

FATHER MASSA AND THE *MASSA DAMNATA*

Massa, Mark, S.J., *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day and the Notre Dame Football Team*, The Crossroad Publishing Co., NY, 1999.

Fr. Mark S. Massa, S.J. a professor of sociology at Fordham, has just brought out a book entitled, *Catholics and American Culture*. We have just had this book read to us in the refectory during supper. It wouldn't be worth mentioning, except that the first chapter is on the Father Feeney Case and is entitled "Boundary Maintenance, St. Cyprian and Emil Durkheim." It is of full of both historical and theological errors, that I feel call for some comment.

Emil Durkheim is the founder of the "science" of sociology and Father Massa says of him:

"A basic component of the social-scientific study of deviance is the systematic exploration of the Durkheimian thesis that social deviance (intellectual, political, religious, or whatever) actually performs an essential service to any society by establishing the boundaries of that definite group's life."¹ "But the most provocative recent applications of this revered Durkheimian thesis to the study of historical groups have been undertaken by cultural anthropologists such as the British scholar Mary Douglas. Douglas has argued that there is a strong tendency in some cultures to replicate social divisions in symbolic form by drawing on bodily symbols in every possible dimension of historical experience. Thus in studies of groups as diverse as African tribesman and London's 'Bog Irish,' Douglas has drawn attention to the fact that social deviance in certain cultures manifests itself in 'witch-hunting cosmology' that draws heavily on body symbolism - 'orifices' to be guarded, improper 'mixtures' to be avoided, fleshly 'corruptions' to be amputated, etc."²

Now I am not going to rush to the library and get out Durkheim and Douglas to find out what happened in the Father Feeney Case, I was there. And even if I wasn't, just from my Catholic Faith, I could do a better job than Father Massa. The great Catholic writer, Hilaire Belloc, says in his marvelous, *Europe and the Faith*:

"The Catholic brings to history (when I say 'history' in these pages, I mean the history of Christendom) self-knowledge. As a man in the confessional accuses himself of what he knows to be true and what other people cannot judge, so a Catholic, talking of the united European civilization, when he blames it, blames it for motives and acts which are his own. He himself

could have done those things in person. He is not relatively right in his blame, he is absolutely right. As a man can testify to his own motive, so can the Catholic testify to unjust irrelevant, or ignorant conceptions of the European story; for he knows why and how it proceeded. Others, not Catholic, look upon the story of Europe externally as strangers. They have to deal with something which presents itself to them partially and disconnectedly, by its phenomena alone: he sees it all from its center in its essence, and together." ³

By trying to see the Father Feeney Story through the eyes of Durkheim and Douglas, Father Massa sees it, as Belloc says, only "partially and disconnectedly, by its phenomena alone," while a Catholic should be able to see "it all from its center in its essence, and together." In this little paper I would like to point out first, some of Father Massa's historical inaccuracies, and then go on to his more serious theological errors. He writes:

"British novelist Evelyn Waugh visited the center that fall on the advice of Mrs. Clare Boothe Luce ('a saint and apostle on no account to be missed'). Waugh's account is itself classic: 'I found him one morning surrounded by a court of bemused youth of both sexes & stark raving mad...He fell into a rambling denunciation of all secular learning which gradually became more and more violent...It seemed to me that he needed an exorcist more than an alienist. A case of demonic possession & jolly frightening.'" ⁴

I was there the day of Waugh's visit, and Father Feeney couldn't have been nicer to him. He urged him to give us a little talk, but Waugh said he hadn't come to talk, just to listen. Father had spent a year at Oxford and had met most of the people engaged in the Catholic literary revival. Some Irishmen, especially the social-climbing Boston Irish, had they spent a year at Oxford, would have spent the rest of their lives talking with an upper class British accent. Waugh had the most extreme case of this affectation that I have ever heard. Father Feeney never lowered himself to that level, but he could imitate it perfectly. At the time he just happened to be working on his *London is a Place* which deals with that literary revival. Waugh settled smugly into his chair expecting, no doubt, the usual social-climbing Irish Anglo-philia. Father Feeney began to do the various figures in the movement and got more and more into his upper class British accent until he sounded almost like Waugh himself. I noticed that Waugh kept getting redder, and eventually began sputtering. He realized that Father Feeney was on to the phonies that they were. Father eventually came to Monsignor Ronald Knox. Let me just cite one paragraph on Monsignor Knox from *London is a Place* to give you an idea of what he was saying about him:

"Monsignor Knox, by way of revising the bad English of the Church he entered recently loaned it his vocabulary, and issued an edition of Holy Scripture known as the 'Knox Bible.' In this Bible, Ronald Knox figuratively puts wrist watches on all the Evangelists, and invites them to dinner in a don's refectory, where, in the midst of revelation and refreshment, they may be colloquially introduced, and may receive academic credit for being the excellent and inspired authors they are." ⁵

I thought Waugh was going to have an apoplectic fit. He leaped out of his chair sputtering: "I will not listen to Monsignor Knox attacked!" and stormed out the door. The old Irish chieftains could have told Waugh, never cross one of the bards lest they immortalize you in

a satirical song or story. If Father Feeney was anything, he was an Irish bard, and though he probably hadn't planned to include Waugh in *London is a Place* (he is too insignificant a figure), he added a paragraph after this visit:

"Among Monsignor Knox's non-competitors, but on the list of his recurrent callers, was Mr. Evelyn (pronounced Evil-in) Waugh, whose father, a London publisher, supplied his sons with early printing privileges in pornography, before one of them (Evelyn) turned to hagiography, and whitened his sepulcher with the life of a saint." ⁶

Let me give a couple more of Father Massa's historical errors. "'The first sign of your approaching damnation is that Notre Dame has Protestants on its football team.' A Feeneyite at a Notre Dame Football game. 1953." ⁷

This story stems from a bookselling trip during which six brothers tried to sell books on the Notre Dame campus. Everything went along quietly for a while until the students realized who the brothers were, and the whole campus erupted. The brothers were eventually backed up against the doors of the chapel, and began reciting the rosary which held the mob of students at bay. The students were shouting, "You're not Catholic!" One of the brothers Brother Dominic Maria, shouted back, "Notre Dame was no longer a Catholic College; it even had Protestants on its football team!" The police finally arrived and escorted the brothers off campus. The reason I mention this story is that the chapel was the Brownson Memorial Chapel. Just a few feet behind the brothers was buried Orestes Brownson, who had fought the same good fight that Father Feeney fought for "no salvation outside the Church" in Boston one hundred years earlier. I am sure he must have been cheering for the brothers. I should mention in passing, that the brothers gradually mellowed over the years, and this type of confrontation became less frequent.

Let me give just one more historical error and then move on to theology.

"...he and his followers had already taken to appearing on Boston Common on Sunday afternoons. There they would boom their doctrine at 'Brimstone Corner' at the Park Street 'T' station, warning (through bullhorns) of the nuclear wrath to come and denouncing the enemies of Holy Mother Church - Masons, the Boston hierarchy itself, but especially the Jews."⁸

On the Common neither Father Feeney nor any of the brothers used a bullhorn; Father Feeney liked to react with the crowd, and this was possible for a few years. Also he did not, nor did any of the brothers, ever attack the Boston hierarchy on the Common. He did, however, attack the Masons and the Jews. Father Feeney was not an Anti-Semite. He always said that he would rather talk to a Jew than a Protestant, because "you could talk turkey to a Jew." It began slowly but as the Jews realized that Father Feeney had been abandoned by the hierarchy, and that the Boston Catholics were not going to defend him, they became bolder. They began shouting things like, "Take Him down from the Cross, and we will crucify Him again!" "He's a bastard!" "He's a mamser!" A mamser is the child of a prostitute. I won't bother giving you the many places in the Talmud where these blasphemies and obscenities, and others like them, are found. Father Feeney reacted in the way that any Catholic who loves Our Lord and Our Lady should have reacted. The Jews want to make any criticism of them, even criticism, of the obscenities of

the Talmud, Anti-Semitic, and the media, and Catholics like Father Massa are going along with them on this.

That is about all I want to do on historical errors, although there are many more, but go on now to theological errors. Father Massa writes:

"Feeney's rigorist interpretation of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* arguably stood much closer to its meaning held by Pope Innocent III in the thirteenth and St. Francis Xavier in the sixteenth centuries than did that of his 'liberal' Catholic opponents who found his teaching abhorrent. Indeed, in the era between the Reformation and Vatican II, 'the church' in official dogmatic statements had meant precisely what Feeney said it did: those in union with the bishop of Rome."⁹

If the Church once taught *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, as Father Massa admits, it can never change. As St. Vincent of Lerins said: *Quod ubique, quod semper, et quod omnibus*: "Moreover, in the Church itself, every possible care must be taken to hold fast to that faith which has been believed, everywhere, always, and by everyone."¹⁰ Or as St. Paul put it: "Jesus Christ, yesterday, and today; and the same forever" (Heb. 13:8). Let me continue with another of Father Massa's theological errors:

"As Mary Douglas might read it, Feeney and the entire Boston Heresy Case served an absolutely essential function for North American Catholicism at a crucial moment in its history: Feeney and his disciples provided the occasion for 'boundary redefinition' in a new cultural context. Doctrinal positions that had been considered rigorous but nonetheless orthodox at an earlier moment in North American Catholic history were now perceived to be beyond the pale - beliefs that the collective now declared to be deviant and even dangerous to the life of the community. The collective conscience had changed, the boundary between what constituted 'inside' and 'outside' had moved or been scaled down, and the official interpretation of what it meant to be 'outside the church' had changed with it.

"From this vantage, Feeney's case provides a critical marker in charting the relationship of Catholicism to postwar American culture. Indeed, it might be argued along Durkheimian lines that the Catholic community used Feeney and his followers to redefine itself, vis `a vis American culture, embracing the American cultural values of respect for pluralism, egalitarianism, and democracy with an alacrity and enthusiasm that today appears too effusive. An older hard line interpretation of the church's relationship to those 'outside' of its body - an interpretation almost sectarian in its rigorous denunciation of the belief that one might 'with impunity consort constantly with heretics and atheists' - was now declared to be deviant, damnably so. The sociological, political, and economic reasons for this redefinition are reasonably clear; the theological justification for this redefinition, however, remained obscure - at least until the Second Vatican Council."¹¹

Father Massa's thesis is that Vatican Council II redefined the boundaries of the Roman Catholic Church:

"...the Second Vatican Council sponsored an initially quiet (and then exceedingly loud) ecclesiological revolution, by positing in its most important document that the true church 'subsists' in the Holy Roman Church. This seemingly simple rephrasing of the relationship between the mystical body of true believers and the Roman Church (the former 'subsisting in' rather than 'existing in' the latter) actually elucidated a new Catholic worldview for viewing non-Roman Christians by allowing that elements of the True Faith could be found outside institutional Catholicism." ¹³

Let us see what the Council actually said. Here is *Lumen Gentium* 1:8:

"This is the sole Church of Christ which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which Our Saviour, after His resurrection entrusted to Peter's pastoral care (Jn 21:17)...This Church subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and truth are found outside its visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards Catholic unity." ¹⁴

Father Massa is claiming that the phrase, "...the sole Church of Christ ...subsists in the Catholic Church," means that the "Church of Christ" is a larger entity than the Roman Catholic Church. But a simple reading of the *relationes*, the official explanations which accompanied the draft decrees, show the falsity of this claim. The first draft of this passage had read: "The one Church of Christ is the Catholic Church," but in the second draft, the "is" was changed to "subsists in." The *relatio* gives the reason for the change. "Certain words have been changed: in place of 'is,' 'subsists in' is used so that expression may be in better harmony with the affirmation about ecclesial elements which are present elsewhere." ¹⁵

"Subsists" is a stronger word than "is" or "exists." It means "to exist for itself and not in another," ¹⁶ in contrast with the "ecclesial elements" possessed by Protestants, like Baptism, Matrimony, the Bible, which merely *exist* outside the Catholic Church, but belong of right to the Catholic Church, and are forces impelling Protestants to the True Church. On March 20, 1985, the Vatican released a "notification," written by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger, which was approved by Pope John Paul II, condemning a book by the Brazilian theologian, Fr. Leonardo Boff, proposing the same thesis as Fr. Massa:

"...In order to justify it, L. Boff appeals to the constitution *Lumen Gentium* n. 8 of the Second Vatican Council. From the Council's famous statement, '*Haec ecclesia (sc. unica Christi ecclesia) subsistit in ecclesia Catholica*' [This Church (namely the sole Church of Christ) subsists in the Catholic Church], he derives a thesis which is exactly contrary to the authentic meaning of the council text, for he affirms: 'In fact it (*sc.* the sole Church of Christ) may also be present in other Christian churches' (p.75). But the Council had chosen the word *subsistit* - subsists - exactly in order to make it clear that the one sole 'subsistence' of the true church exists, whereas outside her visible structure only *elementae ecclesiae* - elements of the church exist; these being elements of the same church - tend and conduct toward the Catholic Church (*Lumen gentium* 8). The decree on ecumenism expressed the same doctrine (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 3,4) and it was restated precisely in *Mysterium Ecclesiae*." ¹⁷

This condemnation of Father Boff would also condemn Father Massa. His whole thesis then of redefining the boundaries of the Church, is based on a condemned proposition. I could continue with Father Massa's theological errors, there are many more, but I think I have made my point. Catholic philosophy guided by Catholic theology can throw light on true science, but it doesn't work the other way around. Father Massa is trying to use a pseudo-science, sociology, to throw light on Catholic theology. The results were predictable.

References

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- 2 Massa, *Op. cit.*, p.24.
- 3 Belloc, Hilaire, *Europe and the Faith*, (Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle, New York, 1920), TAN Books and Publishers, Rockford, IL, 1992, p.2.
- 4 Massa, p.238, n. 31.
- 5 Feeney, Leonard, *London is a Place*, Boston, The Ravengate Press, 1951, pp.119,120.
- 6 Feeney, *Op. cit.*, p.121.
- 7 Massa, p.21.
- 8 Massa, pp.31,32.
- 9 Massa, p.34.
- 10 St. Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitoria*, PL 50:637.
- 11 Massa, pp.35,36.
- 12 Pepper, George B., Ph.D., *The Boston Heresy Case in View of the Secularization of Religion, A Case Study in the Sociology of Religion*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston/Queenston, Ny, 1988, p. 48, n.58, College, New Rochelle, NY, p.69, n.48 Letter from Rev. Richard Shmaruk, 12 July 198
- 13 Massa, p.33.
- 14 Flannery, Austin, O.P., *Vatican Council II*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1975, p.357. *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Oecumenici Vaticani II*, Typus Polyglotis Vaticanis, Rome, Vol. I, pt. 4, p.177; cited in Fr. James O'Connor, "The Church of Christ and the Catholic Church," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, January, 1984, p.15.
- 16 Deferrari, Roy J., Ph.D., *A Latin-English Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Daughters of St. Paul, Boston, 1960, p.1003.
- 17 U.S. Catholic Conference Documentary Service, April 4, 1985, Vol. 14, No. 42, pp.685,686.
