

CHAPTER XIX

Muskegon—On the Borders of Lake Michigan

If you want to have an idea of the marvelous lumber industry of the United States, go and see the numerous saw-mills which are around the city of Muskegon, and count, if you can, the piles of lumber, of every size, which stand like giant sentinels along the shores of Lake Michigan.

In the year 1862 the greatest number of those saw-mills were manned by our French Canadian emigrants who, to the number of hundreds of thousands, had to leave the country of their birth, in order to go and eat the bitter bread of exile in the United States.

The Archbishop of Quebec, Bishop Baillargeon, had a near relative among those emigrants, who addressed me the following letter at the end of September, 1862:

“Dear Father Chiniquy:—

“Though I have not met you for several years, I hope that you will remember me when I tell you that I am the near relative to the present Archbishop of Quebec, Bishop Baillargeon, who visited you in the autumn of 1843 when you were curate of Kamouraska. Obligated, as so many of our countrymen, to exile myself, I am keeping a large boarding house here in Muskegon, on the borders of Lake Michigan. Many of our countrymen have emigrated here with me. Like yourself, we were born and raised in the Roman Catholic Church, but you understand that our faith has received a serious shock by your so public and solemn step of passing to the side of the Protestants. However, I would not be honest if I were leaving you under the impression that our own faith in the Church of Rome had not been shaken before you left it.

“Our last two priests have done more here than yourself to cause us to suspect that the religion of the Pope of Rome is not the religion of Christ.

“One of them was almost constantly drunk. Several times it has been my sad duty to pick him up when lying drunk along the streets.

“We complained to the Bishop, and, at our request, he gave us another one. But we fell into bad hands again, for this last one was making use of the confessional to corrupt his female penitents. His life was a public scandal which forced us to blush. The shameful conduct of those priests is, to many of us, a sure indication that they do not believe in the religion they preach, and we ask ourselves: Is it not a supreme act of folly to believe in it?

“There is no need to tell you that the scandalous lives of those priests, with your public exit from our church, have so shaken our faith that many of us have absolutely ceased from attending any religious services. However, that state of things cannot last long. We want a religion for ourselves and our children. But how can we make the choice of the true religion of Christ, without the help of some one who is wiser than we are?

“Please do not rebuke us when we ask you to come to our help in these days of supreme anxiety and distress. In the name of our common Saviour, come and give us the benefit of your experience and knowledge in the choice we must make of the religious way which will lead us to a happy eternal life, after the sad experiences of these few days of tribulations through which we have to pass in this land of exile and misery.”

The only answer I could give to that so pressing request was to go without any delay to the help of those dear, but so distressed, countrymen. A few days later it was my privilege to be the guest of my old friend, Baillargeon, and to shake hands with the multitude of my dear countrymen by whom he was surrounded.

The news of my arrival had been quickly spread, and I was hardly half an hour in the hall of the hotel, when it was crowded to its utmost capacity.

I saw at once that I was in the presence of a great difficulty. Every one of that multitude had his private and personal difficulties. Some wanted me to tell them how it was possible that a priest could make God with a wafer, others wanted to know how it was possible that a drunken priest, whose name was connected with sins, could forgive the sins of his penitent, whose life, very often, was more moral than that of his Father Confessor. I told them:

“My dear friends, we should avoid a very fatal mistake. If you speak all together with the hope of getting the answers at once, we shall have a renewal of the confusion of the builders of the tower of Babel. Please let only one of you alone put his questions, and when I shall have answered him, another one shall have the same privilege.” This being agreed, Mr. Baillargeon said: “As it is my privilege to have you in my humble house, I will take the liberty of opening the meeting by calling attention to the article of our religion which I consider the most puzzling of all. We are told that when our Saviour Jesus Christ took the bread in His hand at the supper with His disciples, ‘After He had given thanks, He brake it and said, Take, eat; this is My body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of Me.

“‘After the same manner also He took the cup, saying, This cup is the New Testament in My blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till He come.’ (1 Cor. 11: 24-26.)

“Our Roman Catholic Church teaches us that, by this ceremony and these words, our Saviour Jesus Christ not only changed the bread and the wine into His body, soul, and divinity, but that He gave to His apostles and to all our priests the power to perform the same stupendous miracle.

“Now, Mr. Chiniqny, you had to believe that, and to teach

it, before you left our church—but we know that you do not believe it any longer. Now please give us the reasons you had for changing your faith on that subject.”

“Yes! yes!” repeated every one of the multitude which surrounded me. “Tell us why you have changed your views on that solemn question.”

I replied, “Before answering you, let me read you the first and second commandment of God as they were given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

“‘And God spake all these words, saying:

“‘I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generations of them that hate Me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me, and keep My commandments.’

“In the second commandment our God forbids to take a created thing,—to make an image of it—to make a god of it,—and adore it.

“But what does the Pope of Rome order his priests to do every morning? He orders them to change those wafers into gods! Does he not give them the power to make as many gods as there are wafers before them? But do you not see that this is an imposture? The very moment that you have said that there is only one God, you are sure that the Pope is an impostor when he says that the priest has the power to make as many gods as there are wafers about him! Surely our Saviour, when holding the bread, said, ‘This is My body,’ but He immediately added, ‘Do this in remembrance of Me,’ that we might understand that it was not His body, but only a remembrance of His body.

“In the Gospel of St. John, chapter 10: 9, Christ says, ‘I am the door,’ and in chapter 15: 1, He says, ‘I am the true vine.’ Will the Pope make us believe that our Saviour was really a door and a vine? No. Our Saviour was neither a vine nor a door. When He called Himself a vine, a door, it was only in a figurative way; it was to show us that it was through Him alone that we could have any hope to enter into heaven.

“St. Paul, speaking of the rock which Moses struck with his rod in order to quench the thirst of the Israelites in the desert, says, ‘That rock was Christ!’

“Will the Pope persuade you that that rock was really Christ? You understand that it was only through a figure of language that Paul said, ‘That rock was Christ.’ It was only to make us understand that it was only to Christ alone we must go to find the spiritual favours we are in need of for our salvation. So our beloved Saviour called the bread of the holy communion His body, that we might, when receiving the bread of the communion, forever remember that His body was nailed to the cross, and He died the horrible death of Calvary, that by His sacrifice we might have our sins forgiven.

“Is it necessary to address you a long speech to prove to you that the Pope and his priests are impostors the very moment that they assure you that they make as many gods, every morning, as they have baked wafers before their eyes? Transubstantiation is an imposture; the mass has been invented to make money. Paul, speaking to the Athenians, said, ‘God cannot be made with gold and silver.’ If the great apostle had been questioned on that subject, he certainly would have denied that God Almighty can either be made with the cakes baked by the servants of the priests. The ceremony of the masses, for which you have to pay from twenty-five cents to one dollar, or more, is an imposture invented to fill the purse of the Pope and his priests.

“The moment our Saviour has said: ‘I do not come to break

the commandments of My Father, but I come to fulfil them,' He could not take a created thing, a wafer, a small piece of bread, into his hand and make a god of it. We see that the doctrines as well as the practices of the Church of Rome about the Communion are not the same that we find in the Gospel; for, in that Holy Book, we see that the apostles, and Christ Himself, received their first communion after supper. But, according to the teachings of the priests, it is a mortal sin to receive the Holy Communion after breakfast, and still more after supper. If the teachings of the Pope and his priests are correct on that subject, we must believe that Christ and His apostles were guilty of a mortal sin for daring to receive the great sacrament after supper! And, as they never repented of that sin, we must believe that they are forever lost for having made such a sacrilegious first communion."

It pleased the Good Master to give such a blessing to my few clear and simple arguments that it was evident the huge fabric of the teachings of Rome on that subject had crumbled down before their candid minds.

It was then nearly ten P. M., I added:

"You have all worked hard to-day, you want some rest. Come again to-morrow evening, and with the help of God I will continue to answer your questions and to show you some of the errors of Rome."

And I dismissed them after a short prayer.