

THE CHURCH IS A FAILURE?

by Daniel A. Lord, S.J.

HELEN WEBB'S mother, who was always being surprised and was sometimes a little alarmed at her literary duckling, had raised politely incredulous eyebrows.

"A priest?" she asked, in a tone that suggested that her daughter was bringing home a zebra, a Cornish giant, or a giant baby panda.

"A priest," replied her daughter. "You'll like him, I think, mother; and if you knew how little he calls on any except his own parishioners, you would realize that his coming here is an event."

"An event," Mrs. Webb agreed, "that will undoubtedly make my Puritan ancestors roll restlessly in their graves." She addressed the impersonal and unresponsive ether: "First I find that I have a daughter who never attends the church of her ancestors, and now I discover that she consorts"—she dwelt on the word in almost affectionate distaste—"with Roman Catholic priests."

Novel Guest.

Just the same, she was perfectly polite when Father Hall arrived. In fact, thought Helen, with amusement, her attitude could be called the world's most perfect imitation of being polite. She welcomed Ford Osborne with genuine affection; even though she thought him queer, as were most literary people—her daughter included. She respected his ability to make money out of stringing words together, and she liked him for his obviously pleasant intentions toward her daughter.

The dinner was a success. Father Hall talked of all the things that New Yorkers talk about, until there were moments when Mrs. Webb had to pull herself together and whisper to her Puritan conscience, "In spite of his surface charm the man is a reactionary Romanist."

After dinner Helen showed Father Hall the very pleasant library, which she had reconstructed into a workroom for herself.

"A pleasant blend of order and disorder, of charm and waste paper, of feminine craft and masculine carbon paper," annotated Ford.

To which Helen retorted by demanding to know when carbon paper had become either masculine or feminine. "Either species may turn copycat," she protested.

Conversational Swing.

Then Mrs. Webb disappeared into the mysteries over which hostesses preside as priestesses, and Father Hall and the two young people seated themselves in comfortable chairs in the library workroom and relaxed. Odd, thought Helen, that we young pagans should find this orthodox, middle-aged priest so thoroughly companionable. And odd, thought Ford, his mind paralleling Helen's, that he should have the power to ruffle the depths of our souls.

They talked of summer styles in boots, and ocean-going liners, and the joys of correspondence—with or without sealing wax—and the coming of kings to hospitable American shores. At length they arrived by the devious paths of conversation at the inevitable subject of religion. It was not that Father Hall directed their vocal steps that way. It was just that, as is the case with all intelligent people, religion inevitably demanded attention as the conversation came to rest either lightly or heavily upon it as one of the world's most absorbing topics.

But clearly religion in general was not the subject that was serving as magnet for the younger two. When they finally reached this particular subject, Father Hall had the feeling that they themselves had discussed it very often: their opening lines sounded so well rehearsed.

Logic.

Said Ford: "You see, Father, if Christ is really God..."

"... and," antiphoned Helen, "if He established this Church of yours..."

"... then the Church is a Divine institution."

"Perfect logic expressing an inevitable conclusion," nodded Father Hall.

Helen and Ford interchanged triumphant glances.

"Then—" began Ford.

"... if that is the case—" supplemented Helen.

"... how do you explain—" continued the young man.

"... that where individuals and nations and ages are concerned—", the girl subsumed.

"... the Church is not—uh—as—"

"... more successful?" concluded Helen.

Again, they interchanged glances. Ford thanked Helen silently for what was clearly a polite term to cover what they were really thinking.

"You mean"—and the priest smiled at them—"that you want to know why the Church is such a failure?"

Failure.

Of course, they had ceased being amazed at the frankness of their priest friend. They hedged around a problem, and he smacked it flat and limp on the table before them. They tried to phrase a difficulty in words that would be inoffensive, and he called spades spades, with sometimes a highly descriptive adjective to boot.

"Ah—er-," began Ford. Then, gathering courage, "To be perfectly frank, that's exactly what we want to know. How can a Divine institution be a failure?"

"Why doesn't the Church exercise a more profound effect on people?" Helen was really eager in her question. "If the Church is really Christ's and Divine, it should transform people. . . ."

The Church is a Failure

"Did you ever," Father Hall asked, mildly, "hear of that wonderfully transformed group of human beings called the saints?"

"Oh," she answered, "a handful out of all humanity!"

"What about Catholic nations?" demanded Ford. "Why aren't they shining examples of what the rest of the nations ought to be?"

"Why, to put it with your own charming bluntness—"

"Why is the Church a failure?"

Response

Father Hall, with a gesture, asked permission to smoke his pipe. Helen nodded swiftly. He filled it from a well-worn pouch, lighted it meditatively, and blew out a warm white cloud of fragrance. The chair was comfortable. He sincerely liked the two young people who were his host and hostess on this visit, made possible by an impromptu trip from his beloved parish at Lakeside to midwinter New York.

As for their question, it intrigued him. He had thought of it often in his work for souls. When he struggled with some doubting mind and brought it just to the verge of conversion . . . and then had to watch that soul slip back into boggy doubt; when he saw some young man, Catholic in ancestry and training, turn criminal, go rotten in morals, adopt grafting as his political career, marry some notorious divorcee; when he heard of priests' betraying the Church; when supposedly Catholic nations plunged into bloody civil wars and unjust aggression on weaker nations; when, after nineteen centuries and more of work for humanity, there was still so much tyranny, lust, unloosed passion, graft, injustice, exploitation . . .

The Bright Side.

He pulled himself together with almost a physical effort, and drew his mind back from that swift race down the paths of human failures.

“Of course,” he said, “I could spend the evening showing you all that the Church has really accomplished.”

“Oh,” replied Helen, willingly enough, “we know about the consolation, the religious hope, the spiritual joy, the promise of heaven that the Church brings to her members.”

The priest shook his head.

“That’s not what I mean. I mean that it would be easy to show you how the very things that democracy is fighting to maintain against the dictators wouldn’t have been remotely possible without the past nineteen centuries or so of effort by the Church. I mean that I could show you what the Church has done for the happiness of this life and this very tangible modern world.”

“I wish you would,” said Ford, a little belligerently.

“Some other time,” the priest replied. “Right now I want to discuss that question of failure. Let’s see why the Church fails. Oh, I’ll admit that she does fail. In the end, of course, she cannot fail. We Catholics are sure of that. But she failed in England when Henry VIII. wanted a new wife. She failed in all of Scandinavia, and became an exiled outlaw. She fails with thousands of Americans who should be Catholics, but who are gangsters, rotten politicians, drunkards, bad husbands, unfaithful wives, criminals—”

The Dark Side.

“Well!” cried Helen, in admiration. “What a picture of the situation you can paint!”

Ford laughed. “He always makes our difficulties and objections blacker than even we thought them to be.”

The priest smiled a little ruefully.

“No priest,” he said, “could possibly fail to realize the constant failures of the Church. Such failures are too much his own experience in dealing with human souls. You see, Christ and His Church want to remake the world. Well, the frank reality is that millions of people don’t want to be remade. They like their pet vices. They prefer their doubts and mistakes. As a young Jewish boy wrote to me the other day, in what sounded like an echo of the cry of his people before Pilate: ‘I don’t want to be converted. I don’t want your Christ, and I don’t want your Church. Leave me alone in the ways of my ancestors.’ Naturally there was nothing I could do about it—however convinced I am of the importance of Christ and of Christianity for his life—but bow in polite regret and leave him alone.”

The Charge of Failure.

Father Hall’s eyes grew reminiscent.

“You wouldn’t remember that far back,” he said, “but when the late World War rocked civilization, the Church took an awful beating. ‘Christianity has failed,’ was the howl that went up across the world. ‘If the Church had been on the job,’ writer after writer protested, ‘this never would have happened. Here are these Christian people slaughtering one another. Nineteen hundred years of Christianity climaxes in this mass murder.’”

Ford and Helen both nodded.

“That’s just the way I should have felt about it,” said Ford.

“I don’t see how you ever answered that challenge,” added Helen.

The Answer.

Father Hall faced them quietly.

“Naturally I can’t give you the exact quotation, but Father James J. Daly, writing in the ‘America’ magazine, answered it very simply. What, he demanded, has Christianity and the Church to do with this war at all? Since the days of the Protestant rebellion the nations have been determined that the Church should have nothing whatever to do with the

running of the world. The Pope is a prisoner in the Vatican; his words are disregarded by the rulers of Europe. Who are the prophets of our day? Writers whose books and plays and poetry you can search with a microscope and find no slightest glimmer of faith or Christianity. The scientists that created the big guns and the high explosives were the same ones that had already bombarded the gates of heaven and the Rock of Peter. The Church has been forbidden a place in the council of the nations, forbidden a place in education, in literature. She has been told flatly and coldly to mind her own business. But when a war breaks out and hell pops loose among the nations, then the Church is the one that's to blame. After telling the Church for three hundred and fifty years (1550-1914) to shut her mouth, pagans now say to her. 'Why didn't you cry out?' After stripping her, as far as was possible, of all earthly influence, they taunt, 'If you'd done your job, this wouldn't have happened.' After living like pagans, the leaders who pulled the world into war yap like illogical children and say. 'Yes; but you shouldn't have let us do it.'"

Ideas Continue.

Father Hall laughed, and the two young people joined in heartily and sincerely.

"Once more, that's a subject I'm not going into tonight. But if the world isn't plunging into war this minute, two things are preventing it: fear—the fear of world-suicide—and the fact that in the back of men's minds there still remain a few Catholic principles. Men still know that murder, mass murder, too, is wrong. (Murder wasn't considered wrong in pagan days.) They still believe in international justice, which came into existence with the Christian concept of men's brotherhood in God the Father. Despite dictators, men still think that man is too important and too dignified to be merely gun fodder and a human bomb to clear the path for the glory of some tyrant."

Father Hall waved all that aside.

"But I can't go into that now. Let's stick to the one question of the Church's failure."

Ford and Helen were intensely interested in what, might have become an almost oratorical side-track. But they knew Father Hall's insistence on sticking to one point at a time, so they nodded, and he retraced.

Next Time.

"If," he said, in a footnote he could not resist, "we go hurtling into another world war, I hope I'll be spared that chestnut about the failure of Christianity—at least, any war started by the pagan Hitler, the agnostic Mussolini, the materialist Stalin, Poland's divorced Beck, England's Protestant Chamberlain, and the whole un-Catholic crew who regard the Church as the punching-bag for them to beat in times of peace in order that they might keep themselves in trim for a real fight."

"Chamberlain, too?" demanded Ford.

"Well, perhaps I've exaggerated slightly. But certainly Chamberlain is no Catholic. I'd be interested to know just how much of fundamental Christianity he really holds. But omit him if you wish. And instead let's take the overwhelming mass of English writers who, like most of the really popular writers of the world, are pagan to the core. Paul Claudel, poet, dramatist, former French ambassador to the United States, once said of them that you could search their writing from end to end and find not the slightest intimation of the fact that God died on the cross for their salvation."

Others Fail, Too.

"Yes," Father Hall continued, "the Church fails with individuals, and she fails with nations. So, too, do good mothers fail:

"They see their sons become black sheep; they weep over their fallen daughters. So, too, do great doctors fail: They give their patients prescriptions and diets and advice that would inevitably lead to health; the patients simply decline to follow the doctors' guidance, and regretfully the doctors see their patients grow deathly sick and die. So, too, do the best teachers and the finest schools fail: Students decline to study; they come to school and successfully defy the efforts of the school to educate them; they go to classes in classic literature and come out and read ephemeral junk. I guess failure is

pretty much the common experience of all those who deal with human beings.

“You see the one inescapable fact that we all come to know is the fact of human free will. You can use force on an animal and see him eventually turn out to be the kind of animal you want him to be. You can breed a plant to some highly specialized purpose, and, if your method is right, your plant will produce an eyeless potato or a seedless orange or a new and delicious blend of peach and plum. But human beings?”

Free Choice.

“Yes,” agreed Ford, ruefully; “they’re a problem.”

“And that’s simple history,” continued Father Hall. “Men have that dangerous power to do what they want to do despite persuasion, a sense of their own best interests, and the presence of the police, their loved ones, Christ, the Church. Men continue to steal in an age that has used as its most widely accepted truism, Crime Doesn’t Pay. Young people still refuse to get the education and training that they know are essential for a good job and success in life. Men still drink themselves to death, even though everywhere around them they see the horrible effects of excessive drinking. Human beings see the world-wide effect of vice, yet they say, ‘Who cares for consequences? We’ll take a chance. This is what we want, our passion, our lust, our intemperance, and to hell with the consequences!’”

Tough Problem.

The facts were sufficiently obvious to draw quick acquiescence from the young couple. Anyone who had even slight experience with human folly knew how men, and women, too, went after what they wanted and threw to the winds all consideration of consequences.

Father Hall went on.

“Now the Church is—we may put it this way—a very peculiar organization. It is dealing not only with man’s intellect, as science does. Nor does it deal merely with man’s emotions, as most religions do. A scientist can teach his class that $(x + y)^2 = x^2 + 2xy + y^2$. He can demonstrate that a certain chemical formula is the cause of the crimson light seen in some distant stars. The students nod approvingly and leave the classroom, and that is that. The students don’t have to do anything because or as a result of these things being true; they don’t have to be kinder or purer or more unselfish.

“Most religions give their members a pleasant sermon and some nice music. If the preacher is eloquent, the church is crowded. If the music is good, the congregation is thrilled. But if the preacher starts to wade into questions like divorce, birth-control, the sins of the members of the congregation, he is not likely to be too popular. And there are great religions, like Moslemism and Hinduism, that make almost no personal demands upon their followers. In fact, some of those religions take for granted the existence of solid human vices, like revenge, sexual laxity, hatred of the stranger, and of those of a different race or caste.

Practice Demanded.

“The Church is not an ethical-culture society conducting classes in abstract truths or aesthetic entertainment. It’s a tough organization demanding a lot of hard things of its members. The Church says, ‘You have to believe in one Father in heaven’; and then she immediately adds, ‘So get rid of that hatred that you feel in your heart for any human being; all men are your brothers, and you must treat them as such.’ She says, ‘Follow the pure Christ’; and she immediately adds the conclusion, ‘And note that adjective pure; that means for you no adultery, no impurity of thought or conduct, no divorce, no birth-control.’ She says, ‘Personal property is to be regarded as a sacred trust; it belongs to God; it is given to help you on your way to eternity; but you are merely the steward of that property, and God will demand a careful account of the use to which you put it.’ Hardly has she finished saying this when she adds, ‘hence no theft, no grafting, no using of money to crush your weaker brother, no exploitation, no oppression of the workingman, no injustice.’

“The Church bravely and with sublime and often apparently unfounded optimism goes on making terribly difficult

demands.

“She persistently asks lazy men to do heroic things. She asks selfish human beings to be unselfish. She asks mere mortals to be like Christ . . . to be like God.

Optimism.

“Knowing that she makes such great demands, I am not surprised at her frequent failures. I must confess that I am amazed at her recurrent success.

“After nineteen hundred years or more of pretty bitter and disillusioning experience the Church holds to her unfaltering belief in humanity. She has never lowered her standards as a concession to weak mortality. She has never dropped her ideals merely because men and women found it hard to gain them in entirety. Optimistically, the Church goes on believing that individual men can advance to heroic heights; that humanity can constantly improve; that the human race, whose visible life is bounded by the two blacknesses, can rise to a supernatural destiny in which, endlessly happy, men will do God-like things in a God-like way under the approving smile of God, their Father.”

Despite Humanity.

Ford shook his head a trifle despairfully.

“That’s really expecting a lot from us poor human critters,” he said. “After all, the obvious fact is that we are selfish, greedy, lustful, easily discouraged, dreadfully lazy. . . .”

“And,” added Helen, “proud and conceited and snooty.”

“Granted,” replied the priest. “And that is exactly why the Church is at once magnificent and doomed to constant failure. For the Church is realistic. She knows all about human failures, defects, deficiencies. And yet, knowing that, she does not abandon men to their low ideals. She doesn’t say, ‘Oh, well! after all they are just human beings with strong leanings to the animal side. Let’s let ‘em have their way. They’re naturally passionate, so we’ll say that illicit passion isn’t really so important. They seem to be bent on coveting their neighbours’ wives, so we’ll blink our eyes and admit that divorce is necessary for the modern man and woman. When a man is hurt, he naturally strikes back hard and viciously; so we’ll stop preaching human forgiveness and say, ‘We don’t blame you a bit, if, when he hits you, you hit him back.’ And, after all, there is a difference between petty stealing and a big corporation’s crushing out its small competitors, or a powerful nation’s annexing a defenceless neighbour; so we’ll say that those things are all right, and in that way we’ll keep directors and dictators happy and friendly.’”

Holding to Ideals.

“The amazing part of the Church’s attitude is that she clings to her ideals and keeps on telling faltering, backsliding, lazy, often vicious human beings that they can reach those ideals, in fact, that they not merely can but must reach them.

“I personally don’t know what would happen to the world if the Church ever stopped clinging to her belief in human beings. If, like the Communist, she said, ‘Human beings are just animals; you can expect only animal morality from them; you’re a fool if you trust them to run even a small business. . . .’ Or if, like the Nazi, she said, ‘Just a few people are capable of reaching high ideals. The rest are unfit for any of the privileges of civilization—the vote, the right to own property, the opportunity for education. . . .’ If, like the modern atheist, she said, ‘Men are beasts and the brothers of beasts; don’t be surprised when you find that their lusts are beastly and they fight it out in the jungle competition of big business and on the battlefield. . . .’ If, like most of Protestantism, she declared, ‘Of course, Christ condemned impurity, divorce, neglect of religious duties. Of course, He commanded faith in His doctrines, in the spirit of penance, of self-control. But, after all, you can’t ask such hard things of these moderns. They’d stop coming to church. . . .’

“No; despite failure and collapse all around her, the Church says, ‘These are my ideals because they were the ideals of Christ. Unless I continue to hold them up before men’s eyes, men will look, not to the stars, but to the gutter. Unless I keep reminding them that they are destined for a place with the angels, men will act like animals. Unless I ask hard things

of them, they will do the easy, shiftless, criminal things that mean the collapse of the whole world.’ “

No Problems Barred.

Father Hall knocked the ashes out of his pipe, filled it, and held it expectantly in his hand.

“Another reason why the Church fails,” he continued, “is because she will tackle any sort of job, any kind of person. Some religions—there is no use in being unpleasantly specific—won’t accept anyone as a member until he has proved that he will be a good member. Some religions want only the fashionable, the better-circumstanced to make up their congregation. Some religions throw out any member that won’t live up to their principles.

“But the Catholic Church will accept any sort of person that wants her help and the principles and practices of her founder. She will work with a nonentity, with the poor, with the stupid, the backward, the stubborn. She will take back again and again the lustful who is sorry for his sins. She doesn’t throw out the drunkard, though his sins may cause her to weep over him. She regards the sinner with compassionate eyes, and when he comes stumbling home, she welcomes him with motherly arms.

Backward.

“The Church will tackle the most backward nations, and she has done so throughout history. She will go right down into the bush and start to work on a race of head-hunters, with the same optimistic confidence that she showed when she walked for the first time into pagan Rome. She’ll go into a country that is deep, deep in hereditary and habitual vice and cruelty and undertake the herculean task of cleaning up.

“You must remember that Protestantism took over countries on which the Church had worked for centuries. Before the Church began the conversion of the people of those countries, cruelty and violence had been the national rule. Mercy was unknown. Democracy was not even an ideal, or, if it did exist in isolated sections, it existed only for the very, very few. Protestantism took over a world already civilized and learned in Christian virtue. Protestantism has never yet tackled a land that had to be taught Christian principles from the ground up, (except in some isolated Pacific islands where it was looking over its shoulder to see how much progress the Catholic missionaries were making). Even in India and in China the Protestant missionaries came only long after Catholic priests had been at work there.

“So, if you want the example of a real job, recall what the Church has attempted and accomplished in pagan countries. The Church asked libertines to be pure. She asked tyrants to be merciful. She urged charity upon the rich. She asked the bravado hot on his vendetta to lay aside his dagger. She asked the slave-owner to remember that his slave was his equal in the eyes of God and the Church. She undertook, in other words’ the apparently impossible task of revolutionizing human conduct on the basis of new and humanly difficult principles.

The Church Meets Sex.

“Several years ago I was working on a rather odd assignment, one that brought me in contact with a quiet little scholar. From his almost prissy appearance you’d not guess that he was the author of a book on sex and religion. But he was, and he brought me a copy of the book, and I thumbed through it. I doubt whether the man was a Christian; certainly he was in no sense an orthodox Christian. And for that reason I found the thesis in his book most interesting.

“No religion, he maintained, until the coming of Christianity—by which, of course, he meant early Christianity, which was the Catholic Church—had ever demanded personal purity of its members. Uniquely Christianity expected its members to lead sexually pure lives, to respect the institution of marriage, to refrain from divorce, to aspire to the ideals of virginity exemplified by Christ and by Mary and taught by St. Paul.

“I am not sure how completely correct his thesis was. But I certainly know that the Moslem was encouraged to have four wives; the Hindu saw no connection between religion and personal purity; the Jew might be strict about adultery, but he was pretty casual about divorce. I sighed when I read the book, for right there was one of the big reasons why the Catholic Church recurrently fails. She asks her members to be pure, and the plain fact of the matter is that purity is a lot to

ask of human beings, whether that purity be virginity outside of marriage, fidelity in marriage, or loyalty to one wife or husband.

Who Cares?

“A friend of mine, recently returned from Soviet Russia, was talking about conditions there. ‘There is just one sin,’ he said, ‘that I could discover in Russia: disloyalty to the party and injustice to a fellow party member. If a man or a woman is not guilty of that sin, he or she is a good Communist. Nobody there worries if Jake sleeps with Minnie tonight and with Susie tomorrow night. Your personal morality is your private affair.’

“Of course, moral laxity there went so far, as we all remember, that women were married, so-called, to several successive men in the course of a week. Sex morality was disdained by a good working Communist. I might say that from what I see of many an American Communist the same is true here.

In the Way.

“Now, if I seem to be belabouring this point, it is simply because I know literally hundreds of people who would become Catholics tomorrow if it weren’t for some mixed-up marriage, some strong urge toward lax personal conduct. Catholic faith is beautiful; Catholic devotions are charming; Catholic practice is doggone hard. And the Church insists that faith, devotion, and practice all have to be accepted by a Catholic.

“If we could repeal the Sixth Commandment, modify the Church’s strict attitude toward marriage, give permission for the practice of artificial birth-control, we’d double the membership in the Catholic Church inside of a generation. Very few Catholics would fall away. Millions would join our ranks.”

Father Hall finally lighted his pipe. The other two sat thinking. With all honesty they could recall plenty of their own acquaintances that fell into the class of which Father Hall was speaking. Sex purity was certainly a stumbling block to many a man. A scrambled marriage kept many a woman out of the Church. And of the fallen-away Catholics they personally knew, quite too many were loose livers, involved in some slightly queer marriage, or frequently loud in their denunciation of the Church because she was so strait-laced, strict, and, as far as sex and marriage are concerned, centuries behind the times.

Look for the Woman.

“Whenever a young Catholic drops away from the Church,” he said, “I start looking around for the woman involved. She’s not always there. But she usually is there.”

“Oh!” cried Helen. “Are you blaming us women for everything?”

Father Hall held up a restraining hand.

“And when,” he continued, “a young woman leaves the Church, I’m pretty sure she is involved with some man to whom the Church would have to say a regretful but emphatic no.”

Again they laughed. It was just one of those self-evident things that they themselves had noticed without knowing they were noticing it.

Opposition.

“There is, however, another explanation for the Church’s failures, an explanation that history makes very clear. You see every generation is simply filled with people that are determined that the Church will not succeed. And they are a surprisingly varied and amazingly energetic lot of people.

“There are always the ignorant, whose name continues to be legion. The mobs of Roman days were whipped to a frenzy of resentment by being told that the Christians ate, in cannibalistic fashion, a little child at their love feast, thereby distorting our teaching that at the Eucharist we consume the Body of Christ. Nero pointed to the Christians and said, ‘They burned Rome!’ And out the ignorant mob scuttled to get the hated Christians.

“Moslem mothers used the word Christian to scare their babies: ‘The Christians will get you if you don’t look out.’ Calles, in Mexico, pointed to the Church and assured the poor peon that there was his most vicious enemy. The demagogues have always played the mob against the Church, and they still do.

Ignorance.

“We Catholics never cease to be dumb-founded at the ignorance of millions of our sworn enemies. The men who were foiled by the K.K.K. (the Ku Klux Klan) were in the main a vastly ignorant lot. That same type is now sucked into the Judge Rutherford group now known as the Jehovah Witnesses. The things they believe about Catholics actually fill their books with the most incredible ravings. Their capacity for swallowing in large doses things that we laugh at when we hear them seems to be simply unlimited.

“They still think that we priests wear birettas to hide horns. They’re positive that all convents are filled with dungeons for naughty nuns. They caricature our beliefs until we are ready to roar with laughter, and we would laugh if it weren’t so tragic. And, naturally, being utterly ignorant of the Church and entirely misled about what she holds and does, they have sworn by mighty oaths that the Church shall not succeed.

“Millions like that are being trained by the ridiculous museums of religion in Soviet Russia or anywhere else Communism is seeking to gain a foothold such as in rural China or Vietnam. Hundreds of thousands of Mexican school children in this year of Our Lord of 1940 are being fed a diet of lies about the Church, lies that they’ll probably never quite outgrow. But such was the diet of Protestants for generations in the past. Such it is for many of them today.

Open Foes.

“You’ve only to glance through your histories to see the long record of individual men who have determined that they will never—no; not so long as they have strength to fight her—let the Church succeed. Often they have been sworn enemies of the Church. Too frequently they have been false friends.

“Nero and Diocletian set the standard for hating and fighting the Church. You may be sure that though their persecutions gave the Church uncounted martyrs, others in large numbers fell away because they couldn’t face social exile, loss of jobs, death under torture.

“Mohammed and his followers were consecrated to smash the Church. It seemed at times that they would succeed. A long line of rulers that followed Arius, the renegade and heretical priest, actually drove the Pope out of Rome. The Huns, Attila and Totila boasted that they would stable their horses in St. Peter’s, and they almost made good their boast. Henry VIII and Gustavus Adolphus waged open war on the Church.

War Today.

“The men today who have made open war upon the Church are among the world’s most important—Hitler and Stalin, for example. The tradition of beating down the Church with machine gun and firing squad, a tradition begun by Calles of Mexico, is continued in Mexico by Cardenas in far more subtle and effective fashion. He kills in the souls of children any love they may have for the Church and marks the Church as their vicious, relentless enemy.

“But Bertrand Russell, too, wages open war on the Church. So does H. G. Wells. So, in Europe, did Anatole France, and, more cleverly, James Joyce. So does that great army of pagan writers in every nation who follow the lead of Voltaire in calling the Church an infamous thing that must be destroyed. That their cleverness, added to the force of her other enemies, hasn’t destroyed the Church long since is to me one of the strong proofs of her divinity. Today the libraries of the world are filled with books whose dynamite is meant to blow the Church to bits. Some of it is as stupid as, but more malevolent than, the hill-billies who read it. Some of it is as clever as Zola and Mark Twain.

Traitors.

“Open enemies are bad. But I sometimes wonder whether false friends haven’t done the Church more harm than those

enemies have done. Certainly many of the mediaeval kings were determined that the Church should never cramp their tyranny or hold them back from unjust wars. They pretended to be Catholics, and they drugged churchmen with gold and luxury. That type always has existed. It exists today. From the false friend, O Lord, deliver us!

“Then don’t forget that besides individuals there are great groups vowed to keep the Catholic Church from succeeding. The synagogue of St. Peter’s early days would not listen to any word of Christ and His Church. Militant followers of the religion of Mohammed spent centuries in war on the Church. By the way, has it ever occurred to you to stop to think what would have happened to our world if militant followers of Mohammed had succeeded? How would you like to be a vassal of the Ottoman Turks, Ford? Your independent spirit, Helen, wouldn’t have had the ghost of a chance in a harem.

“Every heresy that marked the history of the Church represented an enormous group of men who were determined that the Church should not succeed. Most of these heresies are now frayed and faded historical curiosities. In their day they were strong and relentless factors directed to the destruction of the Church.

“Today anti-Catholic groups are numerous and strong.

Modern Foes.

“Communism is militant in its war on the Church. Militant Socialism destroys the Church wherever it gains force. Militant atheism is a world power in Soviet Russia and a deadly force in ‘Red’ China, with apostles and a literature and money and the vowed purpose of wiping out Catholicity. The grand Orient lodge of the Masons—”

“Father,” interrupted Ford, protesting, “I know lots of fine, sincere Masons who haven’t a thought of attacking the Church.”

“So do I,” said Father Hall. “I’m talking about the great Masonic bodies that made war on the Church in France, in Portugal, in Italy, in Mexico and Central America, and in a dozen other countries.

“And has it ever occurred to you to notice what strange groups join bands and become allies when it’s a question of beating down the Church? We Catholics know that any attack on the Church wins the sympathy of people who have no other thing in common with the attackers but that antipathy against the Church. When the Reds in Spain were shooting priests, burning and pillaging churches and raping nuns during and before the recent traumatic Civil War, scarcely a non-Catholic voice was raised in protest. And the list of men who sympathized with Red Spain was studded with Protestant bishops, ministers, and religious leaders, along with anarchists, Communists, Socialists, atheists and frank God-haters. Why? Well, the triumph of Red Spain would have meant the martyrdom of the Church there, probably her end. That was enough to inspire the allied sympathy of various groups that, on any other grounds, would have been sworn eternal enemies of one another.”

“That’s true,” said Ford. “I’ve often been surprised myself at the wide variety of people who don’t like the Church.”

“We sometimes admit,” said the priest, “that we are complimented in our enemies. But remember: The Church is always a minority group. It is not easy for a minority group to continue to exist without some failures, particularly when such a group is struggling against varied, powerful, and relentless foes.”

Force Defends.

Again Father Hall paused for a second before he continued.

“At the present moment,” he said, “the world is getting ready for another war. It looks very much as if that war is going to settle once and for all the question of whether dictatorship of the fascistic and communistic stamp will succeed or democracy prevail.”

“I hope,” said Ford, with suppressed intensity, “that if dictatorship wins I’ll be dead on some nice, comfortable battlefield.”

“Move over,” said Helen; “I’ll want to join you.”

“Then we agree,” asked the priest, smiling, “that democracy is to your mind clearly the finer form of government?”

“Certainly!” Ford almost shouted.

“What an absurd question!” sniffed Helen.

“You’d be willing to fight and die for the blessings that come with democracy?”

“Certainly!”

“Absolutely!”

Said Ford, in an afterthought, “I suppose that is a matter of plain fact, I’ll have to fight.”

Father Hall leaned back, his point already made.

Fighting for the Self-evident.

“That’s all most interesting,” he said. “Here’s democracy, bringing as it does freedom of opportunity, human dignity, peace, justice under the law to all men. It’s a glorious ideal, a wonderful form of government.”

“The best we have found so far,” nodded Ford.

“Yet we are getting ready to fight for it, roll out our tanks, and warm up our planes, and rattle our machine guns, and muster our money men, and ships to defend it against men who call it the world’s stupidest form of government, who want to wipe it from the earth, and who are determined that they will do just that.”

“Just let ‘em try!” said Helen.

“They never will succeed,” added Ford.

“But you think there’ll be a hot battle first?” asked Father Hall.

“Unless there’s some amazing and totally unexpected accident or piece of luck—yes.”

Ford and Helen were clearly in agreement.

“Well,” said Father Hall, “here’s democracy, a glorious thing, and we’re going to have to fight to the death on battlefield, sea, and in air in order to save it. Doesn’t it strike you as a little surprising that for twenty centuries and in the face of the most powerfully organized forces—the armies of the Moslems and those of the German princes, the Vandals of Geiseric and Huneric seduced by the errors of Arius, the bandits of Mexico’s Calles, the storm troopers of Hitler, the Red Army of Stalin, and unnumbered others—the Church has had to wage war . . . without an army or a navy . . . and has always ultimately won?”

“How about the Crusaders?” demanded Ford. “How about the armies of the Catholic kings after the Reformation?”

Almost Without Defence.

“Sometimes,” said the priest, “Catholics did organize armies to defend the Church, which they think at least as important as we Americans think democratic government. But those cases are rare. Throughout most of history the Church had to meet her armed, ruthless enemies—as she certainly has to meet them today—with no arms and no real way of enforcing her law. Always the Papal States were a weak little nation. Today the Church has none of those forces on which the enemies of democracy count to beat democracy and on which we democrats count to save it. The Church has no police, no secret service, no army, no navy. There are no courts before which traitors can be called for any but spiritual punishments.

“We feel that we have to fight for our democratic ideals, and when we have to, we do fight. But the Church has had to struggle along without the ability really to fight. Today, as throughout the major portion of history, the Church has recourse only to threats. She can excommunicate traitors, who probably have already left the Church. She can warn them that they will lose their souls, but they probably have ceased to believe in souls. She can warn them of the danger of eternal damnation—if they still admit that there is a hell.

“If things so self-evident as the blessings of democracy will be lost unless men are ready to fight for them, isn’t it a little noteworthy that the difficult things, which are the ideals of the Catholic Church, always attacked, always riddled and ridiculed, always under fire, have prevailed and today still prevail, despite the Church’s complete lack of any physical force with which to whip her enemies?”

That's Why.

“And are you surprised that her powerfully armed and physically strong enemies, like Red Russia and Red Mexico and dark brown Germany under the boot of the Nazis, for a time seem to succeed?”

“When you're counting the failures of the Church, do try to remember the miracle of her success—unarmed and usually undefended—against the armies and hordes of spies and traitors who have at their disposal every conceivable human means to wipe the Church from the face of the earth.

“And don't be surprised if through cowardice and fear a Catholic leaves the Church when a machine gun points at the pit of his stomach or a concentration camp is the threat to his wife and children.”

Small Worlds.

Again the priest paused, as if collecting his thoughts. He was, as a matter of fact, searching in his memory for cases. Not that cases were difficult to recall; the difficulty was in the selecting of a few cases from the many that clamoured for attention.

“Somewhere, we all recall, man was called a microcosm.”

“Isn't he just that?” agreed Helen. “A little world, a world in miniature.”

“That's why, I suppose, from the study of an individual man we can learn a great deal about the whole world. The world repeats in magnified, multiplied style the history of individual men and women.”

Again Father Hall paused. The two young people looked curious.

“This,” prompted Ford, “is, of course, prelude to something?”

The priest nodded.

“I have personally known the Church to fail in many, many cases,” he continued. “I wonder whether, if we looked at some of those cases, you couldn't see why it is that sometimes the Church fails with whole nations, as she sometimes fails with large groups of people.”

Unconsciously they leaned forward, as people do when the conversation becomes factual and deeply personal.

“This is interesting,” said Helen, quietly.

And Ford, “We're certainly listening, Father.”

Let's Look at Cases.

“Well,” said the priest, “let's take case number one: a young man, educated in Catholic schools, clever, attractive, well established in life. He comes to see me about a young woman in whom he's interested. We talk about her for a bit, and then he says, ‘I might as well tell you, Father: She's been married before.’”

“We go over the Catholic position on the subject of divorce, but I know that as I talk the face of that young woman stands between us. The young man isn't hearing what I say. He is hearing only the beating of his own love-tossed heart, and the voice of the woman calling him.

“Within a short time after our visit he marries her, and the Church has failed in his case.

“There's a second case. This young man is of old Irish Catholic stock. He's a naturally clever business man, and he finds that he has the Midas touch. By the time he is twenty-five years old, he has made his first million. At forty he is the head of an enormous steel mill. He's very busy now. He hasn't time for Mass. He is engrossed in making money, and more money. Then there is trouble in the mill. He is, truth to tell, paying his employees criminally low wages. He hears from the Bishop, who expresses himself as on the side of the strikers. Furiously the man cries out, ‘I'll run my business as I want to run it, and no Bishop or Pope can tell me how.’ He wins the strike, but he is a Catholic no more.

More Personal History.

“The third case is a woman. She comes into the parlour late one evening. Her hands twist the handkerchief she holds, and her mouth is drawn with pain as she tells her story. She is a secretary, and she has fallen in love with her employer.

But he is married and has no intention of facing the scandal that would come with a divorce.

“‘But I love him,’ she says. ‘I’ve been living with him. I can’t give him up, and he can’t give me up.’

“We thrash it all out—the consequences to her future, to her soul, to his family. She sees all that. But passion is too strong. When she leaves me, I know that the Church has failed in her case, for she is leaving her faith, too.

“The fourth case is a young woman who goes away to a State university. She is clever; but as far as her religion is concerned, she knows only the simplest fundamentals. Her favourite professor in her sophomore year is a brilliant and attractive young psychologist. Ironically, though gently, he riddles her faith. He shows her, or he seems to show her, that she has no soul at all, so how can she possibly talk about saving it? He gives her books against her religion, though she has read almost no books in favour of it. She notices how many of the professors at the university have no religion, and how gracefully dignified the chapel services can be without any real faith or the Real Presence.

“She always means to consult a priest, but she is not sure that she can find one so clever and attractive as her professor. She really wants to read up on the Catholic side of the question but she has to read assigned books for classes, and she really has no time for other reading.

“She ends by giving up her faith, whose teaching she never really knew, because she never troubled to get the answers to arguments against that faith. The Church has failed in her case.

Still Others.

“This family, my next case, has made money recently and rapidly. They have a growing son and daughter, and their one ambition is to give them the very best that life can offer. Now, the mother notices that the majority of Catholics are not in the social register and that the majority in the social register are decidedly not Catholics. So she sends her son and daughter off to fashionable schools, where they have no chance to get to Mass; where the only references to religion are made condescendingly and with amusement; where they will be likely to meet, fall in love with, and marry delightful young pagans. And since the Catholic religion is most assuredly unfashionable, they will probably drop it out of their lives.

“The next case is very simple. The young man is determined to make money, and lots of it. But he notices that in his particular line of business the big jobs and the important salaries go to men who wear the scimitar and belong to the proper Masonic lodges. He talks the matter over with some of his Masonic friends, who point out quite logically that Masons cannot be blamed if they are loyal to their own and a little cold to outsiders. He knows that joining the Masons means leaving the Church. But remaining in the Church isn’t making him the money he wants; joining the Masons will make him that money. The Church fails completely in his case.

Lazy . . . Proud.

“The young actor that I knew failed very easily, too. He played late on Saturday nights, and to get himself to Mass the next morning was a plain nuisance. So was abstaining from meat on Fridays as we Catholics do as a little penance to honour the day Our Lord died for us, especially when he was on the road. And he couldn’t take that fat part in that smutty musical comedy and still go to Holy Communion. So he shrugged his shoulders. Later on he would undoubtedly come back to the Church. When there was a Catholic benefit, he’d be delighted to donate his services. But religion was a little too much a burden, and he had to give it up . . . at least for the years of his theatrical success.

“Then there was the stubborn young fellow. I never knew anyone else who could set his jaw so hard when he heard an order. Any sort of order made him furious. He was brilliant, one of the most brilliant young fellows I’ve ever known. But he hated authority, and all that anyone had to do was to give him an order, and his spine stiffened with pride in the most visible resistance.

“He got out into the world, and the orders of the Church began to grate irritatingly. He didn’t like the Pope’s speaking out on business and politics. He was furious when he ran into the Church’s legislation on birth control. He thought the parish priest a stupid old fool, and the sermons to which he had to listen made him physically sick. He began to feel that

his religion was a handicap to a successful man, so he soft-pedalled his Catholicity. He wondered whether he was too big to practise it. By Jove! he really didn't need it. The Church failed in his case, and failed because he was too big for this medieval institution.

The Enormous Dime.

“And so it goes for each little microcosm, each little man and woman. The Church fails as far as they are concerned. But really the Church is not the one that fails. They fail. Lust, passion, money, pride, laziness, society—those mean more to them than do their souls, the ideals of the Church, Christ Himself. So it is they who fail. The Church goes her serene way.”

“Yet it seems strange,” Ford objected. “If the motives of religion are so strong, if the beautiful faith of the Church is so compelling—”

Father Hall dived into his pocket and pulled out a dime.

“Remember the dime and how it can get between your eye and the enormous sun?”

“Remember the man who finds the love of some unworthy woman more important than real success in life, than the calm beauty of his wife's love, than his children? Remember the fellow who in hot blood lust kills and then has to live through all the hell of trial, prison, and execution? Remember the millions of people who spend their lives struggling for things that you and I think unworthy of a single lazy gesture?”

Here and Now.

“The immediate urge of passion is always terrific in its power. The glitter of money is hypnotic. The present advantage weighs down the balance when the other factor holds some advantage that won't, let's say, come till after death. Oh, the mind is so terribly lazy when it comes to struggling after truth.

“‘The world is too much with us,’ Wordsworth said, in another connection. Today's good time seems so much more attractive than tomorrow's eternal happiness.”

Father Hall grew serious, as he always did when he was talking to these young people. He leaned forward a little in his chair.

He Failed, Too.

“Yes,” he said, quietly; “the Church fails again and again. In that, as in all else, she is very like her Founder and her Head, Jesus Christ. I suppose you could tell me, without my having to repeat it, the story of His apparent failure.”

Helen nodded. “That's world history,” she agreed.

“Well, remember now: That failure was made by a man so attractive that, seen through the inverted telescope of twenty centuries and met in the pages of four slim little Gospels, He is still the world's most attractive, most charming man.

“There is no gesture in His life that is not beautiful, consoling, blessing-full. There is no word of His that isn't remarkably vivid, gripping, thought-provoking. He commanded health as no man has ever done. He went about doing good. What man, He challenged them, could justly accuse Him of sin?”

“And in the end the whole world of His time rose up and killed Him.

Why His Death?

“The mob had been misled. Their leaders had lied about Him to such an extent that the people laughed with joy when He was nailed to a cross.

“The priests didn't want Him. His success meant the end of their proud position of leadership, and they had no intention of giving that up—no; not even to the Son of God Himself.

“The buyers and sellers in the Temple didn't want Him. He had messed up their business once or twice before, when He drove them out of the stalls and from behind the money tables. He was bad for business.

“Herod looked into His pure eyes and knew that if he followed the leadership of this innocent leader he would have to give up his incestuous wife and look no more on the shameless dance of that wife’s daughter.

“Pilate wanted to befriend an obviously innocent man. But if he did, he would sacrifice the friendship of Caesar, and his career would be over. And as he was a career diplomat . . .

“Judas had spent three years in His company. But he had expected that as treasurer of the company he would carry a full purse. Evidently the mission of Christ was as empty as was the purse. Well, thirty pieces of silver were better than nothing, so . . .

“The soldiers flung Him down on the Cross. Cruelty was a matter of routine with them. A victim was a victim. Where’s the hammer? Hand me those nails.

Like Him.

“So the greatest man that ever lived died a failure. Of course, He had not failed. But the weaknesses and sins of men had come between them and Him, and they decided that death was the only thing He deserved.

“Well, if ever the Church grows too successful, I shall worry. If ever men of sin start to love her and dictators and tyrants to coddle her and the lustful to find her ideals palatable, and the selfish to admire her unselfish commands, I shall wonder what has happened. She will cease to be like her Master, Christ. She will, for that matter, cease to be like all the world’s great benefactors, for whom the world has always reserved its dungeons, its racks, its stakes.

Long-Range View.

“And remember this: There is always the long-range and the short-range view of history. Seen at short range, with regard to this one man or that rebellious nation, the Church may seem to fail. But over the long course of history, in her influence on humanity, in what she does for all the nations of civilization and for those outside civilization’s pale, she does not fail. She never will fail.

“I advise you to look at the Church from that long-range view. Triumphant enemies rise and crow in victory. But they swiftly disappear. Tyrants are sure that they have crushed the Church; time proves them stupidly wrong. One highly publicized Catholic falls away. Faith is born in the souls of a hundred others, of whom nobody ever hears. This Catholic nation loses the faith. The faith comes to some remote tribe in Africa.

“Christ died, and the triumphant march of Christianity had just begun.

“The Church fails, and her conquest of souls for Christ continues uninterruptedly.

“And somehow, Ford, and you, Helen, I’ve a feeling that where you are concerned the Church will in the end not fail.”

“I wonder,” said Ford.

But Helen was silent.

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