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CATHOLICITY

AND

THE AMERICAN MIND.

BY

GEORGE PARSONS LATHROP,

NEW LONDON, CONN.

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Pamphlet No. 19.

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It has been said that Catholics and Protestants live in two different worlds; and this, as you all know, is in some senses true.

The world of clear, coherent faith; of serene insight into the supernatural and the divine; and the world of mere opinion, of individual, private judgment which leads always to difference and indifference, which professes to divorce belief from reason, and ends too often in helpless, naked rationalism—these two worlds of men certainly cannot be one and the same. Yet this fact does not necessarily prevent us, who dwell in humble but direct communion with Him who is called "Wonderful," "God," "The Prince of Peace," from coming directly into relation with those—our neighbors, acquaintance and friends—who dwell just over the border, in that dazzling but somewhat befogged region which may be termed the Debatable Land, or the Land of Endless Debate.

In fact, we do meet and converse with them every day. We trade and fraternize with them, and love them. We can understand perfectly all that they think and feel. But they cannot understand us. There's the pity. And there, too, is the problem. How shall we lead them to understand us and the simple yet sublime truth to which we are loyal?

At this mere question, as though by a word of magic incantation, the barriers between the two worlds of thought arise and interpose themselves like a solid wall. The wall, however, is only one of mist. It can be penetrated. I have been a Protestant; and now, happily for me, I am a Catholic; that is, a Christian in the true, uncompromising faith of Christ. Therefore I know something about the two worlds, and a good deal about the barriers between them.

It seems to me that the most practical thing I can do is to give you very simply, in the light of my own observation, a few instances of the way in which the non-Catholics of New England regard Catholicity and its adherents.

In the first place, they are brought up with an indescribable dread of it, which they imbibe in childhood, with their earliest associations, and before they are even conscious that it is being instilled into them. This indescribable dread—when you come to inquire and try to analyze it—turns out to be also indefinable. It is like the hobgoblin of the nursery. Every one of the scared nurslings is confident the hobgoblin exists, and would like to hurt them if he could; but no one of them can explain just *what* he is, or *why* he should wish them harm. The terror of these people has no logical beginning that even the most patient search can trace; and it always, when investigated, falls back upon an absolute defiance of logic.

For example, I have a Congregational friend with whom for years I have discussed every topic that came into our ken, exhaustively and with the freest comparison of views; not at all in the manner of dispute, but simply for the profit of candid intellectual inter-

change. We had often spoken of religion, and many times alluded to the Catholic Church. On this last subject he appeared to have prejudices which I did not share; and I frequently told him so, giving him my reasons, although I did not then dream that I should ever become a Catholic. When at last I was received into the church, it was natural to suppose that he would be the first and the most eager to obtain my views on this as on all other matters; and I told him I would gladly answer any questions that might occur to him. But, on this one topic, he promptly said: "No, we had better agree to disagree. If I thought as you do, I should be where you are; and if you thought as I do, you would be where I am." The utter platitude and vacancy of that reply almost paralyzed me. "But," I said, "I know you have certain ideas about the Catholic Church, which I never thought were correct, and now that I am in the church I can show you and assure you that they were entirely wrong." He answered: "Oh! those who are inside the church don't always know about it. Several converts in England have just left the Catholic Church." His inference, of course, was that, since they had abandoned it, *they* were the ones who really understood and knew all about it. But, since they had been inside; and since he held that those inside could not know the truth concerning the church—how did it happen that these particular apostates thoroughly knew the church and were to be trusted, while I, as a faithful convert, could not know what I was talking about?

If I had retorted upon him with his own style of argument, I would have said this: "You declare that members of a religious organization—for example, the Catholic Church—do not really know what that organization is, what it means, and what it aims at. *You* are a member of a religious organization called the Congregational Church: *therefore* you do not necessarily know what it means. You assume that those who secede from the Catholic Church are the only Catholics who understand that Church. *Therefore* you, who are

now a Congregationalist, do not understand your own church; but, if you seceded from it, you would *then* understand it. Hence, no one understands any church unless he is outside of it."

He would have been convicted by his own absurdity. Yet it is just this sort of absurdity that we have to encounter. To this same friend I remarked, later on, that he had conspicuously avoided talking with me about my faith. He replied: "Oh! you may speak freely about it." I answered: "Very well. But it isn't likely that I am going to sit down and expound it all to you without inquiry from you. You have always wanted to know what I thought about every other thing. But on this you seem wholly indifferent." And then he said: "Oh, I never want to talk with a man after he has made up his mind!"

So, then, the conclusion would be that there is no use in an interchange of views when a man has any settled and definite views to express. According to this, the Protestant ideal would be a state of perpetual indcision; a state that might be described as general mindlessness, or Universal Absence of Mind.

And yet this friend is a very bright man in all other ways; a man in active business, who is also an author. If I were a Buddhist, or a Mahometan, or a Mormon, he would be intensely desirous to hear what I might say in explanation of my tenets. As I am only a Catholic Christian, he throws reason and logic to the winds, in his anxiety to escape the possibility of talking with me about my faith; although he is still perfectly ready to converse on any other subject under heaven, without let or hindrance.

In this case, though, as in many others, I recognize a tacit admission of the intense, overwhelming power of Christ's teaching as embodied and presented by His holy Catholic Church to-day. The general Protestant fear of the church is inherited and traditional, based on long-continued misrepresentation and prejudice. But in the individual Protestant or non-Catholic that fear is especially the dread of a vast idea, an infinite

truth which—if they permit themselves to look into it—may engulf them in its immensity. They recoil at the mere chance of surrendering their small individuality to this immensity of the eternal.

It seems to be as hard for them to acknowledge, sincerely and thoroughly in their hearts, their exact relation to it, as it would be for them to jump off from the edge of the earth. There is a mental attraction of gravitation which holds them down. Yet in recognizing the vast truths of astronomy they surrender themselves willingly to the infinite of space. They admit that the whole solar system is visibly progressing through space towards some goal that no one is able to sight by the human eye, or by the telescope, or by private judgment. All this, they concede, is going on according to one great principle, one fixed order of logic and law. Yet when it comes to consideration of the moral and spiritual infinite, which also moves toward a great unseen goal, they cannot bring themselves to admit the same fixity of law and supremacy in one all-embracing truth of religion. In this department—or rather, in this aspect—of the universe, they would persuade themselves, the truth—*i. e.*, the principle of things—need no longer be single and unvarying, but may be several and changeable according as it is interpreted by different men and groups. It is this inconsistency of theirs that we must first gently make plain to them, before they can comprehend us or grasp Catholic verity. Meanwhile it will continue one of the most perplexing among barriers, because by its very nature it obliges them to shift ground constantly, and try to escape from logic by a variety of excuses or side-issues. Nevertheless, the non-Catholic dread is, at bottom, an admission that Holy Church is the earthly representation or portal of the Divine infinite.

It has also happened to Mrs. Lathrop and myself that Protestant friends, and even simple acquaintances, who never broached the subject before, have written to us—since we became Catholics—asking us to pray for their dead; their departed kindred. Of course they

would not dream of petitioning for such prayers in their own churches and denominations. Others have sent to ask our prayers for some member of a family undergoing illness or surgical operations involving great danger. In all the years that we were outside of the Church they never made such a request, although they were as sure of our friendship then as they are now.

This is another and touching evidence of the fact that Protestants feel, if they do not perceive, some peculiar virtue in the Catholic Church. They turn to it instinctively, in these cases, as meeting the needs of the heart and soul with a supreme efficacy not found in their own organizations; a power that they may oppose, yet inwardly realize.

A Presbyterian teacher of high standing, intellectual, accomplished, and of considerable renown, said to me heartily that, in becoming a Catholic, I had taken the noblest and truest attitude a man could take, and that he wished he could do the same. A friend who has suffered much told me that he often went into the Catholic Church—as it was open every day in the week—and simply sat there meditating. He knew nothing of Catholic prayers and could not pray; but he always came out feeling purer, better, and stronger. A lady of Puritan descent wrote to us that the Catholic Church was the only one she could ever join; yet that, if she ever found herself inclining that way, she would instantly buy and read all the books against the Catholic Church that she could obtain. This was another form of tribute to the strength of Catholicity. So, too, was that of a most distinguished scientific man who said to me that for a year in his youth he had gone to early Mass every day, without ever inquiring or learning anything about the service and sacrifice, but simply because it made him feel “good.” He now—still omitting to inquire—scoffs mildly at the church; but, with a large experience of Protestant denominations and pastors, he says: “I have known lots of Catholic priests, and they are the best men I ever knew.”

If we look for negative or passive tributes, what better could we ask than these?

They show that the non-Catholic Yankee mind and in fact the American mind, is in search of a religious truth which it has not yet found. It gropes; it dimly guesses at a revelation from God, present in the world to-day, which it has not been able to lay hold of in evangelical bodies. The American mind, all through the United States contains a foundation element of strong and earnest religious feeling. Religious reading and aspiration, occupy much of its attention. This may be seen from the character of some of our most widely popular novels and other works of current literature; also from the prevalence of meetings and movements based on natural religion, or upon a partial, fragmentary perception of perfect and *supernatural* religion. Great numbers of people, the most American of Americans, from the very beginning of our national history down to the present day, have perceived and loyally accepted the divine truth of a supernatural and universal religion, as set forth by the one true and Catholic Church. The non-Catholic American mind in general is really ripe for this divine truth; yet it is clouded still by mists of prejudice, indifference and careless custom.

Now, the parish priest cannot possibly, with his multifarious duties, go forth and attend to the needs of non-Catholics. Of course the church building is open to them as to all. They may come there and try to learn and try to worship. But, while the temple is crowded with the faithful, the others come rarely or by accident, and do not even understand the simple, holy rite when they do come.

I would suggest that in every parish there should be a small, efficient organization of laymen, who could take charge of the business of explaining Catholicity whenever it is publicly misinterpreted. A local Truth Society would fill the bill; and in our parish we have begun to talk of forming one, or a Columbian Reading Circle, or both. Now, the main practical difficulties of

non-Catholics, even when they are convinced of our consistency and that our logic is impregnable, seem to be these two bugbears: That the church wishes to overthrow or unfairly capture the public schools, and that it seeks to subvert American institutions.

Millions of Catholics contribute to the support of the public schools under an un-American system of taxation almost without representation, since they are so little represented on the school boards, and still show their sincerity by voluntarily maintaining schools of their own, besides. Catholics were the first settlers in this country, the bringers of civilization. They were loyal to the American Revolution when many, and perhaps most, Episcopalians and Methodists were on the Tory side. Many scores of thousands of Catholics have laid down their lives in war for the upholding of American institutions and liberty. Catholics are absolutely loyal to the constitution, laws, government, and spirit of this Republic to-day, and they prove it in every way that it is possible to offer proof, by act and conduct. Yet all this seems to count for nothing when the prejudices above mentioned come into play. If so brilliant a man as Gladstone in England could so misapprehend the Vatican decrees as to imagine they might sap the loyalty of Englishmen, what are we to expect from the ignorant here? It will not do to dismiss them by saying that they are too dense to be enlightened. We must find a way to reach them, and to make them see and know us as we actually are. Am I, whose ardent and steady patriotism no one doubted before; whose family, of Puritan origin, has produced a line of evangelical ministers and has been solidly American for two hundred and fifty-eight years—am I at once transformed into a disloyal citizen when I become a Catholic? An eminent man said to me: "You have turned your back on your own countrymen." I replied: "No, sir. I am now the best kind of American there is." And with entire modesty—for the merit is not mine—I believe this to be true.

For what can make a man so good a citizen as the

religion which teaches him the oneness of truth, fidelity to God, to his country, to marriage, to conscience, and applies itself directly every day to strengthening those forces which conserve or purify society and exalt the soul?

It is this that we must bring home to their minds.

And, while the circulation of books and documents is of immense use, there are other means of reaching those who will not read. Not long ago there came to New London one of those scamps who make a living by sensational lectures maligning all that is most sacred to Catholics. People who, all the year round, would never come near us to ask for a plain, candid, intelligent explanation of Catholic faith and practice, flocked to hear this deliberate falsifier. Such a lecture delivered against any other religious body would have caused a riot, and the riot would have been generally excused by the nature of the insult offered. As it was, we were all indignant and talked of letters to the daily papers—both of which in New London are owned or edited by Catholics—and of a public meeting. But we feared possible disturbance or futile bitterness, and so we remained silent. Now, a local committee of the sort suggested could have held that meeting; with calm, well-considered speeches; could have got the general public there; had the thing fully reported, and so, without hurting any one, could have administered a crushingly gentle rebuke and let loose a great deal of life-giving truth.

Still another point. Secular and national holidays belong just as much to us as they do to all other Americans. Why should not local committees of Catholic laymen call public meetings to celebrate the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day, and other fitting occasions, when their patriotism would be made apparent along with the high, religious spirit that animates it?

I would have lay Catholics take the initiative in celebrating the New England Forefathers' Day in such manner as to pay tribute to the great merits of the Massachusetts Pilgrims, and at the same time bring

out the immense service of other settlers of the United States, notably the Catholic founders of Maryland, who established there the complete sway of religious toleration, while the founders of Massachusetts based their State on intolerance. All this could be done in a friendly way, and would be very instructive.

It would have been a great thing if Catholic laymen all over the country had seized the 1891 anniversary of Columbus's landing as a time for general celebration, and had emphasized the fact that the discoverer of America planted the holy cross here one hundred and twenty-eight years before the Pilgrims set foot on Plymouth Rock.

The secular daily press would be a powerful agency for the correction of misstatements, for the popular newspaper reaches the eyes of many who would never consent to examine a Catholic book or journal. But, while there are great numbers of Catholics employed on the daily newspapers, they are not their own masters. Under hostile editors they do not enjoy the reputed American privilege of free speech. Everything they write is carefully examined, sifted, and cut down where there is the slightest chance that they may be saying anything which will make the Catholic position clear and place Catholicity in a fair, impartial light. In many newspaper offices it seems to be a maxim that a man who believes nothing is a perfectly safe person to entrust with Catholic matters. It is also held to be a merit in any Protestant writer on the staff to do what he can towards reporting and presenting Protestantism favorably; but for a Catholic to put his convictions into what he writes for the daily columns, or to shed light upon the truth of his religion, is treated as something in the nature of a conspiracy.

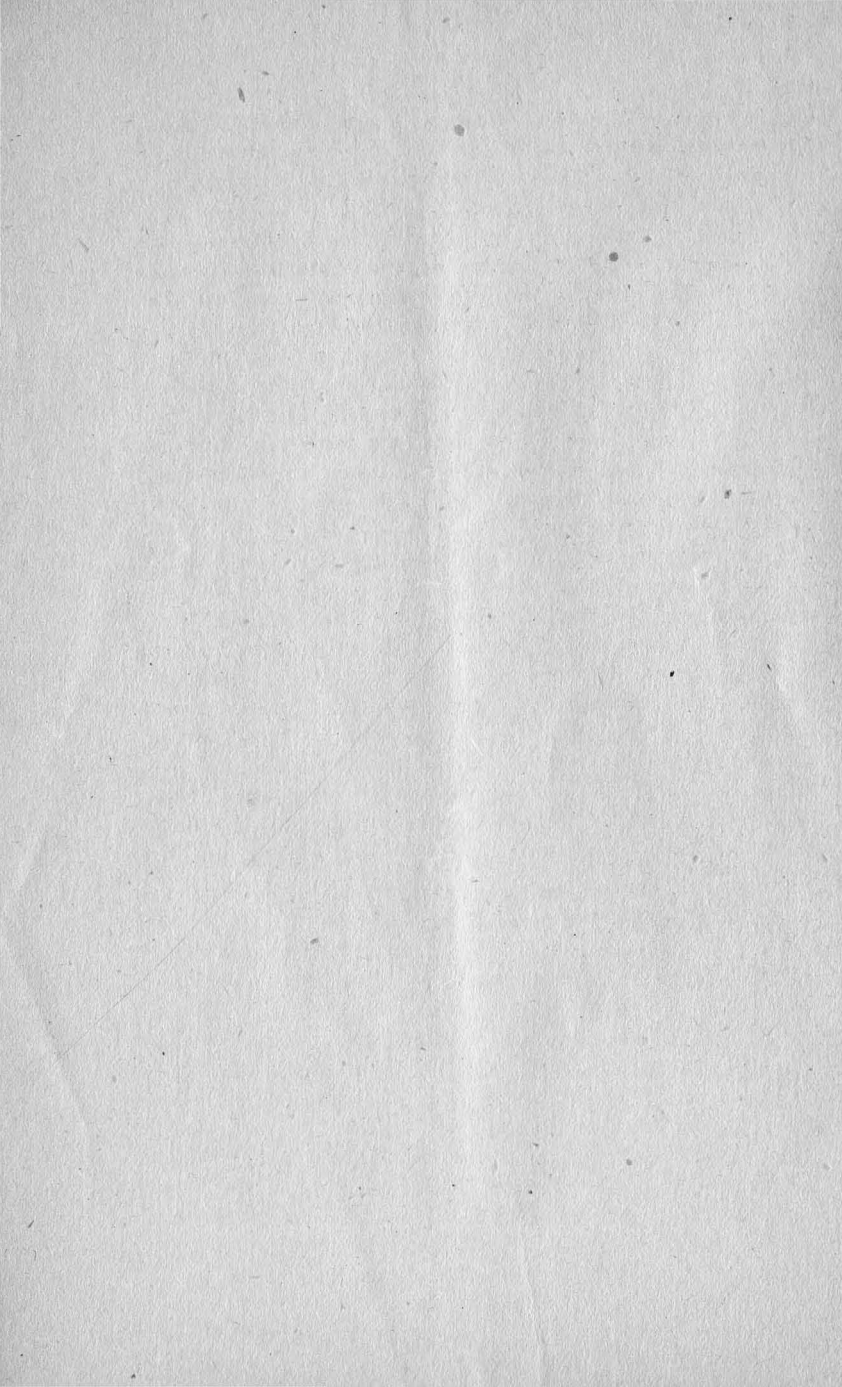
The chief organized way in which you can use the secular press now, is for local committees to prepare short letters to the editor in due emergencies, and when such letters are not accepted, pay for them at advertising rates. Many editors will gladly publish them free.

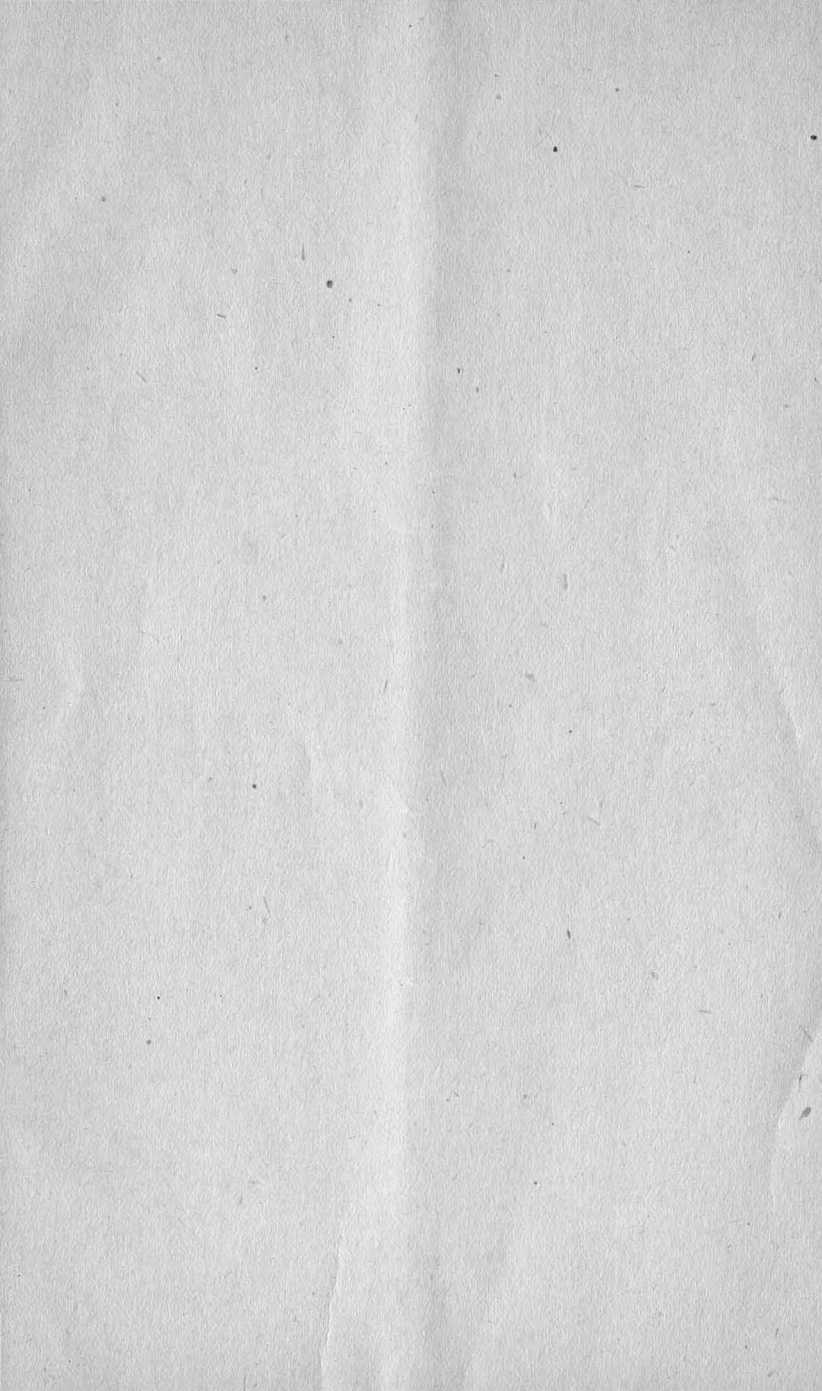
The American people are honest and open-minded,

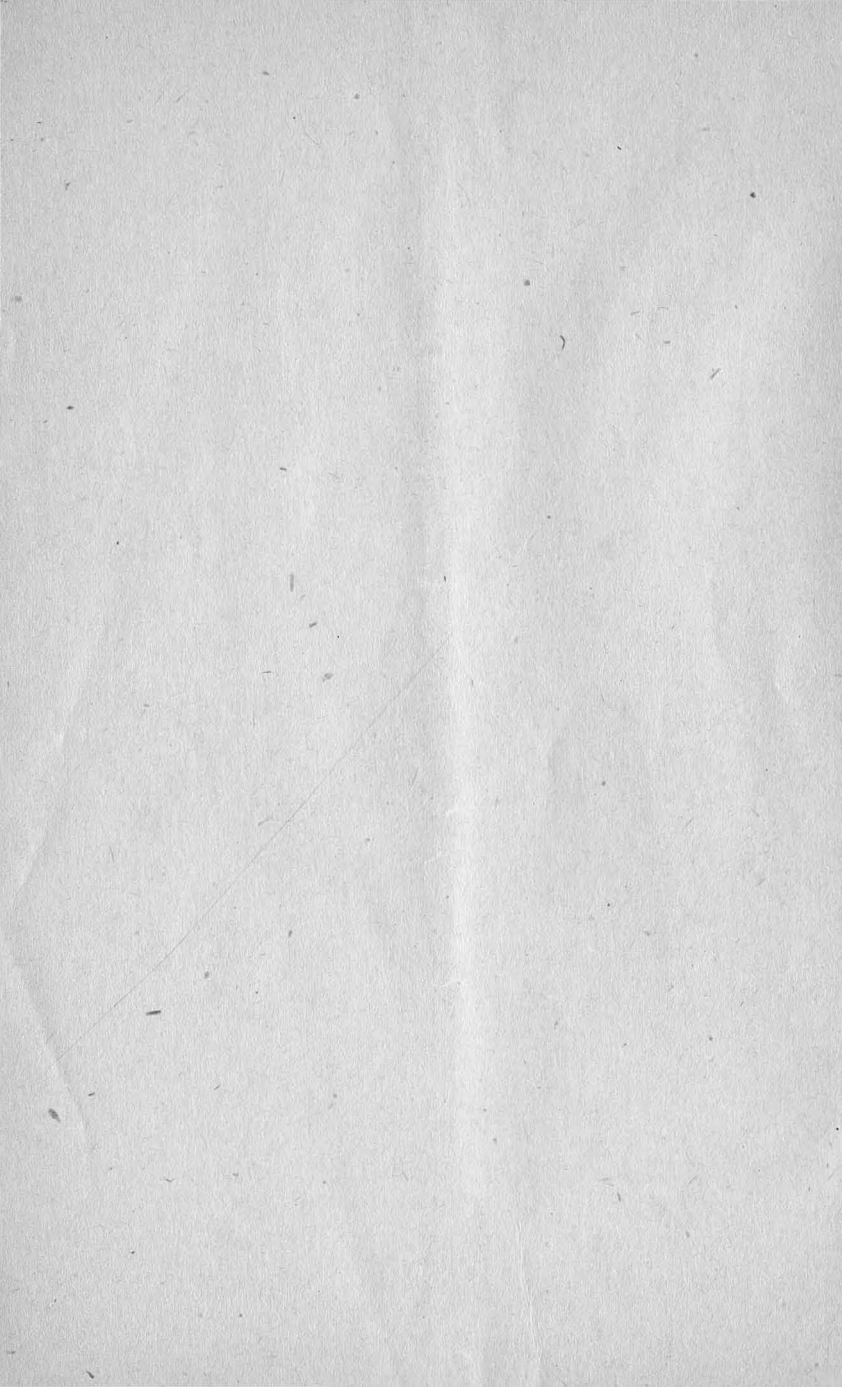
and when once they realize that a large number of their fellow-citizens are asking to be properly heard and understood in this matter, they will not only listen, but will insist upon hearing more.

I know of one daily prayer that has gone up for months past, that the mass of the American people should be led into the one fold of the one Shepherd, the true Church. Why do I pray that the American people should become Catholics? Because it is their natural destiny. The best people on earth ought to be loyal believers in the best religion. Catholic faith, in my opinion, is the only force that can save our national character and national greatness, already threatened by many dangerous elements and tendencies, from the peril of disintegration.

I too, believe that the next century will see a tidal wave of conversion sweeping the majority of our countrymen into the Holy Catholic Church. At this Epiphany season how shine the words of Isaias: "Arise, be enlightened, O Jerusalem, for thy Light is come"! Those words the prophet uttered seven hundred years before the incarnation of Christ, yet he saw the event so clearly that he spoke of it as already present. We American Catholics of to-day do not need a tithe of his prophetic power to declare to our countrymen that their Light is come and will presently bathe the land in splendor.









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