

## Our Roman Letter

(By "STANNOUS.")

March, 1924.

The latest phase of the Anglican question has caused but mild excitement here in Rome although the home papers appear to have considered the matter as being one of world-wide importance. It seems unlikely that the Malines conversations were such as to lead to any real result in the direction of what has been conveniently termed "re-union" between the Catholic Church and the small but noisily earnest group of English Churchmen known as the Anglo-Catholic Party. One reason why all such zealous attempts to achieve anything like success in the direction indicated seem doomed to failure is that sooner or later they must be concerned with fundamental Catholic doctrines like the Papal Infallibility, on which the Church can neither offer concessions nor permit compromise. According to those competent to speak for the Anglicans, the precise proposition which members of their party must reject is that the Pope "is the one and only sovereign and autocratic ruler, teacher, owner and proprietor of the whole Church militant here on earth." (N. P. Williams, Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford. *Our Case as Against Rome*. Longmans, London, 1918.) In passing I should like to point out that not only is the phrasing wanting in theological precision but that the implied interpretation of the Vatican decree on the Pope's infallibility is grossly erroneous. Be that as it may, the proposition, correctly expressed both as to phraseology and to theological import, is just the very one that Catholics must believe and admit. We Catholics believe that the Catholic Church is the one true Church of Christ on earth, and that the Roman Pontiff is *by divine right* the visible head and the infallible teacher of the whole Church militant. In plain language, the Anglican repudiates and rejects just precisely what the Catholic accepts and believes. There is then an essential antagonism between the two positions and no amount of polite professions of goodwill can lessen that substantial difference. From the theological point of view, the baptised enquirer, admitting without question or reserve every other dogma of the Catholic Faith, either admits or does not admit this doctrine of Papal Infallibility; if he formally admits it he may be termed a Catholic *tout court*, if on the other hand he refuses to admit it he does not pertain to the body of the Church. The doctrinal exclusiveness of the See of Peter on this point is so essential and final that it would almost seem as if the obstreperous Orangeman of Sandy Row had a keener appreciation of the meaning and scope of English Protestantism than the zealous but misguided partisans of Viscount Halifax and Co.

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So much misrepresentation was caused by the newspapers' accounts of the Malines conversations that his Eminence Cardinal Mercier has felt constrained to publish a pastoral letter on the subject of the whole affair. This letter, which appeared in the beginning of February, was issued directly to the clergy of the archdiocese of Malines but was designed ultimately for the world at large. The full text of it was published in Italian in the *Osservatore Romano* and Italian excerpts from it were published in more than one Catholic journal in Italy. Translations of it, official and otherwise, have duly appeared in other countries also. So that even those remotely interested have the opportunity of learning what were the actual facts relating to the conversations and what were the motives that inspired the good Cardinal in the part played by him in the course of the affair. In these *Notes* I am not directly concerned with the facts, which are all duly set forth in the first part of this pastoral letter. I am however intimately concerned with the second part, wherein his Eminence expounds the motives that guided him in the matter. Were it not for the startling fact that Catholic Ireland is quite coolly passed over in almost the very first words of that exposition and her glorious contribution to the growth of the Faith implicitly credited to Protestant England comment on the letter might appear to be something wanting in due respect and proper regard for the high dignity which his Eminence so worthily holds. But as the offending

sentences are more likely to be used for a propagandist purpose which doubtless the eminent writer did not foresee, and indeed as they are even now being used here in Rome as testimony of what England has done and is doing for the Faith, I make no other apology for bringing the clause in question before my readers.

From an English Catholic weekly containing the Cardinal's own official translation of the whole pastoral letter, I take the following:—

### II. Why These Conversations?

Why? First and foremost because I am not entitled to shirk an opportunity which comes in my way of fulfilling a duty of brotherly love and Christian hospitality.

For the whole world, I would not that one of our severed brethren should have the right to say that he had knocked trustfully at the door of a Roman Catholic bishop and that this Roman Catholic bishop refused to open it.

A great nation was, for more than eight centuries, our beloved sister; this nation gave the Church a phalanx of saints whom to this day we honor in our liturgy; *astonishing reserves of Christian life have been maintained in its vast Empire; from it numberless missions have gone out far and wide; but a gaping wound is in its side.* We Catholics, kept safe by the grace of God in the whole truth, weep over the criminal sundering, etc. etc.

The clauses to which an Irishman immediately takes exceptions are those in italics. It need scarcely be pointed out that the italics are mine.

*Astonishing reserves of Christian life have been maintained in its vast Empire*, says the Pastoral Letter. Yes, but who maintained whatever reserves of Christian life may be said to exist to-day within the confines of the British Empire?

Was it the great Protestant nation of England? Was it the English landed classes, the classes that owed their wealth and position to the plunder of the monasteries? Was it the Protestant religion as by law established, that State establishment wherein men holding official positions as ministers of the Christian religion and drawing salaries for teaching the Faith of Jesus Christ can be found to deny doctrines essentially bound up with the *depositum fidei*, the given revealed of the teachings of Our Blessed Lord—Was it the governing classes of England with their traditional hostility to Catholic claims, a fierce and bigoted hostility that is directly responsible for the educational system under which Catholics in England labor to-day? No man, with the slightest knowledge of the facts, could be found to maintain that the plunderers of the monasteries, of some of whose descendants it has been said in our own time that their hands were dripping with the fat of sacrilege, husbanded in themselves or in the traditions they left behind them astonishing reserves of Christian life. No man, having first-hand knowledge of the conditions of English life, could have honestly asserted that the sources of political life in Protestant England have ever been such as to store up and maintain the astonishing reserves of Christian life referred to. Writing of those same sources of political power one who has excellent opportunities for forming an opinion on the matter makes the following statement:—

"Without exception they are profoundly secularised, atheism in practice, limited, if at all, merely by the State for its own convenience, according to Hobbes. This law, not in any shape divine but strictly a matter of expediency, regulates the home, the market, the exchange, the journal, the music-hall and theatre. Can we feel astonished if the people moulded on methods precisely opposed to Gospel-teaching during six days of every week refuse to attend church on the seventh?" (Canon Barry, D.D., in the *Dublin Review* for the 1st quarter, 1922.)

Where then are the astonishing reserves of Christian life to be found in England to-day? Perhaps in the disciples of that section of religious thought known as Anglicanism. In face of the judgment passed by competent critics on the value of Anglicanism in regard to the conservation of Christianity, one can hardly believe that much is to be hoped for Christianity from that direction. I could quote a formidable list of names and opinions in favor of this distrust, but owing to the exigencies of space I confine myself to one:—

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