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Mirari Vos

On Liberalism and Religious Indifferentism

Pope Gregory XVI - 1832

ON LIBERALISM AND RELIGIOUS INDIFFERENTISM

To All Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, and Bishops of the Catholic World.

Venerable Brothers, Greetings and Apostolic Benediction.

1. We think that you wonder why, from the time of Our assuming the pontificate, We have not yet sent a letter to you as is customary and as Our benevolence for you demanded. We wanted very much to address you by that voice by which We have been commanded, in the person of blessed Peter, to strengthen the brethren.[1]

You know what storms of evil and toil, at the beginning of Our pontificate, drove Us suddenly into the depths of the sea. If the right hand of God had not given Us strength, We would have drowned as the result of the terrible conspiracy of impious men. The mind recoils from renewing this by enumerating so many dangers; instead We bless the Father of consolation Who, having overthrown all enemies, snatched Us from the present danger. When He had calmed this violent storm, He gave Us relief from fear. At once We decided to advise you on healing the wounds of Israel; but the mountain of concerns We needed to address in order to restore public order delayed Us.

2. In the meantime We were again delayed because of the insolent and factious men who endeavored to raise the standard of treason. Eventually, We had to use Our God-given authority to restrain the great obstinacy of these men with the rod.[2] Before We did, their unbridled rage seemed to grow from continued impunity and Our considerable indulgence. For these reasons Our duties have been heavy.

3. But when We had assumed Our pontificate according to the custom and institution of Our predecessors and when all delays had been laid aside, We hastened to you. So We now present the letter and testimony of Our good will toward you on this happy day, the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin. Since she has been Our patron and savior amid so many great calamities, We ask her assistance in writing to you and her counsels for the flock of Christ.

4. We come to you grieving and sorrowful because We know that you are concerned for the faith in these difficult times. Now is truly the time in which the powers of darkness winnow the elect like wheat.[3] “The earth mourns and fades away....And the earth is infected by the inhabitants thereof, because they have transgressed the laws, they have changed the ordinances, they have broken the everlasting covenant.”[4]

5. We speak of the things which you see with your own eyes, which We both bemoan. Depravity exults; science is impudent; liberty, dissolute. The holiness of the sacred is despised; the majesty of divine worship is not only disapproved by evil men, but defiled and held up to ridicule. Hence sound doctrine is perverted and errors of all kinds spread boldly. The laws of the sacred, the rights, institutions, and discipline — none are safe from the audacity of those speaking evil. Our Roman See is harassed violently and the bonds of unity are daily loosened and severed. The divine authority of the Church is opposed and her rights shorn off. She is subjected to human reason and with the greatest injustice exposed to the hatred of the people and reduced to vile servitude. The obedience due bishops is denied and their rights are trampled underfoot. Furthermore, academies and schools resound with new, monstrous opinions, which openly attack the Catholic faith; this horrible and nefarious war is openly and even publicly waged. Thus, by institutions and by the example of teachers, the minds of the youth are corrupted and a tremendous blow is dealt to religion and the perversion of morals is spread. So the restraints of religion are thrown off, by which alone kingdoms stand. We see the destruction of public order, the fall of principalities, and the overturning of all legitimate power approaching. Indeed this great mass of calamities had its inception in the heretical societies and sects in which all that is sacrilegious, infamous, and blasphemous has gathered as bilge water in a ship’s hold, a congealed mass of all filth.

6. These and many other serious things, which at present would take too long to list, but which you know well, cause Our intense grief. It is not enough for Us to deplore these innumerable evils unless We strive to uproot them. We take refuge in your faith and call upon your concern for the salvation of the Catholic flock. Your singular prudence and diligent spirit give Us courage and console Us, afflicted as We are with so many trials. We must raise Our voice and attempt all things lest a wild boar from the woods should destroy the vineyard or wolves kill the flock. It is Our duty to lead the flock only to the food which is healthful. In these evil and dangerous times, the shepherds must never neglect their duty; they must never be so overcome by fear that they abandon the sheep. Let them never neglect the flock and become sluggish from idleness and apathy. Therefore, united in spirit, let us promote our common cause, or more truly the cause of God; let our

vigilance be one and our effort united against the common enemies.

7. Indeed you will accomplish this perfectly if, as the duty of your office demands, you attend to yourselves and to doctrine and meditate on these words: “the universal Church is affected by any and every novelty”[5] and the admonition of Pope Agatho: “nothing of the things appointed ought to be diminished; nothing changed; nothing added; but they must be preserved both as regards expression and meaning.”[6] Therefore may the unity which is built upon the See of Peter as on a sure foundation stand firm. May it be for all a wall and a security, a safe port, and a treasury of countless blessings.[7] To check the audacity of those who attempt to infringe upon the rights of this Holy See or to sever the union of the churches with the See of Peter, instill in your people a zealous confidence in the papacy and sincere veneration for it. As St. Cyprian wrote: “He who abandons the See of Peter on which the Church was founded, falsely believes himself to be a part of the Church.”[8]

8. In this you must labor and diligently take care that the faith may be preserved amidst this great conspiracy of impious men who attempt to tear it down and destroy it. May all remember the judgment concerning sound doctrine with which the people are to be instructed. Remember also that the government and administration of the whole Church rests with the Roman Pontiff to whom, in the words of the Fathers of the Council of Florence, “the full power of nourishing, ruling, and governing the universal Church was given by Christ the Lord.”[9] It is the duty of individual bishops to cling to the See of Peter faithfully, to guard the faith piously and religiously, and to feed their flock. It behooves priests to be subject to the bishops, whom “they are to look upon as the parents of their souls,” as Jerome admonishes.[10] Nor may the priests ever forget that they are forbidden by ancient canons to undertake ministry and to assume the tasks of teaching and preaching “without the permission of their bishop to whom the people have been entrusted; an accounting for the souls of the people will be demanded from the bishop.”[11] Finally let them understand that all those who struggle against this established order disturb the position of the Church.

9. Furthermore, the discipline sanctioned by the Church must never be rejected or be branded as contrary to certain principles of natural law. It must never be called crippled, or imperfect or subject to civil authority. In this discipline the administration of sacred rites, standards of morality, and the reckoning of the rights of the Church and her ministers are embraced.

10. To use the words of the fathers of Trent, it is certain that the Church “was instructed by Jesus Christ and His Apostles and that all truth was daily taught it by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”[12] Therefore, it is obviously absurd and injurious to propose a certain “restoration and regeneration” for her as though necessary for her safety and growth, as if she could be considered subject to defect or obscurity or other misfortune. Indeed these authors of novelties consider that a “foundation may be laid of a new human institution,” and what Cyprian detested may come to pass, that what was a divine thing “may become a human church.”[13] Let those who devise such plans be aware that, according to the testimony of St. Leo, “the right to grant dispensation from the canons is given” only to the Roman Pontiff. He alone, and no private person, can decide anything “about the rules of the Church Fathers.” As St. Gelasius writes: “It is the papal responsibility to keep the canonical decrees in their place and to evaluate the precepts of previous popes so that when the times demand relaxation in order to rejuvenate the churches, they may be adjusted after diligent consideration.”[14]

11. Now, however, We want you to rally to combat the abominable conspiracy against **clerical celibacy**. This conspiracy spreads daily and is promoted by profligate philosophers, some even from the clerical order. They have forgotten their person and office, and have been carried away by the enticements of pleasure. They have even dared to make repeated public demands to the princes for the abolition of that *most holy discipline*. But it is disgusting to dwell on these evil attempts at length. Rather, We ask that you strive with all your might to justify and to defend the law of clerical celibacy as prescribed by the sacred canons, against which the arrows

of the lascivious are directed from every side.

12. Now the honorable **marriage** of Christians, which Paul calls “a great sacrament in Christ and the Church,”[15] demands our shared concern lest anything contrary to its *sanctity* and *indissolubility* is proposed. Our predecessor Pius VIII would recommend to you his own letters on the subject. However, troublesome efforts against this sacrament still continue to be made. The people therefore must be zealously taught that a marriage rightly entered upon cannot be dissolved; for those joined in matrimony God has ordained a perpetual companionship for life and a knot of necessity which cannot be loosed except by death. Recalling that matrimony is a sacrament and therefore subject to the Church, let them consider and observe the laws of the Church concerning it. Let them take care lest for any reason they permit that which is an obstruction to the teachings of the canons and the decrees of the councils. They should be aware that those marriages will have an unhappy end which are entered upon contrary to the discipline of the Church or without God’s favor or because of concupiscence alone, with no thought of the sacrament and of the mysteries signified by it.

13. Now We consider another abundant source of the evils with which the Church is afflicted at present: **indifferentism**. This perverse opinion is spread on all sides by the fraud of the wicked who claim that *it is possible to obtain the eternal salvation of the soul by the profession of any kind of religion, as long as morality is maintained*. Surely, in so clear a matter, you will drive this deadly error far from the people committed to your care. With the admonition of the apostle that “there is one God, one faith, one baptism”[16] may those fear who contrive the notion that the safe harbor of salvation is open to persons of any religion whatever. They should consider the testimony of Christ Himself that “those who are not with Christ are against Him,”[17] and that they disperse unhappily who do not gather with Him. Therefore “without a doubt, they will perish forever, unless they hold the Catholic faith whole and inviolate.”[18] Let them hear Jerome who, while the Church was torn into three parts by schism, tells us that whenever someone tried to persuade him to join his group he always exclaimed: “He who is for the See of Peter is for me.”[19] A schismatic flatters himself falsely if he asserts that he, too, has been washed in the waters of regeneration. Indeed Augustine would reply to such a man: “The branch has the same form when it has been cut off from the vine; but of what profit for it is the form, if it does not live from the root?”[20]

14. This shameful font of indifferentism gives rise to that absurd and erroneous proposition which claims that **liberty of conscience** must be maintained for everyone. It spreads ruin in sacred and civil affairs, though some repeat over and over again with the greatest impudence that some advantage accrues to religion from it. “But the death of the soul is worse than freedom of error,” as Augustine was wont to say.[21] When all restraints are removed by which men are kept on the narrow path of truth, their nature, which is already inclined to evil, propels them to ruin. Then truly “the bottomless pit”[22] is open from which John saw smoke ascending which obscured the sun, and out of which locusts flew forth to devastate the earth. Thence comes transformation of minds, corruption of youths, contempt of sacred things and holy laws — in other words, a pestilence more deadly to the state than any other. Experience shows, even from earliest times, that cities renowned for wealth, dominion, and glory perished as a result of this single evil, namely immoderate freedom of opinion, license of free speech, and desire for novelty.

15. Here We must include that harmful and never sufficiently denounced **freedom to publish** any writings whatever and disseminate them to the people, which some dare to demand and promote with so great a clamor. We are horrified to see what monstrous doctrines and prodigious errors are disseminated far and wide in countless books, pamphlets, and other writings which, though small in weight, are very great in malice. We are in tears at the abuse which proceeds from them over the face of the earth. Some are so carried away that they contentiously assert that the flock of errors arising from them is sufficiently compensated by the publication of some book which defends religion and truth. Every law condemns deliberately doing evil simply because there is some hope that good may result. Is there any sane man who would say poison ought

to be distributed, sold publicly, stored, and even drunk because some antidote is available and those who use it may be snatched from death again and again?

16. The Church has always taken action to destroy the plague of bad books. This was true even in apostolic times for we read that the apostles themselves burned a large number of books.[23] It may be enough to consult the laws of the fifth Council of the Lateran on this matter and the Constitution which Leo X published afterwards lest “that which has been discovered advantageous for the increase of the faith and the spread of useful arts be converted to the contrary use and work harm for the salvation of the faithful.”[24] This also was of great concern to the fathers of Trent, who applied a remedy against this great evil by publishing that wholesome decree concerning the Index of books which contain false doctrine.[25] “We must fight valiantly,” Clement XIII says in an encyclical letter about the banning of bad books, “as much as the matter itself demands and must exterminate the deadly poison of so many books; for never will the material for error be withdrawn, unless the criminal sources of depravity perish in flames.”[26] Thus it is evident that this Holy See has always striven, throughout the ages, to condemn and to remove suspect and harmful books. The teaching of those who reject the censure of books as too heavy and onerous a burden causes immense harm to the Catholic people and to this See. They are even so depraved as to affirm that it is contrary to the principles of law, and they deny the Church the right to decree and to maintain it.

17. We have learned that certain teachings are being spread among the common people in writings which attack the **trust and submission due to princes**; the torches of treason are being lit everywhere. Care must be taken lest the people, being deceived, are led away from the straight path. May all recall, according to the admonition of the apostle that “there is no authority except from God; what authority there is has been appointed by God. Therefore he who resists authority resists the ordinances of God; and those who resist bring on themselves condemnation.”[27] Therefore both divine and human laws cry out against those who strive by treason and sedition to drive the people from confidence in their princes and force them from their government.

18. And it is for this reason that the early Christians, lest they should be stained by such great infamy deserved well of the emperors and of the safety of the state even while persecution raged. This they proved splendidly by their fidelity in performing perfectly and promptly whatever they were commanded which was not opposed to their religion, and even more by their constancy and the shedding of their blood in battle. “Christian soldiers,” says St. Augustine, “served an infidel emperor. When the issue of Christ was raised, they acknowledged no one but the One who is in heaven. They distinguished the eternal Lord from the temporal lord, but were also subject to the temporal lord for the sake of the eternal Lord.”[28] St. Mauritius, the unconquered martyr and leader of the Theban legion had this in mind when, as St. Eucharis reports, he answered the emperor in these words: “We are your soldiers, Emperor, but also servants of God, and this we confess freely . . . and now this final necessity of life has not driven us into rebellion: I see, we are armed and we do not resist, because we wish rather to die than to be killed.”[29] Indeed the faith of the early Christians shines more brightly, if with Tertullian we consider that since the Christians were not lacking in numbers and in troops, they could have acted as foreign enemies. “We are but of yesterday,” he says, “yet we have filled all your cities, islands, fortresses, municipalities, assembly places, the camps themselves, the tribes, the divisions, the palace, the senate, the forum. . . . For what war should we not have been fit and ready even if unequal in forces — we who are so glad to be cut to pieces — were it not, of course, that in our doctrine we would have been permitted more to be killed rather than to kill? . . . If so great a multitude of people should have deserted to some remote spot on earth, it would surely have covered your domination with shame because of the loss of so many citizens, and it would even have punished you by this very desertion. Without a doubt you would have been terrified at your solitude. . . . You would have sought whom you might rule; more enemies than citizens would have remained for you. Now however you have fewer enemies because of the multitude of Christians.”[30]

19. These beautiful examples of the unchanging subjection to the princes necessarily proceeded from the most holy precepts of the Christian religion. They condemn the detestable insolence and improbity of those who, consumed with the unbridled lust for freedom, are entirely devoted to impairing and destroying all rights of dominion while bringing servitude to the people under the slogan of liberty. Here surely belong the infamous and wild plans of the Waldensians, the Beghards, the Wycliffites, and other such sons of Belial, who were the sores and disgrace of the human race; they often received a richly deserved anathema from the Holy See. For no other reason do experienced deceivers devote their efforts, except so that they, along with Luther, might joyfully deem themselves “free of all.” To attain this end more easily and quickly, they undertake with audacity any infamous plan whatever.

20. Nor can We predict happier times for religion and government from the plans of those who desire vehemently to **separate the Church from the state**, and to break the mutual concord between temporal authority and the priesthood. It is certain that that concord which always was favorable and beneficial for the sacred and the civil order is feared by the shameless lovers of liberty.

21. But for the other painful causes We are concerned about, you should recall that certain societies and assemblages seem to draw up a battle line together with the followers of every false religion and cult. They feign piety for religion; but they are driven by a passion for promoting novelties and sedition everywhere. They preach liberty of every sort; they stir up disturbances in sacred and civil affairs, and pluck authority to pieces.

22. We write these things to you with grieving mind but trusting in Him who commands the winds and makes them still. Take up the shield of faith and fight the battles of the Lord vigorously. You especially must stand as a wall against every height which raises itself against the knowledge of God. Unsheath the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God, and may those who hunger after justice receive bread from you. Having been called so that you might be diligent cultivators in the vineyard of the Lord, do this one thing, and labor in it together, so that every root of bitterness may be removed from your field, all seeds of vice destroyed, and a happy crop of virtues may take root and grow. The first to be embraced with paternal affection are those who apply themselves to the sacred sciences and to philosophical studies. For them may you be exhorter and supporter, lest trusting only in their own talents and strength, they may imprudently wander away from the path of truth onto the road of the impious. Let them remember that God is the guide to wisdom and the director of the wise.[31] It is impossible to know God without God who teaches men to know Himself by His word.[32] It is the proud, or rather foolish, men who examine the mysteries of faith which surpass all understanding with the faculties of the human mind, and rely on human reason which by the condition of man’s nature, is weak and infirm.

23. May Our dear sons in Christ, the princes, support these Our desires for the welfare of Church and State with their resources and authority. May they understand that they received their authority not only for the government of the world, but especially for the defense of the Church. They should diligently consider that whatever work they do for the welfare of the Church accrues to their rule and peace. Indeed let them persuade themselves that they owe more to the cause of the faith than to their kingdom. Let them consider it something very great for themselves as We say with Pope St. Leo, “if in addition to their royal diadem the crown of faith may be added.” Placed as if they were parents and teachers of the people, they will bring them true peace and tranquility, if they take special care that religion and piety remain safe. God, after all, calls Himself “*King of kings and Lord of lords.*”

24. That all of this may come to pass prosperously and happily, let Us raise Our eyes and hands to the most holy Virgin Mary, who alone crushes all heresies, and is Our greatest reliance and the whole reason for Our hope.[33] May she implore by her patronage a successful outcome for Our plans and actions. Let Us humbly ask of the Prince of the Apostles, Peter and his co-apostle Paul that all of you may stand as a wall lest a

foundation be laid other than that which has already been laid. Relying on this happy hope, We trust that the Author and Crown of Our faith Jesus Christ will console Us in all these Our tribulations. We lovingly impart the apostolic benediction to you, venerable brothers, and to the sheep committed to your care as a sign of heavenly aid.

Given in Rome at St. Mary Major, on August 15, the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, in the year of Our Lord 1832, the second year of Our Pontificate.

1. 22.32.
2. I Cor 4.21.
3. Lk 22.53.
4. Is 24.5.
5. St. Celestine, Pope, epistle 21 to Bishop Galliar.
6. St. Agatho, Pope, epistle to the emperor, apud Labb., ed. Mansi, vol. 2, p. 235.
7. St. Innocent, epistle 11 apud Constat.
8. St. Cyprian, de unitate eccles.
9. Council of Florence, session 25, in definit. apud Labb., ed. Venet., vol. 18, col. 527.
10. St. Jerome, epistle 2 to Nepot. a. 1, 24.
11. From canon ap. 38 apud Labb., ed Mansi, vol. 1, p. 38.
12. Council of Trent, session 13 on the Eucharist, prooemium .
13. St. Cyprian, epistle 52, ed. Baluz.
14. St. Gelasius, Pope, in epistle to the bishop of Lucaniae.
15. Heb 13.4 & Eph 5:32
16. Eph 4.5.
17. Lk 11.23.
18. Symbol .s. Athanasius.
19. St. Jerome, epistle 57.
20. St. Augustine, in psalm. contra part. Donat.
21. St. Augustine, epistle 166.
22. Ap 9.3.
23. Acts 19.
24. Acts of the Lateran Council 5, session 10, where the constitution of Leo X is mentioned; the earlier constitution of Alexander VI, Inter multiplices, ought to be read, in which there are many things on this point.
25. Council of Trent, sessions 18 and 25.
26. Letter of Clement XIII, Christianae, 25 November 1766.
27. Rom 13.2.
28. St. Augustine in psalt. 124, n. 7.
29. St. Euchenius apud Ruinart. Acts of the Holy Martyrs concerning Saint Maurius and his companions, n. 4.
30. Tertullian, in apologet., chap. 37.
31. Wis 7.15.
32. St. Irenaeus, bk. 14, chap. 10.
33. St. Bernard, serm de nat. b.M.v., sect. 7.

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