

I FOUND THE ANCIENT WAY

By

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CHAPTER TEN

HOW I SAW AN EVANGELICAL CHURCH

I CAN'T EXPRESS the surprise I had when I got in touch with the Evangelical Christians and observed their customs and manner of life. It was so absolutely opposite to what people had told me and to what I had come to imagine the "Protestants" were.

In my days as a worker in Catholic Action, I had been taught that the Protestant heresy breaks family and social ties with a lax and compromising morality.

This impression was confirmed for me in my seminary years, when I thought I had gained a more profound understanding of the causes of the Protestant Reformation, the vacillating doctrines of its supporters and promoters, and the lewd and mentally deranged character of those emissaries of Satan who were raised up to break the unity of what I then considered to be the one church of Christ. *

* Later I have been able to confirm with pleasure that this extremely pessimistic impression that I had, and that a majority of Catholics still have, about Protestantism, is far from being shared by everybody in Spain. There are still many who would call for the inquisition and the stake, although those who have had occasion to have frequent contact with Evangelical Christianity, a thing which I never had, and whose intelligence has not been clouded by an ignorant and extreme fanaticism, don't feel the same fear of it that I did.

This comforting fact was revealed recently in a poll published by the Review of the Central University of Madrid.

It was a poll taken among the students of the universities of Madrid and Murcia. Here are the comments that we copied from El Correa Catalan of Barcelona, the edition of February 22, 1955:

"If in the abstract religious sense - the existence of GOD, the teaching of religion and the salvation of the civilized world through faith - the answers are optimistic, and in a moral sense they are not out of line either, except for a spectacular 50 per cent only of votes against abortion, in the sense of the Catholic church the whole thing drops resoundingly. For example: 74 per cent of the young people state that official Catholicism promotes Phariseism; 79 per cent (the highest percentage of the whole poll) say that freedom of worship is compatible with a live Catholicism; 47 per cent decide that the church does not promote scientific progress in Spain (only 39 per cent say that it does); 79 per cent recognize that religious orders should not be given preference in teaching. But there is still more. There is a greater number of students who believe that masonry is not to blame for our war, and don't believe that Protestantism is a breaker of family ties, and defend academic freedom, than those who hold the opposite opinion.

"The field has been completely threshed, and after these many percentages the church will have to think seriously about its future work."

What was my surprise when, in my first talks with one of the venerable pastors who happened to be in Madrid, I discovered a Christianity of admirable qualities!

He was a person whose very presence inspired respect for Heaven. His conversation was sincere and from the heart, and his knowledge of theological subjects and of the Holy Scriptures was so profound that I marveled greatly.

As I mentioned in the Foreword, this Protestant minister didn't talk to me against the Catholic Church, nor did I see in him any desire to proselytize.

He talked to me about CHRIST, His redemptive work for sinners, the necessity of regeneration and the joy of having assurance of salvation.

It was a religious language entirely new to me, but it seemed to me very logical and, above all, well based on the Holy Scriptures, whose texts he quoted endlessly from memory without hesitating over a single word.

But my wonder reached its climax when, already free from the ties that bound me to the Catholic priesthood, I entered into the Evangelical atmosphere of one of the most active and well-attended churches that exists in Spain.

There I found people of all ages and sexes united by a common faith, so warm, so pure, so well-formed and definite that it seemed to me I was in one of the early assemblies of Christians in the Apostolic Age.

There I saw more than a hundred young people of both sexes in the flower of youth, separated from worldly entertainments and in brotherly comradeship given over to spiritual ends, in Bible study classes by sections and ages; in the general worship service conducted by the pastor; in the choir practice where, alongside hymns of a popular nature, there appeared selections from the great composers, such as Handel's Messiah.

These practices always end with a prayer, not a routine formula but a spontaneous prayer expressing to the Lord the desire that all efforts should be for His glory and for the eternal benefit of souls, a prayer that was assented to in some of its parts by an occasional isolated amen and another unanimous and fervent one at the end.

I saw these young people steeped with great religious feeling, yet enjoying the attraction proper to their age, pure love with the expectation of marriage, but all of it in an atmosphere of purity and Christian consecration; for I saw them not only sacrifice worldly amusements but even the little time that they had for their legitimate youthful idylls on the altar of their religious activities.

And what shall I say of the weekly prayer meeting?

It wasn't just fingering a rosary, repeating a thousand times some very good, very significant words, but words that even in my days as a priest I knew leave off being a prayer when they are turned into mechanical, routine expressions. It was a lifting of the soul to Heaven with a fervent meditation on the Holy Scriptures.

And then I saw the congregation divide into groups who went to various departments of the church to pour out their souls to the Lord, each one in the presence of the brethren: men and women, almost all of them working people, young people and even children talking to GOD with ease and naturalness not customary in those of their condition, and for some, of their age.

"Is this," I asked myself, "the Protestant religion? Is this what they taught me to hate, in my years as a priest, as an anti-religious endeavor and even to its way of thinking anti-patriotic and destined to de-Catholicize Spain?"

I was actually in one of the "Reddest" cities of Catalonia, distinguished in other times for its stubborn atheism and anarchy. Yet in the midst of that social, moral and religious breakdown, that outstandingly Christian congregation had kept up during the difficult years of the war and had come out stronger than ever.

There I encountered and witnessed real miracles of the regenerating grace of the Gospel.

Men and women who had lived an immoral life long before when they were Catholics by birth - or rather, some of the twenty-eight millions that statistics count as Catholics in Spain, and are atheists or skeptics by conviction - had been transformed into pious Christians since the Gospel had entered their hearts, as it was preached by the Master, without additions or corruptions.

I saw people who had come to the brink of suicide, now with constantly joyous faces, and they talked to others of their present experience of the mercy of GOD, of answers to their prayers, of desire to save other souls, and I said to myself, "Here is a non-Catholic congregation, very strong in faith, and quite similar in customs and worship to what Fleury and other Catholic writers tell about the way the early Christians were. How are people so blind, that they don't see what they have before their eyes?" I never had known an Evangelical Christian congregation, and maybe the Lord had permitted it so that today my experience and testimony as a Catholic priest could encourage others, for I am sure that if I had been acquainted with it before, nothing or no one could have kept me from following what is so clearly the Church of CHRIST.

What is the secret of such a sincere and sturdy piety? What mystery had transformed these former atheists and skeptics into convinced Christians, who knew their faith and were happy?

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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