

Introduction: **Judgment Without Evidence**

This is a book born of frustration; a frustration brought on by years of exposure to the works of most American writers dealing with the question of Catholic opposition to modern civilization. For the articles, essays and volumes which such authors have produced—promising to treat this question fully and arousing my hopes accordingly—have seemed to me ultimately to lead to nothing but dead ends and disappointment. Whatever their initial goal may have been, their arguments have generally misinterpreted both the nature of the Catholic critique as well as the entire problem of modernity. In doing so, they have demonstrated the power of the spirit of the times, the *Zeitgeist*, over many of even the finest minds and best intentions.

Any American whose knowledge of the struggle between the Church and the world in the modern era has been shaped by the typical texts available to him in English must be led to two conclusions.

The first and most fundamental of these conclusions is that everyone agrees that it is undoubtedly the modern spirit that is on the right track in any contest with the Church. How could a person be expected to think otherwise? Most Americans take the truth of modernity for granted as *the* first principle. And even if some writers do go beyond deploring what they might call the aberrations of the modern world, and actually come to believe that they themselves espouse an anti-modernist position, they almost invariably do so by emphasizing what is merely a variation on the modern theme; a variation

perfectly familiar to the reader from his everyday environment. How often, to take but a single example, one sees certain supposedly anti-revolutionary conservatives strike at the disease of modernity in the name of an obsession with individual freedom that is itself a manifestation of the presence of the same non-traditional virus.

Secondly, anyone nourished by the available English sources (with the very notable exception of works like Michael Davies' book, *The Second Vatican Council and Religious Liberty*) must also conclude that Catholic positions in the contest with the modern world are either ludicrous or pointless. How, generally speaking, could any other opinion be formed? After all, those people who militantly accept modernity as a dogma nevertheless insist that they are operating from purely rational foundations. They cannot allow what they consider to be irrational Catholic criticisms of enlightened modernity to be presented as something worthy of respect to sensible people. Instead, they dismiss them automatically, as one would exile fruits from a meat market, or shut his ears to the ramblings of the insane. At best, they may triumphantly inform their readers that even if such absurd objections to modernity once abounded in Catholic circles, they have, since Vatican II, been banished and no longer torture otherwise intelligent Christian minds. Meanwhile, some conservatives who wish to be friendly to the Church in her commitment to tradition offer "Catholic" solutions to present-day dilemmas that correspond to their own unconscious modernism, harmonize nicely with what is merely another strain of the spirit of the times, and can be called Christian only with the greatest of reservations. Hence, authors "friendly" to Catholicism who have nothing distinctly Catholic to say influence readers who see that there is nothing specifically Catholic to

learn—which is what American society has taught them to suspect all along anyway.

This book, then, hopes to contribute to bridging the gap between what an American may think he knows about serious Catholic criticisms of modern conceptions of human life, political order and social problems, and what he actually does know—which is generally very faulty indeed. It is intended to help raise the consciousness of Americans above their own *Zeitgeist*; to aid them to understand that the truly sophisticated Catholic critique of modernity has never been revealed to them; to the fact that that critique has been smothered beneath a smug and even totally thoughtless disdain.

The task of providing a comprehensive English-language introduction to this profound Catholic analysis of the problems of modern civilization is, to a large degree, the task of describing Catholic counter-revolutionary thought. This is because the French Revolution and opposition to it have been and still continue to be the crucial historical symbols of the battle of the modern world with the Church; the struggle of the new order of the ages to “liberate” itself from the “oppression” of the traditional and Catholic past of Europe.

This book seeks to demonstrate that much Catholic counter-revolutionary thought is not at all “what a vain people thinks”. It will point out the abyss that separates such thinking from mere conservatism. It will underline the way in which the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Mystical Body of Christ lie at the foundation of the most developed Catholic counter-revolutionary thinking, precisely because those doctrines contain sublime teachings on the interaction of nature and supernature and of individual and society that are essential to the well-being of mankind. Perhaps most importantly, it will discuss the profound

Catholic counter-revolutionary conviction that modernity, the Revolution, and the civilization built upon it are involved in a great delusion, one that psychologically, sociologically, as well as intellectually blinds people even to recognition of obvious truths. This is not merely because they are objectively wrong, not simply because they render inevitable enslavement and decay under the guise of protecting human dignity and assuring social perfection, but also because their manner of penetrating and dominating the spirit of our world causes a veil to descend before our eyes, making it almost impossible to recognize their error.

Serious Catholic counter-revolutionary thought is so broad in its scope that the effort of opening it up to a readership almost totally unaware of its existence is daunting. I have chosen to place this task within reasonable bounds by concentrating on an Italian journal, *La Civiltà Cattolica* (i.e., *Catholic Civilization*), which was published twice a month in Rome from 1850 onwards. A study of the writings of *La Civiltà Cattolica* offers the student an opportunity of examining both the theories motivating the leaders of the Catholic counter-revolutionary camp, and the way in which these theories were applied to unfolding events. *La Civiltà Cattolica* is immensely valuable because of its systematic presentation of important themes. Nevertheless, it is essential to point out in an introductory work of this type that the Roman periodical did not act in a vacuum. It was especially influenced by events in France and, in particular, by a French journal, *l'Univers*. *L'Univers* is generally studied only with reference to its seemingly exaggerated, uncritical support for Ultramontanism and attack on Gallicanism, which are not central concerns of this book. Its editors, however, discussed a vast range of other topics. Many times their arguments *were*

contentious and flawed, but they were also capable of great insight in ways that made them highly useful allies of the *Civiltà*. Hence, the ideas and actions of the Parisian *l'Univers* will serve as a complement to this book's primarily Roman focus. With a view to most effectively introducing a topic unfamiliar to the majority of American readers, I shall attempt to develop the history and themes of Catholic counter-revolutionary thought in as clear, concise and simple a manner as I can. Anyone wishing to do further research on the subject would do well to consult the journals themselves with their wide variety of interests. Although the groups and individuals whose invaluable assistance made this project possible are many—most notable among them the Earhart and Marguerite Eyer Wilbur Foundations and Mr. David Lane, who spent innumerable hours patiently editing early drafts of this text—the names of two men need to be given pride of place.

One of these is Emile Mersch, a Belgian Jesuit priest who died under tragic circumstances during the 1940 invasion of the Lowlands. It was Fr. Mersch's books, *The Whole Christ* and *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, that first led me to recognize the Catholic counter-revolutionary concern for an ecclesiology evoking major patristic themes. Without the formation given me by Fr. Mersch's teaching, I should never have come to understand the profundity of the issues involved in the present-day battle for the minds and hearts of men, nor the full consequences of a Catholic defeat.

Secondly, Catholic discussion of the topics considered in this text would be immeasurably diminished had it not been for the courageous efforts of those prelates of the nineteenth century who sacrificed everything to teach both supernatural and natural truths deemed "reactionary" by the spirit of their

times. Among those prelates, the chief figure—as *La Civiltà Cattolica* and *l'Univers* both agreed—was Giovanni Mastai-Ferretti, Pope Pius IX (1846-1878). A man of action and of prayer rather than an intellectual, Blessed Pius IX nevertheless sacrificed himself in defense of a Catholic civilization that exalted the mind far beyond anything that the proponents of a so-called Age of Reason could imagine. And since he did so while holding a position that might have been used to flatter the powers of the world rather than risk their vilification, it is to the memory of his life of self-sacrifice that this book is dedicated.