

REVIVING THE FAITH IN FRANCE

A GREAT CENTRE OF CATHOLIC INFLUENCE

It is impossible to insist too strongly on the activity that is displayed by the despoiled and disestablished Church of France in circumstances of peculiar difficulty (writes the special correspondent of the *Catholic Times*). Her old organisations have been swept away by the recent laws, her priests have been beggared, and her hold on the churches and cathedrals, occupied by the faithful, is feeble enough in a legal point of view and is subject to the caprice of the Government; yet never has the Church's influence been so decidedly felt throughout the country. It is felt as the influence of a counselling, inspiring power; keenly interested in all social problems and well informed of the necessities and claims of the working classes, whose growing demands are an ever-present cause of anxiety in France as elsewhere.

The Catholics are no longer a down-trodden party, that from discouragement or from a mistaken sense of dignity, keep aloof, imprisoned, as it were, in the traditions of the past. They have thrown themselves into the fight; they are to be met with everywhere, even in public life. Thus our readers may remember that at the recent municipal elections, forty-two members of the clergy were returned, among them one Bishop.

The renewed activity of the French Catholics has attracted the attention of their friends and well-wishers beyond the frontiers of their own country, but few of the latter realise what hidden causes contribute to direct and enlighten these activities. M. Georges Goyau, the eminent Catholic writer, has lately taken notice of one of these secret mainsprings. As he justly observes: behind the public life of the Church there exists a hidden life of silent labor, and of slow preparation, where ideas are discussed and schemes are ripened 'under the kindly and secret direction of God.' In a masterly paper (*Correspondent*, June 25, 1912), he tells the story of one of these centres of Catholic influence.

'L'Action Populaire de Reims.'

It was established nine years ago by a zealous priest, M. l'Abbe Leroy, who, judging rightly that the social question was daily becoming more important, undertook to found a centre of work, where the social education of Catholics might be carried out, on safe and just lines. At that time, the questions most eagerly discussed among the working classes were a closed book to the generality of young Catholics of the higher classes; hence the revolutionary and Socialistic bent that was given to questions so complex that it is easy to twist their real meaning. There is no denying the fact that these questions exist, that they are much to the front, and that by keeping aloof in the matter the Catholics lose a powerful means of influencing the people. Hence the usefulness of the task that the 'Action Populaire de Reims' has accomplished within nine years. Three times a month, its little booklets carry much wise and useful knowledge, compressed in a clear and practical form, far and wide. The men who are at the head of what Count Albert de Mun calls an 'Atelier de Travail,' scrupulously follow the instructions of Popes Leo XIII. and Pius X. on the social question, and, without closing their eyes to the just and reasonable demands of the working classes, they keep carefully aloof from the revolutionary theories that are indirectly encouraged by an atheistical Government.

The pamphlets published by the 'Action Populaire' form a collection at once varied and practical; they treat of the social question under its different aspects; they inform French readers of the work accomplished by the Catholics of Germany, Holland, and Italy; they touch upon the social influence of the clergy, upon women's work in religion and sociology, upon the different guilds, 'Patronages,' clubs, libraries, gymnastic associations, etc., that have sprung up within the last few years, under Catholic patronage and supervision. Graver questions still are treated in these

yellow-covered booklets that are hailed with delight by many a lonely worker, to whom they bring

Light, Counsel, and Encouragement.

They discuss subjects that affect the material comfort and well-being of the working classes: alcoholism, hygiene, old age pensions, savings banks, syndicates, co-operative societies, etc. 'There does not exist,' says M. Georges Goyau, 'one single happy effort, inspired by the spirit of Christ and tending to the good of the people, that has not been taken notice of by 'L'Action Populaire.'

Besides these small tracts, three of which are published monthly, the 'Action Populaire' has started several reviews. Its *Guide Social*, that comes out once a year, is a kind of inventory of the social work accomplished in France during the preceding twelve months, and its *Année Sociale Internationale* serves the same purpose for social work in other countries. A series of pamphlets on the religious action of Catholics deal with the organisation of parishes under the new conditions that exist since the break with Rome, and they also touch upon the question of education, a vital one in France at the present moment. A review, called the *Courrier des Cercles d'Etudes*, treats of higher education, to which many children of the people now aspire, and which, unless carried out on safe lines, leads them to irreligion. Another periodical called *Le Recrutement Sacerdotal* is addressed to priests; another, *Peuple de France*, is meant to inform the peasants and workmen of the country of the questions that are passed over by the newspapers. The articles are short, bright, and simply written, being intended to instruct and amuse at the same time.

'L'Intermédiaire, as its name implies, is a medium of communication between 'L'Action Populaire' and its many thousand readers, who write to Reims for advice and enlightenment. Some apply to the *Intermédiaire* for the rules of a syndicate; others ask for counsel before founding a savings bank; local committees request that a good public speaker, skilled in sociology, should be sent to them. To all these demands, the 'Action Populaire' gives a careful and wise answer, accompanied, if necessary, by booklets treating of the subject in hand. To these publications might be added many others touching on religious and social subjects, in various forms, but always in a spirit of loyal obedience to the instructions of the Pope, combined with an intelligent sympathy with the needs and claims of the people. It may help our readers to form an idea of the activity of the Reims organisation if we tell them that, between 1903 and 1912, it distributed

Over One Million Pamphlets,

60,000 books, 200,000 almanacs, and 150,000 leaflets. The *Intermédiaire* receives on an average one hundred letters every day, a sufficient proof that the 'Action Populaire' knows how to excite interest, provoke inquiry, and inspire confidence. The pamphlets that it scatters broadcast fulfil their mission and are truly messengers of charity in the highest sense of the word.

Another characteristic of this active and powerful organisation is the new spirit that it strives to infuse into old existing works: to the boys belonging to Catholic guilds and to the directors of these guilds or associations, it explains the necessity of forming good workmen as well as good Christians, who should be superior to their rivals from a professional as well as from a Catholic point of view. It preaches to the Catholic youth the duty, not only of saving their own souls, but of 'extending the reign of God' among their fellow-workers by the exercise of an influence that comes from professional excellence united to religious practice.

A last proof of the usefulness of the 'Action Populaire,' and of its growing importance is the fact that the Government was alarmed some months ago by its daily-increasing popularity. Its offices were visited by the police, determined to discover whether or not the Jesuits were at the bottom of this suspicious association. The examination led to no sensational discovery, and the ten priests and sixteen laymen, who work the organisation, continued to perform their task as if nothing had happened. Since then, an idea has been started that it would be well to found a 'republican and