

The American Ecclesiastical Review

A MONTHLY PUBLICATION FOR THE CLERGY

Cum Approbatione Superiorum

VOL. CXXIX

JULY—DECEMBER, 1953

Ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι, μιᾷ ψυχῇ
συναθλοῦντες τῇ πίστει τοῦ εὐαγγελίου
Phil. 1:27

Published by
THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA PRESS

THE TEACHING OF THE *TESTEM BENEVOLENTIAE*

On Jan. 22, 1899, Pope Leo XIII sent an apostolic letter to Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, at that time the only American member of the Sacred College. This document, the *Testem benevolentiae*, contained one of the most important doctrinal pronouncements of modern times. It is definitely a document with which our priests should be familiar.

Some recent outstanding literary productions have aroused important new interest in the subject matter of the *Testem benevolentiae*. Exactly fifty years after the *Testem benevolentiae* was written, Fr. Felix Klein, one of the central figures in the controversy Pope Leo's letter set out to resolve, was printing the volume of his autobiography dealing with the controversy itself and with the pontifical pronouncement it provoked.¹ Two years previously Fr. Edgar Hocedez, S.J., had dealt with this topic briefly but competently in the third volume of his *Histoire de la théologie au XIX^e siècle*.² Last year Dr. John Tracy Ellis again focussed attention on this topic when he dealt with it in his masterly biography of Cardinal Gibbons.³ This year Msgr. Moynihan's biography of Archbishop Ireland⁴ has brought about an increased awareness of and interest in this vital pontifical document.

Unfortunately, despite the high quality of the historical and autobiographical writing that concerns the *Testem benevolentiae*, there seems to be some danger that many of our people may fall into a very regrettable misunderstanding of the teaching set forth in this letter. The misunderstanding centers around the designation "phantom heresy," which has sometimes been applied to the teachings reprovved in the *Testem benevolentiae*. It would be unfortunate if our people should come to imagine that

¹ Klein, *La route du petit Morvandiau: Souvenirs de l'Abbé Félix Klein*, Tome V, *Une hérésie fantôme, l'américanisme* (Paris: Plon, 1949).

² Hocedez, *Histoire de la théologie au XIX^e siècle*, Tome III, *Le règne de Léon XIII, 1878-1903* (Brussels: L'Édition Universelle, 1947), pp. 190-94.

³ Ellis, *The Life of James Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore, 1834-1921* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1952), II, 1-80.

⁴ Moynihan, *The Life of Archbishop John Ireland. A Definitive Biography* (New York: Harper and Brother, 1953), pp. 104-35.

the teachings criticized adversely in this pontifical letter were actually condemned as heretical therein. It would be much more regrettable if they were to be cajoled into imagining that the Holy See, in 1899 or at any other time, would mislead its people by attacking a non-existent doctrinal deviation.

The term "phantom heresy," applied to the teachings attacked in the *Testem benevolentiae*, certainly did not originate with Father Klein. The expression "phantom of heresy" was employed, as a matter of fact, in the Parisian newspaper *Figaro*⁵ only a few months after the issuance of Pope Leo's letter to Cardinal Gibbons. Hocedez himself adverts to the use of this designation in his treatise on the history of sacred theology during the nineteenth century.⁶ There can be no doubt, however, about the fact that Father Klein popularized this designation in a uniquely effective way by using it as the subtitle of what must be considered as the most interesting volume of his autobiography.⁷

The rather common use of this expression in our own day has led even as eminent and careful a scholar as Fr. Thomas McAvoy, C.S.C., to say that "in the Apostolic letter of Pope Leo XIII there are several doctrines set forth and condemned as heretical by the Holy Father,"⁸ and to speak of "the heresy as condemned by the Holy Father"⁹ in the *Testem benevolentiae*. The use of this same terminology has tended to influence some of our people to imagine that a highly important pontifical document was concerned with errors which no one ever actually held, and which were thus not at all dangerous to the life of faith within the Catholic Church.

⁵ Cf. Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 413. The expression was used in an article signed by Julien de Narfon, who spoke of "the phantom of heresy which, during these last years, disturbed the sleep of Canon Delassus and Father Maignen."

⁶ Hocedez, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

⁷ It must be understood that, like de Narfon, Father Klein spoke of the "phantom heresy" as existing primarily in the minds of his theological opponents. It was not applied primarily to the teaching precisely as reprovved by the *Testem benevolentiae*.

⁸ McAvoy, in the article "Liberalism, Americanism, Modernism," in *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia*, LXII, 4 (Dec., 1952), 225.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND LIBRARY

Because there are definite and important parallels between the *Testem benevolentiae* and the present Holy Father's great encyclical letter, the *Humani generis*, it is highly important that our contemporary Catholics should realize clearly that the letter of Pope Leo XIII was not wasted on the condemnation of any "phantom heresies."

In the first place, the *Testem benevolentiae* stigmatizes neither any individual opinion of which it disapproves nor the sum total of these repudiated teachings with the note of heresy. Neither the term "heretical" nor its definition is to be found anywhere in this document. On this point alone, the designation of "phantom heresy" cannot be applied accurately to the teachings rejected in the *Testem benevolentiae*.

According to the text itself, the document deals with "certain things to be avoided and corrected (*nonnulla . . . cavenda et corrigenda*)."¹⁰ The doctrines reprovred are "new opinions"¹¹ and some "consequences (*consectaria*)"¹² which follow from them. These consequences are characterized as teachings of which "if the intention seem not wrong, as We believe, the things themselves will not appear by any means free from suspicion."¹³ Furthermore, all the teachings dealt with in the *Testem benevolentiae*, taken together, are described as opinions which our Bishops should repudiate and condemn.¹⁴ The Holy Father did not himself condemn these teachings as heretical. There is no indication that he expected the Bishops to do so either.

In the *Testem benevolentiae*, Pope Leo XIII declared that he was writing "on account of Our Apostolic office, in order to provide for the integrity of the faith, and to guard the security of the faithful."¹⁵ Now the *integritas fidei* of which he spoke is something which can be injured by the holding of propositions deserving of a censure less grave than that of heresy. The Sover-

¹⁰ I have used the English translation published in *The Great Encyclical Letters of Pope Leo XIII*, with a preface by John J. Wynne, S.J. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1903), pp. 441-53, and the Latin text as published in the *Codex iuris canonici fontes*, edited by Pietro Cardinal Gasparri (Vatican Press, 1933), III, 535-42. The present citation is to be found in Wynne, p. 441, and in *CICF*, 535.

¹¹ Wynne, p. 442; *CICF*, *loc. cit.*

¹² Wynne, p. 445; *CICF*, 537.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Cf. Wynne, p. 452; *CICF*, 541.

¹⁵ Wynne, p. 441; *CICF*, 535.

ign Pontiff wished to protect that integrity and to safeguard the people Our Lord had entrusted to him by the process of reprovred certain definite propositions.

The principle or foundation upon which the opinions censured in the *Testem benevolentiae* rested was, according to Pope Leo XIII, the statement that "in order the more easily to bring over to Catholic doctrine those who dissent from it, the Church ought to adapt herself somewhat to our advanced civilization, and, relaxing her ancient rigor, show some indulgence to modern theories and methods (*recens invecis populorum placitis ac rationibus indulgere*)."¹⁶ The Pope wrote that there were "many" who hold (*arbitrantur*) that this principle should be applied, not only to the rule of life, but also to the deposit of faith.¹⁷ "For they contend," said Pope Leo, "that it is opportune, in order to work in a more attractive way upon the wills of those who are not in accord with us, to pass over certain points of doctrine, as if of lesser moment, or so to soften them that they may not have the same meaning which the Church has invariably held."¹⁸

The *Testem benevolentiae* teaches that this general principle as applied to the deposit of faith can be disproved by an appeal to the Church's teaching on the nature and the origin of Catholic doctrine, as set forth in the Vatican Council's constitution *Dei Filius*.¹⁹ And, dismissing the opinion that some of the points of Catholic doctrine may be passed over in bringing the Church's message to those outside the fold, it reminds us that *all* the truths of Christian doctrine come to us from Our Lord, and that all of them are adapted to every age and to every nationality. This section of the document ends with one of the most eloquent passages in modern pontifical literature.

Far be it, then, for any one to diminish or for any reason whatever to pass over any of this divinely revealed doctrine; whosoever would do so, would rather wish to alienate Catholics from the Church than to bring over to the Church those who dissent from it. Let them return; indeed, nothing is nearer to Our heart; let all those who are wandering far from the sheepfold of Christ return; but let it not be by any other road than that which Christ has pointed out.²⁰

¹⁶ Wynne, p. 442; *CICF*, 535.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The passage is found in *DB*, 1800.

²⁰ Wynne, p. 443; *CICF*, 536.

It is interesting to note that a very similar task was accomplished by Pope Pius XII in the writing of his encyclical, the *Humani generis*. The present Holy Father speaks of those who aim "at adapting ecclesiastical teaching and methods to modern conditions and requirements." He states that this can be done correctly, "through the introduction of some new explanations," but also warns that "some, through enthusiasm for an imprudent eirenism, seem to consider as an obstacle to the restoration of fraternal union things founded on the laws and principles given by Christ and likewise on institutions founded by Him, or which are the defense and support of the integrity of the faith, and the removal of which would bring about the union of all, but only to their own destruction."²¹

Clearly, then, the fundamental doctrinal fault reproved in the *Testem benevolentiae* is intimately related to one of the basic errors condemned in the *Humani generis*. The men Pope Leo set out to correct believed that, even in doctrines in which the deposit of faith is contained, the Church ought to adapt itself to contemporary theory and practice. They likewise held it expedient and legitimate, in their statements of the Catholic message, to pass over points of doctrine to which their non-Catholic contemporaries were presumed to be unsympathetic. Pope Pius, on the other hand, spoke of men who thought that Catholic theology and the traditional theological methods should be completely reformed "in order to promote the more efficacious propagation of the kingdom of Christ everywhere throughout the world among men of every culture and religious opinion."²² In both cases the Vicar of Christ was faced with a situation in which some of his children believed that certain statements contained in the body of Catholic doctrine would repel those outside the Church and that therefore these teachings should be changed or eliminated. Pope Leo wrote to protect the integrity of the Faith, and Pope Pius blamed the innovators of our day for their opposition to truths in which the defense and the support of the integrity of the Faith is to be found.

Pope Leo taught that people must be brought to Our Lord

²¹ The NCWC translation, p. 6. The Latin text is found in *AER*, CXXIII, 5 (Nov. 1951), 386.

²² *Ibid.*

only by the way that He had indicated. Pope Pius warned that attempts to procure religious unity at the expense of truths pertaining to the body of Catholic doctrine could only result in a unity that would be ruinous to those who found it.

After considering the principle according to which the Church should modify its position in the face of contemporary cultural conditions, and after discussing the application of that principle to truths contained in the deposit of divine faith, the *Testem benevolentiae* goes on to deal with the application of this same principle to the field of law, Church discipline, or the rule of life. It reminds its readers that those who presume to usurp the right of the Church to modify its laws or who hold that the existing discipline of the Church is useless or too rigid to be obeyed are holding a doctrine that is "injurious to the Church and to the Spirit of God which governs her."²³ Pope Leo wrote that such individuals are in danger of incurring the censure which Pius VI inflicted upon the 78th proposition of the Synod of Pistoia.²⁴ It is interesting, incidentally, to note that of the seven censures given to this proposition, all were below the grade of heresy.²⁵

The *Testem benevolentiae* then goes on to explain that this late nineteenth-century movement for a change in Catholic discipline is in some measure worse than that manifested by the *Pistoriensis*. The men whose teaching Pope Leo set out to correct held, as *rerum novarum sectatores*, "that a certain liberty ought to be introduced into the Church, so that, limiting the exercise and vigilance of its powers, each one of the faithful may act more freely in pursuance of his own natural bent and capacity." Pope Leo noted that they claimed that "this is called for in order to imitate that liberty which, though quite recently introduced, is now the law and the foundation of almost every civil community."²⁶

The *Testem benevolentiae* simply refers to the *Immortale Dei* for a discussion of the civil liberties to which the *rerum novarum*

²³ Wynne, p. 444; *CICF*, 537.

²⁴ *Cl. DB*, 1578.

²⁵ The proposition was qualified as "falsa, temeraria, scandalosa, pernicioosa, piarum aurium offensiva, Ecclesiae ac Spiritui Dei, quo ipsa regitur, iniuriosa, ad minus erronea."

²⁶ Wynne, p. 444; *CICF*, 537.

sectatores appealed.²⁷ It took cognizance, however, of another argument which had been alleged in favor of the proposition which it had already condemned. According to that process of reasoning, there is, since the Vatican Council's definition of papal infallibility, no more need for many of the previous restrictions which had been imposed upon Catholics and that thus "a wider field of thought and action is thrown open to individuals."²⁸ Pope Leo repudiated this sort of reasoning, and showed that the problems of the time called for the exercise of that pontifical authority of which the Vatican Council had spoken so effectively.²⁹

All of the above material had been concerned with the basic opinions of the innovators. The rest of the letter deals with the *consecraria* or consequences of these teachings. The first of these was a certain abuse of devotion to the Holy Ghost, according to which all external guidance or direction was depicted as disadvantageous for those who desire to devote themselves to the acquisition of Christian perfection. According to the men who erred along this line, the Holy Ghost "pours greater and richer gifts into the hearts of the faithful now than in times past; and by a certain instinct teaches and moves them with no one as an intermediary."³⁰

Pope Leo first dealt with the assertion that the graces of the Holy Ghost were more plentiful in his time than at any previous period by asking who would dare to say that the primitive Church of the Apostles and the martyrs, and the Church of the past ages with its saints, had a lesser outpouring of the graces of the Holy Ghost than the Church of his own time. He briefly summarized the Catholic teaching on the place of the Holy Ghost and the function of human direction in the spiritual life. He then asserted that those who rejected this doctrine did so rashly and at their own peril (*temere profecto ac periculose*).³¹

He then dealt with the error of those who exalted the natural virtues above the supernatural virtues. He explained why that position was incorrect, and stated that it was difficult to understand how a man imbued with Christian principles could come

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Wynne, p. 445; *CICF*, 537.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Wynne, p. 446; *CICF*, 538.

³¹ Wynne, p. 447; *CICF*, 538.

to hold it.³² He then adverted to an error according to which some men classified some virtues as active and others as passive, claiming that, as the latter had been better suited to former times, the former were more in keeping with the present. He noted that these so-called passive virtues were genuine evangelical virtues, and taught that "there is not and cannot be a virtue which is really passive."³³

Against those who disapproved of religious orders or congregations taking vows, the Holy Father spoke out in forthright fashion. He noted that there were other kinds of communities fostered and encouraged in the Church, but insisted upon the pre-eminence of those "who have left all things and have followed Christ."³⁴

Finally, the *Testem benevolentiae* takes up the position of those who held "that the way and the method which Catholics have followed thus far for recalling those who differ with us is to be abandoned and another resorted to."³⁵ It indicates the imprudence of giving up methods which the Church has always employed. It teaches about the obligation of the faithful and of the priests to engage, in their own ways, in this missionary work. And it commends and cautions those who employ new techniques in the work of conversion.

We can sum up, accurately, even though inadequately, the opinions reproved by the *Testem benevolentiae*, under the following headings.

- (1) The Church should adapt itself to contemporary civilization even with respect to doctrines in which the deposit of faith is contained.
- (2) In bringing Catholic teaching to non-Catholics, it is opportune to pass over certain statements contained in it.
- (3) The Church should adapt itself to contemporary civilization in the matter of its discipline.
- (4) A new liberty ought to be introduced into the Church.
- (5) The Vatican Council's definition of papal infallibility has thrown a wider field of thought and action open to individual Catholics.

³² Wynne, p. 447; *CICF*, 539.

³³ Wynne, p. 448; *CICF*, 539.

³⁴ Wynne, p. 451; *CICF*, 541.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

(6) In the spiritual life, external guidance is to be rejected as superfluous.

(7) The Holy Ghost gives richer graces now than in times past.

(8) The natural virtues are to be preferred to the supernatural.

(9) The active virtues are to be preferred to the passive.

(10) Religious vows and the religious life are no longer advantageous to the Church.

(11) Old methods for bringing the faith to non-Catholics are to be abandoned and replaced.

The last six of these teachings are represented by Pope Leo as consequences or *consectaria* of the first five. The first five, in the context of the document, are applications of one general or fundamental principle.

The first and second of these repudiated teachings are undoubtedly the most important. Yet they were definitely not condemned in the *Testem benevolentiae* (or, for that matter, in the *Humani generis*), as heresies. They were rejected, however, as errors that would effectively militate against that integrity of the Catholic Faith which it is the duty and the prerogative of the Roman Pontiff to defend.

The third proposition is not condemned outright at all. It is presented as erroneous only when it is understood as granting to individuals, rather than to the authority of the Church itself, the right to modify the discipline imposed upon Our Lord's faithful.

The fourth proposition, as it is fully explained in the text of the *Testem benevolentiae*, is reprehensible, and is duly reprehended. It is said to be worse than the offending and similar teaching of the Synod of Pistoia which was stigmatized by Pius VI as *ad minus erronea*. Yet it must be understood that there is no direct or indirect assertion in the *Testem benevolentiae* that this fourth proposition is heretical.

The fifth proposition had little doctrinal importance. It was mentioned and reprovved merely because it was one of the reasons alleged in favor of the previous assertion. Obviously neither this nor any of the *consectaria* are designated as heretical by Pope Leo in the document with which we are concerned.

The *Testem benevolentiae* dealt, then, with inaccurate propositions, but was definitely not a document that condemned heresies.

The errors with which it was concerned, however, were far from being "phantoms."

It attributed the first two propositions we have listed to "many" people. Fifty-one years later, the present Holy Father felt himself obliged, in carrying out his supreme doctrinal work within the Church, to condemn much the same errors.

Like the *Humani generis* half a century later, the *Testem benevolentiae* carefully avoided attributing the errors it condemned to any individual or to any group. Pope Leo said that he was writing, out of Christian charity, to put an end to certain contentions which had then recently arisen among us, in our country.³⁶ He likewise adverted to the controversies which had developed around the book to which Father Klein had contributed a preface.³⁷ He did not accuse either the defenders of the book or its opponents of doctrinal inaccuracy. Neither did he blame any group or faction on this side of the ocean. He was engaged in teaching the truth and in putting down error. He did not want to expose or to hurt those who had taught incorrectly.

To assert, however, that what he condemned in the *Testem benevolentiae* was some phantom error would be seriously to abuse the kindness of a great Pontiff. It would likewise constitute a rather dangerous misinterpretation of a highly important papal document and would serve as a completely undesirable precedent.

JOSEPH CLIFFORD FENTON

The Catholic University of America
Washington, D. C.

³⁶ Wynne, p. 441; *CICF*, 535.

³⁷ *Ibid.*