

LETTER OF OUR MOST HOLY FATHER LEO XIII,
BY DIVINE PROVIDENCE POPE.

To the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, ANTONINE DE LUCA, Vice-Chancellor of the Holy Roman Church, JOHN BAPTIST PIRRA, Librarian of the Holy Roman Church, JOSEPH HERGENROTHER, Prefect of the Vatican Archives.

BELOVED SONS, HEALTH AND THE APOSTOLIC BLESSING.—Much consideration as to what artifices those most rely upon who strive to cast suspicion and odium on the Church and on the Roman Pontificate, has revealed to Us that their attacks are directed with great power and craft against the History of the Christian Church, and above all against that portion of it which treats of the attitude and acts of the Roman Pontiffs in Italian affairs. Several Italian Bishops, struck by the same fact, have declared that their concern at the mischief already effected, is fully equalled by their apprehension of that to come. In truth, it is as dangerous as it is unjust to sacrifice historical truth from hatred to the Roman Pontificate, with the evident object of making the events of the past, distorted by falsehood, serve the cause of the Italian Revolution. Our duty, then, being not only to vindicate the other rights of the Church, but to defend against unjust attacks the dignity and honour of the Apostolic See; and Our desire being that truth should prevail, and that Italians should know what has been for them in the past, and will be in the future, the most abundant source of good, We have resolved, dear sons, to make known to you Our thoughts upon this grave subject, and to entrust to you the fulfilment of Our wishes.

The authentic records of history when considered with a mind calm and freed from prejudices, are in themselves a magnificent and simultaneous apology for the Church and the Pontificate. In them may be seen the true nature and the true greatness of Christian institutions. In her arduous conflicts and her splendid victories are revealed the divine power and strength of the Church; and by the clear testimony of facts are revealed and shine forth the great benefits which the Supreme Pontiffs have conferred on all nations, but above all on her in whose bosom Divine Providence has set the Apostolic See. Those, therefore, who are always assailing the Pontificate in every conceivable manner, could not afford to spare the testimony of history which witnesses to such great acts. In fact, they have set themselves to violate the integrity of history with such perverse art, that those arms which are most fit to defend the Church have been turned against her.

This plan of attack is that first adopted three centuries ago by the Centuriators of Madgeburg. As those leaders of heresy were unable to throw down the ramparts of Catholic doctrine, they adopted the new stratagem of engaging the Church in historical controversy. Their example was followed by nearly every heretical school; and, sadder still to state, it has been imitated by some, who by religion belonged to the Catholic Church, by race to Italy. With the object we have mentioned, the history of former times has been ransacked for the smallest details; every nook and corner of their archives has been searched; idle tales have been brought to the light of day; and impostures a hundred times refuted have a hundred times been repeated. While the essential constituents of historical facts have been mutilated or skilfully thrust into the shade, they have chosen to pass by in silence, deeds memorable and worthy of renown, at the same time devoting themselves with renewed energy to point out and exaggerate every little want of prudence and failure to do right, although the avoidance of all faults, even the least, is beyond the capacity of human nature. They have even allowed themselves to pry with perverted sagacity into the uncertain secrets of domestic life, with the aim of seizing and bringing into prominence all that seemed calculated to gratify the scandal-loving palate of the multitude. Of the greatest Pontiffs, even those of the most eminent virtue have been accused and branded as ambitious, proud, despotic; those whose glorious actions are above the reach of detraction, are blamed for their intentions; and thousands of times the senseless cry has been repeated that the Church was injurious to mental progress, to national civilisation. But the civil principality of the Roman Pontiffs, formed providentially to preserve intact their independence and dignity, most legitimate in its origin and memorable for its innumerable benefits, has been in particular a target for the keenest shafts of malevolence and calumny.

The same tactics are pursued to-day; it can certainly be now said with greater truth than ever that the art of the historian is a conspiracy against truth. The old accusations are again circulated; falsehood is seen to insinuate itself once more through heavy tomes and slender volumes, through the flying pages of the daily Press, and through the studied attractions of the stage. The number is too great of those who would wish the memories of old days to help the cause of outrage—Sicily affords a recent instance of this, when availing themselves of the commemoration of a sanguinary act, they cast on the memory of Our predecessors much abuse which they inscribed on abiding monuments in coarse and violent language. The same thing was seen soon after, when public honours were rendered to the man of Brescia, as though his seditious spirit and his enmity to the Holy See, had recommended him to the respect of posterity. There again they strove to excite the hatred of the people and to brandish the torch of calumny in the faces of the greatest Pontiffs. And where facts most honourable to the Church, whose brilliance completely dissipated the darkness of calumny, could not but be mentioned, by minimising and dissimulation but little of the credit of them has been allowed to the Pontiffs.

But what is of greater gravity, is that such a method of treating history has invaded even the schools. Often, indeed, children have put into their hands for their instruction manuals thickly sown with falsehoods, and, when they become accustomed to these, especially if the perversity or heedlessness of the teacher countenance it, the young students are easily disgusted with venerable antiquity and imbued with a shameless scorn of things and men most holy. On leaving the elementary classes, they are frequently exposed to an even greater danger, for in the higher studies from the narrative of facts they rise to the examination of causes; and from these causes they endeavour

to deduce laws issuing in rash theories, often in flat contradiction of divine revelation, and with no other motive than that of glossing over or concealing the salutary influence which Christian institutions have had on the course of human destinies and the progress of events. Such is the conduct of most of them, who devote but little examination to their inconsequence, the absurdities they perpetrate, or the darkness with which they flood the so-called philosophy of history. In short, details apart, the general plan of historical instruction tends to cast suspicion on the Church, odium on the Roman Pontiffs and to persuade the mass of the people that the Pontifical rule is an obstacle to the welfare and greatness of Italy.

Now, nothing more untrue could well be said; so much so that it is wonderful that such accusations, rebutted so forcibly by such striking testimony, should still appear to some as worthy of belief. As a matter of fact, history consigns to the eternal remembrance of posterity the immense obligations of Europe to the Roman Pontificate, and those of Italy in particular, which has naturally received, above all others, the greatest number of benefits and favours from the Holy See. In the first place, account should be taken of the fact that the Italians have preserved intact, and without schism, their religious unity; an inestimable boon, which affords to the nations who possess it the surest guarantee of domestic and social prosperity. And again, to mention a special instance, no one is ignorant of how, amid the disintegration and crumbling away of the glory of the Roman Empire, the Popes opposed the most stubborn resistance to the encroachments of the barbarians, and that it was more than once due to their constancy and wisdom, that hostile wrath had been subdued, Italian soil saved from bloodshed and fire, and Rome rescued from destruction. Amid the disasters of those times, their signal charity, combined with concurrent circumstances, gave birth to their temporal sovereignty, which has had the glory to be ever inseparable from the common weal. Indeed, if even the Holy See has been able to promote the interests of law and civilisation, if it has been capable of exerting its powerful influence in the civil order and embracing completely all social needs, the share in this must be recognised of the temporal power, which has contributed to these great works the necessary freedom and resources. More than this—if our predecessors have been constrained by the consciousness of their duty to defend their rights against the grasping ambition of their invaders, that very course of action of theirs has more than once preserved Italy from foreign rule. This truth has been witnessed in contemporaneous times when the Holy See stood out firmly against the victorious arms of a mighty emperor, and obtained from the allied power a restitution of its sovereign rights. The people of Italy have profited no less by the energetic resistance of the Popes to the unjust pretensions of princes: nor by the heroism with which, uniting all the forces of Europe in a common bond, they withstood the terrible impetus of the invading Turks. The two great battles which shattered the enemies of Italy and Christendom—the one in the plains of Lombardy, the other in the waters of Lepanto—were planned and fought under the auspices of the Apostolic See. The expeditions to the Holy Land, due to the impulse of the Popes, also gave birth to the glory and naval power of Italy. Similarly the Italian Republics owe to the Pontiff their laws, their life, their existence. To the credit of the Holy See is due the greater part of Italy's reputation in the sciences and fine arts. The classics would undoubtedly have perished had not the Popes and clergy rescued from the wreck the remains of the works of antiquity. In Rome itself, what has been done speaks yet more forcibly; ancient monuments preserved at great expense, new works undertaken and adorned with the creations of the greatest artists, museums and libraries founded, schools opened for the education of youth, great universities munificently endowed; all these have raised Rome to so high and honourable a position that all have recognised in her the mother of liberal arts.

Such is the light thrown on the subject by these and many other considerations, that it is clear that to say that the Pontificate itself, or the civil principality of the Pontificate, is inimical to Italy, is voluntary to falsify plain and evident facts. It is a criminal design knowingly to deceive and to convert history into a dangerous poison, and still more is it worthy of condemnation in Catholics and Italians, who ought beyond all others to be impelled by gratitude, reverence for their religion, and love of their country, not only to regard for truth, but also to its defence. And since many Protestants of acute intelligence and impartial judgment have been compelled by the force of truth to give up their preconceived opinions, and to acknowledge without hesitation that the Roman Pontificate renders immense service to civilisation and public order, it is intolerable that many of Our own people should take the opposite side. These in historical studies, prefer for the most part external aid, and follow and most approve those foreign writers who make the most hostile attacks upon Catholic institutions, contemptuously neglecting Our own highest authorities, who in writing history have refused to separate love of country from reverence and love of the Apostolic See.

It is hard, however, to conceive how much harm may be done by the study of a history which is devoted to party ends, and to the gratification of cupidity of various kinds. For it becomes, not the guide of life, nor the light of truth, as the ancients have rightly declared that it ought to be, but the accomplice of vices, and the agent of corruption, especially for the young, whose minds it will fill with unsound opinions, and whose hearts it will turn away from virtue and modesty. For history has great attractions for the precocious and ardent intellect of youth; the picture offered to it of ancient times, and the images of men whom the narrative invests with renewed life, are eagerly welcomed by young men, and retained for ever deeply graven in their memories. When therefore the poison has once been imbibed in tender years, a remedy is scarcely to be found. For it is an illusive hope that with the growth of years they will know better and unlearn what they learnt in the beginning, because few give themselves to a thorough and careful study of history and in later years they will find in daily life more perhaps to confirm than to correct their errors.

(To be continued.)