

RELIGIOUS IN BELGIUM

For months previous to the general elections in Belgium the Socialist and Radical press organs at regular intervals set afloat the most fabulous accounts of the supposed deluge of religious Orders in Belgium, the twenty million francs that the Belgian people would have to sacrifice to the monks and nuns if the Catholic Government remained in power, and the eight or nine thousand 'monasteries' supposed to cumber the Belgian soil (writes the German correspondent of the Philadelphia *Catholic Standard and Times*). From Belgium these cloister legends—'cloister legends' are always good copy in the eyes of the anti-clerical editor—found their way into other lands and created the impression that the Flemings and the Walloons were monk and nun-ridden with a vengeance.

Here are the plain facts of the case, as communicated by M. Jacquart, director of the Belgian Statistical Bureau to a staff correspondent of the *Koelnische Volkszeitung* :—

In 1900 there were in Belgium 2474 religious communities, with a total of 39,000 inmates of both sexes. To appreciate these figures at their true value it must be borne in mind that in Belgium every house in which at least three members of a religious Order or congregation live together is booked by the statistical bureau as a 'religious community.' Thus all schools, academies, hospitals, prisons, homes for working girls, orphan asylums, etc., in which three or more nuns are employed are, in the official sense, religious communities or convents.

Since the census of 1900 a great number of French religious, both men and women, but especially the latter, took refuge from persecution in hospitable Belgium. The French religious number about ten thousand, about nine thousand of whom are nuns, whose chief occupation is secondary and higher education, only a comparatively small number being employed in the service of the sick and the poor. If we add to these French religious the 150 Dutch and German missionary priests in half a dozen mission houses and a few exiles from Portugal, the roster of the foreigners is complete. As this 'invading army' is recruited almost exclusively from foreign lands, whence their financial supplies are also derived, Belgium has much to gain and nothing to lose by the 'invasion,' even from a material point of view.

In 1911 Belgium harbored, all told, something more than 56,000 religious of both sexes, 43,000 of whom were of Belgian nationality; the number of monasteries and convents—in the sense explained above—amounted to 3500, or one religious community for more than two thousand souls.

The unexampled prosperity of Belgium, which is admitted by all except the very blindest of bigots, proves conclusively that religious communities, however great their number may be, are not, as such, a menace to the material welfare of any nation. On the contrary, they have always been, and still are, a main factor in the progress of the world, spiritual and intellectual, as well as material.

The flourishing convent schools of Belgium are an eyesore to the so-called Liberal journalists. Especially at the close of the scholastic year their 'conscience' urges them to warn parents not to patronise institutions that are nothing but 'hotbeds of superstition and intellectual slavery.' In the same breath that they declare the religious schools to be below contempt they extol the secular schools of Brussels and the other large cities to the skies, schools to which, if they cared to tell the truth, they would have to apply the epithet of 'hotbeds of Socialism.' In the Maison du Peuple of Brussels, the headquarters of Belgian Socialism, there is a special department, called 'Syndicat du Personnel Enseignant,' for the school teachers of the capital. A very large percentage of the official teachers of both sexes are enrolled in the 'Syndicat.'

It has been demonstrated time and again that the Belgian religious schools, both primary and higher, are not only the equals of the secular schools in the teaching of the secular branches, but in most cases their superiors.

A Faithful Corner of France

The melancholy and too-true account given in a recent issue of the results of anti-Christian teaching in France, and the appalling increase of criminality and suicide, especially among the young, consequent on the abolition of religion in the State schools, makes doubly consoling the consideration that there are still extensive districts in France, as a rule remote from the great centres of population, where the people are still staunchly Catholic in faith and practice (writes Dom Oswald Hunter-Blair, O.S.B., in the *Glasgow Observer*). Such a district is High Savoy, not far from the Swiss border. The historic towns of Chambéry, Annecy, and Aix, and the whole country adjoining, remain, notwithstanding the proximity of the very capital and stronghold of Calvinism, namely, Geneva, emphatically Catholic. A recent sojourn in Aix-les-bains, best known to our countrymen for its world-renowned medicinal waters, afforded many consoling proofs of the vitality of religion in this corner of France. A large and handsome parish church has lately been built here, chiefly through the efforts of the zealous 'archpriest' and his 'vicaires,' who have the spiritual charge of the town. Large and devout congregations, including (one is glad to see) many men, throng the edifice not only at the Sunday Masses but also at other times, for instance at the daily 'exercices' in honor of the month of Mary. One of the attractions provided during May was an excellent exhibition, once or twice a week, of lantern views bearing on the religious history of France, accompanied by an interesting lecture from the cure, and followed by devotions and Benediction. On other evenings there was what was called a 'conference dialogue'—one of the curates propounding difficulties and objections from the body of the church, which were answered from the pulpit. The congregation followed these dialogues with the greatest interest, and they also seemed particularly interested in the 'Sermons for Men' preached weekly by the cure, and dealing in a thoroughly practical way with the duties and dangers of the modern Frenchman's daily life. The solemnities of Ascension and Pentecost were well observed at Aix-le-bains, the last-named day being a great popular festival, the religious services being followed by a fair, games and races, music, illuminations, dancing, and much gay and innocent merry-making. A very large number of children of both sexes made their First Communion, after very careful preparation, on Ascension Day; and in Whit-sun-week Cardinal Dubillard, Archbishop of Chambéry, visited Aix and administered Confirmation, after examining the children in the catechism. The visit of his Eminence gave great pleasure to the good people, who observed the day as a general holiday. Within a few miles of Aix, on the opposite side of the beautiful Lac de Bourget, is (one may suppose) the only monastery in the whole of France where the monks are still permitted to live and work and pray. It is the Cistercian Abbey of Hautecombe, the Westminster Abbey of Savoy, in the church of which are to be seen some thirty tombs of the ancestors of King Victor Emmanuel. In deference to the wishes of the Royal House of Italy, the community in whose custody these tombs remain has never been disturbed.

Our Blessed Lady had many things to go through before she celebrated her glorious Home-coming; the Seven Dolors had to precede the Assumption. What does this say to us except that we too must be patient, and work out the allotted portion of our lives for as long a time and under as many trials as our Master may ordain, and wait for the blessed hour that shall unveil His face, in abandonment to His holy will?—Mother Francis Raphael.

One of the claims to a peerage to be heard by the Committee of Privileges of the House of Lords this session is that set forth by Lady Petre on behalf of her daughter, the Hon. Mary Frances Katharine Petre. The claim is to the Barony of Furnivall. The title dates back as far as the Siege of Acre. It passed at one time in the female line from the Talbots to the Howards. In 1777 it fell into abeyance between two old Catholic families, Stourton and Petre.