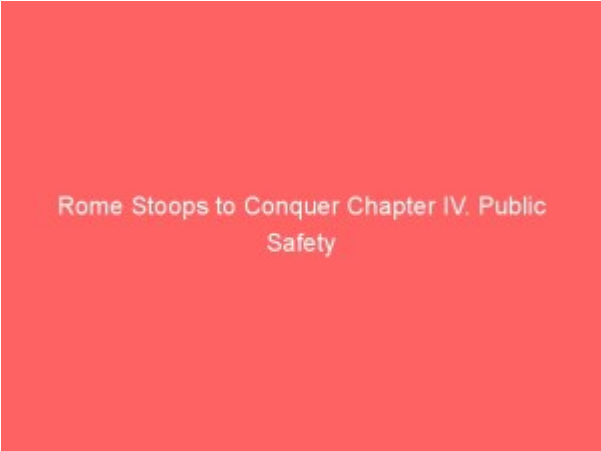


Rome Stoops to Conquer Chapter IV.

Public Safety



Rome Stoops to Conquer Chapter IV. Public
Safety

Continued from [Chapter III. Winning The Worker.](#)

TO ASSUME authority in the name of Public Safety has characterized from earliest times most forms of revolt, and it was in the name of Public Safety that the Catholic hierarchy of America launched their attack on American morals in the summer of 1934.

Addressing his archdiocese, Cardinal Hayes said: "Public Safety demands that we establish quarantine against epidemics, enforce measures against unsanitary conditions, and guard our water supply lest contagion, infection and contamination harm the physical well-being of our people. To be consistent we should be equally concerned about the general moral tone of the nation. A serious lowering of the moral standards of any community menaces the common good and weakens if it does not destroy the sanctions that guarantee peace and prosperity. . . . Evil motion pictures undermine the moral foundation of the State."

Other Catholic archbishops and bishops issued similar proclamations. In Boston, Father Sullivan, the Jesuit, as the Cardinal's spokesman, said: "The present campaign against indecent motion pictures is a campaign for the preservation of our national morality, the very foundation of our governmental structure, and for the preservation of our national ideals,"

All through the land there was an assumption of authority in the Fascist manner by the Church, and a "Call to Arms" was issued. The Pope's blessing was obtained for the crusade, and millions of Christian soldiers enrolled and pledged themselves to fight. "Militant action should be resorted to if necessary" the bishops had declared. *The crusaders were ready!*

The Legion of Decency *began* as an assault on supposedly evil motion pictures. Pictures offered an immediate and convenient target for Catholic Action on a nation-wide scale. There were movie theaters everywhere, in every town and in every village. Every Catholic parish established its Legion at the word of the bishops and got busy. The Liberties Union Committee protested in vain

that "religious censorship is subversive of the religious liberty clauses in our basic law." In the First Humanist Church of New York City, Rev. Dr. Charles L. Potter exclaimed: "It is bad in a democracy to have one group set up a moral censorship over the rest. Who gave the Roman Catholic Church . . . the right to dictate the morals of this nation?" The Church paid no heed to such rebukes. Where her interests are concerned she declines to attach importance to theories of human rights and liberties. Besides, had she not declared in her episcopal manifestos that *Public Safety* demanded and justified her intervention.

The Catholic bishops, in launching the League, called salacious pictures "the country's greatest menace." What they meant was that salacious pictures were an expression of what they considered the country's greatest menace – Neo-Paganism.

It is difficult to define Neo-Paganism. It is a questioning of the worth of Christian ethics, and a practical disregard of the conclusions drawn therefrom. It constitutes a grave threat to Catholicism which stands or falls by the old standard of morals. Catholics like to say that there is an issue between Western Civilization and Neo-Paganism and that in fighting for the former they are defending law, order, art, social welfare, and of course the American Constitution. They invoke the sentiment of patriotism in their struggle with the ugly monster that threatens. They warn that Neo-Paganism means atheism, Communism, and devilry in every form, "Could Satan himself devise a more successfully insidious attack on our national morality and ideals than that which the gentlemen of the motion picture industry devised to reward us for the wealth we heaped upon them and the trust we reposed in them?" The Catholic hierarchy are naturally fearful lest the contamination spread among their flocks. Were such to happen, the Church's influence and their influence would be undermined. Confessions revealed the havoc caused in souls by modern dances, modern literature, the theater, the bathing beach, the night club, Nudism, birth control, secular education, and other manifestations of American "naturalism." In a lament issued at Rome on the eve of Lent (1935), His Holiness declared: "The pagan tendencies in present-day life afflict all open and attentive eyes. For many people life is specifically and paganly given over only to pleasure, to the quest after pleasure, and to amusement that is specifically and paganly immodest, with an immodesty that often exceeds that of ancient pagan life, inasmuch as it is addicted to what is termed with a horrible word and horrible blasphemy, the practice and cult of Nudism."

In the early stages of the Legion's activities the boycott weapon was invoked. Cardinal Dougherty ordered "his" people to stay away from motion pictures good and bad. "Nothing," he said, "is left for us except the boycott. The Catholic people of this diocese are, therefore, urged to register their united protest against immoral and indecent films by remaining away entirely from all motion picture theaters." Archbishop Glennon allowed "his" people to frequent theaters which excluded all indecent pictures. "If the picture house," he said, "shows both types of pictures, we'll tell our people to stay away from both." To show the sweet reasonableness of his decision, he said that no employer would keep a man in employment on the

grounds that he was sober two days a week, although drunk the other four.

Then labor kicked and warned the Church that to boycott theaters would mean more unemployment. In Philadelphia their leaders declared: "It is obvious that the blanket boycott if enforced as planned can only lead to hardship and unemployment not only among musicians but among operators, stagehands, ushers, ticket-sellers, doormen, managers, and all others employed in the theaters." The Church did not wish to antagonize labor anew, nor to alienate her Catholic children who found employment in the theaters, so she modified her stand and restricted the Legion's energies to boycotting specific films. Meanwhile, strange as it may appear, the bishops displayed little interest in what should have been their vital concern—the discrimination between "decency" and "indecent" in films. The great thing, in their eyes, was to have the mighty Legion going strong for the glory of God and of the Church, and to have a good number of movies banned. It did not matter much which!

The work of applying Catholic moral theology to the classification of movies into good, bad and indifferent was usually left to pious women who had no scientific training as moralists, but who were deeply interested in prurient. They drew up the famous "lists." Of these the most important, in fact the "official" list, came from Chicago. It was drawn up by a young lady, unaided! This girl held in her hands, so to say, the moral consciences of millions of American Catholics. Her judgment on what might be naughty for young men and old, maidens and matrons, soldiers and sailors, nuns and priests and even bishops was final, and authoritative!

The ten million Catholics who pledged themselves solemnly, standing in the churches with uplifted hands, "to form a right conscience about pictures that are dangerous to my moral life" took the Chicago maid's word as to what constituted the eternal difference between good and evil, right and wrong in screen drama. For American Catholics she became a holy Delphian oracle.

In connection with the Legion of Decency there soon appeared another anomaly. In various dioceses "Councils" were set up to spread and perpetuate its work. For these Councils a personnel had to be chosen. The individual bishops were faced with a problem. Whom should they choose as members of their Councils? Devout, irreproachable, scholarly laymen who would, supposedly, be sensitive to the canons of decency? Or public men, politicians who knew more about polling votes and wangling jobs, than about the finer points of Catholic theology? .

His Eminence Cardinal Hayes in setting up the Council of the Legion for the archdiocese of New York, gave a lead in this thorny matter by plumping for politicians and public men. He made Mr. Alfred E. Smith, his chairman, and added as councilors, ex-Mayor John P. O'Brien, Judge Alfred J. Talley, Martin Quigley, Arthur O'Leary, George MacDonald, and his own representative, Father E.R. Moore. His Eminence thus officially vindicated the moral outlook of Tammany Hall by entrusting to it a strong vote in the supervision of matters of conscience and chastity in his diocese.

We now broach the subject of the developments and the objectives of the Legion.

In New York, although Father Moore, as the Cardinal's mouthpiece, informed the Press that "The Legion has not any intentions of setting itself up as a guardian of society and public morals *at this time*," it soon began to show its hand.

In St. Patrick's Cathedral Father Graham announced that the movement would be directed against the legitimate stage. "You are urged," he told the congregation, "to ignore producers and authors who lend themselves only to plays that are salacious." Working with two colleagues, Fathers Woods and Furlong, Father Graham drew up a "White List" of Broadway plays. Of thirty Broadway plays current at the time, only four were passed as "white"! Next came the move against Nudism. Speaking on behalf of the Archdiocesan Council, Mr. Alfred E. Smith reminded the Press that the Appellate Division had ruled that existing laws did not justify conviction in cases of Nudism-cult, and added: "If, as the learned Appellate Division ruled, the present penal law is not adequate to prevent public mingling and exhibitions of naked men and women, if such action is not an offence against public decency, this Legion will ask the Legislature to speedily remedy this defect in the law and make it so. It seems to us inconsistent to make a stand for decency on the screen and ignore this latest challenge to the enforcement of decency in reality. *We cannot overlook indecency in the substance while condemning it in the shadow.*"

The contention of Nudists that the nude human body is distinct from the lewd human body is regarded by the Legion as a deceitful sophism. The contention that there is no more essential connection between morality and clothing than between morality and cheese is regarded by the Legion as a blasphemy. Though more and more of the scaffolding about the human body is being removed, with propriety, as the years go by, the Legion in accordance with the Church's view, holds that if *all* were removed the structure would suffer a (moral) collapse.

No doubt, the Legion was acting under a hint from Rome in making this assault on Nudism, for within a month of the date of the introduction of the Anti-Nudism Bill at Albany, His Holiness launched his scathing denunciation. Henceforth nudists may expect to experience the same kind of hostility from the Catholic Church that birth controllers have experienced in this country. The Catholic Church has said "No!" to this cult and her "No!" is final.

The New York Catholic "cleanup" has extended to the magazine stands, the burlesque theaters, and the red-light districts through the agency of the Public Welfare and Police departments. It is also engaged in dealing with "immoral literature." At a meeting of the Catholic Writers Guild (March 4, 1935), Monsignor Lavelle spoke as follows: "There should be a nation-wide movement to suppress pernicious and indecent books. If this were done, as far as literature is concerned, the effect would be the same as in the battle against indecent moving pictures." Mgr. Lavelle's views on what Catholic conduct should be with respect to literature were given in his letter read in all the churches of the diocese on February 3, 1935. These views were meant for the public in general as well as for Catholics: "Exclusion from homes of all books and pamphlets hostile to religion and good works or that ventilate obscene news and licentious scandals... . All our people, men, women, and

children, should pledge themselves not to buy or read anything that offends against decency or that is obnoxious to *the enlightened Catholic conscience*."

One wonders what percentage of current books, published in New York, would satisfy the Lavelle canon. By "enlightened Catholic conscience" Mgr. Lavelle means a Catholic conscience that is illuminated by grace and faith, in other words, a devout and delicate conscience. The present writer knows of no non-Catholic book that would not offend in some manner or other such a conscience.

In Chicago, the anti-book campaign gives promise of being vigorous when launched. Catholic student-sodalists, at a meeting that numbered five hundred, resolved: "In recent years there has been a noticeable increase in the number of salacious books and magazines in wide circulation resulting in the moral tone of much of our modern literature becoming more and more offensive to the sodalists. Therefore be it resolved that the operation of the Legion be extended to decreasing the number and circulation of the salacious books and magazines to improve the moral tone of that part of literature which has become offensive to our ideals."

The threat voiced by the student-sodalists of Chicago, namely, that of "decreasing the number and circulation" of books that Catholics disapprove of, is no idle threat. The general public would be amazed if they realized what power the Catholic Church exercises over the book trade. In the first place, publishers for the most part are in absolute terror of publishing a book that is calculated to hurt Catholic sensibilities. They take shelter under the pretense that their policy is to publish only "tolerant" books, thereby accepting the Catholic viewpoint that all books which are critical of Catholic practices or policies are intolerant. Few publishers endorse in practice the foreword at the head of this book: "We must have in this country the right to speak our honest thoughts or we shall perish."

Thus Catholics block books at the source by keeping most publishers under their thumbs, at least in so far as concerns books about Catholicism. But should some books, critical of Catholicism, filter through, their resources are sufficient to deal with the situation. Catholics have considerable influence with distributing agencies. Through them they hold up or hamper a book that they are determined to kill. Should the book get by the distributing agencies and reach the bookstores and reviewers, the Church pursues it still. Catholic ladies visit the bookstores and threaten the proprietors. "You have a book there that is offensive to Catholics! You know what Catholics will be compelled to do if you persist in selling it? You understand?" As regards reviewers, it is a sad but absolutely true fact that none of the great reviewers feel comfortable in handling a book that is "offensive to Catholics." It happens at times that they think it more prudent not to make any reference whatsoever to such a book in their columns.

In New York there is a diocesan Literature Committee that issues a *Book Survey*, a quarterly in which are listed "good books," namely, such as are inoffensive to Catholics, and at the same time have some claim to being "worth while." Dr. Blanche Mary Kelly edits the Book Survey.

Sometimes Dr. Kelly, or one of her censors, is too liberal and protests are made from shocked Catholics. Such protests led her last year (1934) to remove from her "White List" a book that had formerly appeared on it, a novel entitled *Livingstones* by a young Englishman, Derrick Leon. The excommunication of this book, which won for it a considerable amount of publicity, was referred to in the Book Survey. The reference concluded thus: *"We are sorry if anyone bought the book on our recommendation."*

Reporters elicited from Dr. Blanche Mary Kelly that on second thought and recensorship she had decided that the book offended against the second canon of the Literature Committee's qualifications for the "White List," namely, that a book must not "offend the Christian sense of truth and decency." By Christian is, of course, meant Catholic. The canon is the same as that of Mgr. Lavelle. "Enlightened Catholic conscience" and "Christian sense" are synonyms for a Catholic.

If the Catholic dream come true, and Catholic Literature Committees all over the country have the final say in what the American public may read, that public will be in a far worse case than peoples that lived under the Inquisition. For after all, the Literature Committees of the Inquisition were composed of scholarly Dominican and Franciscan theologians, men of learning and of such science as was then available. Whereas the modern lay Catholic Literature Committees are composed of men and women who are equipped neither with theology nor with much scientific or literary discernment.

Catholic indifference to the taste and judgment of non-Catholics was dramatically instanced by the exclusion from Boston of Sean O'Casey's play *Within the Gates*. Mayor F. W. Mansfield, a devout Catholic, declared that the play as published "was nothing but a dirty book full of common- place smut." The Jesuit, Father Sullivan, as spokesman for the Legion, and for Cardinal O'Connell, said that *Within the Gates* was "a sympathetic portrayal of the immoralities described, and even more so the clear setting forth of the futility of religion as an effective force in meeting the problems of life." Catholicism of Boston gave O'Casey his answer by showing how religion (if it was religion) could be "an effective force" in meeting the problems of its existence.

Catholics answer the charge that such censorship as Mayor Mansfield exercised is "arbitrary" by declaring that a much more arbitrary censorship is exercised by critics and stage managers who offer the public naughty plays to the exclusion of edifying ones. Actually the Catholic attitude might be voiced thus: "I am competent to judge in moral matters and no one else is. There is need of a judge; Public Safety demands one. Therefore, I will be the judge!" The mentality is, of course, obviously Fascist. What else did Mussolini or Hitler say in presence of another field of circumstances? "I am competent to rule the State and no one else is! There is need of a ruler; Public Safety demands one. Therefore I will be the ruler!" The assumption of authority to override the will of the majority, even though merely and sincerely for the good of public morals, is a dangerous precedent in a country like ours. It is un-American and in effect seditious.

It is curious that from the start no attempt was made by the hierarchy to

define "decency" or to lay down the principles on which a definition should be based. Such a procedure would have invited discussion. An intelligent understanding of "decency" might have awakened doubts and hesitations in the minds of Catholic laymen and laywomen. The bishops preferred to eschew theology, philosophy and psychology, and leave their followers under the impression that "hot stuff" in general is subversive of morals and indecent! They aimed, they said, "to bring productions up to right moral standards." But what are right moral standards in the portrayal of crime or of night club life? Is night club life so essentially evil that it may never be portrayed? Are gangster pictures immoral unless the gangster is made out to be a detestable skunk? If so, Macbeth was not written "up to right moral standards," for the murdering pair in it are far from hateful! It has been claimed that the Catholic Church suffered "a humiliating defeat" in its anti-movie campaign and that the whole spectacle was Gilbertian and "illustrated vividly the bankruptcy of Church leadership and intelligence." The fact that box-office receipts showed no falling off is brought forward as a fact to substantiate this point of view.

On the other hand, Catholic leaders have claimed that the victory is complete and the objective gained. "Give credit where credit is due," says Father R. E. Moore. "The producers have cooperated. Without this cooperation no clean-up would have been possible and let us not cavil about motives. Today the leaven of the nation's screen entertainment is immeasurably higher than it was before the Legion of Decency began its campaign." Rabbis and Protestant ministers, who took their part in the movement, also declare that the moral tone of the movies is higher. The producers say that the movement cost them \$10,000,000 in expenses incurred by recasting some films and scrapping others.

In any case, the result of the campaign is not to be judged solely by improvement in moral tone. The campaign was a trial of strength for the Church and an exercise in mobilization. The Church succeeded in demonstrating both her power and her capacity in organizing. Today she is immensely stronger for the display she gave in these respects. Furthermore, she showed her skill in hoodwinking the public and seizing authority to put over her own moral views on the whole nation. Not a Jew or Protestant or freethinker in America but has had to submit to the Church's dictation as to what is right and what is wrong for him or her to witness on the screen.

In the name of Public Safety the Church has laid the foundations of a far-reaching censorship of manners and morals. What she has done in the field of the motion picture industry she will presently attempt and achieve in other fields, especially that of literature.

She means to be the official censor of America.

In time the turn of science and philosophy will come and the Church will take steps to eradicate "error" from the schools and universities. As I have already said, "error has no rights in her eyes." Being "the Pillar and the ground of truth," it is her mission and her duty to make truth prevail and to vanquish its contradictory. The day when the schools and colleges are purified in this sense is still far off, no doubt, but the Church is patient

and long-lived.

What man in Boston wields more power than Cardinal O'Connell? Who in Chicago is stronger than Cardinal Mundelein? Who in New York City than Cardinal Hayes? In Philadelphia, Cardinal Dougherty is a power, and in Baltimore Archbishop Curley—and so on, in most of our great cities, the Roman pennant flies! At the voice of a priest the Senate of the United States was cowed into rejecting the World Court on which it was set. We have seen but the beginnings of the age of priestly control. Our books, our theaters, our amusements are under the Church's scrutiny, and what force can prevent her from doing as she will "in the name of Public Safety"?

(To be continued.)

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