirious and demented. Except under the influence of such violent bursts of indignant feeling, an Irishman never has renounced and never can renounce his faith; whilst the number of those who, to avenge an affront or to retaliate on an enemy, have basely apostatised from their religion, is painfully large. The ancient and noble family of ——— in this diocese, after heroically clinging to the faith through centuries of persecution and of forfeiture of their estates and property, have deplorably apostatised from it in the memory of men still living, simply because they believed that an ordinary country priest had wilfully or perhaps ignorantly affronted them. The unhappy apostate who then represented that family became afterwards an illustrious penitent; and publicly apologised before the grand jury at Trim for the scandal he had given, and did all in his power to atone for it. In spite, however, of all his efforts his descendants followed him in his apostasy, but not in his repentance, and the family continues bigotedly anti-Catholic to the present day. Bearing in mind, then, how vastly and vitally the faith of a nation is influenced and affected by its religious feelings and sympathies on the one hand, and the excessive and dangerous sensitiveness of our national character on the other, I confess that, for some time past, I could not help feeling uncomfortable misgivings for the future of our ancient national Church.

The lessons taught by the experience of several years past plainly show that, in the present excited and suspicious state of public feeling, grave and dangerous complications and misunderstandings might, at any moment, crop up between the Irish nation and the Holy See; and no one could calculate or fix a limit to the deplorable consequences that might result from them. And enemies would never at any time be wanting who would labour might and main to widen the breaches and aggravate the misunderstandings that would then arise. In the excitement inseparable from such controversies, it would be easy to persuade a jealous and credulous race like ours that the Pope had acted on erroneous, prejudiced, or one-sided information. Considering how desperately bent the nation always seems to be to secure all the social and political amelioration of its conditions that are within its grasp, a fatal misconception of this kind would be quite enough to drive it into an attitude of dogged and sullen disobedience. The consequences that might then follow God only knows. It is a very melancholy and indeed a very awful fact that great Catholic nations, like France, England, and Scotland, have practically apostatised from the faith. The fact is surrounded with very salutary as well as with very unpleasant warnings. I do not believe that the Irish nation will ever follow their fatal example; but I do believe it would be nothing short of criminal rashness to expose it to the danger or temptation of doing so. I can find no evidence of a Divine promise made to any nation any more than to our own guaranteeing to it the indefectibility of its faith in all circumstances. Neither can I see any solid grounds for believing in a special exceptional Providence which would save Irish multitudes any more than Irish individuals from renouncing their allegiance to the Church in a paroxysm of passion, either in retaliation for some imaginary interference with their political freedom or to avenge an insult or an affront which they had rashly assumed had been offered to them by the Holy See. But to go further or deeper into this delicate and dangerous matter is now, fortunately, wholly unnecessary.

The enlightened, the experienced, and far-seeing wisdom of Leo the Thirteenth in summoning the Irish bishops to Rome has rescued the nation's faith from the grave and serious dangers that constantly threatened it, and has relieved ourselves even from the apprehension of these dangers ever again recurring. By citing "the representatives of the various shades of opinion in the Irish episcopate," he has shown his determination to ascertain with precision and certainty the intrinsic merits of the questions on which they may be divided, and he has chosen the simplest, the easiest, and most infallible method possible for ascertaining the truth, not only on these questions, but on every disputed question of fact or of doctrine that can ever possibly arise. He has shown, too, that he has totally discarded the dubious, the suspicious, the prejudiced and misleading channels through which information on Irish public questions may hitherto have reached him. Henceforth he is determined to believe nothing of us except what we tell him ourselves through the bishops that will represent us. Of his own proper accord, and without a suggestion from any quarter, he has chosen the readiest and the most effective method possible, for ascertaining the whole truth on every Irish question with clearness, precision, and infallible certainty.

The Irish bishops will not, and cannot, ever conspire to deceive the Holy Father or to misrepresent their countrymen. They will tell him the whole truth, even when it may be disagreeable to themselves or distasteful to the feelings of their countrymen. They go before him, this time at any rate, substantially united and agreed on every question, even in the slippery and dangerous region of politics. The fact of having unanimously entrusted the educational interests of the nation to the advocacy and protection of the Irish Parliamentary party proves that no essential difference of opinion divides them on any question. To rescue the nation's faith, then, from the grave and serious dangers that threatened it is the first great public benefit here conferred on us by Leo the Thirteenth. To introduce and establish a new principle of ecclesiastical polity which surrounds