

An Episode of Convent Life.

Translated from the French by Rev. M. J. P. Thibaut, A. M.

CHAPTER X.

"Let me ask of you, if it is the invisible or the visible church of which you speak, Annunziata?"

"Why that question? I speak of the holy, apostolic, universal, Roman Catholic church."

"I understand that; but since this church has a visible body, is it the visible or invisible church?"

"Annunziata was a little troubled by my question; but she recovered herself immediately and said:

"The church is a mystical body, and its soul is the holy spirit. It is not able to err, since it is the spirit of truth that guides it." (Theological Catechism of the Jesuits.)

"What is meant by the word 'mystical'?"

"She shook her head, saying: 'Ah, Clarisse, you are still in the gall of bitterness. What is the aim of all these questions?"

"The truth. What do you understand by the word 'mystical'?"

"You arrogate to yourself a right that does not belong to you. The only place which is suitable for an impious heretic is the rack and burning. And you wish to reason with me! Dare you ask what the word 'mystical' signifies? Do you not know that a mystical body is something whose mysterious quality surpasses the comprehension of man?"

"So, then, that body which you call the church is not natural but mystical. How, then, is it able to have a natural head, viz. the pope, and then preserve its unity, for you say that the church is one?"

"The true church is in the first place one; she has only one faith and one head. Secondly, she is universal and perpetual. Thirdly, she is holy. As to your argument that a mystical body is not able to have a natural head and maintain its unity, I do not understand."

"But it is not possible to put new wine into old bottles, nor a piece of new cloth upon an old garment. A spiritual head is not possible to be united to a natural and corrupt body, neither the mystical body to be united to a natural head."

"It is the devil," said Annunziata with violence, "who has inspired you with these arguments, Clarisse; and as I do not wish to be the first to pronounce anathema maranatha upon your soul, I declare to you beforehand that your principles will lead you straight to hell. May our holy mother give me patience to endure you! Tell me openly, do you deny the authority, the purity, the universality, of the church?"

"No, certainly! I believe in the holy Catholic church; I recognize her spiritual head, who is the Lord and Saviour. I believe, further, that her body is a spiritual body, and, as you have said, is a mystical body, composed of all whom the Father hath given to the Son in all centuries. I bow before her authority and I recognize her beauty and holiness, magnificent gifts of the Saviour. But I deny that she has a visible seat upon earth, or any authority over the realms of earth; and since I have found my Father who is in heaven, I am resolved never to give hereafter to any person below, the title of spiritual father. My heritage is on high, and there is my treasure; and I assure you that my heart will be there always."

"From all that you have said, am I to conclude," said Annunziata, forcing herself to check her violence, "that you are resolved to maintain your heretical opinions towards and against us?"

"I know what it will cost me, but I hope that I shall be preserved to the end. He who is for me is stronger than those who are against me."

"I came to reiterate to you the order that Mother Ursula has signified to you on the part of Madame, to return to your duties. The abbess has never before had such a case of obstinacy after so many penances. Tell me, what must I say to the abbess?"

"And she heard my response in silence."

"Say to our respected superior that I will render obedience to her in all things which are in accord with a higher authority."

"Do you wish me to repeat these words whatever they may mean?"

"Yes, whatever they may mean."

"Very well," said she and she went away.

"A moment after I was summoned before Father Joachim in the parlor of the abbess, where she was also present. I saw immediately that the priest was in a violent temper; his face was livid, and I do not know for what reason he contained his wrath. He trembled in his whole body, and during the time I spoke with the abbess he walked the room all agitated and giving vent to ejaculations. His threats were terrible, if I had the obstinacy to harden myself in my opposition. Madame was mute, pale, immovable, and truly frightened at what awaited me, for I was told repeatedly that the flames of purgatory, even though they were to

continue a million years, would not be able to expiate my offenses.

"I will not repeat all that was said to me by the priest. I had expected something terrible would be assigned me, but the conference terminated in an unexpected manner. Instead of ordering me, as I had feared, to join in the idolatrous ceremonies of the church, he commanded me to return to the kind of life that I had led for some time past. It was for me a great benefit."

"A diet of bread and water, many hours of meditation, partly by day and partly by night, in the private chapel of the abbess, and the repetition, some thousands of times, kneeling, of the Ave Maria—it was nothing in comparison to what I had feared. Hence the order for me to re-enter into my solitude was for me like a festival, for it was there I had found the blessing of God. Oh, how true it is that 'the Lord stayeth the rough wind in the days of the east wind.'"

"I had learned many passages by heart, which remained in my memory during my hours of retreat, and I was also consoled by the songs and portions of the Gospels that my good nurse had taught me at her knee. Then, also, the memory of my father, my brother, my pious nurse; of plains, woods, flowers and hedges of my native land, lighted by the summer sun—all these things passed before me so lively in my imagination that I almost wept for joy that they were pledges of the love of my Heavenly Father, and feeble images of those good things held in reserve for those who were led to God by Christ."

"From time to time I drew from its hiding place my little Bible, and I quenched my thirst at the source of eternal truth. Sweet moments of consolation, which prepared me with strength for the things which were to follow."

"I have learned since that the interviews between Mother Ursula, Sister Annunziata and Father Joachim were held the same day that Sister Angelique entered the convent as a boarder, and that the superiors dared not use any violence towards me because of the political events of which they knew the progress. Already the convents had been destroyed in France, and elsewhere the cry was against the communities. It was desirable that I be restored to obedience without any severity exasperating the other members of the family."

"For that reason I was left in the strictest penitence until the day of Sister Angelique's profession. Then the abbess called me to her, and after having shown me on the one hand what repose I would enjoy if I submitted, she ordered me to rejoin the family."

"My dear Pauline was struck with the effect of my appearance, and as I would not promise to follow again the idolatrous observances of the church the abbess, who desired to persuade me, but in vain, to disguise my new beliefs, soon took other measures. She declared publicly that I was under the influence of evil spirits, and that if she still kept me in the house she must forbid them talking with me. From that time I was able to see the implacable hatred of the slaves of the pope. At this time poor Annunziata, thinking to serve God, would not ask even that I be pardoned."

"I was beside myself with indignation, and I let them see it. But if I talked then with harshness may God pardon the excess of my expressions! And yet what were these trials in comparison with the suffering of those excellent of the earth, 'of whom,' said the apostle, 'the world was not worthy.'" —Heb. 11:38.

"From the time I was denounced as a demoniac until my public anathema, I was forced to assist in all the services of the choir, a painful compulsion to me, since I was obliged to stand with a heavy extinguished candle in my hand."

"I had, it is true, more freedom in the house; but it was still a refinement of cruelty, seeing that everybody hated me, except good Mother Genevieve, who from time to time gave me a sign of compassion that my poor heart received like a drop of oil, and my sweet sister Pauline and Angelique, who were the means of my receiving a letter from my well beloved brother, a letter which was the *avant courier* to my marvelous deliverance."

"I succumbed to the incessant fatigue of remaining standing during the long services. A few sisters having shown some interest for me, they desired to turn them by the proof of the cross, at which all the family assisted. But the crucifix having fallen to the earth, I was forever banished from the society, as a reprobate who merited eternal perdition."

"It was then that I was compelled to drink to the dregs of the fury of that idolatrous church, upon whose forehead is written these words: 'Mystery—Babylon—Mother of abominations.'"

"From that evening, expelled from the family, I was returned to my cell, where, during how many days I know not, I saw nobody. My food was passed me through the opening, and my door was not opened except during the night, that I might go and pray at the foot of the cross in the cemetery. Even then, in order that the sisters might not see me in passing to the midnight service, I was covered with a heavy dark cloth."

"During these cold watches, and in

this somber place, my meditations were often of an acid coloring that I could only weep as I held my head in my hands. More than once sleep overpowered me: it was at one of those times that the wind lifted my covering and Sister Clotilde gave the alarm, for which Mother Ursula reproved me severely when I re-entered my cell."

"But as I persisted in my refusal to retract, I was placed in a cell more suitable, they said, for a creature as hardened as I. I was unable to account for the motives that led to this change, but I learned them soon after."

"Father Joachim had a friend, a Jesuit like himself, with whom he had studied in Nice. This man, named Julian, had gone to Rome when Father Joachim had come to St. Siffren, and he had become the favorite of a cardinal. This one had given him a place in the inquisition with other offices that placed him under the authority of our bishop."

"It was then as grand vicar to the bishop that Father Julian came to St. Siffren, in order that all preparation might be made for the reception of his superior; and Father Joachim having talked with him concerning me, he blamed Father Joachim severely for the indulgence that had been shown me."

"The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel," says the Scripture. This man made himself well known. Though the treatment that I had already endured had been of such a nature that I should have succumbed without divine assistance, he judged that it was too gentle, and he instituted another without delay. He attributed the alarm which had been in the night to negligence on my part; and the same night Mother Ursula came to find me and conduct me by many winding corridors to the apartments of the abbess."

"It was the first time that the abbess placed before me the alternatives, either to abjure my errors, kneeling before the crucifix, or to be shut up in a subterranean dungeon in eternal night."

"No, not eternal," said I. "I know whom I have believed, and I shall not be confounded."

"At these words Annunziata changed color, but said nothing. Then the abbess said to me:

"Do you understand, Clarisse? It is true that many do not know their errors; there are a few, however, who do not doubt; and even they are unable to have any knowledge; and so they are able neither to love God, nor to do a single thing that will be to their merit in the matter of salvation."

"I had learned by heart this exordium. I knew then from whence it came. I do not remember what I said in response. Our interview was long, and the abbess made every effort to restore me by leading me to retract, but God sustained me. One thought ruled all the fear of my future torments, and that was that they would compel me to change garments and so discover my dear little Bible; for I had taken it from its hiding and bound it to my side. Happily they did not search me. Finally, the abbess having lost all hope of winning me, declared to me that my fate was irrevocable, and that I must submit to my condition willingly or be forced to do so."

"Then at a signal from the abbess, Mother Ursula and Annunziata came forward, and each of them taking an arm tried to draw me from the room. They were obliged to use some force, because I had thrown myself at the feet of the abbess to ask pity of her."

"Do not kneel before me, miserable apostate!" she cried; "never bend before those knees that hate the symbols of the dying Jesus."

"Then rising, she uttered a terrible cry and said:

"O miserable Clarisse! Would that I had died before seeing this day!"

"My mother, my dear mother," I replied, "hear me, hear your unhappy child! I do not hate the cross of Christ! No, I glorify it! I live by it; it is everything to me! But I cannot adore the symbol!"

"I was about to go on when Mother Ursula struck me on the mouth saying:

"Do not pronounce your blasphemous words in this holy chamber!"

"Then seizing my sleeve with her nervous grasp, she drew me through the ante-chamber into a cell situated by the side of the porch and facing the cemetery."

"Two candles were burning there. Annunziata took one and Mother Ursula the other. This cell was made of wood and covered with panels of tapestry. Left alone, I fell upon my knees, not to implore pity of those who had none, but to ask of the Lord His aid and strength. I was rudely raised by Mother Ursula, while Annunziata, pressing a spring concealed in the wood, opened one of the panels and revealed a slight of narrow, circular stairs. There came a cold and humid atmosphere that made the flame of the candles flicker. The sight made me recoil even to the opposite side of the chamber, where I resisted with all the power of my strength when they came to seize me. I was beside myself, and I addressed to Annunziata some reproaches of which I afterwards often repented. 'You will have remembrance of this hour some day with anguish and

bitterness?' I cried; and that day will come sooner than you think!"

"May God pardon me the expression! It was one of vengeance. Ah! it was such a proof of our corruption naturally that I saw that my strength rested in my Savior, and in Him alone. I have a very confused recollection of the remainder of the scene. It was to my mind like a frightful nightmare, in which accumulated all the horrors of the infernal powers; but all in vain—they could not tear me from the arms of the Eternal!"

"I was dragged in spite of my efforts to the bottom of the winding stairway and through long arched corridors and somber chambers where the respiration was oppressed. Finally we came to an iron door, and I leave you to surmise my thoughts when I saw the realization of a solitary and perpetual imprisonment."

"The iron door opened and turned on its rusty hinges. Before I could pierce the shadows that surrounded me, my companions had pushed me into the dungeon and closed behind me the iron door with such a noise that the report must have been heard in the upper story. They departed; I listened a moment to the echo of their footsteps; then everything lapsed into silence."

"But I was not left in as complete obscurity as I had thought. I was in a large chamber hewed out of the rock. From the peak of the arch hung an iron lamp; it spread, it is true, a vacillating light, but I found it sufficient for all my needs. There were some bits of furniture in the room, one bed in the angle near the door, and a second on the opposite side, with a table and a footstool. While I asked myself if this was all prepared for me alone, a shadow raised itself from the farthest bed, and inclining on the side gave me the indistinct outlines of a human creature. Not having any idea of finding a companion in this somber place, I was seized with terror, and screaming with fright, I fell upon the floor senseless. You regard me with astonishment, my friends, but you recollect this Agnes whom you already know, and whose interesting history I will relate to you later."

"It was less a human being than a specter. Dear Agnes! the little time that we passed together has united our hearts more than could have been done in long years under other circumstances. 'I was unconscious for a long time; when I regained consciousness the poor nun was bathing my forehead with cold water. When she saw that I was about to faint again, she said to me in a gentle voice full of tears:

"'Poor child! do not be afraid of me! I asked her who she was. She recounted to me her history in a few moments. I was filled with astonishment, not having the least idea that she still existed."

"She was very small in size, and in appearance of an advanced age. Her face was drawn, and of a severe expression; she was bent almost double though she was not more than fifty years old. She tried to lift me, but was not strong enough. It was only when I was somewhat restored that she conducted me to one of the beds, where I stretched myself upon the surface while she arranged about me the slender covering; then she seated herself upon the stool."

"'Speak to me! speak to me! To you I say that I have heard a human voice, that sweet sound of heaven! Why are you here and since when? Have they seen enough of my misery to give me a companion? They have brought you here, poor child, that I may tell you that I had fallen into a mortal heresy, but I have been restored to the church by a severity which I call goodness, to rejoice in the prospect of a delivery from fire and this mortal body.'

"'Have you, then, retracted?' said I. 'I have recognized my error,' said she."

"I sighed deeply and burst into tears. My tears soiced me."

"'Yes they have brought you here,' she continued, 'in order that I may talk with you, dear child. May God aid us in it! May He grant that our coming together in this prison shall become the means of our reunion in glory! So I implore the help of God for the great task before me. *Domine adjuvandum me festina. Ave Maria, gratia plena.*' After this she signed herself many times."

"I made no response."

"'It will be a blessed work,' she continued, 'to snatch you from your error. What a compensation for all my sins, my child.'

"'Are you wholly sure,' asked I, 'of being now more sure of having the truth than at your entrance into this dungeon? Dear mother, time is short for you, and you have little means for your instruction; but since we are together, together let us examine the truth. Do you know the Scriptures?"

"'How should I know them, my child? I have never seen them.'"

"'By what means then did you acquire your principles which made you incur the displeasure of the church?"

"I received them of a young girl to whom I taught Italian. I was young and ardent, and I spoke with contempt of the mother of God! *Miserece mei, Domine!* I was obstinate in my error; I refused obedience to the church; they were severe toward me, and I lost my reason. I became a maniac, or rather I was delivered to satan; but they have

made me see my error. Now that my name has disappeared from the house, there is no more remembrance of me. It is not possible for me to say how many years I have passed here; there is nothing to mark the flight of time. But I have had many rejoicings; my child; since I returned to the bosom of the church."

"And was it to obtain them that you have retracted, my mother?"

"No, I hope that I have not committed that sin. I had retracted long before they gave that light, a little more of nourishment and some warmer clothing."

"God be praised that you can say that! But, dear mother, let us pray together; let us examine with the aid of the Holy Spirit, celestial truth, and not wishing to have any other hope, let us attach ourselves heartily to what the Almighty shows us to be His truth. If our spiritual guides are right, the Scriptures are true; but if the Scriptures are corrupt, deceptive, and abominable."

"No, my child, replied the old religious, joining her withered hands, 'no, do not talk so.'

"And she looked around her with affright, and signed herself many times invoking the saints and repeating the litanies."

"But as you are doubtless in a hurry to know the rest of my history, I will give you at another time more of the details of my conversation with poor Agnes. I will only say that a few days after I became her companion in the dungeon, where she spent thirty years in solitary confinement, I became so sick that for many hours I was completely insensible and incapable of moving. During all this time the dear creature gave me all the care of a mother. What means she employed to comfort me! And with what vivacity she gave me an affection that for so many years had lacked an object upon which to concentrate its force and tenderness, and which ceased only with her life! I have seen since, what I did not understand then, how this lively affection was to prepare her mind for

the instruction she was to receive from me under the efficacy of the Holy Spirit. (To be Continued.)

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