

# THE FIGHTING CHURCH

Rev. Valentine Varona, C. M.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH has always sought that all men be saved, that all should rise again to the life of grace but she knows that first they must suffer and die with Jesus, for it is from the Cross their salvation flows. She wants all her children to give themselves up entirely, in these days, to the thought, love and embrace of Christ, and Christ crucified.

Oh, Cross of Christ! Thou art the Book of life open for all to read. Thou art a Book open for all to gather round and write their names in letters of purest gold! Let us take our stand, then, at the foot of the Cross, and with the sorrows of the Mother and the anguish of the Son filling our hearts, let us meditate . . . let us study, the mighty problem of our own and that of others. " Behold the Tree whence hung the world's ransom; come, let us adore!

The Drama of Christ's Passion and Death is summed up by the Church in one felicitous phrase of her hymn to the Cross "*Mors et vita duello conflixere mirando*," "Life and death engaged in fearful battle." Our Redeemer had compassion on human wretchedness, and going forth to battle with the Prince of Death, died, but in His death triumphed, and gave Life to mankind.

The struggle was fierce. Tears on Christ's entry into the Holy City; deep anxiety and the pain of departure at the Last Supper; agony of soul and sweat of blood in the garden of olives; forsaken by His own; contrivances of love with Judas; silence before Herod; insults, affronts and humiliations along the streets of Jerusalem. The crown of thorns clamps His brow, thirst consumes Him, and the cruel scourge has left His sacred body one bleeding, burning wound. Then follows the way to Calvary, the outrage of the crucifixion, the shame of being stripped, the mysterious "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken Me? And on the cross, His bodily sufferings are enhanced by bitterness of soul; He sees before Him a blinded people that rejects Him and cries out to Him: May His Blood fall on us and on our children! He hears the scoffing of His enemies; He gathers before His eyes the ingratitude of the human race. . . . What titanic struggle now encompasses Him " *Mors et vita duello conflixere mirando!*"

Life and death engaged in fearful battle!

But He died so that from His death Life might sally forth triumphant!

From that moment Jesus Christ wields sceptre over all things, and is Master of every human heart. In His Name every knee shall bow in heaven, on earth and under the earth; and every tongue shall confess, that He is Lord of all." (Philippians ii, 8 foll.)

From the. Death of Christ flowed for all men the life of divine grace. And the Church, lost in admiration and joy at this mystery of Mercy, at this divine Offering in Sacrifice for us that unlocks the gates of Heaven, cries out in her emotion "O happy fault, that claimed such and so great a Redeemer!"

## THE GREAT MYSTERY.

Admirable, sublime, is the work of our Redemption; but frankly, considering the Tree of Life so laden with fruits of salvation, on the one hand, and the fruits actually plucked by mankind, on the other, we are dumbfounded and seek an answer. One drop of Christ's Blood shed for our ransom would have been more than enough to redeem a thousand worlds like ours. Jesus might have redeemed us by shedding a single tear, or by a prayer for our forgiveness. Of this there is no doubt, for "as far as the ocean exceeds one drop of water, so do Christ's merits surpass our debt." But Christ shed all His Blood; His whole life was but one long martyrdom. And, as if this were not sufficient, He remains night and day on our altars as a Victim; perpetually He intercedes for us in Heaven.

## HOW IS IT THEN THAT SO MANY SOULS STILL FIND THEMSELVES ESTRANGED FROM CHRIST?

Any Catholic fixing his eyes on the map of the world will discover that 1,300 millions know nothing about Christ, and that the ransomed world today is athirst with murder, hate and voluptuousness. Are these the fruits plucked by mankind from the Tree of Life of Calvary?

"Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God!". . . Who is man that he should pretend to penetrate God's infinite ways or fathom His judgments, so far beyond human reasoning? "Who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counsellor?" (Romans xi, 34),. These are the words that spring to our mind when confronted with the great problem of the salvation of the world.

Words of trust in God, no doubt, but our heart and reason are still left aching, wondering. Knowing, as we do know, that Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ yearns to make all men share the fruits of His most holy Passion and Death, we are spurred on to ask the question: Why is it that the vast majority are still plunged into error, vice and paganism? I should not wish to overdo the dark side of the picture before our eyes, but surely I cannot be said to exaggerate when I affirm that not only in the heathen world, but also among Catholics saturated with Christian principles, the number of the apathetic and indifferent towards everything supernatural is legion; not to speak of those who openly turn their backs on Christianity. And all this after the Church's relentless endeavour for so many centuries to Christianize the world and make men share the fruits of Redemption!

(a) Theoretical solution. The solution to the problem is twofold; the first answer is summed up by St. Augustine as follows:

GOD WISHES ALL MEN TO BE SAVED, HE WISHES ALL TO COME TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH. BUT THIS DESIRE, INFINITELY SINCERE, DOES NOT DESTROY THE FREE WILL OF THOSE WHOM HE WISHES TO SAVE.

God, has endowed human beings with the gift of intelligence, a gift that brings us very close to Himself; but having given us the power of reasoning, it would be unworthy of our nature to force us to receive His other supreme gift: the gift of His grace. Therefore, together with knowledge, God gave us the power to choose between good and evil. This power, called free will, is the most delicate token of love we could possibly receive from Him who is our Sovereign Lord and Master; and of this token God will never deprive us.

But, while respecting this gift of free will, God ardently desires our salvation, and calls us to Himself with insistency and fatherly solicitude. "This is the will of God: your sanctification." It remains for us, then, simply to accept God's invitation or to reject it: our free will ultimately will decide our destiny, once we have attained the age of reason.

God Himself has inspired the Psalmist with words of tender beseeching wherewith to show us the reality of his desire for our salvation

*"Hear, O my people, and I will testify to thee.  
O Israel, if thou wilt hearken to me,  
There shall be no new God in thee:  
Neither shalt thou adore a strange god.  
For I am the Lord thy God. . . .  
If my people had heard me,  
If Israel had walked in my ways. . . .  
He had fed them with the fat of wheat,  
And filled them with honey out of the rock."*

(Psalm 80).

And God Himself proved this love in a way that would leave no doubt whatsoever. His Son gave His very life for us. But many, many do not wish to find Life in His Death!

Thus, no one may presume to challenge God's justice and Love. Yet still our minds ache.

The problem throbs with greater violence still when we see our Good Shepherd and Master hanging from the infamous gibbet, looking over the earth, piercing every generation till the end of the world, and uttering that tremendous word: "I THIRST!" I thirst to suffer for all men, for their salvation, for everyone.

Twenty centuries nearly have passed and that thirst burns as fiercely as ever. Today, that word "I THIRST" is as full of reality and meaning as on the day it was uttered by the Divine Victim.

If grace can change the heart of the coldest and most rebellious, how is it that so many ransomed souls fail to reap the fruits of their Redemption? One reels to think of it.

(b) Practical solution. The Apostle St. Paul gives us the clue to a solution which, while yet enshrouded in darkness, affords some comfort to the heart. St. Paul professes to know only one thing: Christ, and Christ crucified, to live by Christ, to despise all things but Christ, and to labour with every ounce of his strength to make Christ known, loved and lived by all men. The crumbling of his body in death he looks forward to, for then his union with his Saviour will be perfect.

With all this zeal and labour, however, he realizes that others must help him: "Pray that the glory of God may run and may be glorified as among you." He clearly sees that the Church of Christ must offer to God a united and fervent petition that his work may be fruitful; and in his epistles he very earnestly asks the help of the faithful:

"I beseech you, therefore, brethren, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Charity of the Holy Ghost, that you help me in your prayers for me to God . . . that the oblation of my service may be acceptable to the saints . . ."

And again, so convinced is he of the power of prayer when offered by the faithful for the salvation of all men: "I desire, therefore, FIRST OF ALL, that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men . . ."

"I beseech" . . . "I desire" . . . My strivings and those of the other Apostles will be of such limited efficacy without your co-operation, that my one supreme concern in your regard is that you offer "supplications, intercessions, prayers and thanksgivings." Not casual prayers, but many, repeated, fervent, unceasing and in every manner and form. The dictionary is too small for the Apostle's requirements when dealing with this pressing practical solution to the terrible problem of human salvation.

"First of all", not an obligation to be taken up or left at choice, but your first duty; a duty to be performed through our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Charity of the Holy Ghost." If the Spirit of Christ is in you at all, you will not slacken in your efforts to make fruitful for all men the Blood which Christ shed on Calvary! And St. Paul sets the example: "God is my witness that without ceasing I make a commemoration of you."

The answer to the problem, then, is crystal clear in its practical aspect: *if the Redemption has reached so few souls, it is because we Christians have not played our part assigned to us by God for the application of the merits of His Son.*

### **CO-REDEEMERS WITH CHRIST.**

*Our union with Christ.* —Shortly before leaving this world, at the Last Supper, our Divine Saviour prays to His Eternal Father that, as He is one with His Father, so too may His believers be all one with Him, united to Him as the branches are united to the stock of the vine; receiving from Him what only He can give: a share in that very Divine Life which He receives from the Father. True it is, grace does not make us equal to God, but it does enable us to enter into the Life of God in a way far surpassing our human capacities: by grace we are allowed, in some degree, to know God as God knows Himself, to love God as God loves Himself, and to be happy with the happiness wherewith God is eternally blissful. Through Christ, the Son of God, we are adopted by the Father and also made sons. Thus we become likened to Jesus Christ, and whatever we do in union with Him is of merit for Heaven. If we pray for the salvation of our own soul and for others, we become still more like the Redeemer, and we call ourselves fellow workers with Christ.

The reason why we can benefit one another by our prayers and good works is that in Christ we all constitute one great Mystical Body: a living, supernatural Organism whereof Christ is, as it were, the Head, and we the Members. Just as the soul is the binding power that unites all the parts of a human body, so does the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Ghost, unite us all into one Body; and, in order to keep the Mystical Body well nourished, Christ has given Himself as Food in the Holy Eucharist, till the end of the world. Every Communion, then, strengthens our membership in the Body, strengthens likewise the Body as a whole, and so ensures a more vigorous mutual assistance between the various Members. The profit of one member is the profit of all; the loss of each, the loss of the collectivity: this is the underlying truth about the Communion of the Saints, and the great spur to an ardent, enlightened zeal for souls.

But Christ lives within us, as well as among us. He identifies Himself so closely with each one of us, that at the Last Day of judgment He will reproach any lack of fraternal charity with these astounding declarations:

"I was hungry, and you gave me not to eat;

I was thirsty, and you gave me not to drink, . . .

For what you did to the very least of my brethren, you did it to me."

This union of the soul with Christ is developed most perfectly in the Apostle St. Paul, to such an extent that He can cry out:

"I live, now, not I; Christ lives in me!"

If, according to the expression of St. Augustine, the faithful united with Christ constitute the "WHOLE CHRIST," it was not sufficient for the HEAD to pray, suffer and die, the MEMBERS must do likewise; and until the WHOLE CHRIST is zealously engaged in the salvation of the world, the world will continue along the ways of indifference, rebellion and ignorance of salvation. Have we done our duty as members of Christ?

An Indian Chief from one of the American tribes, after visiting Christian countries, was asked by his tribesmen what had most deeply impressed him. "When I entered the great Christian churches and heard huge throngs of people singing the praises of Jesus Christ, I was thunderstruck by the thought that those same people who found such delight in their religion should have remained so many centuries doing very little to bring their religion over to us; this was what impressed me most deeply!"

A hard saying, but largely true!

### **THE APOSTLESHIP OF PRAYER.\***

*Its aim*, briefly, is to ensure the daily consciousness of our place as co-redeemers with Christ, and to bring forth from every quarter of the globe a steady flow of prayers and sacrifices and Communion for the world's conversion, in union with the Suffering and Crucified Redeemer. It is not enough to compassionate the Saviour on the Cross, like the Mother, we must positively unite our prayers and sufferings with His for one common purpose.

*It is within reach of everyone*. Not all can contribute with money; still less can all give their personal services on the Mission field; but everyone without exception can pray daily and make an Offering of all his good works to Christ the Redeemer.

The excellence of the work of this Society has often been praised by the Roman Pontiffs and also richly indulged. "The Apostleship of Prayer", says Leo XIII, "is so beautiful a work and unites so much fruitfulness with so much simplicity that it assuredly deserves all the favour of Ecclesiastical Authority. I rejoice to see it established, and I shall never tire of promoting it." . . . "It is a happiness to Us, very dear sons, to call to mind, for the greater glory of God, that from the moment when the divine Will committed to our hands the charge of a portion of the flock of Christ, We held it as a duty of our Pastoral Ministry to offer to the faithful the most efficacious means of salvation, among which, without a doubt, the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is one of the foremost. We resolve, in consequence, and We order by a special decree that the Apostleship of Prayer should be established . . . ." " We desire to see the clergy and people acquainted with, appreciating and embracing the Apostleship of Prayer and its practices. Our wish is that all parish priests and all the directors of pious Associations should devote themselves to introducing and fostering this work in the parishes and confraternities under their charge."

The abundant harvest reaped by means of this Association and the fact of its being now established in every part of the world speak highly of its importance and of how pleasing it must be to the Sacred Heart.

*The three degrees*. I shall briefly indicate here the degrees of membership in this Association.

*i. The first degree*—essential and common to all members—consists in the daily offering of all our prayers, good works and sufferings, in union with the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, for the intentions of Christ agonizing on the Cross. This is the primary and necessary condition for membership. And although devotion to the Sacred Heart is not the direct

*\*Founded in 1844 at the Jesuit Seminary, Vals, France, it now numbers thirty million members throughout the world.*

aim of the Apostleship, all members are obliged to cultivate it, because the Association makes special use of this devotion as a means of making its members men of intense prayer, prayer which, united to the Heart of Jesus, becomes most efficacious and powerful to bring about the supreme aim: the extension of the Kingdom of Christ on earth.

The formula used by members for the fulfilment of this first degree of membership is:—

"O Jesus, through the most pure Heart of Mary, I offer Thee all my prayers, works and sufferings of this day, for all the intentions of Thy Divine Heart."

*ii. Second degree.* Besides the Morning Offering, as prescribed above for members of the First Degree, one must invoke the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin, saying each day [1] Our Father and [10] Hail Marys for the intention approved by the Pope which is made known at the beginning of each month by the Promoters.

*iii. Third degree.* Besides the Morning Offering mentioned above, the members of the third degree undertake to receive Holy Communion once a week, or at least, once a month, in reparation to the Sacred Heart for all the sins of the world.

Prayer and the Offering of all our good works and sufferings in union with the Sacred Heart for the intentions of Christ, as He hung agonizing on the Cross, is the only thing we are asked for to be members of this Association.

Without prayer and suffering there can be no fruitful ministry, no means of obtaining the grace of God. Jesus Christ Himself, Almighty as He was, chose no other means of redeeming the world. He wends His way through cities and hamlets in Palestine; the crowds eagerly throng round Him at the crossroads and follow Him along the streets; and Jesus is moved to compassion as He looks about Him and sees them like sheep straying without a shepherd; but withal, He has recourse only to one remedy: "Pray to the Lord of the Harvest

He enjoins His Disciples that He send labourers into His Harvest, for the labourers are few and the work is great." And later, when He is lifted up on the Cross, the Mediator between God and mankind, in the midst of His most awful agony, He turns to His Heavenly Father and PRAYS:—

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

To Christ praying for us on the Cross the Church unites herself. And every day, on the paten at Mass she offers her prayers together with those of the Divine Victim, that He may offer both in unison to His Father. Were it not for this daily Offering of the Church at large, the world would be engulfed in the punishment it deserves; the world would cease to exist at all.

Every Catholic, then, must contribute daily with his petition: "Thy Kingdom come" to the salvation of souls and the glory of God.

It is not precisely the devotion to the Sacred Heart that constitutes the primary aim of the Apostleship of Prayer, but it is a condition of efficacy, a potent means and special means of reaching the goal. The Communion of Reparation, characteristic of the third degree, and the Holy Hour, also peculiar to the Apostleship, are both inseparable from devotion to the Heart of Jesus.

As a matter of fact, the Apostleship of Prayer has come to be the most strenuous and successful promoter of this devotion. To this intimate relationship with the Sacred Heart the Movement chiefly owes its rapid and astounding extension throughout the world. There is nothing better calculated to warm and strengthen in the love of God a world that has grown cold and lost its spiritual energy; nothing that snatches souls more promptly from the snares of the devil; nothing that will unfurl the Standard of Christ the King more triumphantly among nations and in the hearts of men.

## **PRACTICAL CONCLUSION.**

### **GET DOWN TO THE WORK.**

Not only on the Cross, but on our altars till the consummation of the world, does Christ offer Himself as Victim of His yearning to save all men. That same Blood that streamed from the Tree of Life is being scattered abroad by thousands of Missionaries and with it is mingled the blood and the sweat and the toil of Christ's front-line soldiers. Light and Darkness, the Spirit of God and of Evil, Life and Death are now as on Calvary, locked in mortal strife. We, then, must enter the fray, for Christ will conquer not only for us, but with us, and in us. We are Members of a Mystical Christ that continues the

battle first waged by the Physical Christ.

Never in all human history perhaps, especially in heathen lands, has the Church been up against such terrific odds and battling more decisively. A mighty army of heroes, unknown, unsung, and cut off from what was nearest and dearest to them in this world: an army entrenched throughout the vast regions of unbelief with only truth and love and sacrifice as their weapons! But (let it be said with pride), never have these soldiers of the Church's missionary campaign been so generously and universally helped by the faithful in Christian countries. And we, heirs to the Gaelic tradition of generosity and missionary enterprise, shall we not be alive to the pressing need of the hour?

What indeed will those valiant Missionaries do by way of conquest and triumph if behind the lines there is not this continual supply of ammunition and foodstuffs and clothing: this supply of prayer and sacrifice? They will do what earthly soldiers would do, cut off from vital supplies from the rear; perish on the field.

Only when Moses stretched out his arms on the mountaintop interceding for his people before God, did the Israelites make headway against their adversaries. Only when the faithful, like one great Mediator, like active Members of the One Mediator, Jesus Christ, hold high their hands in fervent prayer, will the Church consolidate her past positions and make a successful drive for new ones.

Conversions to the Church have never been so sincere and constant as in times of persecution, simply because the prayers of the faithful were more fervent and were enhanced by the sufferings of martyrdom. It was only after being drenched in sorrow for the fate of her son, Augustine, that St. Monica obtained the grace of his conversion, and so fruitful were her tears that they gave to the Church the greatest of the Fathers. The prayers and sufferings of a St. Teresa in her lonely, windswept cell at Avila are compared, by their efficacy in bringing souls to Christ, to the long and sweated labours of St. Francis Xavier in India and wherever his zeal urged him to trudge.

Prayer and sacrifice! Catholics, of whatever place and social standing! Those of you chiefly whose life is spent in hard work, poverty and sickness: make an offering of those treasures of suffering you possess: unite your lot with the Lot of the Divine Victim on the Cross; unite your suffering heart with the Suffering Heart of Jesus and His sorrowful Mother; and say: "Our Father . . . hallowed be Thy Name. . . Thy Kingdom come!"

Do not forget that Victory came from self-surrender to the will of the Father; Life proceeded from death. And so it will be with us: it is by means of this Apostleship of prayer and suffering that the Apostles of the Church will advance and conquer for the salvation of souls and the glory of Christ. By means of this Apostleship we shall have found a practical and most satisfactory solution to the great problem of why so many souls are sitting still in the darkness of error and superstition while the Tree of life on Calvary is loaded with fruit.

May the Apostleship of Prayer be established among you as a permanent front of battle for the kingdom of Christ. Rest assured that our Catholic Missions will be the first to reap the fruits thereof.

Nihil Obstat:

Reccaredus Fleming.

Censor Theol. Deput.

Imprimi Potest:

✠ Ioannes Carolus,

Archiep. Dublin.

Hiberniae Primas.

12/5/1947

\*\*\*\*\*