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Edwin Mortimer Standing

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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AS "THE MIRROR OF
THE WORLD".

By the late Dr. Maria Montessori.

Edited and arranged by E. Mortimer
Standing . (1)

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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AS "THE MIRROR OF THE WORLD".

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The following essay — if one may call it so — is the outcome of a series of conversations, spread out over some ten days, between Dr. Maria Montessori and the editor in August, 1950, two years before Dr. Montessori's death. Though he took down full and careful notes of these conversations every day as they proceeded, the editor does not vouch for the verbal accuracy of every sentence; but the substance of the ideas put forward are truly Dr. Montessori's own. In fact, ~~on the face~~ they bear the stamp of her original mind. In some places the editor has not hesitated — where it helps to bring out a point more clearly — to amplify it by his previous knowledge of Montessori's writings and lectures; here and there he has added a few comments of his own ^A in parenthesis.

The scene of these colloquies was a beautifully situated guest house (Landhaus Beck) in the mountains near the village of Iglis, above Innsbruck. These conversations began quite unexpectedly in the following way. The editor — who was on vacation — was at that time engaged in teaching at the Gatehouse Montessori School in London. This school was then housed in

the only remaining cloister of the monastery (destroyed by Henry VIII) which was once attached to the ancient church of St. Bartholomew the Great, in Smithfield, London, E.C.1. This church and the adjacent St. Bartholomew's Hospital (~~popularly~~ known as "Barts") were both founded by a man called Rahere who had been formerly a jester at the court of Henry II. While on a pilgrimage to Rome in , Rahere was taken seriously ill, and made a vow to St. Bartholomew that if he recovered he would found both a church and a monastery with a hospital at Smithfield. His health was restored and he fulfilled his vow; and that is how the church of St. Bartholomew and the hospital of the same name came into existence.

The editor happened to relate this story one morning on the terrace at Landhaus Beck to Dr. Montessori when - rather to his surprise - it seemed to set off something like a mine in the Dottoressa's subconscious.

"It is not only true (she remarked) that many hospitals first came into existence in connexion with the monasteries, but it is equally true that in many other spheres also, the Catholic Church anticipated, often by many centuries, beneficent activities which were afterwards copied by those outside it. What the Church did during the ^{se}centuries out of pure charity was often afterwards undertaken by the State as a matter of policy. To take one example. From the very beginning the Church was - as it is still - very solicitous for the well-being of the poor; and now in this century we have witnessed the

coming into existence of the Welfare State. Similar developments have taken place in many other spheres = in the arts, in education, in architecture, even in politics (it was Archbishop Stephen Langton [^] more than any other [^] who was instrumental in bringing about the signing of that great charter of political liberty [^] the Magna Carta. Ed.)

"In fact, we can truthfully say that the Catholic Church is a society, brought into existence and guided by the Holy Spirit, which has [^] right from the beginning [^] manifested through its individuals and institutions those factors which are necessary for the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth."

On the following days Dr. Montessori carried these ideas still further, developing them at intervals in the manner shown in the subsequent pages.

"Looked at from a purely objective point of view the Catholic Church is the most interesting and wonderful institution on the earth. Supposing an inhabitant from another planet were to come to this, in order to make a study of its inhabitants, he would find one institution [^] and one only [^] displaying in its origin, history, structure, activities, aims, continuity and influence a unique position = something wholly different from anything else that exists on this planet. He would see [^]infact a social organism, coming down through the centuries possessing in itself, [^] as it were in miniature [^] and from the beginning, everything that human

society needs for the establishment of a harmonious civilisation,²
in short Lo Specchio del Mondo - the mirror of the world to come -
of that society which humanity is striving consciously or un-
consciously to create.

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"Many reforms and ideals which people are trying to bring
about to-day have already been in the possession of the Church
for nearly a thousand years. In fact the people in this ^{"enlightened age"} "atomic
age" are still centuries behind the Church, and do not begin to
understand many things which she has known and practised all along.

"Do not misunderstand me! In speaking of the Church in
this way I am not considering such matters as the Consubstan-
tiality of the Three Persons in the Holy Trinity, or the Problems
of Predestination and Grace, etc. ~~I~~ No, I am thinking of the
Church simply as a visible, historical, society, objectively
considered; regarded as you might say, as a "going concern"
amongst others - considered as something viewed dispassionately
and without prejudice by a complete outsider - as from another
world. For this reason - and from this point of view - the
Church is an institution which would repay careful study from
many different aspects. I myself learned many things from it
(from a psychological point of view) that were useful in building
up the practice of my method.

"To me the Catholic Church is the greatest of all the
miracles that Our Lord worked on earth. None of the other

great religions has anything remotely corresponding to it. It differs from the others because it is a living organism, the creation of the Holy Spirit, and it has brought into existence new forms of civilisation. Compare it with Buddhism for instance. It is true that Buddhism has its own philosophy, yet it has not radically changed and uplifted the form of society around it. (It did not drain the swamps, educate the people, free the slaves, and preach the essential equality of all men before God. Ed.)

The Church possesses a "divina sapienza" a divine wisdom because it was not only created by, but is continually guided and directed by the Holy Spirit. Her wisdom is super-personal; and the Church carries out her divine mission in spite of the imperfections - not to mention the downright wickedness - of some of the individuals in it. Thus, this or that bishop or priest - or even Pope for that matter - may woefully neglect his duty; but nevertheless the Church continues to fulfil her mission on earth. Often the individuals, who are carrying out this divine plan, are unconscious of the value of their own work.

The Two Annunciations.

"It is interesting to notice that there exists a certain parallel between the coming of Our Lord and the coming of the Church - which is in sort a continuation of His Incarnation. Both events were announced beforehand; and both were foretold as

the coming work of the Holy Spirit. The Angel Gabriel announced to the Blessed Virgin that the Holy Spirit would come upon her; and, similarly, Our Lord foretold to His disciples the coming of the Holy Ghost; and it was with the fulfillment of this prophecy - on the first Pentecost - that the Catholic Church was born.

A Comparison with Protestantism. (Quote? No)

We can see a great difference, here, between the Protestant and the Catholic points of view. In Protestantism the final authority is a book - the Bible - whereas in Catholicism it is the living voice of the Church, under the immediate guidance of the Holy Spirit. In fact Our Lord promised His followers that when the Holy Spirit came, He would teach them many things about His own doctrine which they were as yet unable to understand. In foretelling the day of Pentecost Our Lord told His disciples to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit - not for a book (which was only completed many years later). It was not the pages of a book that fluttered down on their heads in that upper room but living tongues of flame which the Holy Ghost had enkindled in their hearts. It is the Holy Spirit therefore - working through the ages - which guides the church as a living authority enabling her to speak with authority in every epoch as it comes.

The Organization of the Church.

" One of the most remarkable features of the Catholic Church is its organization. Contrary to what is generally supposed, Christ, in conjunction with the Holy Spirit whom He sent, was the greatest organizer the world has ever known. Many of the problems which confronted the early church had to do with questions of organization. During the Middle Ages the whole of Europe was ^A in a sense ^A a part of that organization; and the civilization of the time, in so far as it reflected the unity ^Z of that organisation, was a model one. Even Kings and Emperors were subject to the rulings of the Church. So remarkable is the organisation ^Z of the Church = which has come down unbroken through the centuries = that those outside it would be better advised ^A instead of attacking it ^A to study it dispassionately; and in doing so they would glean many important hints.

How the Church is Governed.

\ Take for instance, the question of how the Church is governed. If I were head of a state I would send some of my counsellors to make a special study of the method by which the Church is governed. In many countries to-day there exists great confusion and political instability because those who are elected to govern are not really fitted for such a high and

difficult task. They have had neither the training nor the kind of experience which would prepare them for dealing with the sort of problems that they have to cope with. In other departments of public life there is usually a long and special preparation: the lawyer, the doctor, even the ship-builder and carpenter have to go through a long period of apprenticeship. But in this "democratic age" the choice of the governor is often made by the ignorant masses, who are unaware of the qualities which are essential for a true leader. So it often happens that this or that individual is chosen on account of his political views, or of some past achievements which really have nothing to do with the intricate business of guiding a state. It is almost as if a group of persons went out into the street and said "We will take the third person we meet and make him our Prime Minister or President".

Now if you turn your attention to the manner in which, in the Catholic Church, its governors are chosen for their high and responsible offices, you will see how great is the difference. You will see in fact that the method of the Catholic Church is that of an enlightened democracy. You will find that the person chosen to act as the supreme governor has nearly always had a long and varied preparation. Let us consider some of the usual steps in this preparation.

1. One of the most important qualities in a governor is that he should have an intimate knowledge of the people whom he is

to govern. So we start with the ^{curate =} ~~village cure~~ - the assistant to the Parish priest. His work brings him into direct contact with the people as individuals; and he becomes acquainted with their difficulties, their hopes and fears - all their various needs.

2. If the curate does well and conscientiously, and shows promise, he is promoted to the position of ^{Pastor} Rector to a parish of his own. He is thus brought into contact with a wider area, and bears heavier responsibilities; and has to deal with a great variety of problems which call for prompt decision.

3. If he continues to show himself faithful and efficient, he is again promoted - passing through various stages - until he is made a bishop responsible for a whole diocese.

4. If he continues to acquit himself well and displays even more outstanding qualities, he may be made an Archbishop or even raised to the rank of Cardinal.

5. A still higher office is open to him, by election by the College of Cardinals who, with a sort of educated democracy, choose the new Pope. It is an educated democracy because the cardinals are not "ignorant masses". They themselves have been through the previous stages described above; they know the people, and are well acquainted with the problems of government; and choose accordingly. But it is in a genuine democracy because many of these Cardinals themselves are originally from the masses. (At the time of writing ¹⁹⁵⁸ in the College of

Cardinals in Rome one is the son of a farm labourer, another the son of a stone-mason, a third from the family of a boatswain, and the fourth the son of a docker, and of course, as everyone knows, ^{Pope John XXIII} our new Holy Father comes from peasant stock. (Ed.)

The Individual Touch.

You will only find true loyalty given to those that rule, by those that are ruled, when the latter feel that they, themselves count as individuals. And this is just what Catholics all over the world feel about their sovereign ruler ^{the} the Pope. (There is no need to argue this point: anyone who has heard an Italian crowd shout out "E viva il Papa, or witnessed the ardent devotion of the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims that throng annually to St. Peter's, must realise ² how profound is this sense of a sort of personal link between the Holy Father and his children. The very teaching of the Church = that every individual soul is of infinite value in the eyes of God = helps to foster this awareness that the Government of the Church exists ~~f~~or the individual benefit of all its members. Ed.)

The Communists have taken a leaf out of the book of the Church in this respect. It is a definite principle in their method of propaganda to make contact with "individuals" through their "cells"; thus making their proselytes feel that they count as individuals, and not merely as one of a crowd. In this way they are able to arouse in their followers a genuine enthusiasm combined with an intense loyalty = almost comparable

to religious zeal.

"A Ministry of Information".

Most modern states of any size have created a Ministry of Information so that they can keep themselves informed of the various social movements that are going on within and without their boundaries. But long before the present age — and for centuries — the Church has possessed the most perfect system of keeping in touch with what is happening in the world, that has ever been derived. Not of course that the Church keeps professional spies, as do many states; but her priests all over the world are so intimately in touch with the peoples in various countries that they cannot but be aware of the various movements that are going on. All this information is transmitted through various channels to the different "Congregations" in Rome. Let there be a new heresy forming in one country, or a persecution of religiousⁿ in another, or new methods springing into use in medicine or psychology, or new ways discovered of transmitting information by scientific methods — or any of a hundred and one other new events coming into existence, somehow or other the Vatican gets to know about them as soon^s and often sooner[^] than the heads of any other state. (Not only is this so, but, partly for the above reason and partly as the result of inspired wisdom, the Popes — like Shakespeare's "prophetic soul of the wide world dreaming on things to come" — have, as Newman

points out [^]often been so well able to read the signs of the times as to foretell by half a century or more the shape of things to come. Ed.)

Equal Justice for All.

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Thirty years ago ^{my son} when I was living in California [^] Mario (I) struck up an acquaintance with a student who was to all intents and purposes an anarchist [^] - in theory, at any rate, if not in practice. This man was always inveighing against the injustices in society; how in the law courts the rich could "get away with it" in a manner which was impossible for the impecunious. I told him that in a properly organised ² society everyone = the rich equally with the poor = should be brought before the same tribunal, and judged with equal impartiality. "Yes, yes," replied our anarchist excitedly, "that is just what I think, but that would only happen in Utopia!" "Not at all," I replied, "such a society already exists, one in which every one, from the king downwards, is obliged to go before the same tribunal, and their offences ⁵ judged with the same impartiality". The anarchist opened his eyes wide with incredulity and exclaimed, "Where is that society?" "It is the Catholic Church," I answered. "Kings and Emperors = even the Pope himself = all have to come before the tribunal of the Confession, where their sins are judged in the light of immutable moral laws. In the Middle Ages it was not

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Note (M. M. S. W.)

uncommon for the highest personages in the land to do public penances^s for their sins. (Thus Edward III walked barefoot to Canterbury for causing the murder of St. Thomas à Becket; and the Emperor Charlemagne, after divesting himself of his crown and royal robes, knelt in penance before Pope Gregory at Connessa. Ed.)

Right and Wrong Ideas of Justice.

The world outside the Christian tradition has its own idea of justice, but it is a very limited one. I once knew an old Italian peasant who said to me: "I have lived for seventy years but in all that time I have never, thank God, had anything to do with justice!" By this he meant to say that in all his life he had never been brought into a court of law as a prisoner. This implies a very negative idea of justice = as if it only concerned itself with evil deeds, and had no necessary connection with the good, still less with genuine sanctity.

As a consequence of this point of view the attention of the world (as far as justice is concerned) tends to be focussed on crime and evil. The public are even invited to come and see "how justice is carried out;" the papers are full of detailed and morbid accounts of all sorts of crime; press photographers rush to the scene of a crime to obtain lurid pictures of it and of those who took part in it. The ^{MOVIES} cinemas, too, are constantly portraying criminal actions = which, incidentally, is one of the causes for the increase in juvenile delinquency.

The Church, on the contrary, has a higher and more complete idea of justice. Her tribunals study not only what is evil but also what is good. The long sifting of evidence which is carried out during the process of canonization is a concentration upon what is good - upon the conspicuously charitable actions ^A the heroic sanctity ^A of the Servant of God whose case is being tried. In this way, and in the lives of the saints, the Church focusses the minds of her children on the good rather than the evil, thus tending to raise the level of morality instead of lowering it, as happens when so much attention is given to crime.

There is also another point which is also worth mentioning in this connection. In civil law the criminal remains a criminal after his sentence; in fact in ancient times he was literally branded as one. Even now, a civil servant who is punished by law for any serious offence ^S loses both his position and his pension; and there always tends to be a social stigma on anyone who has served a term in prison. How different it is in the Church! It matters not how grave has been his offence ^S, the criminal, once he has passed through the tribunal of penance, is re-instated to his former dignity as a human being. Many indeed - like Mary Magd^Aelene and Augustine - attain to the glory of sanctity and shine for ever as fixed stars in the Church's calendar. It is only quite recently that the Church's point of view with regard to criminals is being taken up by the State. We find now in certain countries special remedial prisons in which the aim is to help the offender

to regain his dignity and self-respect and re-instate him to his former position in society. Here again we see the State [^] after many centuries [^] beginning to adopt the point of view which has been part of the Church's teaching since long before the coming of "The Dark Ages".

The Church as the Patron of the Arts.

When I was giving a Montessori Course in Kodaikanal, in India, amongst the students there was a Protestant lady missionary from Switzerland. She also attended a course I gave in the teaching of Religion. In one of my conversations with her she spoke critically of what she described as the unnecessary luxury which is found in many Catholic Churches, and disparaged the spending of money on beautiful vestments, golden vessels, mosaic designs, paintings, statues, stained glass windows, marble pillars, and so on - money which in her opinion could, and should have been given to the poor. In my reply I said to her, "but all ^{THIS} ~~these things~~ - this luxury as you call it - IS for the poor." "Supposing", I continued, "there was somewhere a great and beautiful palace, and supposing there was to take place in it a splendid and elaborate function, attended by a group of high personages marvellously dressed - with beautiful music played by the best musicians - how people would regard it as a favour to be allowed to attend, and would even be willing to pay liberally for the privilege of so doing. Yet - and quite apart from its religious value - this is exactly what happens in a

great Catholic cathedral; only with this difference, that the poor are just as welcome as the rich. In museums you may see wonderful paintings and statues and jewels and vestments (many of them originally the property of the Church) and you may even have to pay to go in. But such rare and beautiful things can be seen in the great Catholic Churches by the poor for nothing. I was crossing Barcelona once in a taxi and was having a chat with the driver en route. It was at the time of the Civil War; and my taxi driver complained that the Communists - by closing all the churches and prohibiting religious festivals - had taken all the splendour and pageantry away from them: there was nothing left for them now except the bull fights.

The Church and Medical Science.

The Church too, helped in the development of the sciences - especially of medicine. It was only when the monks began to maintain hospitals for the sick - looking after them for long periods at a stretch - that it was made easy to observe the comparative effects of various methods of treatment in a scientific manner.

The Ministry for Agriculture.

In many modern states there is a ministry of agriculture whose function it is to study and advise on all subjects connected with the land - tilling and drainage, rearing of stock,

sowing of crops, and so forth. Over a thousand years ago this work was, to a large extent, carried on by the monks who taught the people how to do many of these things, and ^{through} ~~by~~ the best method = by example.

Education.

Nowadays in most civilised ^z countries there is compulsory education by the State; but it was not so until comparatively recently. During the Middle Ages it was to the religious houses that boys were sent to be educated. It was only after the so-called "reformation" and the dissolution of the monast^εries, that most lay schools were founded, just as it was during the same period = and for the same reason = that the Poor Laws came into existence, and Alms Houses were set up. The Church even had a form of adult education right from the beginning ^λ the sermon.

Religious Orders in the Church.

One of the most characteristic and impressive features of the Catholic Church is to be found in Her Religious Orders. These are wonderful institutions, unique in their nature, origin and function. New Religious Orders come into being when there is a new "sensitive period" ^ε in society. They arise in response to some new need in the body politic: or = to speak biologically = the function creates the organism. The new need is there (function) and it calls into being the new organ(i.e., a new religious order).

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Again and again, in history, new religious orders have burst forth with a sudden and tremendous impetus, astonishing everyone with their vitality and growth; as, for instance, when the new mendicant orders - the Franciscans and the Dominicans - spread with surprising swiftness over the whole of Europe, and even beyond.

Individual charity is an excellent thing and accomplishes much; but when that charity - gathering together a host of individuals who are fired by the same enthusiasm - becomes organized and disciplined into a religious order there seems almost no limit to what it can accomplish. In this respect religious orders can be compared to the powerful new machines now used in agriculture - tractors, combines, bulldozers and the like. One man working by himself at ploughing or harvesting can do a certain amount of good work; but it is almost as nothing compared with what can be accomplished, in the same or even less time, by one of these machines. Even so a religious order is able to accomplish far more than any single individual, or a great number of individuals all working singly as isolated individuals.

But of course there is nothing mechanical about a religious order, since it depends ultimately upon individual vocations under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who has brought the order into existence. Furthermore they do not wear out, like machines; for many of them have been in existence for centuries; witness

the Benedictine Order which was founded by St. Benedict as long ago as the fourth century, and is still going as strongly as ever.

Wanted, a New Order: ^ga Montessori Order.

I have often considered the possibility and propriety of forming a new religious order to carry on my work. But such a task is not for me; nevertheless some day someone may arise and found such an order. I am not thinking primarily of an order that would have as its aim just to teach my method of education. I am obliged to repeat, again and again, that I do not think my main work has been the founding of the "Montessori Method" (though of course, there is such a method). If I have done anything that will last it is primarily due to the fact that = under Providence = I have been the instrument through whom certain higher possibilities in childhood have been revealed which were hitherto not generally known. And with this discovery there has come a new conception of the immense potential constructive powers for building up a better civilisation^z that are latent in children = powers which hitherto have never been fully implemented, not even by the Church. For I verily believe that, without the support ("concourse") of these newly revealed ("natural") virtues in children, even religious influences cannot have their fullest effect, according to the well-known theological principle that Grace builds on Nature. The aim of this new order would be, with

and through the help of the Church, to make use of these newly-discovered constructive powers in "normalised children" (E) for the building up of a stable, harmonious, and peaceful Christian civilisation. I believe that all the great civilisations of the past, including our own, have been incomplete and unstable because they have been built only on "adult values": they have never taken into account these immense powers latent in that "other pole of humanity" = the Child.

The need for such an order is urgent. I have taught and given diplomas for forty years but as yet nothing really great has been accomplished = nothing, that is, corresponding to the immense need, and the equally immense possibilities for good which are waiting to be made actual.

Private.