

NOTES

THE GATES OF HELL (MATT. 16:18)

In the traditional interpretation of this *incisum*, the phrase, "the gates of hell" is taken as a metaphorical designation for "the powers of hell." These include all of the destructive powers of Satan and the demons, plus all the human forces of evil he can muster and incite. They are represented as constituting an aggressive force, united in ceaseless attack on the Church in a relentless effort to destroy it. The Church is represented as the resisting force, the impregnable citadel that stands firm against these unending assaults because of the unconquerable endurance she derives from her Petrine foundation. This interpretation of the text has strongly conditioned our habitual ways of thinking of the Church and of picturing her in our imaginations. It is the idea usually developed in sermons on this text and in the literature that it has inspired. It has received its most popular expression in English in Macaulay's famous passage on the visitor from New Zealand.

Exegetes however have always felt some obscurity in this interpretation. If this is the idea that the text means to express, there seems to be some little distortion or at least unusualness in the way of saying it. At first sight, "gates" does not seem to be a familiar, or even warranted, metaphor for "Powers." And it is a little bit puzzling to see how "gates" can be conceived as an aggressive force. This difficulty has been frequently urged in the history of the exegesis of this text: "Gates do not attack; they do not invade." Knabenbauer mentions this difficulty to dispose of it.¹

For this reason Harnack rejected the traditional interpretation and substituted another that made the text merely a prediction of the immortality of Peter.² He bases his exegesis on the Greek version: *πίλαι ἕδου οὐ κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς*. In this version, *ἕδου* does not stand for "hell" in the theological sense, i.e., the detention place of the damned, ruled over by Satan and his cohorts. Rather it has the classical sense of "Hades," the asylum of the dead, and becomes in the text merely a metaphorical designation for "death," secondly, *πίλαι* is pleonastic; it has no function at all in the text and can be dropped without any loss to the sense, thirdly, *κατισχύσουσιν* is used in its intransitive sense and means, "is stronger than." Finally, *αὐτῆς* in its grammatical form can modify either *πέτρα* or *ἐκκλησίαν* and can

¹ *Comm. in Matt., in h. 1.*

² *Apud Lagrange, Evangile selon S. Matthieu, in h. 1.*

therefore designate either Peter or the Church. But since immortality cannot be predicated of an institution but only of a person, it must here refer to Peter. Hence Harnack translates the text: "Death shall not be stronger than he," i.e., Peter will be in some sense immortal.

A French Catholic critic of Harnack's interpretation, Schepens,³ accepts his reasoning to the extent of reading the passage as a prediction of immortality. But this immortality is predicated not of Peter personally, but of the Church. Institutions, as well as individuals, can be immortal. It is therefore a declaration of the indefectibility of the Church.

Lagrange, criticizes and rejects each of these opinions and declares in favor of the traditional interpretation.⁴ By figure of metonymy, he argues, the word "gates" is not infrequently used in Holy Scripture to designate the whole citadel or fortress or city. Furthermore, the underlying reasons which suggest the metonymy are clear. The gates are initially the weakest part of the fortress or surrounding wall; but for this very reason they were normally fortified and reenforced to such an extent that they became the strongest part. Consequently to take the gates was to conquer the enemy. From this it is but a short step, by a natural extension of the metaphor, to assume the "gates" as a figurative designation of the "powers," the "military strength" of the city or citadel. Hence in the text "the gates of hell" is rightly understood as "the powers of hell." These are represented as taking aggressive action against the Church; but they will not prevail because she is firmly established on the rock of Peter. Hence her indestructibility results from her victorious resistance to the aggressive action of satanic forces.

Lagrange supports his reasonings with his usual scholarship, and for the most part his conclusions seem to be decisive. But in one respect he seems to have gone a little beyond what his citations warrant. From these it is clear that the "gates" of the city are frequently used in Holy Scripture metaphorically to designate the "powers" of the city. But in all the places cited the expression seems to stand for the resisting powers of the city, rather than its aggressive powers.

The metaphor is obviously drawn from ancient siege-warfare, in which the resisting powers of the city were commensurate with the strength of her gates. If these could hold out, the city was safe; if they were battered down, she was conquered. Consequently the gates of the city becomes a natural and easily understood metaphor for the power or might of the city, only if

³ 'L'authenticité de saint Matthieu XVI, 18," *Recherches de science religieuse*, I (1920), 269-302.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, in h. 1.

these are understood as the resisting powers of the city. It becomes forced and puzzling if understood as a metaphor for her aggressive might.

In this interpretation the picture presented in the text is reversed. The Church is represented as the invading force, taking aggressive action against the beleaguered citadel of Satan. The world would be represented as under the dominion of Satan. Christ entering into the world would first organize His forces in His Church and then attack with the purpose of breaking the power of Satan. The text therefore becomes a guarantee that the Church will take the offensive, carry the warfare to the enemy, and besiege his fortified domain. In this attack she will be victorious, for "the gates of hell will not prevail against her," i.e., they will not stand up under her battering assaults.

If this interpretation could be substantiated it would have some implications especially useful for our day. We have become habituated to thinking of the Church as tightly resisting, holding her own against the unending attacks of various hostile forces. This type of thinking cannot help but result in a weakening of the spirit of conquest. Certainly we hear it repeated often enough that the Church is always on the defensive. This was not the attitude of the primitive Church. The little band that went forth to attack and finally overthrow the consolidated might of the pagan world, did not think of itself as a resisting force. Perhaps a few sermons on our text representing the Church as the aggressive force battering down the gates of hell would result in promoting the attitude so strongly advocated in the Christopher movement: "That's the magic of the Christopher idea—the shift from selfish defense to unselfish offense."

Weston College

LOUIS E. SULLIVAN, S.J.