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A Satirist's View of Some Catholics: The Trouble with Catholics

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A SATIRIST'S VIEW OF SOME CATHOLICS

THE TROUBLE WITH CATHOLICS . . . By Frank Getlein. Baltimore, Md.: Helicon Press, 1964. 224 pp.

The Trouble with Catholics. . . is a mild title for a book that explodes with satire and devastating wit page after page as it dissects the Catholic body in general and American Catholics in particular into pitiful shreds. The subject of the "scalpel" however is indicated in the quotation preceding the first chapter: "There is a tendency to judge a race, a nation, or any distinct group by its least worthy members. Though manifestly unfair, this tendency has some justification. For the character and destiny of a group are often determined by its inferior elements."

On the basis of this reasoning, the gifted Mr. Getlein proceeds to itemize and scrutinize with relish from all angles the inferior elements and the open and hidden failures of the least worthy members of Christ's Mystical Body. The outcome is a catalogue of Catholic failings. Some samples are as follows:

* Mr. Getlein observes that the Catholic monologue in the United States lasted from the Council of Trent until the day before yesterday and it never did work up many good lines. The improved lines came only when the sins of the past were confessed instead of defended, atoned for instead of intensified and consequently have restored once more signs of life and enthusiasm for genuine reform and reunion within and among the divided branches of Christianity.

* Mr. Getlein shatters the glacier of triumphalism and misplaced loyalty that has frozen the growth of charity and the worship of Christ in spirit and in truth among the very members of Christ's Mystical Body by comparing the hierarchical Church to the brain and the laity to the toe or the toe-nail—both being truly members of the same body—and asks what can be expected of a dialogue on this basis: a toe, let alone a toe-nail holding a dialogue with the brain! Accordingly all the experts on the lay state not excluding the marriage state are the clerics. This caricature of a dialogue has at times led the disgusted laity to infidelity or at least promoted a kind of hopeless acceptance of a Church as an institution beyond change due to the invincible impenetrability of the clerical, managerial mind.

* The Church in her wisdom put an end to internal strife (counts and barons forever falling upon each other in medieval Europe) by inventing external strife. The launching of the Crusades against Islam thus becomes an early antecedent of the urban priest who cures juvenile delinquency by teaching the young hoods to play basketball.

* 'The family that prays together stays together' runs a familiar slogan which thus slightly demeans both the purpose of prayer and the significance of the persevering family. It demeans the purpose of prayer because it devalues prayer here as simply a means for family-get-togetherness; it demeans the significance of the persevering family because in practice the Catholic Church is cluttered up with auxiliary religious organizations or classes more or less independent of one another and not directed to the family as such like: the fathers as a class, mothers as a class, children as a class—or rather as two classes—unmarried men as another class and unmarried women another, with the secular clergy and the religious constituting separate classes of their own, the last two handing out most of the treatment.

* Catholic schools regard their alumni as interested in little but sports yet the schools have made them so, if so they are. Football coaches are normally paid the highest salaries given laymen in Catholic education.

* The Catholic college course in philosophy still adopts the logic of the non-Catholic Muslim on burning down the library at Alexandria: 'The books in the library either agree with the Koran or disagree with the Koran. If they disagree, they are false and should be burnt; if they agree, they are superfluous and may as well be burnt. Light the torches!' In application: 'The other philosophers of history, from before Aristotle to after Lord Russell, must either agree or disagree with St. Thomas. If they disagree . . .' and so on as at Alexandria. The basic difference is that the Muslims were wrong, the Catholics are right. If you know the truth, you need no longer seek it.

This is a book that can be given to any Catholic or non-Catholic who has the unhappy propensity to attack the Church—just to hush and sober him up because someone has already done it in such an articulate manner that as another layman observed, this book can be considered a catharsis for Mr. Getlein.

For the humble Catholic, always conscious of his limitations and at the same time trusting wholly in the strength and mercy of Christ, this book need not rattle him but should urge him on to be more realistic and therefore authentic in the daily living and dying of the Christlife in him.