

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

In the Light of Scripture

by

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THE PAPACY AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

OUR LORD GAVE HIS DISCIPLES a test by which to distinguish false teachers from true. He said, “**By their fruits ye shall know them**” (Matthew 7:20).

The test has three characteristics. It is simple: every man can use it for himself, be he high or low, wise or simple. It is universal in its application: for all places, all people, and all times. It is reliable: the test cannot go wrong, for a good tree brings forth good fruit, and a bad tree brings forth bad fruit.

The test applies not only to people but also to churches, and as we apply it to the Church of Rome, we are reminded of our Lord's parable of the mustard seed, which grew into a tree so big that the birds of the air lodged in its branches. The Church of Rome has greatness and strength and beauty of a kind, but of a kind which is out of keeping with its proper character. Men have wondered at its vast development, at the power it wields, at its immense organization, at its ramifications, and have been drawn by these things into its communion. Others, considering the fruit it has borne, so out of keeping with the character and teaching of the One it professes to represent, have been repelled.

We have already made a brief survey of its doctrines and practices, and have found many of them at serious variance with the teaching of Holy Scripture, and it is not necessary to recapitulate these.

But something needs to be said about the impact of Romanism on the social life of the peoples in countries where it has held sway, for this has been most significant and condemning.

Mention has been made of the terrible backwardness of the Papal States before they were taken away from her and merged into modern Italy. In the Papal States, the Roman Catholic Church surely had a wonderful opportunity to exhibit the beauty and beneficence of her rule, for she had none to limit her freedom of action. But as a matter of fact these States were perhaps Europe's most notable example of oppression and misrule and corruption.

But they were not the only example. More than a century ago Lord Macaulay drew attention to the contrasting conditions of Roman Catholic and Protestant countries. He pointed out that the territories and countries in which Roman Catholics predominated were among the most fertile and beautiful in the world, yet their peoples generally speaking were ignorant, servile, and poverty-stricken.

On the other hand, many of the Protestant countries were poor in natural resources, yet, through the enterprise and diligence of their inhabitants, they had been turned into productive and pleasant places.

Macaulay cited Italy and Scotland as illustrations of this, also Spain and Holland. Spain, not indeed rich in natural endowment, but with the riches of the New World pouring into her coffers, was perhaps the foremost country of Europe, but had fallen into decay and destitution. Holland, on the other hand, with immense natural handicaps, had risen to prosperity and power.

Again Macaulay pointed to Roman Catholic parts of Germany, Switzerland, and Ireland, contrasting them with the Protestant sections of those same countries. Crossing from the one to the other, he was conscious of moving from a lower civilization to a higher.

The countries of South and Central America and Mexico, when compared with the United States, pointed the same lesson, as did also the Roman Catholic Province of Quebec, compared with the rest of Canada.

What Macaulay wrote a hundred years ago is still true, except that in areas where Roman Catholicism has lessened in power, there progress has been made. Many Roman Catholics, especially among the intelligentsia, do not now subscribe to all the Church's beliefs, nor submit to her domineering conservatism.

They believe in democratic government, and while retaining the old religious name, are too often agnostic or even atheistic.

Illiteracy in Roman Catholic lands is far greater than in Protestant countries. In Portugal 54 percent of the people cannot read, in Spain 46 percent, in Italy more than 50 percent. UNESCO'S report for 1950 put illiteracy in Brazil at 57 percent, Chile 28 percent, Colombia 44 percent, Peru 57 percent, Venezuela 57 percent and Poland 23 percent. Eire stands at 12 percent, but in the Protestant countries of Europe the percentage of illiterates is much lower: Denmark, Germany, Holland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Finland all being under 1 percent. In spite of the large number of foreign immigrants it has received and considerable Negro population, illiteracy in the United States stood at 4 percent.

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is not a movement just for social betterment.

It is primarily good news of salvation for the individual. Yet it cannot stop there: as people turn to the Lord in repentance and faith, receive forgiveness of sins, and are regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit, they become new creatures in Christ Jesus. While still not perfect, they do bear fruit unto holiness, and their transformed lives make for transformed homes, and for transformation in the society in which they move. Visible changes are brought about, working from the center outward in ever widening circles.

There are humanists who think that better living conditions will in time make better men. While we thank God for every improvement in living conditions, experience has shown that this in itself will not make men better. But it is universally true that better men do produce better living conditions.

Godliness is not a way of gain, and we are told to withdraw ourselves from those who try to make it so (I Timothy 6:5), but godliness with contentment is great gain (I Timothy 6:6), and that gain is not in the spiritual realm only, but in the whole of life. Godliness affects the spiritual, mental, and material, both for the individual and for society at large.

Godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come (I Timothy 4:8).

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things [food, raiment, etc.] shall be added unto you (Matthew 6:33).

The established fact that social conditions in Roman Catholic countries are consistently worse than in lands where the Gospel is freely preached condemns the whole Roman system which enriches itself and impoverishes the people under its sway, not merely in material things, but in the far more important matters of spiritual, moral, and intellectual worth.

“**By their fruits, ye shall know them,**” said the Lord.

~ end of chapter 35 ~

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