

## A FRENCH CATHOLIC ON CHURCH AND STATE

As Vicar-General of the diocese of Nimes in southern France, as founder of the Assumptionists, and above all as helper, adviser, and often guiding spirit of nearly all the great religious enterprises of his day in France, Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon was one of the most influential leaders of French Catholicism in the XIXth century. His writings, with their frequent allusions to contemporary events, would serve as a penetrating and supremely interesting commentary on the passing of the Third Republic. Thus, in 1835, writing to a friend, he crystallised his thoughts on the Church's part in politics :

. . . I assure you, I have made up my mind about politics, my most intimate conviction being that Christianity must be separated from parties . . . in order to dominate them all by spreading through society the so often stifled seeds of justice, order and charity. Christianity is destined to be the foundation of society : belonging to no particular fraction of the body, it must embrace them all, link them together, and force them to forgive one another.

In the light of this principle, the co-operation of the spiritual and temporal powers for their mutual benefit, he would almost certainly have welcomed the fall of the Third Republic, whose rise he watched wistfully for ten years before his death : much as he, the descendant of **some of the noblest families** in France, would have regretted the circumstances of that fall, he would, as a far-sighted, optimistic, and Christian thinker, have considered the actual passing of the Rousseau-inspired system, which had so largely betrayed the Catholic traditions, the 'soul' of France, as a providential stepping-stone, a link in the long chain of historical events, from the worst threads of which God is forever weaving greater good.

It might of course be said that Fr. d'Alzon was not a typical Frenchman. In a way he was not, for he was always above the average and ahead of his times. When still a seminarist, he wrote : 'Every young man must keep abreast of his times. If he is a Catholic, he must go ahead of them . . . by thinking at the double.'

This article proposes to sketch—in his own words as far as space will allow—how Fr. d'Alzon did this under the different forms of government which quickly succeeded one another in his day. His policy was ever the same : to further the unity and extension of God's kingdom on earth through full liberty for the Church.

Already under the restored monarchy his letters abound in denunciation of the abuse of royal absolutism, especially with regard to the Church and education. It is understandable then that he welcomed the Second Republic in February, 1848, as a harbinger of religious as well as political freedom. With his habitual shrewdness, he immediately summed up the implications of the situation: freedom having usurped the kingship, granting licence even to many evil tendencies, at least, it was up to the Catholics to procure, by way of compensation, full religious freedom for themselves.

With his support, the staff of his college at Nîmes started a newspaper, *La Liberté Pour Tous*, with a view to propagating this policy, which he himself defined in an article entitled 'What We Are': after declaring that true sons of the Church consider religion as a reality, and not a mask, he added:

We are *Catholics* . . . and Catholicism is for us an eighteen-hundred-year-old giant, who is ever on the march, who is ever growing, who appears at times to stop, but who, just when he is thought to be exhausted, rises up with new grace and vigour, carrying humanity away in his strong arms to the limitless regions of the future . . .

Then he suggested reasons for rallying to the republican cause: no world movement can prosper without God's blessing—indeed, His Church watches the democratic movement with a favourable, though cautious, eye, and, after all, the children of God are equal inasmuch as they share the same liberty, partake of the same bread, and dwell in the house of the same Father.

'We are *Republicans*,' the article concluded, 'because Christianity, destined to triumph over all, must show its mettle under all forms of government and face every kind of trial . . . Finally, we are *Republican Catholics*, because if to-day in France, in Europe, two things are made to be united, they are: *religion and liberty, God and the people.*'

Similar foresight, detachment, and penetration are recurrent and even more striking in Fr. d'Alzon's writings just before and under the Third Republic. Already in 1868, in the days of the Second Empire, addressing the General Chapter of his Congregation concerning its spirit, he depicted contemporary relations of Church and State: the rebellious spirit in politics is but a shadow of the general revolt against God's law, he said: indeed,

Satan, in order to overthrow the Church, tries to upset the whole social structure, and the fifty or sixty thrones which have collapsed beneath his blows during the last century are the symbol of his final efforts to overthrow the throne of the Vicar of Jesus Christ on earth,

since he cannot overthrow the throne of Jesus Christ in Heaven. The infernal hordes cry out : *Nolumus hunc regnare super nos . . .*

Then, after recalling that we must prove our love for God's law by our zeal in defending the Church against the forces of rebellion, he concluded :

Finally, love for the Church opens out before us, especially in these days, new horizons. Look around you : chasms grow deeper, ruins pile up, catastrophes are brewing. In the midst of all this confusion, the Church, unshaken on her rock, sees the old world swallowed up, just as, from the shores of Hippo, St. Augustine watched the Rome of the Caesars being submerged by the irresistible waves of barbarism . . . . Let us do likewise; without vain regrets for the past and without presumptuous hopes for the future, let us carry on our work as God puts it before us. Perhaps it will be greater with re-Christianised peoples than with barbarians torn from all the rudeness of the uncivilised world . . . :

On the eve of the birth of the Third Republic in 1870, speaking at his college immediately after the Vatican Council, Fr. d'Alzon made an interesting allusion to England, whilst expounding his ideas concerning education and democracy :

. . . One of the best-known French Protestant writers has expressed his surprise at seeing that the three principal leaders of the movement in favour of *infallibility* were three Bishops of *free countries* : an Englishman, a Belgian, and a Swiss. He might have added almost the entire hierarchy of the United States. How could one associate pontifical despotism, henceforth attaining its zenith of power, with the love of the old English Constitution, with Belgian freedom, and with Swiss or American radicalism? On the other hand, how could one explain why the majority of the Bishops most devoted to Gallican errors owed their position to erastianism, or were supposed to rely on erastianism for support.

Puzzled by these apparent contradictions, I put the matter to the saintly and illustrious Archbishop of Westminster : his noble and sympathetic face lit up :

'Ah!' he said, 'modern governments have all turned erastian and I doubt whether they will last . . . . Soon there will remain standing only two things : *the Pope and the nations*. I have expressed this conviction in very exalted circles without being contradicted; and it is because in England they know my convictions on this point that my position there is unassailable.'

*The Pope and the nations*, Fr. d'Alzon went on, such is the slogan for the future, . . . that is what the Bishops of the free countries see in papal infallibility : a higher moral power in order to govern a greater liberty according to justice.

At the next Chapter in 1873, after the rise of the Third Republic, Fr. d'Alzon set his Congregation to help in rebuilding the religious life of the nation out of the spiritual ruins resulting from the Franco-Prussian war. He exhorted his religious to base their social work on the principles of faith, remembering that temporal authority draws its power from its own submission to God's will, and he added: 'To-day the Church has three great enemies: revolution, Prussia and Russia, and Russia is not the least to be feared of the three . . .'

He ended with three counsels: the first was to foster mutual confidence, for 'is not the cause of truth God's cause, and whose is God's cause except His own? . . .'; the second was to beware of complacent self-deception; and the third was:

To practise the boldness of faith . . . True prudence is the queen of moral virtues: now a queen commands, acts and, if necessary, fights. Some people have turned her into a woman aged by fear; that kind of prudence goes about in bedroom-slippers and a dressing gown; she has a cold and coughs a great deal. I want no such conventional prudence . . . Personally, I would prefer to trust passionately in God's Providence, even if I should, abandoned by all, have to go and die in hospital . . .

Once more, in 1874, in a circular letter preparatory to the next General Chapter, Fr. d'Alzon defined certain 'landmarks,' by means of which a way may be found amidst the labyrinth of social problems. From the firm conviction that Divine Providence will necessarily triumph, in its own good time, over revolt, and that Our Blessed Lord is continually performing miracles in the work of Redemption, Fr. d'Alzon concluded that we cannot help 'seeing the constant existence of social miracles wherever Jesus Christ lays His hand,' and that 'to deny miracles in the development of human affairs is not only to deny Jesus Christ, but to deny the fact, as visible as the sun, of the Church's existence.' So, the letter continues:

'the societies which adhere to the Church, without possessing promises of immortality, draw from their contact with an indestructible society principles of duration which, since the advent of Christianity, they will find nowhere else.'

All this leads up to the last 'landmark' containing two warnings, which have lost nothing of their significance to-day. The first insists that:

'the cause of the Church, the cause of Jesus Christ the King, consequently God's cause, is the cause of truth and good, and that every time we see a nation defending that cause openly and loyally, with the Church we can support that nation.'

And the second warning reminds us that : :

nations live as such either out of self-interest or for an ideal. If they live out of self-interest, they are traders carrying on their business' . . . But there are some who live for an ideal! If that ideal is true the nation which defends it has God's blessing.

'Alas!' the letter concludes, 'France received this blessing. What has she done with it? France was born the day Clovis espoused the cause of Christ's Divinity against the old Roman world and barbarism, both plunged in Arianism. She grew in the plains of Poitiers, when Charles Martel there repulsed Islamism, which was threatening Europe. She flourished when Charlemagne strengthened the temporal power of the Papacy. She reached her zenith when St. Louis, dying on a bed of ashes, breathed his last on the shores of Africa for the cause of Christ's sepulchre. Her mission was ever clear. In spite of a few family squabbles, the eldest daughter of the Church knew how to defend her mother's cause before the world. Has she deserted this mission so unique in history? Judging from what has happened, we have reason to think she has, and if we saw some nation ready to replace her, it would be for us a period of bitter anguish. Fortunately, our successors in this noble work are not forthcoming; the place is still left for us: let us find a means of recovering and keeping it.'

These last paragraphs are a strangely prophetic indictment of the Third Republic. With them should be compared a remark made in a letter to an old friend :

'I tremble, I confess, at the sight of the progress of unbelief, lest our Lord should transfer the light hitherto borne by France to England!'

GABRIEL SLATER, A.A., S.T.L.