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*A Letter to a  
Friend  
Not of My  
Faith*

BY DANIEL A. LORD, S.J.

*THE QUEEN'S WORK*

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THE QUEEN'S WORK

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# A Letter to a Friend Not of My Faith

By DANIEL A. LORD, S.J.

**M**Y DEAR FRIEND:

This letter is being written in all affection and friendliness, and I have long wanted to write it. There are a number of rather important things that I have wanted to discuss with you.

First of all let me say that I am not trying to convert you to the Catholic Church. I respect your conscience, if you sincerely love, accept, and try to use your faith as the blueprint of your life. Your conversion we will leave to God.

This letter has an entirely different purpose, one that will, I think, commend itself to you.

Besides being personal friends, we are here in free America neighbors. Our churches almost adjoin, built as they are in the same neighborhood, and often our separate congregations intermingle on the streets on their way to and from church. We go to the same polls. We belong to the same or to friendly rivaling political parties. We join the same or similar clubs. We root for the same home team. We read—though we may not always be in agreement on—the same newspapers.

## **Unknown**

So it amazes me sometimes that my fellow Americans know so little about my Church. It is really very easy to find out

all about us—and I mean all. We have no secrets. Priests are quite willing—in fact glad—to talk about the Church. Catholics are not always, I'll admit, too intelligent in their explanations to those who inquire; but they are usually ready enough to find for the questioner an easy-to-read booklet that explains the problems or questions.

Yet ignorance about us is phenomenal. Seldom do I read a violently antagonistic book about Catholics written by one not of my faith without being torn between the impulses of laughter and tears—and I am baffled. Are our real teachings and our conduct as Catholics so undramatic, dull, and without interest that the sensational writer has to make us out to be believers in nonsense and devotees of absurdities?

### **Fables**

You must have heard some of the really extreme things attributed to us. One of those things is that priests have horns . . . and that's why they wear those queer little four-cornered hats called birettas—to hide their horns.

I have always loved the story of the ancient crone in the hills of Kentucky who finally met a priest and at his invitation investigated for herself as to his horns. When she found none, she was baffled for a moment. Then she drew back, and, looking at the priest who was innocent of horns, she said, shrewdly, "You're young yet."

Then there's the legend that priests wear those long robes called cassocks in order to cover their cloven hoofs . . . and I am led to wonder how on earth a cloven hoof could be fitted with shoes, which priests do wear.

## And Legends

Literature and legend are full of awful things about us Catholics . . . as for example: Nuns who misbehaved were walled up in chapels (this persists despite the explanation of archaeologists that sometimes distinguished people were buried in upright positions and facing the altar) . . . Orphanages are full of the children of priests and nuns . . . All Jesuits are enormously rich and terrifyingly subtle, clever, and sinister (you know that I am a salaryless, incomeless man; and I am afraid that you find me neither very clever nor a character crying to be impersonated by Boris Karloff).

Such legends about Catholics started very early. Romans in the days of the first Popes whispered that at their banquets the Christians ate babies (a queer and ugly twist given to what little they heard about the Eucharistic love feast). In the forum Christians were reported to be a perilous sect of political radicals bent on overthrowing the empire and poisoning the emperor; this rumor grew out of the fact that the Christians declined to offer incense to the emperor-god.

At best Christians were regarded as a mysterious lot who cut themselves off from the life around them, probably to plot mischief in dark and secret meeting places. This rumor was the net result of their absence from the bloody games of the arena, or their refusal to be audience to the lustful and bawdy plays of the theater, or their absence from pagan temples.

Those secret meeting places were, as everyone now knows, the catacombs, where, because the Romans respected burial asso-

ciations, the Christians could find a measure of safety for the worship of their God and Savior.

### **The Great Unknown**

I have sometimes been led to believe that most Americans not of my faith know less about the Catholic Church than they know about Mohammedanism. At least what little they know about Mohammedanism is not misconception; the things concerning us about which many an American is most convinced are things that a Catholic never held, never said, and never did or planned to do.

It is natural that there should be many things about Catholics and the Catholic Church that you do not understand. But you would be fair if, before you come to the conclusion that we are queer and senseless, you asked us whether what you have heard is really true of us, whether we have an explanation for what may seem to you at first glance or at superficial sight purposeless and foolish.

### **Popes and Nuns**

For instance . . . the Pope is not an absolute and dictatorial monarch. We Catholics believe that he is the divinely ordained head of the Church. We respect and obey his divinely constituted authority; and his authority is precisely that, divinely constituted. He does not rule as dictators do, by an "*ipse dixit*"; he rules within the framework of a divinely constituted Church. He may not act against the Gospels. He is bound by the traditions and laws of the Church itself. He cannot deviate from what is right and what is wrong. He governs under God and along lines that the Savior has clearly indicated. Any student can



soon discover just what these lines are and how the constitution of the Church defines what Christ meant His Vicar to do, teach, and command.

Nuns are not queer, odd people, despite the fact that they wear unusual clothes. They are normal American women; they dress as they do so that the whole world will know that they are specially devoted to work for the happiness of God's sons and daughters. Believe me, if a thousandth part of the immorality attributed to convents by fake ex-nuns were true, the newspaper headlines would be black with nun-nish crimes and misdemeanors, and nuns would be the most frequent visitors to police courts and jails.

### **Bible and Protestants**

Catholics do not dislike the Bible. They do not burn the Bible. They are not forbidden to read the Bible. On the contrary the Popes have so urged the reading of the Bible that a Catholic believes that by his daily reading of it not only is he helped to heaven but his stay in purgatory is actually shortened. Catholics know the Bible to be the word of God revealed for our salvation. Under pain of serious sin the priest must read a section of the Bible every day.

### **Not Condemned**

Catholics do not condemn all Protestants to hell or believe that God will damn all unbelievers. In fact Catholics are taught that though Christ established one Church and not many, His true Church has both a visible and an invisible membership. Those professing openly membership in the Catholic Church are the visible members. Those who are trying to the best of their ability

to love and serve God and their fellow men, far from meriting the wrath of the Almighty and the thunders of the Church, are really invisible members of the Church we love. Perhaps you resent the Church's claiming as invisible members these good men and women. But the Church means to be kind in this. We believe God does not deny His grace to those who do their best. They must accept and use that grace.

### **We Agree**

But before we touch on the differences that distinguish us, may I point out—perhaps to your amazement—the many things on which we agree?

Like all decent men and women we hate sin and evil in all forms. To us a lie is always a lie. An evil action is not made good even if its motive and goal are good; I cannot poison my grandmother in order to get her more rapidly to heaven. Despite the stale charge we do not hold and we never have held that the end justifies the means and that people can commit crime in order to benefit themselves or others.

We Catholics hate cruelty. We outlaw impurity. We are convinced that crimes against our fellow men are so terrible that they sometimes call down God's punishment even in this life. Like Calvin Coolidge's famous minister, Catholics are against sin.

In common with all decent men and women, the Catholic believes in the home and the family, in the powers and dignity of the state, in honest and just laws and respect for lawful authority. If he steals in business, he must return penny for penny what he took unlawfully; whether the victim of the dishonesty is a Catholic or a Turk, restitution must be made.

Catholics regard contracts as sacred—notably the marriage contract between men and women. They are convinced that nations and big corporations and labor unions are bound by the same moral law and the same obligations that bind all decent men and women (bigness or power does not obliterate sin and responsibility).

### **God and His Son**

As do the overwhelming majority of people in our Western world, Catholics honor and believe in God, our heavenly Father, and they recite as their greatest prayer the Lord's own, which begins, "Our Father, who art in heaven . . ."

Contrary to the persistent misstatement of some of the lunatic-fringe religions, Catholics accept Jesus Christ as their sole Savior and Redeemer. They know that their personal actions have value because of His grace. They know that their repented and confessed sins are forgiven because of His merits. They ask the Savior to be their advocate with God the Father, and they hail Him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

### **Mary and Saints**

But what, protests the surface observer, about the Blessed Virgin and the litany of the saints? They are not, answers the Catholic turned objector, and never could be our saviors. Their intercessory power (quite different from redemptive power) comes from their closeness to the Savior, their friendship with Him, their devotion to Him. If there were not Christ, there would be no Mary and no saints. If there were no Savior, neither Mary nor the saints would have any power.

In prayer we ask the saints, not to give us grace or grant us eternal life; we ask them, who are friends of God, to speak a good word for us, who have done perhaps little to deserve God's friendship. We ask them, who gave themselves to His devoted service and have consequently won eternal life and a place near His throne, to be from their place of power in His kingdom our spokesmen.

Prayers to the saints are acts of humility. We confess that our sins have made us unworthy of God's interest and grace. Such prayers are a sign of our great confidence in God's gratitude: We know that He will listen to those who have served Him well. Such prayers are an expression of faith in life eternal and an act of hope that someday we will be where the saints are. Such prayers are an act of love for our neighbors, since the saints are surely among those neighbors whom Christ commanded us to love.

### **Jesus Christ Sole Savior**

Always Christ remains our sole Savior, by whose life and death our redemption and our right to eternal life were won.

The entire teaching and practice accepted by the Catholic is based on the clear teachings of the Savior.

Indeed much of what others most object to in us comes straight from Christ's teaching. Catholics oppose divorce chiefly because Christ declared that divorce with remarriage is adultery. Catholics claim inalienable rights and powers for the Church simply because Christ made the clear distinction that ended forever the justifiableness of an all-powerful state: "Render

...to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

Without a doubt some of the things that Christ demanded are startlingly hard, but Catholics accept them because He demanded them.

I was talking once with a good Protestant lady whose daughter wanted to become a Catholic. The woman's sole argument against the step was that the girl owed a loyalty to her mother and to her family; even if they were wrong, she should stick with them and share their convictions. I demurred, reminding her that Christ had said that there were circumstances under which one had to leave father, mother, brothers, sisters, and all things for His sake. He even went as far as to say: "If any man come to me and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

"Did Christ really say that?" the Protestant lady asked.

I found the passage for her in the Gospel of Saint Luke, and she read it thoughtfully. When she closed the book, she said, with set jaw, "Then I am sorry, but I shall have to disagree with Christ."

We Catholics do not feel free to disagree with the Savior, not even about the hard, stern, and exacting things He demanded.

### **Other Beliefs**

We Catholics believe firmly in the human soul, immortal, free, spiritual, more precious than all else in the visible universe.

Let's come back to the Bible for a moment. It is historic fact that the Catholic Church preserved the Bible with reverent

and scholarly love. It knew that the "deposit of faith" was closed when the last Apostle died. The early councils of the Church determined once and for all out of the extensive Christian writings which books and writings belonged in the New Testament. Through the ages long before and after Protestantism the Church safeguarded the Bible against tampering. But Catholics do not forget the closing lines of Saint John's Gospel: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did, which, if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written."

### **Tradition**

That is just one text that could be offered in explanation of the Catholic attitude toward tradition.

The Bible is a rule of our faith, but not our sole rule. Nothing however is ever taught by the Catholic Church that is opposed to the Bible. Nothing for example is thought up by a group of cardinals or a Pope for fresh consumption. Teachings come out of the ancient records of the Church, the long cherished beliefs of the Catholic world, the historic faith of Christendom.

But then no Protestant should forget that the whole Christian world, Catholic and non-Catholic, start their worship of God with something, not in the Bible, but right out of tradition. They go to church on Sunday, the first day of the week; the Bible seems to order the celebration of the Sabbath, the last day of the week. The practice of tradition is responsible for that change; and most Christians—even those Protestants

who protest loudest against tradition—follow the tradition of Sunday, not the Sabbath.

### **Taken Along**

So we see that Catholics hold much in common with Christians of various denominations throughout the great Western world. In fact I venture to say (with an apology for possible hurt feelings) that Christians who today are not Catholics believe as they do and act religiously as they do because once on a time their forebears were Catholics. Sometimes it surprises non-Catholics to learn how much of their religious faith and practice were retained from Catholicism when their ancestors cut their connection with the parent Church and went off on their own. Whatever the reason, Catholics and Protestants have much in common, much more than some of our friends or critics seem to know or realize.

### **We Differ**

Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to discuss with you some of the things that make the Catholic Church seem queer, off, and different. Since this booklet offers really little space for a complete explanation of our differences, perhaps the best I can do is indicate briefly that there is such an explanation.

Let's take that annoying difference of Latin in Catholic worship. Why in the world doesn't the Catholic priest use a language that people can understand? Why does the Church cling to a dead speech, an obsolete tongue?

There's a misapprehension in those last phrases — dead speech... obsolete tongue. To the Church, Latin is not dead. Latin is

its international language, its ecclesiastical Esperanto (but Latin works, and Esperanto never has worked), a language used in the Church's laws, by its general councils, and for its official documents. The Church believes that it needs one language to bind that great international organization that is the Catholic Church.

Even at that the Church is not rigidly and exclusively Latin. Many other languages are used by Catholics throughout the world in their worship. Greek is official in parts of the Eastern world. The ancient Slavic tongue is used in many Slavic countries. Other languages are official where they are historic and a matter of custom. Latin prevails throughout those parts of the Western world that recognize this language as their mother tongue historically almost as they regard the Catholic Church as their mother religion.

### **Latin**

Latin, we hear it stated, is unintelligible.

We must remember that the liturgy of the Church is addressed to the creator of the world and the Lord of languages. The language in which God is addressed takes second place to the worship expressed in that language. The prayers of a loving heart and the prayers of the Church of Christ rising in the beautiful and now unchangeable language of ancient Rome reach and are heard and understood by the mighty God who is worshiped.

As for the laity, a surprisingly large number of them study and read Latin. These days they are once again being encouraged to read the religious services in Latin. If their Latin is weak, they follow



the Mass with their own prayer books or missals so that, as the priest talks to God in official Latin, they parallel his Latin with the most exact translations in their missals. Certainly they follow the services far more intelligently than do operagoers who with the aid of English librettos tag after the lyrics sung in foreign tongues.

Experience has proved how the common Latin language is a perfect symbol of religious unity. Its precise words and sentence structure safeguard faith.

Far from being a nuisance to most Catholics, Latin remains the guarantee that they will never be without their religious services. If a Protestant visits France or Germany or Sweden and wishes to go to church, he must find some small English-speaking service (and perhaps there is none in that vicinity), or he must listen to minister and congregation praying and singing and sermonizing in an utterly strange language. The Catholic visiting any land can find a priest saying the Mass exactly as it is said in his own country, the language dearly familiar, and his prayer book or missal the perfect guide to what the priest and the congregation are saying and doing.

### **Our Priests Are Different**

“But these Catholic priests!” urges the non-Catholic. “Why are they so different? Why do they wear Roman collars? Why the long-skirt clothes that are called cassocks? Why the elaborate and nonsensical garb in which they drape themselves before they say Mass?”

Yes, Catholic priests are different. Believe me (and I, a priest, say it with all modesty), we Catholic priests are supposed to be different. We are set aside for the

sole and express service of God. We are to be professional Christians—Christians, that is, who make of their Christianity the unique profession of their lives. If we write, it is supposed to be the kind of writing that will promote God's honor or human happiness. If we attend a meeting, we sit as the representatives of Christ's viewpoints and standards.

So our outlandish or unusual garb is no different in purpose from that of the unusual garb of a soldier or a sailor or a marine; it is in plain fact our uniform. In time of war a soldier may be court-martialed if he appears in clothes other than his uniform. That uniform is a public declaration that he is engaged in a war on the enemies of his country. A priest's collar and black garb, his cassock and his cincture make up nothing less than a clerical uniform. The honest priest never has denied that he is at war with evil and error, with the enemies of God and mankind. He wears a uniform that proclaims this fact to the world.

### **Dress With a Meaning**

Nor is there anything nonsensical or purposeless about the clothes that the priest wears for Mass. The clothes tell the age of the Church; for once they were the regular garments worn by dignified men, dressed in their best.

Yet every garment has a deep, historical significance. When the priest says the Mass, he stands at the altar in place of the Savior and reenacts a glorious role, for which he was ordained. He is of course helplessly inadequate without Christ; yet for the minutes of the Mass he is significant as he and Christ together offer up what

Catholics believe is the repetition of the Last Supper and of Calvary.

So he dons a long white robe that suggests the white robe with which the Savior was clothed for His Passion. He binds himself with cords to recall the captive Christ. About his shoulders he lays the stole, the ancient sign of priesthood among the Jews and pagans. On his back he lays a garment on which is represented a huge cross.

One glance is enough to indicate to the faithful that their priest has changed in character. He is no longer just the good friend and dear associate; now he is the representative of Christ, carrying the cross of the Savior; he is a man invested with the terrible responsibility of bringing God down to the people and the people up to God.

Perhaps you do not understand these garments; but don't, please, suggest that they are worn without high purpose and a blend of historic and poetic rightness.

### **Nun's Dress**

While we are on the subject of clothes, I might revert briefly to the clothes that nuns wear, the habits that so puzzle the non-Catholic. Most of the habits have an easy explanation right out of historic costuming. The Ladies of Loretto, founded by the great Mary Ward of England, still wear the street dress common in the time of Elizabeth, when the order was established. When Mother McAuley of Ireland established her now world-flung Sisters of Mercy, she set for them—and they still wear—the dress style of the widows of Dublin in that day. Nor has the habit of the Little Helpers of the Holy Souls been changed since the first

style for that order, that of French widows in the early nineteenth century.

One of the most famous habits in the Church is worn by the Daughters of Charity, founded by Saint Vincent de Paul. Their blue dresses and widespread white hats (coronets they are called) have continued to fascinate artists and writers. It is amusing to note that their founder chose that dress so that the nuns could move about without being conspicuous. You see, that costume was the dress of Brittany peasants, and Vincent de Paul felt that it was not likely to stand out conspicuously.

There is however in the nun's habit a deeper meaning than history can offer. These women are dedicated to God. They take the three difficult vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. A uniform garb for all the members of one order eliminates all possibility of feminine vanity in dress, insures modesty, and is generally inexpensive.

Nuns' habits mark the wearers off so that even evil men are reluctant to touch them—except with deep respect. Their habits make possible for them a sort of projection of the peace and prayerfulness of their cloister, which they love. When for reasons of their work they leave those cloisters for short spaces of time, they take that peace and prayerfulness with them.

### **Mumbo Jumbo**

“I went to your church a few Sundays ago,” wrote an unknown (to me) but not anonymous correspondent, “and I left it thoroughly disgusted. What mumbo jumbo! What unintelligible and confused sitting, standing, kneeling, ringing of bells, burning of candles, bobbing, and weaving! All

for what? Believe me, I shall go back to my own church, which means something and says and does what it means."

Once I saw a cricket game. Later I carefully read the newspaper report on it. To the very end the spectacle and the report were incomprehensible to me. But then nothing else strikes foreigners as more completely baffling than an American baseball game or more completely meaningless than a world series.

Here and now we have neither time nor space to do more than indicate the broadest purposes of the Mass and the widest vistas of its meaning.

To begin with, the Mass is an act rather than a series of prayers. The prayers, I hasten to add, are highly intelligible and easy to follow. They start with a prayer of humility and sorrow (these prayers are taken chiefly from the Psalms). They advance to a keynote text that is read in order to sound the spirit of the day's feast. They then include the great prayer of glory to God (an echo of the song of the angels), the special prayer of the day, a passage from the Epistles or the Acts of the Apostles, selections from the Old Testament and the New, a reading from the Gospels, the solemn and sonorous Nicene Creed, and then prayers venerable in antiquity but sharply clear in their reference to the great and immediate act of sacrifice.

Often the prayers are the very words of Christ, as for instance the entire "Our Father." Often they are from the various books of Revelation, like the cry "Holy, holy, holy" that Saint John heard in the vision of Patmos.

## **The Action**

But always, however significant the prayers, it is the act that is important.

Here again we must note a clear division. At the center of the action that is the Mass, there is a very simple core that endlessly repeats the Last Supper and deals with the same simple sacred elements. As Christ did on that Holy Thursday, so the priest does now—offers up to God bread destined for a great dignity, pronounces the solemn words “This is my body . . . . This is my blood,” and gives the Host in Holy Communion.

Around these basically simple elements the Church has woven the beauty of art, the richness of prayer, the inspiration of music, the flash of color, the depth of symbolism. All these added elements could be eliminated, and the Mass would still remain the Mass. But the presence of these elements is easily understandable. If people build a lovely building to house a dead hero . . . place a lock of a mother’s hair in a gold and jeweled locket . . . erect a shrine for the Liberty Bell . . . dress a bride in the finest silks and laces . . . the same divinely-imparted human instinct is right when it tries to enfold the glorious action that is the Mass in the finest and the best that earth and art can afford.

## **Significant**

At Mass the priest does these significant things:

He offers to God the gift of bread and wine. This Melchisedech did in the Old Law when he prefigured that sacrifice because of which Christ is a priest forever “accord-

ing to the order of Melchisedech." In this gift the priest gives God the things that sustain life, bread and wine, as a sign that he and the people who offer the Mass with him are offering to the Trinity their very lives in an intention of unity and peace.

We call this the Offertory of the Mass. Christ did this first at the Last Supper.

Then the priest says over the bread, "This is my body" . . . and over the wine, "This is my blood" . . . and we believe that Christ, when He ordered those words spoken, meant just what He clearly said. His order to His Apostles at the Last Supper was, "Do this for a commemoration of me."

He did not say, "This represents my body" . . . or "This is a symbol of my body" . . . or "This is like my body" . . . or "This through your faith becomes my body" . . . or "This at the moment you receive it has the effects of my body's coming to you." He said flatly, "This is my body . . . . This is my blood." We Catholics believe that He meant what He said.

The priest now offers the body and blood of the Savior to the Blessed Trinity; he offers God His own Son. This is a repetition of Christ's offering of Himself on Calvary.

Then when the priest and the people receive Holy Communion, God has given Himself to them.

They can thus make the gift of themselves to God. Their existence from this point on is intended to be a continued living and working with Christ, the offering of life itself together with Christ to the Trinity.

## **A Blessed Sacrifice**

So the Mass is a sacrifice, and a sacrifice is basically a symbolic gift. The three all-precious gifts that are given to God during the Mass are:

Bread and wine, the symbols of life, of unity, of peace.

Christ Jesus, our high priest and victim.

Ourselves and all Christendom in the offering of our lives in union with the Savior.

You may not believe any of this. But you will, I think, admit that there are here beauty and significance and religious purpose that are impressive and worthy of respect. Let's look at it from your viewpoint as a non-Catholic: If we believe that the Mass is Calvary and the Last Supper renewed, then certainly we have in the Mass an act of religion well worth envy from others.

## **That Confessional**

Now may we take your attention from the altar to the confessional? That's a mysterious spot from the viewpoint of the average Protestant.

Is the confessional sinister, as our enemies maintain? Is it a place of dark immorality where queer, twisted souls grovel before a man who pries into their secrets and holds over them the threat of obscure powers?

First let's talk about the architecture of the confessional. Usually it is like a very small room divided down the center by a wall of pierced wood. On one side of this wall sits the priest, his face in profile to the penitent. On the other side of the wall



kneels the penitent facing the profile of the priest. Between them is a solid grill having a perforated panel. Sometimes this panel is covered with a curtain so that the priest cannot see the face of the penitent—even should he be curious (usually he is not so curious).

The person who is going to make his confession first spends some time outside the confessional, in one of the pews. He looks back over his life to find what sins he has committed since his last confession. He then tells God that he is sorry that he committed those sins. It may be sorrow because God is so good and the thought of sin rising against His goodness is appalling. It may be a regret that sin, the sinner's personal sins, killed Christ on Calvary. It may be a sorrow that flows from the dread of losing heaven and spending an eternity in punishment.

Then he plans how he will avoid these sins for the future, and how he can become a better, more unselfish and Christlike person.

### **Inside the Confessional**

The penitent then enters the confessional, where the priest blesses him. The penitent tells his sins and the number or times he committed them, repeats his act of sorrow, and quietly asks for absolution.

If not everything that the penitent has said is clear, the priest may need to ask him a few questions. (He never probes or searches after obscure and unnecessary information.) The priest then gives the penitent advice on ways to become a better and a stronger person, assigns some prayers to be said or some good work to be done, and

then, lifting his hand (after he has recited a beautiful prayer), says, "Therefore I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

The penitent then leaves, by no sign having betrayed to the priest who he is or anything about himself.

Confession is as simple as that. And if you don't believe me, just drop into a Catholic church some evening, go into the confessional, tell the priest that you are not a Catholic but that you wanted to see what confession was like, ask his blessing—if you care to—and go out in perfect safety.

The confessional is not, I assure you, the port of missing men—or women either. It is a place of peace and the center of God's dear mercies.

### **By What Right?**

But by what right, you protest, does any man lift his hand over a sinner and say, "I absolve you from your sins," even though he does this in the name of the Trinity?

Here again the answer is that our priests believe that they have that power—because we Catholics take Christ literally. We think rightly (you may think that it is wrongly) that we heard Christ say to His disciples, "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." Christ gave this power to His Church, and His Church simply continues to exercise it. Note that since there was a decision to be made—whether the sins were to be forgiven or retained—it was necessary that the sinner indicate his sins, his sorrow, and his determination not to sin again. So the Church through its

representatives exercises the power that Christ Himself proved He had when He raised to his feet the man sick of the palsy.

### **Sin No More**

But note too, please, the importance of the sinner's determination not to sin again.

Sometimes people who do not know the Church get an idea that a sinner trots gaily into the confessional, tells his sins, gets a quick forgiveness, and then dashes right out to start sinning all over again. That is not at all the way confession works. The sinner must be sorry for his sins. He must tell them honestly. He must be resolved with God's help to strengthen what he knows to be poor human weakness, that he will do his best not to sin in the future.

I hope that someday you will have the privilege of confession. You see, the Christ who understands human needs so clearly knows that we need at times some human ear into which to pour our troubles. (Modern psychology insists on this need and the importance of the fulfillment of that need.)

Christ knows too that we want a positive assurance that we have left behind us the burden of our sins. God's voice is unheard, but it is often clearly felt. What Christ did was to put upon the lips and into the hands of a mortal man the power to reassure souls and guarantee forgiveness. "I absolve you," says the priest. And implicitly he adds, in effect, "...not by my own power, but by the power given me by the lover of humanity."

After the penitent's confession the priest speaks with confidence the consoling words, "Go in peace."

## Wise Guide

Surely there is need today for a place to which people can go and in complete secrecy talk over with an expert the problems and difficulties of their personal lives. In the priest Christ offers us that expert. During his days of education the prospective priest sits under skilled directors and learned professors who know human nature thoroughly and who have at their disposal profound studies of the law of Christ and of human experience, studies gathered by the Church of Christ throughout the centuries during which it has dealt with human problems. This wisdom the directors and professors pass on to the future priest, who is thus enabled to bring to the confessional profound study that soon ripens under the experience of the parish or the classroom.

Married people who bring their problems to the priest can be sure that he will give them objective and dispassionate advice. Men troubled by questions of honesty and by business matters that involve right and wrong have in the confessional a skilled counselor who has studied the laws of justice and has learned to apply Christ's principles to modern living.

Catholics know that nothing in their personal problems is outside the range of the priest's study, that no question is too intricate for the alert, intelligent attention of the priest.

In addition Catholics know that everything they tell a priest remains secret; he is bound by what we call the seal of the confessional. Priests have fallen and sinned and become basely evil, but none of them that I have ever heard of or known has

told what he heard in confession. God sees to that, and Catholics know that God's vigilance in this respect is historic fact.

### **"Priestcraft"**

"But," says many a non-Catholic, "I violently object to priests in general. Though I may know nothing about them as men, I dislike the very idea of priesthood. I want no one between me and God. I shall go straight to the Savior Himself, without need of priest or other intermediary. My religion is my own, not something to be directed and controlled and interfered with by a lot of priests."

Though I can understand independence of spirit, it is apparently not the way that God felt his sons and daughters should act. Nor for that matter is it the way that anyone acts—except in the simple case of religion. I wonder why.

Priests are as ancient as God's Law.

In the Old Law the people reached God through the ministry of priests. In the New Law, Christ became our high priest, an office He will hold until the end of time. But it was Christ's own idea to choose Apostles and disciples. And He gave to them explicitly and with dramatic gesture the powers that the Catholic priest today exercises—to teach all nations, to change bread and wine into His body and blood, to forgive sins. You may think that Christ made a mistake; we Catholics believe nonetheless that this is exactly what He did and that He meant what He did.

We must never forget that in a sort of final transference of power Christ said, "He that heareth you, heareth me, and he that despiseth you, despiseth me." Certainly He

seemed to regard some people as especially set aside to speak and act with His authority. We call these people priests. We think that all that they do is what Christ instructed His Apostles and their successors to do—speak with the voice of Christ and exercise the powers He gave them to the honor of God and the salvation and happiness of souls.

### **Why Just in Religion?**

Anyhow, as I said earlier, it seems to be only in religious matters that people want to be left entirely on their own.

When we are sick, we call in a doctor; we do not doctor ourselves. If we happen to be a physician, we consult another doctor. We do not argue our own law case in court; we get a trained lawyer. If we are planning to build a house, we call in an architect and a contractor. We let the engineer drive our train; we do not insist that, if we are to ride the Broadway Limited, our own hand be on the throttle.

There remain a few of that obsolescent race known as self-educated men; the overwhelming majority of the human race however, mediocre and genius, go to school and, at least to start them off on their education, learn from a trained teacher.

Are the issues involved in religion so simple and easy that they can be handled by amateurs? Why should religion be the only field not in need of experts? Certainly the religious confusion in the world today proves that religion is a difficult subject, that dabbling in it does a lot of harm, and that the situation calls for a few God-commissioned experts.

You may not like dentists, but you don't

try to fill your own teeth. You may not like generals, but you don't try to win a war without officers. You may find accountants stuffy, yet you call them in when your income tax becomes intricate and confusing. You may not like priests, but they seem to fit into the general picture of the way the human race under God's direction should act.

### **Convents**

While we are on the subject of priests and confessionals, we might stop for a second on the question of convents.

No...no woman is kept in a convent because there are bars or prison locks or some sinister power that enslaves her. Convents house generous women who want to love God intensely and undividedly and do something outstandingly heroic for humanity.

Should you decide to visit a convent, you will find it wonderfully clean and peaceful and hospitable. You will not fail to note the clear eyes and ageless faces of those to whom you talk, whatever their age. You will be charmed by their laughter, their keen awareness of the problems of the world — somewhat like the awareness of the guardian angels.

Forgive what may sound like poetry, but nuns seem to me more than a little like guardian angels, these nuns who pray for you and for me, who teach our Catholic school children to know God and walk His paths, who nurse the sick and care for the orphans and administer to the poor and the aged.

Please don't believe the stories about convents that you run across in books by people

who in most cases never saw a convent. Meet a few Catholic nuns, and know for yourself how really ridiculous are the yarns about the horrors of convents and the slavery of nuns.

### **But Unmarried**

But, you ask, why don't priests and nuns marry?

For the same reason that Saint Paul did not marry.

"But I say to the unmarried and to the widows, it is good for them if they so continue, even as I . . . . He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God. But he that is with a wife is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife; and he is divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she that is married thinketh on the things of the world, how she may please her husband. And this I speak for your profit, not to cast a snare upon you, but for that which is decent and which may give you power to attend upon the Lord without impediment."

Some Protestants are said to claim that, while Saint Peter founded the Catholic Church, Saint Paul was the somewhat remote ancestor of Protestants. I wonder how they read what Saint Paul wrote so plainly to the Corinthians and then have their doubts about the Catholic unmarried clergy and religious. In this at least we are certainly much closer to Saint Paul than are married ministers.

Priests and nuns do not marry simply in order that they may be free, as Saint Paul



was free, to concentrate on the work of God, to move easily and unimpeded by family ties and responsibilities wherever the kingdom of Christ needs them, and to give their whole energies to the Savior and His cause. They may often fall far short of their goal, but at least their goal is one that Saint Paul clearly understood and unmistakably praised. They give up human love to love Christ and find His love a complete and satisfactory filling of their heart.

### **Intolerant?**

We Catholics are often accused of being completely intolerant. Generally the accusations run along lines like these: We claim that we are right; in fact we *admit* that we are right. All others are wrong, and we let them know that we think they are wrong. We want to jam our opinions down the throat of everyone else who does not hold our opinions. In our turn we will pay no attention to the opinions and views of non-Catholics.

I might start with that last—that we pay no attention to the opinions and views of non-Catholics.

Even educated Protestants are surprised when they find out how much time and attention go into the training of priests and into a thorough and honest study of the principles—and the arguments in support of those principles—that are opposed to Catholic teaching. Whether it be the reasons that Luther gave for his leaving the Church or the latest scientific theory that is supposed to be an explosive hurled against the spirituality of the soul, the cases and the arguments are given honest consideration. The best proponents of the other

side are studied, the arguments of these proponents presented to the student priests, their positions clearly explained, and full opportunity given for proof of the arguments if the proponents have proof.

I do not find among non-Catholics with regard to Catholics anything similar to this procedure followed by Catholics with regard to non-Catholics. Even learned non-Catholics who object to Catholic teachings are often amazingly ignorant of the things they imagine they reject.

The Church does not think that a lay Catholic who has not had the extensive training and knowledge of an expert is wise to study the position of any of the thousand discordant leaders who claim that the Church is wrong—and each claim for entirely different reasons. The Church recognizes that the Catholic layman must know his own position thoroughly and convincingly. But thoroughly educated Catholic laymen are likely to know the positions of those who oppose the Church, and they give the arguments of those opponents intellectual courtesy of hearing and honorable debate.

### **Yes, Intolerant!**

But are we intolerant?

If by that you mean that we believe that there is such a thing as a positive difference between religious truth and religious error, religious right and religious wrong, I'm afraid we are intolerant. But if by intolerant you mean that we make life difficult for those who disagree with us, I do not think that your accusation is according to the facts.

I do not believe however that it is pos-

sible for any honest man to be tolerant where truth and error are concerned. An astronomer whose students include a fellow who is convinced that the world is flat as a dinner dish and another who cries out that the sun moves around the earth, not the earth around the sun, will hardly be likely to be tolerant of these two fellows' ridiculous notions.

I do not find reputable doctors tolerant of medical quacks or sincere lawyers lenient where shyster lawyers are concerned.

You send your children to school in order that they may shed their childish and heretical ideas about arithmetic and geography. If an accountant devised and practiced a bookkeeping method by which two and two are made to add up to five, he would soon find himself facing a highly intolerant law court.

One is not tolerant in the sense that he grants as fact the fantasies of the little boy who insists that the moon is made of green cheese; but one is—one should be—kind.

So if we are convinced that Jesus Christ taught certain things and told His followers to do certain things, you cannot expect us to say, tolerantly, "But really it doesn't matter one bit whether or not you teach the exact opposite." We cannot be tolerant where truth is concerned, where the issues are the correct service of God and the real salvation of human souls.

### **In Catholic Lands**

But we are kind. I find that Catholics nowadays lean over backward in their efforts not to force their beliefs on others. Indeed they seem to be almost slow in suggesting

to others that they come the Catholic way. Honestly now, hasn't it been your experience with Catholics that they are almost reluctant, hesitant about disturbing your present religious status and your honest religious convictions?

In a solidly Catholic country, things, I admit, may be somewhat different. Where a Catholic way of life is universal, where the faith is written into the constitution and an overwhelming majority of the citizens are united in their beliefs and practices, the Church is not happy to see other beliefs, partial beliefs, or no beliefs at all entering in to upset the nation's faith and form of worship.

There is an amazing unity that results from unity of religion.

There can be a terrifying division brought about when a nation is newly split into discordant religions.

History has never forgotten the wars and national disunions that followed the splitting of Christendom during the Protestant Religious Revolution.

It is one thing to allow a person to practice an alien religion; it may be quite another to grant him the leave to teach that religion and to strive to win to his religion those who have already accepted the faith which the Catholic country believes was given to the world by Christ Himself.

In recent years we in America have come to know the fear of a disunited country, as communism sought to win over loyal American citizens to its practices and beliefs. We call such an effort subversive. We do not hesitate to interdict it.

Catholics believe that Christ did not mean

the world to be split into discordant sects. He gave, or so we believe, one faith. He prayed that the human race should be united in one fold under one shepherd. He must have foreseen the religious strife that follows a splitting of His Church into embattled groups. The modern world to a large extent maintains religious peace by the pretense that no religion is really essential and that all religions are equally worthy . . . since, in a strange sort of way, all are equally without authority or the approval of God.

Catholics do not believe this.

So when a land is solidly Catholic, when its people kneel at one altar, worship one Christ, follow one code, practice one cult, offer one sacrifice, and know the union in the Mystical Body of Christ, Catholics dread to see division, disunion, the separation into discordant sects, and the shattering of the sheepfold through the introduction of jangling and jarring shepherds.

At least the stand is something that is reasonable and not too difficult to understand.

### **Mixed Marriage**

But what about the intolerance expressed in the Catholic attitude toward mixed marriages?

Let me put it this way: If a good friend of mine—you for example—were to tell me that he was thinking of marrying a Catholic, I should say emphatically, "Don't!"

Years ago I wrote a little booklet called *Marry Your Own*. I presented as objectively as I could my reasons for believing that marriages between people not of the same

religion had far, far less chance of happiness than marriages between people of the same religion.

The most interesting letter that came to me as a result of that booklet was from a Methodist woman. "I have read your booklet," she wrote, "and you may be interested to know that I have canceled my engagement to a Catholic young man." I congratulated her and told her that she was smart.

Mixed marriage is a matter not only of probable unhappiness for the Catholic but of decidedly no happiness for the non-Catholic. It is not easy to be a Catholic, and it is not easy for a non-Catholic to be married to a Catholic—to have to put up with his early Sunday Mass, his no-meat-on-Friday, his strict reiteration of the laws of nature regarding birth control, his insistence that all the children be reared and educated in the Catholic faith.

I note that a good many modern non-Catholic groups are also opposed to mixed marriages: Jews do not like them; Mormons are violently opposed to them; the full-ranking members of the Communist Party in the Soviet are forbidden marriages outside the Party. Why? Too many and too great differences of ideas, backgrounds, tastes, training, obligations, responsibilities.

### **No Laws Except for Our Own**

Please note that while the Catholic marriage laws are very strict for any marriage entered into by a Catholic, the Catholic Church regards any legal marriage between non-Catholics as valid. So if you have heard that the Catholic believes that Protestants who are married before a minister

are not married, don't believe it. During the sulphurous heat of the KKK after World War I, I read in one of the Klan's smelly papers that Catholics believed that all children born to Protestant couples were bastards. That statement is a simple lie.

The Church recognizes as valid any marriage performed by legitimate authority for those outside the Catholic faith.

But the Church's rule for Catholic marriages are very likely to be a burden on the non-Catholic in a mixed marriage. They are made, these laws, out of a great desire to safeguard marriage as the fountain and source of human life. Catholics know this all-important reason for the Church's laws; the non-Catholic in a mixed marriage is likely, I think, to find these laws galling.

### **Too Conservative**

But isn't the Catholic Church the citadel and bulwark of all conservatism?

Now there's a subject on which I wish I could write another complete booklet.

Yes the Catholic Church is conservative; it struggles mightily and continuously to conserve and preserve all that is best in human knowledge and experience. It wants to keep alive the principles of Christ and the law of God. It loves great art no less than it loves great philosophy. Precisely because it grants that there may be genius in the world today, it has not lost its respect for the genius of the past. It believes that experimentation with precious institutions like the state, the family, the school should be done cautiously. It wants all that is valuable in human history and experience to remain part of our human heritage, a

guide to the future, a foundation on which to build.

### **True Radical**

But sometimes I wonder whether the Catholic Church is not the only true radical in the world. To be radical means, you recall, to go down to the roots, the *radices*. The Church does just that—goes down to the roots.

The Church is as radical as the rock of Peter and as radical as the roots that support the mystical vine and its branches. It digs deep into the reasons that underlie faith, and it tries with every resource of science and philosophy to keep vigorous the roots of our belief.

It is radical because it is international in outlook. It is radical because it has always believed in the brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God. It is radical enough to be convinced that you cannot make over a world unless in the process you remake human souls—on the simple principle that since the chain is no stronger than its weakest link, humanity must be regarded, not as an abstraction or an individual link, but as a composite chain made up of individual men and women.

It is radical as faith, hope, and love are radical, as radical as are the war on vice and the cultivation of virtue.

So the Church is at the same time conservative and radical—as must be, I think, any great lover of humanity.

### **In Conclusion**

This has grown to be a frighteningly long letter. But the subject is so enormous that even in this long letter I have done no more than drop hints.



I have written this letter in all friendship and kindness.

I have a deep admiration for men and women who love their particular faith, understand it, and live by its principles.

But you haven't minded, I hope, that I have tried to present however crudely and thinly some of the things that I think are worth knowing about my faith, the Catholic faith.

May the gracious God, who loves all His children, and the Christ, who died that we all might be united with Him as branches of the true vine and who prayed that we might be one flock under one shepherd, guide you in your ways all your days.

Devotedly in Christ,

DANIEL A. LORD, S.J.

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