

THE CHURCH IN THE BALKAN STATES

During the past few weeks, since it became evident that 'Turkey in Europe' was no longer a political or geographical entity, letters have appeared in several Irish papers with reference to the position of Catholics in the Balkan States (says a writer in the *Irish Weekly*). Public sympathy in this country has undoubtedly been with the small nations who rose against the tyranny of the Turks over their kindred. That those small nations looked forward to garnering the harvest of victory is undeniable; but they took the terrible risk of defeat when they decided upon war; and hostilities had already begun when the chief statesman of France, speaking, it was understood, not only for the 'Triple Entente,' but for the 'Concert of Europe,' announced that the territorial 'status quo' would be maintained no matter how the struggle might terminate. Events have made the 'Entente' and the 'Concert' alike seem rather foolish before the world's eyes; but the threat was directed against the Christian nations, and they defied it. Therefore they hazarded everything on the prospects of a complete triumph, and their heroism should not be questioned. I have been urged by many friends to grieve for the Turks rather than rejoice with the Bulgarians and their allies, on the ground that the latter 'persecute' Catholics. Beyond ex parte statements, I find no warrant for the assertion. The Rev. Dr. James McCaffrey, Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Maynooth, the distinguished Ulsterman who published a valuable *History of the Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century* three years ago, is perhaps the latest recognised authority on the position of Catholicity in the European countries that can be cited; and Dr. McCaffrey's work does not dispose one towards the belief that the Ancient Church will suffer through the overthrow of the Ottoman Empire west of the Bosphorus.

Dr. McCaffrey tells us:—'The work of the Church in the Balkan Provinces has been carried on under great difficulties during the nineteenth century. Islamism, as represented by Turkey, the schismatical Russian Church supported by the Czar, and the Protestant missionaries, maintained in great measure by English money, have united in opposing the progress of Catholicity.'

I was reminded, very aptly, some days ago that the Sultan of Turkey sent a magnificent subscription towards the alleviation of Irish misery during the great famine two generations ago; and it is a fact that this Moslem gift was returned to the donor by Lord John Russell because it represented a sum larger than that bestowed by the British Sovereign. And the Rev. Dr. McCaffrey writes:—'It must be confessed that, with the exception of popular outbursts (1821, 1830, 1860, 1877, 1897) caused very often by political considerations, the Sultans have shown themselves very liberal in their treatment of the Catholic Church. But the Sultans have been unable to restrain the officials from adopting a hostile attitude in many places where the old spirit of fanaticism is still strong.' The local officials, rather than the Sultans, have always been responsible for much of the outrageous tyranny that has made Turkish rule over Christian communities morally impossible.

Of the quarter of a million people in Montenegro, about 12,500 are Catholics—these figures are of a later date than those accepted by the historian. The Catholic Bishop of Antivari is an ex-officio member of the Skupshtina, or Montenegrin Parliament; 'and full liberty is given to the Catholic Church' within King Nicholas's dominion.

In 1904 Serbia's total population was 2,676,989, of whom 10,423 were returned as Catholics. The Greek Orthodox Church is established by law; and Dr. McCaffrey writes: 'For the government of the Catholic Church and administration there exists a bishopric at Belgrade.' He does not complain of any persecution; and if there were any serious reasons for such complaint, so candid and courageous a chronicler would have referred to it.

Bulgaria's religious history is rather peculiar. The historian says:—

'The Encyclical of Leo XIII. addressed to the Slavs in 1880, and the great Slav pilgrimage to Rome in 1881, created a sensation in the Balkan Provinces. Russia grew alarmed lest a Slav Catholic movement should be created under the protection of Austria, and was especially alarmed lest Bulgaria should pass over to Rome. This danger became greater when, in 1881, on the abdication of Prince Alexander, Prince Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg was elected ruler of Bulgaria. The Prince was a Catholic, and married a Catholic lady, the daughter of Robert, Duke of Parma.'

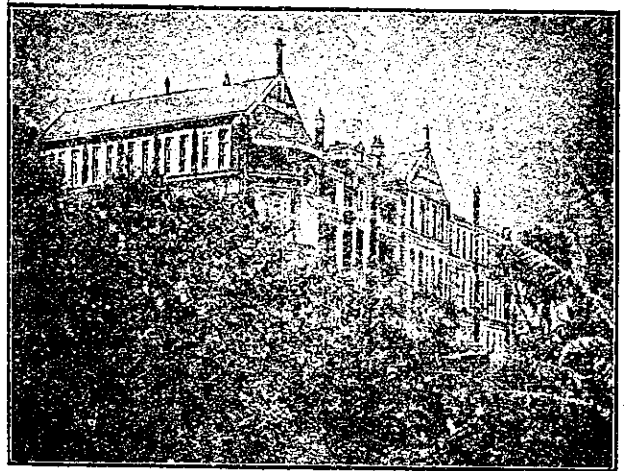
After the assassination of Stambouloff, Russian influence became predominant in Bulgaria; 'and it was demanded that Prince Ferdinand should allow his son, Prince Boris, to be reared in the Orthodox (Greek) faith.' Therefore in 1895, Ferdinand announced that 'though he was unalterably attached to the religion of his forefathers . . . he would allow his heir to be received into the service of the Church of the nation. Through the Nuncio at Vienna, the Prince opened negotiations to secure the approval of Rome for such a step; but naturally enough he found no support.' Next year poor little Boris was formally received into the Greek Church; and it is said the 'unalterable' Ferdinand intends to renounce his religion also. But so far as the Rev. Dr. McCaffrey's volume indicates, the 30,000 Catholics in Bulgaria have not been 'persecuted.'

Roumania's Catholic population is about 120,000. 'The Government of Roumania is favorable to the Catholics, and full permission is given to the religious congregations to settle in the country and to conduct their educational and charitable institutions.' So, under all the circumstances Catholics in the Balkans need not dread the consequences of the war; and Catholics everywhere are, through the essential spirit of their faith, enemies of tyranny and oppression over people of any race or religious creed. Were Moslems harried, outraged, plundered, and murdered by Bulgarian or Greek rulers, we in Ireland would sympathise with the victims.

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