

CHAPTER XVI

There are several imposing ceremonies at the ordination of a priest; and I will never forget the joy I felt when the Roman Pontiff, presenting to me the Bible, ordered me, with a solemn voice, to study and preach it. That order passed through my soul as a beam of light. When holding the sacred volume, I accepted the command with unspeakable joy but I felt as if a thunderbolt had fallen upon me when I pronounced the awful oath which is required from every priest: "*I will never interpret the Holy Scriptures except according to the unanimous consent of the Holy Fathers.*"

Many times the other students and I had discussed that strange oath. Alone in the presence of God, my conscience had shrunk in terror from its consequences. But I was not the only one who contemplated its evidently blasphemous nature.

About six months before, Stephen Baillargeon, one of my fellow theological students, had said to our superior, the Rev. Mr. Raimbault: "One of the things which my conscience cannot reconcile is the solemn oath we will have to take never to interpret the Scriptures except according to the *unanimous* consent of the Holy Fathers! We have not given a single hour yet to the serious study of the Holy Fathers. I know many priests and none of them has ever studied the Holy Fathers!

"In the name of common sense, how can we swear that we will follow the sentiments of men of whom we know absolutely nothing, and about whom, it is more probable, we will never know anything, except by mere vague hearsay?"

Our superior gave a weak answer, but his embarrassment grew when I said: "If you will allow me, Mr. Superior, I have some more formidable objections. Would to God that I could say, with Baillargeon, I know nothing of the Holy Fathers. But my regret is that we know already too much of the Holy Fathers to be exempt from perjuring ourselves, when we swear that we will not interpret the Holy Scriptures except according to their *unanimous* consent.

"Please, Mr. Superior, tell us what are the texts of Scripture on which the Holy Fathers are unanimous. You respect yourself too much to answer. And if you, one of the most learned men of France, cannot put your finger on the texts of the Holy Bible and say, 'The Holy Fathers are perfectly unanimous on these texts!' how can we dare to swear before God and men to interpret *every text of the Scriptures* only according to the unanimous consent of those Holy Fathers?"

"The consequences of that oath are *legion*, and every one of them seems to me the death of our ministry, the damnation of our souls! Henrion, Berrault, Bell, Costel, and Fleury all testify that the Church has constantly been filled with the noise of the controversies of Holy Fathers with Holy Fathers. Some say, with our best modern theologians, St. Thomas, Bellarmine and Liquori, that we must kill heretics as we kill wild beasts; while many others say that we must tolerate them!

You all know the name of the Holy Father who sends to hell all the widows who marry a second time, while other Holy Fathers disagree.

“Some had very different notions about purgatory. Others in Africa and Asia refused to accept the supreme jurisdiction of the pope over all churches. Several have laughed at the excommunications of the popes, and gladly died without doing anything to reconcile themselves to him! And have you not concluded that St. Jerome and St. Augustine agreed on only one thing, which was to disagree on every subject they treated? St. Augustine, at the end of his life, even agreed with the Protestants of our day, that ‘upon that rock’ means only Christ, and not Peter.

“And now we are gravely asked, in the name of the God of Truth, to swear that we will interpret the Holy Scriptures only according to the *unanimous consent* of those Holy Fathers, who have been unanimous but in one thing, which was never to agree with each other, and sometimes not even with themselves.

“If you require from us an oath, why put into our hands the history of the Church, which has stuffed our memory with the endless fierce divisions of the Holy Fathers on almost every question which the Scriptures present to our faith?

“If I am too ignorant or stupid to understand St. Mark, St. Luke and St. Paul, how can I be intelligent enough to understand Jerome, Augustine and Tertullian? And if St. Matthew, St. John and St. Peter have not got from God the grace of writing with a sufficient degree of light and clearness to be understood by men of goodwill, how is it that Justin, Clemens and Cyprian have received from our God a favor which He denied to His apostles and evangelists? If I cannot rely upon my private judgment when studying, with the help of God, the Holy Scriptures, how can I rely on my private judgment when studying the Holy Fathers?

“This dogma, or article of our religion, by which we must go to the Holy Fathers in order to know what ‘The Lord saith,’ and not to the Holy Scriptures, is to my soul what a handful of sand would be to my eyes. It makes me perfectly blind.

“What a frightful alternative we have! We must either perjure ourselves, by swearing to follow a unanimity which is a fable, in order to remain Roman Catholics, or we must plunge into the abyss of impiety and atheism by refusing to swear that we will adhere to a unanimity which never existed.”

It was visible during the class that we had spoken the sentiments of every one of the students in theology. But our Superior did not dare to face or answer a single one of our arguments. His embarrassment was only surpassed by his joy when the bell announced the end of the class.

He promised to answer us but the next day he did nothing but throw dust into our eyes and abuse us to his heart’s content. He began by forbidding me to read any more of the controversial books I had bought and I had to give back other books which I had been given liberty, as a privilege, to read. It was decided that my

intelligence was not clear enough, and that my faith was not sufficiently strong to read those books. I had nothing to do but to bow my head under the yoke and obey, without a word. The darkest night was made around our understandings, and we had to believe that that awful darkness was the shining light of God! We did the most degrading action a man can do, we silenced the voice of our conscience, and we consented to follow our superior's views, as a brute follows the order of his master.

During the months before my ordination, I did all I could to annihilate my thoughts on that subject. But, to my dismay, when the time came to perjure myself, a chill of horror and shame ran through my frame in spite of myself. In my inmost soul my wounded conscience cried, "You annihilate the Word of God! You rebel against the Holy Ghost! You deny the Holy Scriptures to follow the steps of sinful men! You reject the pure waters of eternal life, to drink the waters of death."

In order to choke again the voice of my conscience, I did what my Church advised me to do—I cried to my wafer god and to the blessed Virgin Mary that they might come to my help, and silence the voices which were troubling my peace by shaking my faith.

With the utmost sincerity, the day of my ordination, I renewed the promise that I had already so often made, and said in the presence of God and His angels, "I promise that I will never believe anything except according to the teachings of my Holy and Apostolic Church of Rome."

And on that pillow of folly, ignorance, and fanaticism I laid my head to sleep the sleep of spiritual death, with the millions of slaves whom the pope sees at his feet.

And I slept that sleep till the God of our salvation, in His great mercy, awoke me, by giving my soul the light, the truth, and the life which are in Jesus Christ.