

«Patriotisme et endurance», pastoral letter from cardinal Mercier

Malines, Noël 1914

My very dear Brethren, I CANNOT tell you how instant and how present the thought of you has been to me throughout the months of suffering and of mourning through which we have passed. I had to leave you abruptly on the 20th of August in order to fulfil my last duty towards the beloved and venerated Pope whom we have lost, and in order to discharge an obligation of the conscience from which I could not dispense myself, in the election of the successor of Pius the Tenth, the Pontiff who now directs the Church under the title, full of promise and of hope, of Benedict the Fifteenth. It was in Rome itself that I received the tidings—stroke after stroke—of the partial destruction of the Cathedral church of Louvain, next of the burning of the Library and of the scientific installations of our great University and of the devastation of the city, and next of the wholesale shooting of citizens, and tortures inflicted upon women and children, and upon unarmed and undefended men. And while I was still under the shock of these calamities the telegraph brought us news of the bombardment of our beautiful metropolitan church, of the church of Notre Dame au de là la Dyle, of the episcopal palace, and of a great part of our dear city of Malines. Afar from my diocese, without means of communication with you, I was compelled to lock my grief within my own afflicted heart, and to carry it, with the thought of you, which never left me, to the foot of the Crucifix. I craved courage and light, and sought them in such thoughts as these: A disaster has visited the world, and our beloved little Belgium, a nation so faithful in the great mass of her population to God, so upright in her patriotism, so noble in her King and Government, is the first sufferer.....

Then I looked upon the Crucifix. I looked upon Jesus, most gentle and humble Lamb of God, crushed, clothed in His blood as in a garment, and I thought I heard from His own mouth the words which the Psalmist uttered in His name: “O God, my God, look upon me; why hast Thou forsaken me? And forthwith the murmur died upon my lips; and I remembered what Our Divine Saviour said in His gospel: “The disciple is not above the master, nor the servant above his lord.” The Christian is the servant of a God who became man in order to suffer and to die. To rebel against pain, to revolt against Providence, because it permits grief and bereavement, is to forget whence we came.....; when, later at Malines, at Louvain, at Antwerp, it was given to me to take the hands of those brave men who carried a bullet in their flesh, a wound on their forehead, because they had marched to the attack of the enemy, or borne the shock of his onslaught, it was a word of gratitude to them that rose to my lips. “O valiant friends,” I said, “it was for us, it was for each one of us, it was for me, that you risked your lives and are now in pain.....

I was asked lately by a Staff officer whether a soldier falling in a righteous cause—and our cause is such, to demonstration—is not veritably a martyr. Well, he is not a martyr in the rigorous theological meaning of the word, inasmuch as he dies in arms, whereas the martyr delivers

himself, undefended d'nd unarmed, into the hands of the executioner. But if I am asked what I think of the eternal salvation of a brave man who has consciously given his life in defence of his country's honour, and in vindication of violated justice, I shall not hesitate to reply that without any doubt whatever Christ crowns his military valour, and that death, accepted in this Christian spirit, assures the safety of that man's soul.....And the soldier who dies to save his brothers, and to defend the hearths and altars of his country, reaches this highest of all degrees of charity.....

Christian mothers, be proud of your sons. Of all griefs, of all our human sorrows, yours is perhaps the most worthy of veneration. I think I behold you in your affliction, but erect, standing at the side of the Mother of Sorrows, at the foot of the Cross.Not all our heroes obtain temporal honours, but for all we expect the immortal crown of the elect

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