

IV. -The general apostasy.

Unless the apostasy come first. 2 THESS. 2:3.

Thus, the collapse, the lowering of the honour offered to Christ's Kingship, came at the same time from two sides. The glory of that Kingship was almost entirely extinguished in the wide circles of the intellect, and it waned in the circle of the professed. This last point should also be emphasized. People are so easily tempted to shift all responsibility to the children of the world, thinking they are free to do as they please, and in doing so, break its power. This is not meant in the general sense of the unmistakability of humility for anyone who is preparing for action in the spiritual domain. Unfortunately, we have always seen that this urging to humble oneself was most prevalent among those who wanted to resist any vigorous action with all their might. Humility was then preached without restraint, and it was added that action could only begin after humility. And because humility never went deep enough, action could never begin. A sedative of fear! Oh, sure, humbling oneself about personal sin and personal unfaithfulness can be stirred up by a tone of holy earnestness, but humbling oneself about general conditions of the people, about social aberrations and about church laxity and lukewarmness is an act of mind, which at the most a single prophetic man, a single priestly figure, can achieve, but which is inconceivable for the great mass. It is possible to make the masses understand in a meeting or gathering for a few moments that there is also a debt in these broad, communal fields that should make us small, but this impression will later be erased by the diversity in personal life. He who is not concerned with the world of his imagination, but with the real world in which he lives with the great masses on a daily basis, must realize that, from a spiritual point of view, such a general humiliation about general situations, if not immediately followed by action against evil, is and can never be anything other than a haze which passes over the minds for a moment, but then also a haze which is immediately driven away again by the wind of the day. Such a general humiliation, on the other hand, is not only conceivable, but is even a duty and constitutes an uncommon strength, if one, ready to make a vigorous attempt to defend or attack, exhorts at that very moment that first everyone will kneel down to confess his guilt before God, and not in a delusion of his own holiness, but only in the power of the Lord to take action. On the other hand, anyone who refrains from all action, and then calls year in year out for humility - we repeat, not about personal sin, but about the common guilt that lurks in the general situation - is either a stranger in the field of spiritual science, or he is deceiving himself and the multitude. Such a

call to humility is lost in words and ultimately affects neither the spirit nor the mood of the people. Honor weakens such pleading, extinguishes all holy spirit drive, and leads to sickly complaining and idle sitting. In the powerful moments of history, an impressively humbling atmosphere prevailed. Then it was there and did wonders, but it arose out of the very decision to take action. On the battlefield, too, even the most insensitive soldier is never in a lower mood than the moment the first cannon shot thunders through the air. Our pointing out the gap in honoring Christ's Kingship, also among the professed, had by no means the intention of extinguishing courage, but rather to lead to a better understanding of the existing situations, and in that clarity to discover the path we have to follow.

It must be realized that we have gradually arrived at a period of general waste. We do not yet draw the conclusion that we are ready for the great apostasy that will bring the end of all things near. The times and occasions are in the Father's own power, and always it will be daring, as long as there are no special signs, to proclaim the end of things as imminent. History shows us how often even the most pious of men have failed in this. Each time it appeared from behind that God's ways are higher than our ways, and that He nevertheless swept away the clouds and broke through the light once more, even though the Christian people thought they were on the point of the final destruction of the light. But while it is certain that, time and again, Christendom has been mistaken in predicting the end of the world, it must also be acknowledged that some of us have become far too confined within our own circles and, because things are going well within them, unfortunately remain all too blind to the desolation that, in general, affects the world of spirits. People may rage against public opinion, they may condemn without reservation the rise and increase of all kinds of social evils; they may be annoyed at the most insolent expression of unbelief; but they do not open their eyes to the general character that this drift carries, nor do they realize the imminent danger that such a general situation ultimately presents to our own circle in the next generation. A man is one of the peaceful ones in Zion, and does punish other apostates, but considers himself safe within his own circle. And it is precisely because of this that one does not understand the world outside that small circle and is therefore unable to exert any positive influence on it.

In nothing does this contradictory state of mind among the faithful show up so strongly as in their mutual quarrels and strokes. They almost never agree on everything. That is not possible. That is why our strong individualism works too powerfully. All kinds of peculiarities and sensitivities, arising from what lies

behind us, have too strong an effect. The derivation of our conclusions from what all confess together is too variable and too uncertain. But if you look carefully at the issues and points on which the faithful have fought in the last half century, and note the bitterness with which the battle over such issues has been fought, and is still being fought in part, tell me yourself, can you escape the impression that you see a powerful enemy emerging? that you see a powerful enemy advancing to besiege a small fortress and soon to take it, while in that fortress the chieftains and soldiers, far from being prepared for vigorous defense, are almost attacking each other to decide whether the facade of a barracks should be built in Renaissance or Gothic style.

Of course, we would not wish to deny that such questions are not important in themselves, nor would we wish to deny that in times of peace such questions can be important; But what must not be overlooked is that when the enemy is at the gates, the weight of such issues is dwarfed, and that it is neither his duty nor his vocation for anyone at such a time not to prepare with all his might for the defense of the fortress against the enemy. From the fact that people often do not do this, but continue to exhaust their strength in settling all kinds of second, third and fourth order issues, it is all too clear that they do not have an open eye for the danger that threatens, they do not see it, and therefore imagine that they can afford a luxury that can only be enjoyed in days of complete peace. In addition, love will cool; it will not be won, but repelled, and the impression will be disastrous: in order to admire and enjoy the mighty rule of Christian love, one should at least not seek refuge in the tents of the faithful. The odium theologicum, i.e., the fierceness with which those who are theologians tend to fight each other, has unfortunately become proverbial. Even now, in the Far East, one can lament the unfortunate division of Nestorians, Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Copts, Marionites, and whatever else their names may be, which, as a bitter result of that theological quarrel, keeps the Christians powerless under the supremacy of Islam. There, too, when the enemy stood at the gates, the Christians failed to see the imminent common danger, and for twelve or thirteen centuries now their descendants have been reaping the bitter fruits of what, when Islam arose, the Christians of all kinds had sinned, neglected and done wrong. The issues that divided Christians in the East were certainly important in themselves, but what they overlooked was that where the very existence and prosperity of Christ's Church are at stake, every other issue loses its predominant weight and importance. How one should dress is in itself by no means an unimportant question, but when you are lying in bed stricken

with death, you would still condemn your family and relatives if, instead of focusing all their attention and love on saving your life, they stood at your doorstep arguing whether, as a Christian in the East, one should dress as a European or as an Oriental.

It should therefore be pointed out to the faithful with all seriousness that their little circle cannot be hermetically closed off from the great spirit world, and that in that world of spirits an action is now taking place that is increasingly assuming the character of a rejection of Christianity, a rejection that is proceeding ever further. In fact, it must be made clear that a situation is already developing in which not only the Christian religion, but all religion is increasingly losing its influence. Throughout society there is a separation from religious life, which is becoming more evident with each new generation that comes along. It is so in the wide circle of the baptized, but it is also so with the Jews, and partly even with the Mohammedans. In all three great monotheistic religions, which stand together against Paganism as adherents of polytheism and Pantheism, a dulling and sinking of religious feeling is at present unmistakable, and in all three it is equally clear why. Neither the Christians, nor the Jews, nor the Mohammedans are affected by the apostasy. Almost everywhere it can be said that among the petty bourgeoisie and among the lower classes a very considerable group still maintains the ancient historical traditions. As far as the Christians are concerned, this is evident in our own country. As far as the Jews are concerned, this is confirmed by broad orthodox Jewish circles in Amsterdam, but especially by what one finds among the Jews in Poland, Russia and Rumania. And among the Mohamedans, the decline of religious life affects only a very thin upper layer of their modernized society. But in the higher social strata an entirely different spirit has gradually gained influence, one that everywhere leads people away from religion; one that closes their eyes to the world of unseen things; and one that, under the name of the modern spirit of the age, has brought to power an entirely different conception of life and the world. That spirit now, that modern zeitgeist, descends ever further from above, first to the middle layers and then to the lower layers of society as a whole. It is like an oil slick on blotting paper, which of itself spreads in more and more circles. It is true that in this modern spirit of the time a sharp distinction must be made between a cynical-materialistic and an idealistic-mystical current, but the latter is so weak and insignificant in comparison with the former that it neither stirs nor supports. It is very much the cynical-materialistic current which is gaining ground hand in hand in order to spiritually bind more and more of our sons and daughters to the rising

generation. There is also an intellectual circle which, without being idealistic, nevertheless opposes both cynicism and materialism, but numerically (as far as the number is concerned), this circle is also so small that it barely leaves a trace in the wider stream. And even if you include all the more ideally inclined, more intellectually developed, and more mystically inclined, these three small groups together form no more than a vanishingly small minority that exerts almost no influence on the wider masses. The quiet hope, once cherished by modern theologians, and in which many of them stood completely sincere, that they would succeed in making all our people religious again through a higher religion, has ended in a fatal fiasco; and what was recently declared on the Dageraad's jubilee day: The Christians sang: "High, up, the heart up, down here it is not", but we counter that: "Here down here it is"; we work only for this earth. " - betrays the spirit that now sets the tone in the higher layers. In this earthly life all intentions come together and merge, and in this earthly life some people strive only for money and goods, others for art and beauty, a third for science, a fourth for sport, a fifth for pleasure, but in this all agree that it must be found here on earth, in this world, that we have to confine ourselves to this earthly circle of life, and that about what lies beyond and within and above this one should preferably neither muse nor think, think or speak. We know nothing about it, and whoever claims to know something about it is either a clever man and then a hypocrite, or not a hypocrite but then stupid.

There are many different causes for this, but the main cause is the decline, the sinking of the activity of religious awareness. And whoever realizes this clearly will also realize that this evil is not limited to our modern circle, but has affected our own circle just as well, though thank God to a lesser extent.

However much the Christian's personal life of faith is concentrated in the conversion of his soul to God, we are also subject to certain currents in the circles of Christendom. Sometimes there are times when the spiritual life of the people is the most sacred; other times there are times when the spirituality of the people is more influenced by the past; then there are times of weakening and diminishment and finally there is the period of spiritual depression. Everyone who reads about the Reformation era and compares the situation then with what we see around us today can feel that. In the 16th and 17th centuries religion was the main issue of life, not only for the faithful, but also for those who opposed them. The religious yardstick decided. The importance of religion came before all else. People were familiar with it, they talked about it, they read about it, they made the greatest

sacrifices for it, courageously and perseveringly, and precisely because of this, the life of religion in those days had a depth, which future generations looked back on with envy. But already in the second half of the 17th century this changed. In the first half of the 18th century, one notices a barrenness, where once the roses and the lilies bloomed. And at the end of the 18th century this barrenness had almost turned into mortification. Since then, the wonderful revival has given rise to a new awakening, and since the revival has passed into more national action, there has been a revival for which we cannot be thankful enough. But no matter how highly we value this, the contrast with the 16th century remains. It's not that anymore. It is something else, it is something of a lower degree, of a lower elevation, of a weaker tone, and continually you see how that tone is still dropping in more than one circle of professors.

This now we have to receive from the Lord's hand, as He disposes it in His omnipotent will. Our century, as well as the second half of the previous one, is more marked by matter than by religion. The religious movement in the minds of the people lacks the holy energy that it has known in other periods. This is so in all countries. It is to be observed all over the world. The atmosphere of religion itself has been pressed down, and we who breathe in it no longer drink from it that full and abundant measure of spiritual oSon which kindled in our fathers their high spirits. There are signs of a favorable change in the state of the religious atmosphere, but this is still more like a gentle evening chill than a strong, gale force wind that shakes the trees of the forest and shakes the dust from their foliage.

Now this does not prevent God's grace from being and remaining powerful to strengthen the personal life of faith, even in that dull atmosphere, to keep it healthy, and to inspire it with holy enthusiasm, but never think that the atmosphere in which you breathe has no influence on you. Matt, as that atmosphere is, it dampens to some extent the most powerful life of faith, and above all it has a highly detrimental effect on those broad circles of believers in which the personal life of faith has not yet attained sufficient strength. And since this is unmistakable even in religious circles, how could it be otherwise, or in the circles outside the firm faith, the influence of this oppressive atmosphere must have been even more fatal. When the water level in the religious stream is high, people in worldly circles are also lifted up by that stream, and automatically live higher. But if, as now, that stream sinks, then everything goes down, and finally it sinks to such a low level that all religious influence in these wider circles disappears completely. The more one feels that a general evil is at play here, under which we ourselves suffer, the

more grateful we shall be for what the Lord has left us, and the better we shall also be able to feel something of compassion for the spiritual poor in these other circles and to be a blessing to them by God's power.