

ROME LETTER

(From our own correspondent.)

November 28.

CHRISTMAS IN ROME.

Christmas in Rome! Here, as in every capital in Europe, the idea conjures up memories of a grinning skeleton. Too much sorrow lies in the future and in the past for Europe to enjoy Christmas festivities. At every table in the greater part of this Continent one chair will be vacant at the Christmas dinner. So it will be in Italy when a couple of million young Catholics under arms yearn to be present at the 'cenone' or 'big supper' of abstinence fare at home. No, there can be no spontaneous merry-making this Christmas in Europe.

But still the Southerners will not omit any of the customs that have been observed on the Seven Hills of Rome for over 1500 years. On December 23 every Roman thinks it his duty to buy a basket filled with a dozen kinds of fish from the Mediterranean Sea for the 'cenone' of next evening. His great-grandfather vowed that he should never again spend an hour jostling and haggling among thousands in the fish-markets. But next year found him there as 1999 will find the great-grandsons of Romans of 1915. Customs die hard in Rome.

But if Christmas be not so happy in Europe as it might be, many have reason to thank Benedict XV. that conditions are not worse. The sick, the wounded, prisoners of war, and civilian prisoners, families which had lost all trace of missing members, Belgians and French who had been condemned to death, all these categories have to thank the influence of the Holy Father in tens of thousands. But, sad to say, no hope for a peace in the near future exists in the Vatican.

In the Apostolic Palace, as everywhere else, it is simply waiting, weary waiting. Little help is given to the Pope to blow any spark into a blaze, even though all look to his Holiness for courage and initiative to make a faint glow to develop into the sun of peace. 'If,' said a foreign diplomatist, a convert to the Church, 'if I felt sure that the Pope were neutral in the European war, I should return to Protestantism.' And one of the Roman Cardinals, on hearing of these words a few weeks ago, remarked in a quiet voice: 'Then that gentleman has already ceased to be a Catholic.' To the credit of Italy, it must be said, her Government and her people fully and publicly appreciate the Pope's neutrality. Even Italian writers, who for political reasons can rarely afford one favorable word about the Papacy, laud the firmness, the prudence, and statesmanship of Benedict XV. amid the storms of the past fifteen months.

IRISH PRIESTS AS CHAPLAINS.

But what a pity it is the Irish priest does not get full credit for his love of souls shown in following the Catholic soldiers to the field of battle! In a week or so we may expect to hear a pharasaical murmur raised from a Catholic quarter on the plea that Irish chaplains cannot be got to go in sufficient numbers to the front, a murmur that ought to keep dumb where the name of Irish zeal is concerned. Let us go into facts. All other things in an argument are not worth an unsound straw. One charm of life in Rome is the relative certainty with which one can speak of other countries. Other nations' affairs seem to cling to the wall of the Eternal City.

The number of Catholics in Ireland totals 3,238,000. The number of her secular and regular priests is 3600. This makes one priest for every 900 Catholics. What, now, of across the Channel? It is this: The number of Catholics in England and Wales is 1,891,000, and they have 4000 priests, secular and regular, to choose from. This makes one priest for every 470 Catholics.

And yet one-half the chaplains in the British Army hail from Irish dioceses—viz., priests lent to the English mission and those gone to the front directly

from Ireland; but there is another fact to be noted—viz., about 15 per cent. of priests in Ireland are engaged in the secondary schools, a work which for the most part is done by laymen in England. Leaving all question of the war out of the matter, I assert this is a fine monument to the proverbial love of souls in the priests of Irish blood at home or abroad.

AN ATHEIST'S CREED.

Since the war began atheists and indifferentists and bad Catholics have opened their eyes to religion by the roar of the cannon. Here is the latest 'Credo,' that of Lovredan, the famous litterateur, who, by the way, moots the question as to whether France will be Catholic after the conflagration is extinguished.

'The past of France is great,' he writes. 'It was a France that believed. The present of France is a calamity. France feels that she could no longer believe. Will things be better in the future? This lies in the hands of God. Oh! a people dead cover the fields. How terrible it is to be an atheist before this national cemetery. I deceived myself, and you who read my books, of what do you sing? France, France, return to the faith of your most glorious days. To abandon God is to be lost. I do not know if I shall be alive to-morrow; but I must say to my friends, "Lovredan dares not die as an atheist." A thought oppresses me: a God exists, and you are far from Him. Rejoice, my soul, since the hour is come when, on my knees, I can say, "I believe, I believe in God. I believe, I believe."'

LE BON PERE.

I must not forget another Frenchman, one who lived an honor to his Church and his country, and has just died at the age of 100 years—Leo Harmel, Leo XIII.'s old friend. Would that Leo Tolstoy used his brilliant parts for the elevation of the poor as did Leo Harmel. A wealthy manufacturer, Harmel organised in Val des Bois a Christian Artisans' Co-operative Society, where the multitude of laborers and their families dwelt, worked, and prayed with aged Harmel as their chief. It reminded one of a Utopia, so well did the 'Bon Pere'—as Harmel was known over France—rule. For many years he headed a pilgrimage to Rome, where Leo XIII. greeted with deep affection the great apostle of labor. But Leo Harmel was growing old when Leo XIII. died twelve years ago. He was then near 88, so he retired into private life and lived with his daughter ever since.

NOTES.

It is expected Monsignor O'Riordan, Rector of the Irish College, will return from hospital one of these days.

In order to accommodate the wounded soldiers at Tivoli for a time, the municipality has obtained the use of the summer villa of the Irish College.

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