

THE BUDGET FOR WORSHIP UNDER THE REPUBLIC

Article III

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The deception is presented that the budget diminishes the dignity of religion, by giving the priest an unreal livelihood which he does not receive from those who believe as he does, but from adversaries or from the unconcerned.

To be sure, it is an attractive reality that a religion be supported in its material needs by the sole intervention of the faith and charity of its members. That is how the primitive church lived; this is how the churches of Ireland and of the United States live today. Every time that persecution arises, this is how, under threats and the sword, persecuted churches will survive. This mode of subsistence is heroic, and, consequently, it is impossible that it not impress people by its grandeur.

But the heroic mode of things is not the only appropriate and dignified one. As soon as a religion has become widespread in a people, that it has passed the age of infancy and of persecution, it seeks inevitably a mode of subsistence which corresponds to the universality of its establishment. Its faithful are no longer individuals but a nation. Now, a nation does not subsist like a private group. Its needs, whatever their nature, whether referring to the soul or to the body, have a scope which calls for the cooperation of everyone, and the deepening of universal solidarity to the weakest and most distant reaches of the empire. Without this, the nation is suffering, living partly in isolation instead of in the fulness of association.

This is why every religion which becomes widespread quickly falls, by the very pressure of circumstances, to the management of that society which it conquered spiritually. That society offers it a budget of one kind or another, territorial or financial, perpetual or subject to renewal — no matter. The question at hand is not to consider which is the best budget for the religion, but whether this budget is the just and inevitable consequence of

its popularity, or rather, of its identification with the soul and the life of a nation. We believe it is impossible to deny this statement without denying history as well as logic.

Accordingly, far from being the shame of a religion, the budget is striking proof of its power — not of its human power, to be sure, but that of a superior force which allowed religion to become intimately involved in the existence of a nation, and to become part of the conditions necessary for its survival. Who cannot see this at first glance? Who does not see that asking for the abolition of the budget for worship is to plunge all religions from their public reputation into the shadows of a private life?

Can it be said that in France no religion remains truly popular? This is not where the problem lies. But suppose this were true; suppose that in fact no belief enjoyed widespread adherence in our country: what would the consequence be? Religion, then, by no longer being universal, would lose, along with the budget, the legal sign of its universality. It would have to move down to the rank of something purely private or familial. And so, far from being a matter of shame, the question is one of dignity.

No doubt, following the human cooperation that a nation brings to a religion spread over its entire territory, here and there you could find a useless priest, a priest who, by his own fault or by the force of circumstances, consumes in an involuntary idleness — or, if you will, even in a voluntary idleness — the money of the people and of God. We agree this is a shame, but it is not an evil, however widespread, which would drag down a religion; in the latter case, all discussion about the budget would be superfluous, and it would fail under its own weight as an effect without a cause.

But up to now, this is not the state of Catholic ministry in France. Based on its popularity, the ministry can be divided into three easily recognizable zones. The first includes those sections of the country which have retained a vigorous faith: there, the priest is pastor of souls in the full meaning of the word; he spends his life in the service of a parish, unanimous in its veneration and praise of him. In the second are found those areas where faith has diminished but has not entirely lost its hold; there, the priest does not enjoy uncontested influence. Some of the people boast of having avoided him, but another part of the flock is sufficiently large to fill his life with honorable toil and genuine consolation.

There remains the third zone, assuredly ingrate, since there, faith no longer seems to exist and the priest pours his sweat as discouragingly as it is unfruitful. Yet even there, however, his ministry does not appear to be entirely lost. The Gospel flows from his lips into the souls of children; many of these young ears — having never arrived at the age of manhood or of apostasy — carry to God the eternal happiness of their untimely end. The others, almost certainly deserters of the faith, nonetheless preserve deep within their bones some vestiges which reveal themselves at the hour of death, or which at least keep them from falling very low into degradation. Miscarried children of a Christian nation, they still lift their heads above the cruel fangs of pagan materialism. Even in their roaming, we can recognize the limits placed by the hand which had blessed their soul and anointed their body.

For a poor priest fighting against the rising tide of unbelief, his is indeed a heroic struggle. Alone and discouraged, he remains nonetheless like a lost sentinel of Providence; he accomplishes a good work which appears to him as coming to nothing; he gives without receiving, he loves without being loved in return. Indeed we have seen some of these dejected pastors; and when we were able to find in them the tree of life,¹ when on being questioned their heart expressed a suffering not of their making, we realized our own unworthiness and admired what God can obtain, without giving any explanation, namely, some souls whom He has chosen for this painful martyrdom of sterility. The thought had never come to mind that they were eating a bread dishonestly obtained, or that they were dishonoring their priesthood — no more than, on seeing along the sea isolated sentinels guarding the shores of a nation, would we have had the audacity to condemn them for their solitude or to impugn their laziness.

In a nation in which faith is no longer integral, and in which nonetheless it remains universal, because almost everywhere it has a larger number of adherents, it is not impossible to find some depressing havens of indifference and of unbelief. Should the priest leave them to their curse? Does he not have the certitude of finding there a few faithful souls? And if there is none today, could some not emerge tomorrow? His task, then, is to be present, and his presence is all the more generous for being so little rewarded.

The status of religion in France, such as we have just described it, and as it is known to the world, is not the condition of a nation in which belief is snuffed out or reduced to the level of private activity. In France, religion is still something French, a resource accessible

to everyone. Its authentic sign could not be removed from France with causing unjustifiable injury, and without betraying the development and the hopes of souls.

Religion itself, as any heroic act, could not abandon voluntarily the cultural character which it has enjoyed in France for some twelve or thirteen hundred years. Just as a general does not get himself killed at the head of his army in order to acquire the glory of a courageous death, so too religion does not sacrifice its genuine eminence in the pursuit of a heroism which is not demanded by the situation of nations under its spiritual management.

As to what concerns its temporal life, the Church in France wears on its head three crowns which call for the respect of everyone: it has yielded its property to the country, it is poor, and it loves its poverty. It is not the State which holds religion to its pledges; even if the State were not its legitimate and legal client, it would on this point be only the mediator for the nation regarding an authority which does not emanate from itself, an authority which established itself without the State, and which will subsist without the State. Religion is the faith and the soul of a people; the State can honor both, but in cannot destroy or create either of them. In recognizing a religion, the State recognizes a fact; in providing religion with a share in the public treasury, the State answers a social need. In withdrawing its share for no apparent reason, the State diminishes religion to the extent that it can, but with a decrease that has to be confirmed by the conscience of peoples. Absent this confirmation, the reduction amounts to an act of contempt which will last no longer than an error.

ENDNOTE

1. In other words, a spark of immortality, for they are not dead. Here Lacordaire alludes to the tree of immortal life in the Garden of Eden, *Gen* c. 3. [Trans.]

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