

LOUIS VEUILLOT AND PAPAL ROME

THE restoration of the Papal sovereignty, which was happily brought about last year, brings to mind the name of one whose voice was amongst the few in Europe to be raised in sincere and unwavering defence of the Holy See throughout the troubled years of Italian unification. In an age when the flock seemed to be denying Peter, as Peter had once denied his Lord, the ardent crusadership of Louis Veillot would have sufficiently distinguished an otherwise obscure person; but Veillot, a man of humble origin, self-educated and self-made in his professional career, has been appreciated as the greatest journalist, and one of the most extraordinary personalities, of the nineteenth century.

He was twenty-five years of age, and had been engaged for eight years in political journalism, when a seemingly chance visit to Rome in 1838 led to his conversion to Catholicism. Now for the first time he found a field for the enthusiastic exercise of his talents. Rome had cast her spell on him and, on returning to Paris, he vowed himself to the service of the Pope and of the Church. Under his direction the *Univers*, from being an unknown and unimportant journal, became the organ of an articulate Catholic party fighting the anti-clericalism of the reign of Louis-Philippe. Under the Second Empire it stood out as the relentless critic of free thought and religious liberalism, and most of all as the champion of the Temporal Power of the Papacy, already menaced by the Franco-Piedmontese victories of 1859 over Austria, and the subsequent annexation by Victor Emmanuel II of Romagna. In the following year the *Univers* was suppressed by the government of

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Napoleon III for having published the papal encyclical *Nullis certe*, denouncing this threat to the independence of the Papal See.

Veillot's first act was to hasten to Rome and cast himself at the feet of the Holy Father. He heard from the lips of the persecuted Vicar of Christ the consoling words: 'Beati qui persecutionem patiuntur propter justitiam,' and his prayer was: 'O Dieu . . . soyez béni de m'avoir appelé dans votre Rome, de m'avoir révélé ses parfums, d'avoir ouvert mon intelligence à sa parole, d'avoir purifié et illuminé mes yeux dans sa lumière.' The fruit of this pilgrimage, and of a subsequent visit to Rome in 1862, he gave to the world in the two volumes of his *Parfum de Rome*, for which Pius IX thanked him, and on the success of which he congratulated him, in a personal letter. It was with such writings as this, and a flood of pamphlets, that Veillot filled in the seven years which elapsed before he obtained, in 1867, permission to resume publication of the *Univers*. In this last year appeared his *Odeurs de Paris*, by which he is perhaps better known—a kind of counterpart to the earlier work; but it is the *Parfum de Rome* which especially demands our attention in these pages and which, indeed, makes such fascinating reading to-day.

In form a collection of articles short and long, grouped loosely together under various headings, it might very well have taken one of these headings, *Promenades et Causeries*, for its title. And yet no pilgrim walked the streets of Rome with such sensitiveness to the spiritual significance of 'The City,' or discoursed with such passionate enthusiasm of her history, her monuments, her sacred pageantry, her daily life. The book is indeed redolent of the perfume of Rome, captured and distilled in the mind of a great writer and a great Catholic apologist. Not unfittingly, Veillot adopted for his matter a lyrical

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rhythm and a division, sometimes artificial, into short paragraphs, which give his essays the effect of poems in prose. Yet he never declines into the romantic, and, what is most pleasing to English readers, never sins against the virtue of humour, though his salt has naturally the flavour of satire and irony, rather than of paradox and pure jest. He is full of epigrams, which one tires oneself in committing to paper until one realises that the book itself is the only satisfactory record one can have of all these good things.

Most interesting to us to-day are those parts of the book in which Veillot deals with the 'Roman Question' of his day. For him, of course, there was no Roman Question, yet there is a sense in which it may be said that the Roman Question existed in Veillot's day, and ceased to exist in any but a euphemistic sense when the solitary shot was fired into the Vatican in 1870. *Italia locuta, causa finita*. Until then there had always been room for debate between the apostles of *Roma capitale* and the Catholic world, but unfortunately there were too few spokesmen for the latter. For too many, the question was at the best a political one, to be discussed in the light of national interests and liberal principles. Veillot stands out as one who dealt with, and dismissed, that question in the light of supra-political principles and in terms of the supernatural character of the Church:—

'J'achève de lire divers écrits sur ce que l'on appelle *La question romaine*; question de savoir si l'Eglise est de Jésus-Christ, et au fond, si Jésus-Christ est Dieu; et au fond encore, s'il y a un Dieu. Car les principes moteurs de cette guerre au temporel du Pape sont l'hérésie et le doute, et derrière, l'athéisme.'

Veillot was one of the few claiming to speak in the name of Catholicism whose support the Pope could accept without misgivings. The most complete divorce from political considerations governed the

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whole of his career as a Catholic journalist and dictated the withdrawal of his support from the Imperial régime when the policy of non-intervention was decided upon:—

‘ En conservant l’intégrité du domaine temporel le Saint-Père défend la propriété du monde catholique, propriété instituée par le peuple chrétien pour la garantie d’une indépendance nécessaire à la religion du peuple chrétien. . . . Lorsque le Saint-Père sollicite un peuple chrétien à le défendre, il demande à ce peuple de défendre ce qui est à lui.’

Some of his best scorn is reserved for the hypocrisy of the *catholique libéral*, French or Italian, clerical or lay:—

‘ Je n’ai pas encore parlé de mon ami Ercole, l’aigle des Romagnes. C’est un Coquelet italien et catholique. Il croit en Dieu et en l’Italie ‘une et libre.’ Il confesse l’Eglise et le Piémont; il attend tout du Pape et du roi Victor-Emmanuel. Comme patriote, il veut absorber sa patrie dans l’Italie faite à la taille du Piémont. Comme catholique, il veut placer l’Eglise en l’air, afin qu’elle soit débarrassée du monde, et le monde d’Elle, et que tout aille bien.’

Ercole, Italian and Catholic, and Coquelet, French and *libre penseur*, are Veillot’s official *contradictors* in the running debate. Their slogan, borrowed no doubt from Cavour and not *vice versa*, is: ‘ L’Eglise libre dans l’Etat libre,’ and to this Veillot rejoins:—

‘ Le malheur est que ces deux libertés ne sont pas la même liberté Allez au fond de l’Etat, et vous verrez sans peine que l’Etat se prétend Dieu A quoi se peut réduire la liberté de l’Eglise devant les droits de l’Etat Dieu? Si vous disiez: “ L’Eglise libre dans un peuple libre,” je le dirais avec vous La liberté du peuple et la liberté de l’Eglise ne se séparent point. Eglise et peuple sont libres en même temps.’

What, in the midst of these wranglings, and under the threat of misfortunes already tasted, were the

thoughts of the Sovereign Pontiff himself? Veillot records the *ipsissima verba* of Pius IX, spoken at a private audience which he was accorded :—

‘ Si un souverain très puissant venait dire au Pape : Payez-moi plusieurs millions ! le Pape, pour éviter de plus grands malheurs, se laisserait dépouiller, demandant à Dieu de n’exiger pas plus tard du spoliateur un compte trop sévère Mais quand on dit au Pape : Livrez-moi une âme ! toute la force du monde ne saurait obtenir son consentement.’

and he goes on to say :—

‘ Le Saint-Père croit à une catastrophe signalée, et cette catastrophe sera dans l’histoire une démonstration de la divinité de l’Eglise.’

Rome had already, in 1848, been in the hands of Mazzini and the mob. But the temporal Power is not the Papacy. The one may disappear, the other cannot fail. Veillot believed that the threatened catastrophe was but the beginning of a new and great era for the Papacy :—

‘ Et ce que je veux dire—car je ne prétends rien savoir de la durée ou de la fin du monde, et l’on peut voir un jour descendre de cheval, sur cette place, un Charlemagne aussi bien qu’un Attila ; ce que je veux dire, c’est bien qu’il faudra rebâtir à cette place le Vatican, ou périr.’

Here, and in the following passage, we have the expression of the extraordinary vision of this critic :—

‘ Quand on regarde ce vaste travail de Dieu pour la transformation du monde païen, et quand on voit l’œuvre encore inaccomplie, comment croire que de tels préparatifs n’aient eu d’autre but, même ici-bas, qu’une courte victoire ? Il semble que Dieu a élevé le genre humain pour de plus longues destinées ; et l’on prédirait plus volontiers qu’après ce triomphe imminent du Césarisme et du Protestantisme, César finira par promulguer le concile de Trente dans les pays aujourd’hui protestants.’

It is vision in which optimism and realism go hand in hand.

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Writing ten years before the fall of Rome, he was not content to look for the justification of his optimism in the events of even so remote a year as 1929. Mussolini is perhaps neither an Attila nor a Charlemagne, but he has 'rebuilt' the Vatican rather than see Italy perish. The ways of God are not our ways, but we may well ask ourselves which Caesar will come to promulgate the decrees of the Council of Trent in the Protestant countries of the world. For, in the ultimate analysis, Veuillot's optimism needs no justification in results; it is justified in its principle: 'La conscience du genre humain sait que Dieu est le plus grand personnage de l'histoire humaine.' And grateful for so profound a subject for meditation, we may take leave of a great writer and a great book.

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