

LETTERS TO YOUNG MEN

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Letters to young men by Henri-Dominique Lacordaire

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HENRI-DOMINIQUE LACORDAIRE

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By

HENRI-DOMINIQUE LACORDAIRE

Of the Order of Friars Preachers

Translated from the French

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PREFACE TO THE PRESENT EDITION

THESE *Lettres à des Jeunes Gens* were first collected and edited by Lacordaire's friend and disciple, the Abbé Henri Perreyve, in 1862, the year following the writer's death. An English translation by the Rev. James Trenor was published by Richardson of Derby a year or two later. This has long been out of print in this country, although it has been reprinted in the United States of America. The present edition is based upon Father Trenor's version, but his rendering has been recast throughout, and the editor has added translations of many letters which Father Trenor passed over or which were not found in the early French editions. The autobiographical memoir at the end has also been added by the present editor.

The intrinsic value of these letters is apology enough for offering them once more to English readers; but many reasons concur in giving them special interest at the present moment. He who wrote them was born in 1802, and this year Catholic France has kept the centenary of his birth. The same year has robbed the Church in France of that freedom of teaching for which Lacordaire fought during the best years of his life. In view of recent events it is interesting to recall, after an interval of seventy years, what Montalembert describes as "the first scene in that great lawsuit which was only won twenty

years later"—when the Loi Falloux gave to the Catholics of France the right of bringing up their children according to their faith and conscience. In 1811, by a decree of Napoleon, all public teaching had been made the monopoly of the University. In 1831, about the time when the "Avenir" newspaper began its brilliant but intemperate campaign for the freedom of the Church in France, Lamennais and his young disciples resolved to open a Catholic school in defiance of the imperial decree, which still remained the law of France. They were indicted before the Chamber of Peers, whose verdict was against them on the point of law, and they were condemned to a small fine. It was then that Montalembert won his first forensic triumph. "The peers . . . hardly breathed as they listened to that eloquence at once so youthful and so manly, so haughty yet so meek, so full at once of irony, of passion, of fire and of sound logic. The accused became the accuser . . . the dock became a tribune; and all listened in religious silence to the youth who at one bound had taken his place among the first orators of France."* And Montalembert, silent as to his own triumph, bore a generous tribute to the magic eloquence of Lacordaire's speech for the defence, in which he claimed that by trampling under foot the imperial decree they had deserved well of their country's laws, had done a service to her freedom and to the future of a Christian people.

In a famous article in the "Avenir" Lacordaire once poured scorn on the sacrilegious tyranny of a puppet of Government—*une ombre*

* Chocarne, "Inner Life of Lacordaire," translated by A. T. Drane.

de proconsul ! un simple sous-préfet—who had insulted the Church of France and profaned her sanctuary by causing the corpse of one who had died excommunicate to be carried by armed force into a church before burial. What would have been the measure of his scorn for the action of a renegade Jack-in-office who, by a mere secret circular, issued with no mandate from the nation, has violated the sacred rights of Christian parents and banished 150,000 of their children and 6,000 teachers from their schools! Would that Lacordaire were living now to lash into action by his voice and by his pen the halting spirit of French Catholics; to recall to the sense of his countrymen that Gospel of liberty which he loved so well; to remind them of the true meaning of those rights of man in the name of which the French Government wields a despotism worse than that of monarchy or empire, and which in France are inscribed at the very portals of the House of God, not as the seal of the Church's freedom, but as the brand of her servitude!

It is unnecessary to write here of Lacordaire's life and work, the more so as Miss Drane's excellent translation of Père Chocarne's "Inner Life" of the great Dominican—now in its ninth edition*—is within the reach of all. But there is a note of that life which over and over again receives expression in these letters, and about which a word of explanation may not be amiss. "May I die a penitent Catholic and an impenitent liberal," said Lacordaire in his reply to an address of congratulation on his election to the French Academy; and the words give the key

* London: R. and T. Washbourne. 1901.

to his life. But they are likely to be misunderstood if read apart from his life, especially at a time when liberal Catholicism is taken to indicate a tone or temper of mind which Lacordaire's own instincts would have abhorred.

He tells us in the memoir at the end of this volume that no sooner in his student-days did the din of politics clash upon his ear than he became a child of his age in love for liberty as he already was in his ignorance of God and His Gospel. He did not abandon his ideal of personal and political liberty on his conversion; but rather it was heightened and ennobled by the fuller light which faith shed upon his soul. Freedom did not, in his opinion, require any particular form of government; he saw that it might exist under monarchy as well as under a republic, whereas even democracy might become despotic. His own views rather favoured constitutional monarchy, and he expressed admiration for the British constitution. For himself, however, he aspired to the ideal of a priesthood "rising above all political parties, but sympathising with every need." Towards the struggles of oppressed nationalities, or what he conceived to be such, he gave generous and warmest sympathy; and he watched with lively interest the national movements in Poland and Ireland, and with mingled hopes and fears that of Italy also in its earlier stages. But he was able to distinguish between true liberty and the crimes committed in her name.

It was the liberty of the Church, however, which held the foremost place in Lacordaire's aspirations and public labours. He saw the condition of servitude to which she had been