

Notes on the PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH IN THE 20thC

by Canon Poucin.

The final lecture by Canon Poucin dealt mainly with the persecution of the Church in the 20th C. He began by describing the difficult situation of the Church in France. The National Assembly had, from 1877, been undermining the Church's influence and when the Socialists won the election in 1902 they were headed by a former seminarian, Emile Combes. The Inventory from 1906 sought to remove the finances and property from the Church, this even included the sacred vestments and ornaments. The state would then decide on the ownership of goods. The clergy, formerly paid by the state, had their stipends removed. The state also attempted to put the laity in charge instead of the bishops. There was obviously a strong backlash from the people who tried to stop the police and military from entering the churches. Reconciliation was gradually brought about partly through the work of chaplains in World War 1 and in 1924 Pope Pius XI found a compromise between Church and State which gave the use of the churches back to the bishops. Canon Poucin then explained how the Church in Mexico faced even greater persecution in the 1920s. In 1917 a new constitution forbade the teaching of the faith in schools and worship outside the church, and closed religious foundations. The government elected in 1924 implemented these reforms. Although the church sought to react peacefully the state closed churches, fighting broke out and many priests and laity lost their lives. The people fought the federal soldiers in the revolt of 1927 and although the people lost they turned the tables in 1928 and in 1929 the fighting ended with the state allowing freedom of worship. Some Christian martyrs were canonized later.

The rise of the Nazis in Germany and their condemnation by the Holy See and the persecution of Catholics and concentration camps were also highlighted. The case of Blessed Karl Leisner, who was actually secretly ordained a priest in Dachau, was mentioned.

Canon Poucin then described how the Church made great strides in the area of Missionary work, particularly in Africa and Asia. Much of this work was due to Pope Pius XI, 1922-1939, who set up a Vatican department to oversee missions in 1924. Seminaries and schools were founded which encouraged the training of indigenous clergy. Bishops were appointed in China and some 6 million conversions were the fruit of this missionary activity. The teaching of St Thomas Aquinas was reaffirmed in seminaries and the 1925 Encyclical Letter *Quas Primas*, on the kingship of Christ, led to the addition of the Feast of Christ the King into the calendar. In 1930 the Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii* gave a more developed exposition of the Catholic teaching on marriage. This was followed in 1931 by an encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, celebrating the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, a seminal document on social questions especially ownership and wages.

In 1929 a Concordat was signed, which recognised the Vatican as a sovereign state, and also clarified the role of the Church in Italy.

Finally Canon Poucin drew attention to the fact that the errors of Modernism, condemned by Pope Pius X in the Oath against the errors of Modernism 1910, are still having to be strenuously fought against today.

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