

NOTE

THE CONDEMNATION OF LAMENNAIS: A NEW DOSSIER¹

A few years ago Père Bertier de Sauvigny remarked that he had kept a dossier on Félicité de Lamennais throughout his decades of teaching and writing. When it became evident that his monographs on the Restoration and his volumes on Metternich would prevent a serious study of Lamennais, he gave the dossier to a young student. That protégé must rejoice at the publication of these texts, which clear up much of the obscurity that has clouded this case for its contemporaries and all since. The competent historians on both sides of the Atlantic who have worked on the problem must be equally grateful that solid documentation has replaced inference on many key issues with which they have grappled.

Historians of nineteenth-century France can hardly ignore l'affaire Lamennais. Interpretations vary, but no one contests its importance. Recently, when Bernard Plongeron summarized his innovative research on the Revolutionary period, he saw Lamennais as the last flicker of the eighteenth-century Catholic Enlightenment, already dimmed by the Revolution and now extinguished in France "by a vengeful ultramontanism."² His investigations of the Catholic Enlightenment had revealed that informed and believing Catholics in the eighteenth century had advanced a program that would have been of immense advantage to the Church had it been adopted. Their pleas for a simpler, more understandable liturgy—in the language, it was hoped, of the people—for the regular doctrinal instruction of the faithful, for broader popular education, and for a greater role of the laity in ecclesiastical decisions were constants in the reformers' plans. But the theme of freedom of religion, often denoted as the core of the *philosophes'* position, faced the reformers with a solid tradition enveloping doctrine and practice since the Reformation. It had been commonly accepted that credal unity was necessary for the state to preserve its integrity. The fact that religious pluralism had been partly legalized in England in 1688 and had been practiced in the Netherlands did not appeal to most rulers, although Emperor Joseph II and Victor Amadeus II of Savoy had decreed toleration in their domains and had won some support from Catholic curialists on the grounds of utility. Rulers and theologians generally would reject as too dangerous the right of each to practice and preach any doctrine of one's choosing. The modest

¹ *La condamnation de Lamennais*. Dossier présenté par M. J. LeGuillou et Louis LeGuillou. Paris: Beauchesne, 1982. Pp. 754. Fr. 333.

² "Aufklärung catholique en Europe occidentale de 1770 à 1830," *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 14, série 10, 13-16.

acceptance that had been won among Catholics for the innovation hardly survived the trauma of the Revolution.

It was Lamennais's vibrant assertion of freedom of religion in the widest sense that lay at the root of his difficulties. It explains the paradox of the papal condemnation of this most vigorous ultramontanist and the most successful apologist of the Church in the new Romantic idiom. The man who lived his aphorism "No Christianity without Catholicism and no Catholicism without the pope" could not believe that the institutions that were central to his theory would turn hostile. He remained puzzled even after *Mirari vos* and firmly believed that he had been unjustly condemned solely because of political pressure: "I will never understand the verdict without a precise indictment presented to the accused, without investigation, debate, or defense. Such a monstrous judicial proceeding would be revolting even in Turkey." The secrecy that surrounds these investigations justifies the mystification. He might have been surprised had he been presented with this mass of testimony and opinion that had been collected in his case.

The publication of these documents has been long in preparation. One of the brothers, Louis, has been editing the *Correspondance générale de Lamennais* (9 vols.; Paris: A. Colin, 1971-81). The texts themselves were difficult: they are largely in Italian, often in the colloquial forms of the early nineteenth century. Permission to work on them had been given by John XXIII and his successors; but when the work was completed, the editors sought explicit approval from the Vatican. Wisely they chose to select about two hundred of the most significant, omitting the perfunctory or those which had already appeared in the *Correspondence générale*. As compensation, they added some hundred extracts from contemporary journals and nine essential documents from other sources.

The general conclusion that emerges is that, in the aftermath of the upheaval of 1789-1815 and with new threats arising from the Revolution of 1830, it was nearly impossible for Lamennais to receive a favorable hearing in Rome. He could not have chosen a more inauspicious moment to lead his Pilgrims of Liberty to an Italy where an inexperienced pope had already faced serious insurrections in the Papal States. As in all else in the nineteenth-century papacy, the shadow of the temporal power clouded objectivity.

The documents support a much more benign view of Gregory XVI than is commonly held. Lamennais was correct when he frequently confided to friends (Gerbert, *Corr. gen.* 1, #839) that the pope was woefully ignorant of the world. Lamennais's liberal views had seriously disturbed him, for he considered them subversive of all authority. But he was appreciative of the French priest's talents and his contributions to the Church, and he was anxious to retain him in the fold. Despite glaring

inadequacies, the pope was not overbearing nor inconsiderate. Lacordaire, writing to Foisset (*Corr. gen.* 5, #99), declared that it was his unshakable conviction that Gregory wanted to save the abbé and would never have condemned him had he not obstinately remained in Rome. Certainly the pope had received the three pilgrims graciously in the audience of March 13. Had Lamennais thanked Cardinal Pacca for his communication and left Rome in June or July 1832, declaring that he was returning to France to resume *L'Avenir*, the process would have died. The editor concurs in this opinion of Lacordaire and adds that it is unfair to see Gregory as an autocrat "with his finger perpetually on the trigger of condemnation" (#143).

When in 1833 it appeared that the affair had been successfully concluded, the pope wrote three briefs to express his happiness: to the archbishop of Paris, declaring himself "overwhelmed with joy" (#177); to the bishop of Rennes, Lamennais's home diocese, suggesting that both should rejoice "with the dear son of that diocese who has obediently accepted the encyclical" (#178); and to the penitent himself, praising him for his courage and his devotion to the truth (#179). All three bear the stamp of sincerity, though it must be noted that they followed the strong pressure to obtain the compliance of the priest-editor.

The entourage of the pope generally believed that the French priest was in serious error. The classic example is Luigi Lambruschini, who was nuncio in Paris when *L'Avenir* was first published and was an important cardinal in Rome during the controversy. He filled scores of pages with "evidence" that Lamennais was opposing Scripture, the Fathers, the councils, and the great theologians; at the end he recommended that he be given a reprimand and sent off with a blessing, despite the fact that *Les paroles d'un croyant* "filled him with horror."

Archbishop Hyacinthe de Quelen of Paris is often roughly handled in the secondary accounts; in the documents he appears kindly and conciliatory. Writing to the Holy See on November 10, 1831, he expresses confidence in Lamennais's sincerity; he has hesitated to give him too evident approval lest he scandalize the faithful (#10). According to the nuncio Garibaldi, the archbishop attempted to persuade Lamennais not to go to Rome, since the pope could not possibly approve the proposal that the funds owed to the French Church under the concordat be refused (#14). He was equally certain that it was a mistake to trumpet the intention to go to Rome; had the Pilgrims gone quietly, they would have been received in the same fashion. De Quelen's underlying assumption, probably correct, was that the pope did not wish to pass judgment on this issue. When the conflict appeared to have been settled on December 13, 1833, the archbishop suggested to the pope that he address Lamennais some words of paternal appreciation so that the publication of the

adhesion to the encyclical will be clearly seen as the end of the affair. He will write himself, and perhaps offer the priest a canoncy; and he will attempt a reconciliation between Lamennais and the bishop of Rennes (#169). The letter to the reconciled priest would satisfy most injured egos: it speaks of his attachment, his joy, and his hope for an early opportunity to embrace him. When de Quelen heard that the priest was about to publish *Les paroles*, he wrote again in most courtly terms, regretting that he had not had the pleasure of bidding him adieu before he left Paris. The report that has reached him may be a calumny; but in case it be true, the archbishop wishes to be armed to defend his friend's reputation. Despite de Quelen's Gallicanism and ideological distance from Lamennais, there can be no doubt that he was sincerely devoted to the priest's interests.

The concern of the archbishop that some French Catholics might be scandalized was not a chimera. The documents attest to the depth of the fissure in the French Church as a consequence of the Revolution and that it surfaced in resentment to Lamennais. This hostility could find expression in an individual, as with Père Jean de L. Rozavan, S.J.—ironically the only other Breton in the cast. He first appears as one of the expert consultors assembled in Rome to advise the pope on the case. He was already convinced that Lamennais was a threat (#31) and never lost an opportunity to sway official opinion in that direction, sending news clippings and verbal rumors regularly to the Vatican.

Equally disturbed by *L'Avenir's* vision of the role of the Church was Cardinal Paul d'Astros, Archbishop of Toulouse, who was not content with solitary protests. He orchestrated the dispatch of a report from thirteen bishops in the Midi to the pope calling for condemnation of Lamennais (#66, April 1832). From then until the meeting of the Commission for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs in February 1833, he was the source of fourteen of the documents in this collection. From the intensity of the response it is evident that there was a reservoir of resentment in French Catholicism toward any concept associated with the Revolution; it was this fever of resentment that handicapped the work of the Church during the century and led to the disasters at its close. It is interesting to compare the moderation in the letter of Cardinal Gregorio, written at the direction of the pope, to the importunities of the Cardinal of Toulouse. To the collection of demands for censure gathered by d'Astros, the Holy See responded with "patience, prudence, charity." It is hard to believe that the Vatican was determined to break the French priest. The Roman position remained: Lamennais cannot be treated as a heretic nor can his supporters be forced to renounce his doctrine; especially one should not humiliate those who fall into error (#124, 129).

The standard accounts of l'affaire Lamennais have placed major emphasis on the machinations of the European courts, which used every device to destroy this dangerous clerical enemy. The uprisings in the Romagna had brought Austrian troops into northern Italy to regain this most rebellious segment of the papal possessions. This military presence was an implied threat that Metternich used adroitly. A flow of messages to his Vatican ambassador, Count Lutzow (#59), and to the nuncio in Vienna (#195), or ministerial notes from the Imperial Cabinet to the Cardinal Secretary of State (#26) stress, often in unctuous phrase, the threat to government and religion posed by Lamennais. Appeals are made to other monarchs (#60, to the King of the Belgians); copies of radical journals that mention Lamennais favorably are forwarded to Rome; and, most effectively, letters among the circle of the priest's friends were intercepted by the Austrian secret police and made available to the Vatican. This concentrated effort to undermine Roman confidence in the sincerity of Lamennais was supported by similar pressure from Saint Petersburg—an influence particularly resented as the czar was engaged in a brutal repression of his Catholic subjects, consequent on the Polish rebellion of 1830. Yet it is the opinion of the editors—and this reviewer would concur—that while the conservative courts were certainly influential at the Vatican, they were not decisive in the condemnation. Gregory XVI was not politically oriented and the decision was made on what were considered religious grounds.

Lamennais had one firm supporter among the papal consultors, Gioacchino Ventura di Raulica. Even he had some doubts about the balance of the political views of *L'Avenir*, but he argued that they must be weighed against the unquestioned contributions of the Lamennais circle. Ventura even found the journal's criticism of the severity of the papal repressions in the Romagna acceptable, since Lamennais had never lost sight of the interests of religion or the dignity of the Holy See. Because these two themes had been dominant in all his writings, the priest had been consistently attacked by the enemies of the faith. In defending true liberty with the stability of government, *L'Avenir* had reconciled an immense number to Rome. It had exposed the anti-Catholic nature of the new government in France. Against the dangerous Gallican policies of this regime, *L'Avenir* had defended the liberty of the Church and the infallibility of the pope. Its editors had come to Rome with the honorable intention of consulting the Holy See and had offered to submit fully to its decision. In contrast to the services of this French paper, there is the frightful repression of Catholics by the Russians and other enemies of Lamennais.

The final tragedy came swiftly. All sides appeared to have been satisfied

by Lamennais's unqualified acceptance. Yet the atmosphere had been poisoned by the intemperate attacks and a sensitive man had rebelled against the suggestion of the pope that he use his pen to defend *Mirari vos*. He believed that while prohibited from writing on spiritual matters, he was free as a Christian to write on the political. He seems to have intended his *Les paroles d'un croyant* as the cry of his conscience against the oppression of the masses of mankind; or it may have been the pained expression of the anguish he had suffered. Its consequence was his condemnation by name in *Singulari nos*, July 7, 1834—one of the documents in the Appendix.

It would have been too much to expect that any of the opponents of Lamennais could have foreseen the Declaration on Religious Liberty of the Second Vatican Council; but it is curious that they did not examine "monstrous errors" similar to those of Lamennais among Catholic leaders in other countries. The Vatican may have had no report of the appearance of Bishop John England before a joint session of the United States Congress, where in full episcopal regalia he demonstrated the complete compatibility between Catholic principles and the Constitution's guarantees of full religious liberty. They might have been disturbed by his peroration that while he would reject any Congressional interference with his religion, he would equally reject any suggestion from Rome on his politics. Even while England was still in his home diocese of Cork, he had insisted that in the matter of religious liberty the United States was the model for the whole world to follow. While *Mirari vos* was in preparation, Tocqueville was making his memorable voyage to America, noting the passionate devotion of American Catholics to the defense of liberty elsewhere; but *Democracy in America* had not been published and its pertinent passages had not been available to the participants in this controversy. That Catholics on the two sides of the Atlantic would not have understood each other is evident from the reaction of the future bishop John Hughes. When *Mirari vos* was brought to his attention by the nativist press, he cavalierly responded that the encyclical was opposed only to the abuses of religious liberty. He would have found the text in the appendix to this volume useful!

But if America seemed remote and unimportant, the European press covered rather fully the speeches of Daniel O'Connell. Any participant in this debate could have read the Irish statesman's flaming appeals "to the eternal right of liberty of conscience" and his call to all Catholics to "exterminate the Inquisition in Spain," "to stamp out the cruel persecution of the Protestants in France" and "every similar violation of religious liberty which contravenes every principle of justice." All these activities, the Irish liberator thundered, were "contrary to the sacred and inalienable right of humanity."

While the Belgian Catholics who were assisting in the writing of their liberal constitution when *Mirari vos* was being prepared lacked this crusading passion, they did endorse, and profit by, full liberty of conscience. And the pleas of exiled Polish Catholics protesting against Russian repression of their religion appeared in many European journals. All these developments, save the American, were fully reported in *L'Avenir*, and these documents testify to the care with which its opponents scrutinized its columns. Yet, except for a statement in the Censure of Toulouse (#66) that *L'Avenir* "claims credit" for the revolutions in Ireland, Belgium, and Poland and certain complaints of Belgian conservatives (#114, 115, 118), it is the threat to old regime governments that attracts the attention of the critics. That Catholics were suffering from political persecution and could benefit from religious liberty never enters their calculations!

Scholars will welcome the publication of *The Condemnation of Lamennais* for its clarifications of important aspects of this celebrated case. But the removal of these obscurities is not its sole contribution. It focuses again on the tragedy of a deeply religious man who committed his superior talents to the defense of his faith. He was effective enough with his contemporaries in this task to deserve the title "The Chaplain of the Romantic Movement." Certainly the prevailing Romantic mood colored some of his proposals, e.g., his suggestion to French clergymen, struggling to rebuild after the Revolution, that they should reject the payments promised by the state in order to preserve their liberty. Since the time was not propitious for such quixotic self-denial, he was an egregious failure.

Or so it appeared. But l'affaire Lamennais could be viewed as an incident—albeit a regressive one—on the Church's tortuous road toward the acceptance of religious pluralism. Thus Vidler has viewed Lamennais as one of two types who appear in the Church in time of serious change: the prophet who points to the challenge of the future and the priest whose interest is the preservation of the heritage of the past. Lamennais belongs to the prophetic tradition: he sensed that the world was in process of an awesome mutation; he saw more clearly than most the direction in which history was moving. He was specific: the bulk of mankind was coming to demand a share in political decision-making and a portion of the new wealth that the machine was beginning to provide. He argued that the Church would have to deal with the many in forming policy. If the Church were to seek support among the people of God, she would be much more secure than trusting in the volatile will of monarchs. This would not be a distortion of her history, for the seed had been planted in the Gospels and had been maturing for centuries before it could produce fruit in this springtime of peoples. This was a prophetic

vision indeed, and it met the fate of many of its antecedents in ancient Israel. But as we read the documents in this collection, we recall the words of Paul VI at the beginning of his pontificate: "the great principles of the Revolution were merely appropriated from certain Christian ideas—fraternity, liberty, equality, progress, the desire to improve the working classes. All these were Christian. . . ."

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