

The Priest Talked MONEY

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A PERSON really should not pay attention to anonymous letters. Still I read this particular letter with interest.

Then I reread it.

Since the writer had not given me his name or address, I had the feeling of being balked. I wanted to answer that letter. In fact, I wanted very badly to answer that letter.

But the writer had hid behind anonymity. Here's the letter, however, and when you read it, I think you'll see at once why it interested me so powerfully.

Anonymous Letter.

"Dear Father: You're a priest, and because you're not a parish priest, I'm writing to you.

"You see, I want to tell a priest what I think of him. And a parish priest would probably tear this letter up. But since you are not a parish priest and don't, in consequence, depend on Sunday collections, you may read this letter through before you tear it up.

"I'm sick and tired of the whole church-going business.

"I went to church last Sunday for Mass, though I felt none too anxious to go. And when our pastor got up into the pulpit, it was the same old story. All he ever talks is money, money, money. We get the same sermon every Sunday, and it always has the collection box for its text and the three points: give me, more, and money.

"This particular Sunday he started off by announcing the results of the Christmas collection - a trifling sum of about forty-five hundred dollars. Not too bad, not too bad. Honestly, for a moment I thought he was going to be satisfied. But was he? Not on your life. He dismissed the Christmas collection with a gesture and started off on a new tack - pardon me, the same old tack, but with a new port in view.

Still More.

"It seems that he wanted some new hardware for his church. The doors needed new handles. Some of the hinges were badly worn. He thought there ought to be new locks on some of the entrances.

" 'And,' said he, with emphasis, 'they ought to be beautiful, too. I don't want any cheap-looking stuff in this church. It's a beautiful church, and we should keep it beautiful. So I want fine hardware, as fine as anything we have in the whole building. The collection next Sunday will be for that. So be generous. Give bills, paper money. Skip the silver for a Sunday. And we'll make the handles and the hinges and the locks on this church worthy of the church itself.'

"Honestly, I was almost sick to my stomach. We'd just handed him almost five thousand dollars, and now he was yelling for more.

"I stayed for the end of Mass; but when it was over, I left in a rush. All I could think was: What kind of a sucker does he take me for? What kind of saps are we, anyhow? Week after week he barks at us to give him money and more money. He's blowing it in for this and that, always something his church needs. We're poor

people, most of us; some of us are just in moderate circumstances. But from the way he acts, you'd think we were rolling in cash and that we ought to roll it all his way.

Tired of It.

"So I'm through. I'm not going back to church again. I'm sick and tired of a church that's always yapping for money; I'm sick and tired of a priest (just one of thousands) who has no other thought in his head except how he can milk the people for more cash.

"And wanting to tell somebody, I picked you. You might do well to tip off some of your priest friends. For there's a mob of Catholics that feel as I do. Only they haven't the guts to do anything about it. I have, and I'm walking out.

"Very truly yours,

"A VERY TIRED CATHOLIC."

Quite a Letter.

Well that was quite an envelope-ful. You can see why the letter interested me very considerably.

I read it again, and then sat thinking about the whole business of the Church and money. I recalled the first time that I heard a priest criticized because he asked for money. I was a youngster at the time. We were sitting on the broad verandah of a summer resort hotel. Although the crowd was mixed, it was predominantly Catholic; and then one of the men in the group began to lay out his pastor in words that had much the same tone as that of this letter. It made a tremendous impression on me, for it was the first time I had heard a Catholic talk in anger about a priest.

Of course, I've heard that always-talking-about-money accusation many a time and oft since that remote summer evening. Some of my readers will remember that rather recently Father Siedenburg told how that accusation was being used in Soviet Russia, where, in the anti-God museums the Bolshevists have gathered and displayed all the various collection plates, votive stands, alms boxes, and similar articles that have been appropriated from the closed Russian Orthodox churches. The matter of money is always hurled at the Church by every radical that attacks it. Surely you remember how Calles thundered at the Mexican clergy, accusing them of robbing the poor - at the same time that he was building up one of the largest personal fortunes in the world by stealing everything that wasn't red hot or in the heart of an untapped mine.

Priests and Money.

The Spanish clergy were listed as being fabulously rich (but that is ludicrously untrue). The Jesuits are well known - by people who don't know them at all - to be simply glutted with gold. (Alas, that I have never had the good luck to be stationed in a Jesuit house where the treasurer **didn't** wince at thought of the first of the month with its none-too-gentle snow-storm of bills to be paid!)

And if any of my readers has not heard some of his good Catholic friends growl, "Oh, that priest of ours is always talking money"; and if sometimes he himself hasn't shaken an impatient head as the collection was being taken up; and if he hasn't heard or himself uttered a pious prayer that the Church may forget about money, then there is no slightest reason why he should continue reading this booklet. He can file application for a decree of beatification; he can take his place in the higher brackets of the Catholic laity.

Who Owns 'Em?

Of course, I'd like to begin by admitting that perhaps the smartest way to collect large sums of money is never to talk money. The priest who is pastor of the most flourishing parish that I know, who keeps his parishioners supplied with an endless round of activities, social as well as spiritual, recreational as well as religious, almost never mentions the sordid word money. And when he does mention it, it is with such sincere embarrassment and obvious reluctance that his good people rush to relieve him of the necessity for making such an unwonted and unwanted request again.

But the letter that prefaces this booklet and the whole Catholic attitude of mind on which the letter is based (I need not point out that the anti-Catholic charges of vast wealth in the Church and in churches are usually fables, lies, or the most

ignorant blundering) spring from one strange misapprehension.

Some Catholics, heaven alone knows why, think that the churches belong to the priests.

They seem to think that the priests are begging for money for their own personal purses.

Even the less well-informed Catholic should know - for the facts are clear enough - that the churches, more surely than does anything else in the world, belong to the people.

Too Bad.

Now, I'm also willing to admit that it is too bad that there has to be any question of money in connection with religion.

How sweet it would be if in every church there was a widow's cruse or basket filled with cash, just, let's say, two large silver dollars that would always be there. The pastor, when he needed to pay a coal bill or a lighting bill, would simply go to the miraculous little bank and take out silver dollars until he had a suitcase-ful; and there would still be the original two silver dollars in the bottom to begin the next mysterious multiplication of dollars.

How gracious it would be if at the Offertory of the Mass a gentle rain of dollar bills would drop from the dim recesses of the darksome Gothic arches, bills that must immediately be placed, of course, in the collection plate, lest, if kept too long, or used for unworthy purposes, they melt away like the manna of the ancient Jews.

Money Doesn't Grow.

Then we could build our churches without having to resort to collections and special assessments and envelope systems and bazaars and turkey dinners and raffles and door-to-door visitations by embarrassed young curates and boisterously hearty teams of lay people. We could endow our hospitals by the simple process of letting dollars multiply along with the fresh cultures of bacteria. We could start a completely new school system, knowing that every morning we could walk into the garden and gather freshly-sprouted money as our shoes gathered the freshly-dropped dew.

It's a dream so sweet and simple that we grow momentarily wistful and wishful.

But, unfortunately, money does not rain down upon us like manna or multiply like microbes or appear mysteriously in earthen vessels set aside in the sacristy. And for general all-year convenience it's not possible to say Mass unless there is a building to house the worshippers; and for some absurd reason parents prefer that their children be taught in a comfortable classroom rather than on the slope of a hill; and when a patient is brought to a hospital, he expects to have a ceiling over his head and a bed for his sick body.

And to complete this bit of quite astonishing logical reasoning, churches and schools and hospitals and other institutions must be built and equipped; and to this end money is necessary; and money is a thing that has to be obtained in some way or other. For the Government has a tendency to discourage pseudo-miraculous methods of making money with one's own printing press and engraving set or with a metal casting device in one's own basement.

Great Builders.

As a matter of fact, we Catholics in America (and indeed in many parts of the world) have a pretty fine reputation as builders.

I sometimes wonder whether centuries from now, when our civilization is dug up, the visiting party of explorers from Mars won't marvel at the way and the extent to which we Catholics have built. Won't they find many of our churches very beautiful? Won't they be astonished that we built them quite as much in small towns and on country hillsides as in the great centres of population? And won't these Martian scientists be delighted to realize that from the Catholic churches alone they can get a cross section of all the great architectural styles that have been preferred by the various people that make up our country, from great Gothic cathedrals to lovely little English parish churches, from reproductions of ancient Roman basilicas to the latest thing in the application of modern materials to church streamlining?

Sinclair Lewis once remarked in effect that the one building that is likely to be beautiful in the city that is scarred by the hideous gash called Main-street is the Catholic Church.

Our Own.

Well, good writer of the anonymous letter and good friend who has read this far, please remember that you, under the leadership of your priest, are freely and splendidly responsible for these architectural achievements.

The churches of America, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, Great Britain, and so many other places, and I mean it when I piously add thank God! were built without any aid from any government. We, the people, built them, and we own them. Perhaps some day a Red Government or a particularly nasty brand of dictatorship will take these buildings away from us and turn them into motion-picture palaces and granaries and garages and dance halls, as was done in Soviet Russia, in the Red districts of Civil War and pre-Civil War Spain, in "good-neighbour" Mexico (ever since the convolutions of the 1911 revolutions), and as is being done, as I write, in Nazi Germany {and as was to happen throughout Eastern Europe under the jackboot of Communist dictatorships}. But if this does happen, the Government will not be able to say to us Americans: "We built these churches; we own them; and whether or not you like it, we are taking them."

We can look any tyrant in the eye and say, "We built those churches; we own them; our money made them possible; and if you take them, you're committing the rankest and rottenest kind of theft."

We Are the Church.

That's precisely the point: The churches are ours. They belong to the people that erected them. We Catholics - priests and people together - we are the Church.

More than that, beautiful as our churches are, large and sumptuous or small and unpretentious, correct to the last detail of historic style or built out of the native rock to suit the tastes of some small community, they were made possible by the combined efforts of the priests and the contributions of people of moderate incomes and the pennies of the poor.

Seldom enough to be headline news do we hear about a Catholic church that has been built or endowed by the large gift of some rich man. In a spirit of justified pride it has been said that St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City was built with the pennies of housemaids and shopgirls. I hope, and I honestly believe, that the boast is true. For it would give me a real thrill to see some cook or some girl from behind a hardware counter walk into St. Patrick's, pat one of its firm, graceful columns lovingly, and say, "I built you." I think that would be beautiful. Surely God would like it. And American Catholicity could be rousingly proud that it was true.

And Our Institutions.

What is true of our churches is equally true of our schools and other institutions. We, the Catholic people, built them. I remember seeing the Rector of one of our greatest Jesuit universities look out across the mellow campus and say, "Did you ever stop to think that all this was built without the slightest Government aid and without a single large donation or really sizeable gift?" He was right. That university was built by the tremendous efforts of the Jesuit executives and professors who had laboured for it; and the money that went into the building and the equipment came from the tuitions of boys who might have been sent to free public schools and to free State colleges and universities, but who preferred to contribute their money to an educational system that welcomes Christ and is built and conducted around a chapel.

Our hospitals were built in that same way. Our orphanages and our asylums have only this one financial origin and source of continuance. We, the Catholic people of this country, built these institutions out of our poverty. No tainted money went into them to relieve, as it were, some troubled conscience. No large endowment or princely gesture of some important man who wished to immortalize his name in a foundation made these buildings possible. They drew their revenues from no tenement properties or ugly slums.

We Did It.

They were built by the unselfish idealism of our priests and men and women religious and by the magnificent generosity of our laity, who gave, not out of their wealth, but out of their widow mites and their artisan work-soiled wages, out of small-pay envelopes and slim-salary cheques.

It is possible that the Martian scientists will not know all that. But we know it, and we are profoundly glad.

We, the Catholic people, who are the Church, we are directly responsible for the magnificently complete history of architectural beauty of the Catholic churches in America and other places.

We, the Catholic people, built the Catholic schools, made the Catholic school system, because we were not going to stand for having God elbowed out of the classroom.

We, the Catholic people, in a spirit of humanitarian service completed the full cycle of our charitable enterprises, a cycle that has consistently touched and treated every need in every class in every age.

And we did all this because some priest had the courage to ask for money and because Catholic lay men and women had the generosity to give when they were asked to give.

And Glad of It.

I said I wished that our priests did not have to talk about money in our churches.

But now I feel inclined to take that statement back.

Almost I'm glad that we do have to talk about money. I'm glad that we do not have to ask for aid from a grudging and slightly pagan Government; I'm glad that our aid comes from the warm hearts of those who love and are served by the Church. I'm glad that there is some tangible manifestation, some easy gesture by which Catholics can show that they love their Church, that they want her to continue her work, that they insist that even in times of depression or recession she must not stop worshipping God, bringing Jesus Christ from heaven, and serving the needy and the beloved young of Christ's dear affection.

Money and the Mass.

It is important to remember that the offering of money has become part of the Mass itself. It is not by accident that the collection plate is passed around at the moment when the priest is offering to the Almighty Father the water and the wine and the bread that will become the Eucharist.

There was a time when at that particular moment of the Mass the people walked up to the altar - in the dark catacombs, let's say - and presented their gifts. They gave the wine for the priest's offertory. Or they brought the bread that was to be consecrated for their own Communion. The priest took these gifts from their hands and offered them to God in token of the fact that they, the people, wanted to have a part in the Mass and that the bread and the wine were symbolic of their own hearts and souls, which they offered gladly to their Creator.

As you can readily see, if this procedure of individual gifts of wine and bread had continued into our day, it might have complicated things. I wonder what precisely the modern priest would do if at one of the crowded Sunday Masses in a big city church everyone came up to the altar and offered a little jug of wine and a loaf of bread. It doesn't take a too vivid imagination to picture that sanctuary after the two thousand in the church had come up and presented their gifts.

Substitute.

So it was that the offering of money was instituted as a substitute for the offering of bread and wine. As the priest offers the bread and wine to God, the people place, on the church's contribution plate, their gift of money. That money is not, clearly, a gift to the priest. It is not, in the strict sense, a gift to the parish. It is a gift to God Himself, a marvellous gift that will make possible the continuance of the worship of God, the priesthood of Jesus Christ, the flow of grace from heaven, the rebirth of souls in baptism and in penance, the preaching of the words of truth from the parish pulpit.

More than that, as we shall presently see, that gift of money is an investment. It is an investment in an enterprise that is of tremendous importance to the people. For without money the Church could not in these modern times continue its service of souls, much less of bodies. Practically speaking, there could be no sacraments for all, no easy preaching of the truth, no schools, no corporal works of charity. And all these services for souls and bodies are certainly not limited to the use of a priest. They are services that are intended directly for and are within easy reach of the men and the women who place their coins in the collection plate that is held out to them.

What's Free?

One peasant thing to remember is that the Church is ours, yours; she belongs - and belongs as almost nothing else does - to you lay men and women who are reading these lines.

Big cities these days are very proud of their public parks and recreational grounds. But those public grounds are filled with a great variety of restrictions, everything from the patches of lawn that are marked with a stern "Keep Off the Grass" to the tennis courts to which you have access only when you have a licence or a permit. Just try picking the flowers in the park or taking home the city zoo's pet elephant.

And while we are told that the parks are free, we are never really fooled about how free they actually are. We know that

we have paid for them in good round tax coin. And we keep on paying for their support, even if we have our private tennis court, and a membership in the country club, and never picnic in the picturesque setting of the neighbourhood's stray dogs and noisy children.

We talk about our public library, and we like to remember that it is free in its service. But try to take a book off the shelf without going through all the essential red tape of modern library membership and service. Free? Certainly - with the understanding that you pay your taxes to build it, to keep it going, to replace old volumes and to buy new ones.

Yet, not for a moment do you think that the library was built for the sake of the librarians, even though the most poorly paid librarian receives about twice the salary of that delightful young assistant pastor whose sermons you enjoy so much.

We speak of the city hall, and by that we mean the hall that belongs to the city. Strictly speaking, you are the city, you citizens. But the city hall is in most of our cities pretty well pre-empted by the party in power. The building belongs in a very physical sense to the job-holders. But just try assembling the more attractive clerks for a party in the rotunda or borrowing the office pen to play darts.

Remarkably Free.

Compared with this, the freedom that you and I possess with respect to our churches is most remarkable. These wide-open churches are waiting day and night. There is almost nothing to prevent our freest possible use of them. There is no one to utter stern commands, to regiment us, to direct our steps or our devotions . . . except during those brief periods of the Sunday Mass and the seasonal devotions, when a little direction is necessary for the comfort and convenience of all.

And if the park commissioners and their assistants don't own the park, and if the librarians don't own the library, and if the city hall - at least in theory, whatever its practical operation - isn't owned by the men and women who work in it, even a moment's thought gives us the obvious parallel that our churches are not for the priests. The priests are for the churches. And the churches are for the people who use them with a delightful freedom that could belong only to the free sons and daughters of an indulgent Father and a loving Mother, the Church.

Yes; the churches are in most remarkable fashion yours, and coming right down to dollars and cents, they are most moderate in their demands upon your purse.

Collections.

In most churches there is a collection at only one Mass during the week, the Mass on Sunday. Very seldom indeed does it happen that a collection is taken up at any of the week-day Masses.

All day long the churches are open, with no slightest charge upon those who enter.

Evening devotions are often accompanied by a collection, but it seems to me that a sort of shyness always takes possession of collectors after sundown. They present the baskets almost with diffidence. They seem abashed at the possibility that they might be disturbing a devoutly bent head. They walk on tiptoe. They move with a charming reticence, almost as if they hoped that the people would not contribute . . . at least, not too generously.

By Way of Comparison.

As for the collection itself, it would be interesting to make an honest examination of Catholic consciences. That examination might start like this:

How much do you, my good sir, spend each week on cigarettes? On alcohol? On chocolates? On the races? On a loaf of bread?

How much is your cosmetics bill, my charming lady?

How much on the average do you youngsters spend for the movies or other entertainments?

Or, for that matter, what is the average entrance fee to the motion-picture shows in your town?

Now the conscience-pricking question: What is the average of your Sunday contribution to the upkeep of the church that serves you?

I think we needn't go into that. It is regrettable that coins of the lowest denominations are likely to be the most pious and religious-minded; certainly they turn up most often at church. And if a five-dollar bill were to appear in an ordinary Sunday collection, the pastor would be convinced that Mass had been attended by someone with a badly troubled conscience or by a pugilist that was still groggy after an important bout or by someone whose eyes had been tricked by the cathedral's mystic light or too little sleep the night before. [Remember, five dollars in 1939 was a fair amount of money, easily much more than one hundred dollars in 2005's terms.]

The Gate.

My anonymous correspondent pointed to that Christmas collection of forty-five hundred dollars with astonishment. He was dumbfounded, apparently, that so much money should be pouring into a single church. Well, that was, after all, the Christmas collection, out of which, in all probability, the parish was expected to support the young seminarians studying for the priesthood, to liquidate the coal bill for the winter, or to pay the interest on the church's heavy debt.

Just as a matter of financial interest, however, a gate of forty-five hundred dollars is not considered tremendous these days. Time was when Americans paid a million and a quarter to see two heavy-weights bash each other around a ring, and some of the so-called spectators were so far away from the ring that they received for their five dollars only the privilege of watching what seemed like two ants struggling over an invisible grain of sugar.

Radio City Music Hall in New York has been known to take well in advance of twenty thousand dollars in a single day and one hundred thousand dollars in the course of a single week. And half a dozen big motion-picture palaces in each of our larger cities draw weekly crowds that together pay twenty-five thousand dollars and more for the privilege of seeing galloping shadows endlessly repeating adventures on a two-dimensional screen.

So I am not astounded over the fact that once a year a large city church takes in forty-five hundred dollars - not especially since I happen to know what it costs to keep in repair and full operation the church, school, recreational centre, priest's house, and Sisters' convent that are usually found in the ordinary large-city parish.

The Pocket of the Priest.

But once more, isn't it a little silly to talk and act as if the collection -plate money went right into the pocket of the priest?

You'd really think from the tone of my good friend's letter that the priest who was so strenuously requesting hardware was going to wear it himself. As I read the letter I had visions of the good priest putting one of the hinges on his coat lapel and using the locks for buttons, and perhaps planting a doorknob firmly on the handle of his cane. Really, he wasn't. That was merely the impression I got from the tone of the letter.

The hardware was going right into the church. I think it was rather fine that the priest wanted it to be beautiful and worthy of the rest of the church. Evidently he is the kind of priest who thinks that the church of God should be worthy of God. Perhaps he even feels that if his parishioners go to see Donald Duck squawk his way through his ludicrous adventures in a cinema palace that was confessedly erected at a cost of a million and a half, they ought to attend the sacred mysteries of Christ's Body and Blood in a church that is at least somewhat comparable in beauty to the motion-picture palace.

Not His.

No; the priest isn't going to wear the doorknobs. Nor can he get any personal comfort from a beautiful pulpit. And he has no really private use for a lovely altar rail. And whether the church is left in cold whitewash or finished in calm, dignified, devotional frescoes really makes no essential difference to his own peace of mind. The plain fact of the matter is that his parishioners will use the knobs much more frequently than he will - for they are in the thousands, and he is merely one.

What could be more gratifying than the feeling that the hinges of the house of God are so strong that the batterings of hell could not loose them; that the church is so safely locked at night that the precious vessels of the altar could not be stolen; that the hinges are so fine that the touch of a child would send the door swinging easily and gently and welcomingly inward?

For the People.

Please remember that the Catholic church is, beyond any other building in the world, for the people.

There in that church the priest serves his people. There the Sacraments become the channels of endless grace. There the

blessings fall in showers upon eager souls. There Christ awaits and serves His people. There truth is preached and hope is awakened and the words of love are tirelessly repeated. There the weary and the burdened come to sit quietly with eyes on the tabernacle. There the tempted flee to seek and find sanctuary. The young mother with her baby boy, the old mother praying for her straying son, the youngster face to face with the hot eyes of sin, the girl at the end of a day at the office, the man from the factory, the failure and the success, the conquering and the conquered - to all of these and to thousands more the doors of the Catholic churches are welcomingly open.

Ours is no two-hours-of-a-Sunday-and-one-night-in-the-week building, so much spoken against by modern economists. Ours is an every-hour-in-the-day-far-into-the-night building; it is always at the service of the people. And, happily, the people know that it is theirs. It is the one building in the world that can be entered without the use of a key, the ringing of a bell, the presentation of a letter or a card, the knocking at a door, the buying of a ticket, the waiting in an anteroom, or any other of the laborious conventional means that human beings must use to gain access to other buildings.

Completely Owned.

Here is the one building in which everyone is always welcome. Here is the only building in the world for which we pay no instalments, lay no rent on the line, sign no lease, enter no contract, and stand no chance of eviction.

Show me any other building on earth that is owned and used so completely.

Within that church Mass is offered daily; and the poorest may attend without embarrassment. Most Catholics seem ignorant of the fact that the priest at the altar is required by Church law to say Mass frequently for them. The Mass that the pastor says on Sunday must be said for his people. And though many of the old feasts of the Church are no longer holy days of obligation, still on the major days of the year the priest must say Mass for those who are within that parish.

And speaking of the services that the Church renders, shall we mention Confession and what it means to the people? visits -to the Blessed Sacrament? Viaticum and the Last Sacraments? Or aren't these so commonplace that we need only glance at them to renew our gratitude?

The Clergy's Share.

Now, the relation of the clergy to the Church, and especially to the churches, is something that must be recalled.

"Servus Servorum Dei" is the title that the Pope deliberately chose for himself. "I am," he said (the translation is exact), "the servant of the servants of God." That is precisely the attitude that characterizes the spirit of the clergy. The Church does not belong even to the Pope. He is her administrator, the Vicar of Christ, serving the lambs and sheep of the flock of Christ. If the churches belong strictly to anyone, they belong to God. But they are operated by the Church for the sake of the people who are the children of God and the members of His flock.

The Bishops.

Throughout America civil law has made it necessary that any organization holding property must be a civil person. We call such a civil person a corporation - that is, an organization with a *corpus*, a body. Hence it is that in America each diocese is as an almost universal rule set up as a State-recognized corporation. The diocese usually uses as a title the term, The Catholic Bishop of --- (the name of the diocesan city). In this way the property can be safely held and legally protected; the people have the assurance that their churches, schools and other institutions are secure.

But you'll notice that the title includes only the impersonal word Bishop. The church property does not belong to the Bishop of the diocese as a person. He is merely the administrator of a corporation that is called, not by his personal name, but by the name of his office. He dies, and the next Bishop of the diocese takes over the administration. He dies, and his successor, still under the impersonal title Bishop, administrates the property.

The Bishop himself can touch none of this property for his personal use. He can will none of this to anyone. He is merely the custodian of the property, which belongs to the people. He cares for and protects and by the use of this title legally safeguards what really belongs to all the faithful of the diocese. And when he dies, the administration of that property, always for the good of the people and the service of the members of Christ's kingdom on earth, passes on to his successor.

The Priests' Salaries.

Precisely what financially does a priest get out of all the money that my good friend talks about?

Well, in most dioceses to-day the salary of the priest is determined by the law of the diocese, and it is relatively easy to find out just what that salary is. In a city a pastor's salary averages round twelve hundred dollars a year. The assistants each receive from two hundred and fifty dollars to approximately six hundred dollars. [1939 values]

I have met country pastors who have accomplished the incredible financial feat of caring for a parish, running a small school, paying the tiny salaries of three nuns, operating all the parish activities, and caring for their own living on a total gross parish income of approximately three thousand dollars a year. And believe me, there are priests in sections of this country to whom that sum would look princely, priests who have to struggle along on starvation incomes.

Men, Not Money.

Now all that I've said of the parish church is in some ways even more true of the schools and institutions to which Catholics are asked to contribute. To me the miracle of all finance is the way in which religious communities keep their work going and their institutions in full operation. Of course, I know that they do it by the quite simple process of not paying salaries to the members of their own community. This is so much a recognized fact that associations like the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools and important hospital standardizing groups list as present in Catholic institutions what they call endowment in men.

By this the Protestant and the Jew have acknowledged that we Catholics make a contribution to our causes that is in all things unique. We command a contribution of man power. Our priests and men and women religious work without salary. They contribute their lives to the cause of education and charity. If salaries were paid them, as are paid similar workers in other like institutions, our colleges and hospitals and charitable enterprises could not possibly exist without enormous endowments in money. The fact that these men and women give their services without charge of any kind means that the work can go on. And while the late depression (the 'Great Depression') showed us how tricky and faulty and easily lost are the vast endowments on which non-Catholic institutions often rest, how they shrink and disappear, that same depression made us realize the stability of the endowment which is ours, the endowment in man power and human devotion that continues without dependence on any economic rise and fall.

The Gift of Lives.

When next you are asked for money, remember that there are priests and religious who are matching your gift of money with the gift of their lives to God and to the service of humanity - and to you.

I should think it would be a source of real and justified pride to us that we Catholics have built so splendidly. But I think it should cause the layman a little embarrassment to realize that men and women of his own generation and class of society, with opportunities equal to his and talents that match his own, are giving their lives while all that he is asked to give is a small gift of his money.

What Makes it Possible?

Let me assure you that the actual money that Catholics have contributed thus far would make a very poor showing in the world of architecture, of education, of social service, of hospitals, and of charity if every dollar had not been placed in the hands of men and women who gave it all back to God and who administered it with such canny shrewdness and supernatural devotion that one dollar was made to do the work of five.

It is only the fact that heavy overhead is cut, the cost of high-priced executives eliminated, our colleges staffed with volunteer professors, and our hospitals served by men and women who ask only the little food they eat and perhaps a new habit once in seven years (the period is probably average) - it is only this fact that makes it possible for us to match our achievements against the achievements of any other group in modern life - match, and in many cases surpass.

Out of all this money, be sure to remember, your priests and your religious get almost nothing. And when they ask you for the money, they ask also for the one privilege that they really want: the privilege to use that money to supplement the services they hope you will accept from their hands.

Forgotten.

It sometimes strikes the observer as odd that the priest who was primarily responsible for the building of a great church is so little the owner of that church that within a very few years the parishioners do not so much as remember the name of the man who worried about the plans, supervised the construction, and carried the burden of seeing that the interest on the debt was paid and the capital debt slowly wiped out.

Some splendid nun builds a great hospital out of the pitiful savings of her religious community. The hospital serves the

public with generous zeal. The nun is transferred to another post or she dies; and if a generation later you asked the chief of staff who it was that founded this hospital, he wouldn't be able to tell you; he could tell you the name of the first head physician, but the name of the nun probably has not lingered on even as a legend.

I have seen old nuns who had established an entire educational system living in complete obscurity with the simple comforts of an old mother in a family of the poor. I have known old priests who at one time guided the destinies of great universities and at the end of their lives were not even mentioned by the commencement orators who strode the stages of the great auditoriums these priests had built.

Well Used.

Your priests and religious, believe me, have in general used your money wisely and well. They have not even asked that their name be carved in stone or that they be commemorated in a tablet with their profile in brass.

They have planned well. They have used pennies wisely. They have erected cathedrals on a foundation of nickels. They have built great hospitals on the strength of a dollar a month taken from a thirty-dollar-a-month salary of their teaching nuns. They have used incredible thrift in the effort to make possible incredible charity. They have worried about mortgages and have grown grey carrying heavy debts. They have guided the finances of the American churches so skilfully that even to-day our Catholic bonds are high in market value and seldom indeed does a piece of Catholic-church property go the common way of real estate. And for all that, they have taken only what for most of them amounted to a barely decent living.

Financiers.

I have sometimes wondered, rather crudely, whether the financiers of the world would not be willing to pay highly for the talents of our priests and religious. But then I have realized that the financial ability of our priests and religious is given to them because of the work they do. They have made St. Joseph their treasurer; they take their financial worries to the Mother of Good Counsel; they ask the Christ to teach them, as He taught St. Peter, how to find tax or interest money in the mouth of a fish.

But all this simply brings me back to the real point at issue.

My good anonymous friend was, I'm sorry to say, thoughtless and sadly unobservant. If he had thought for even a minute, all this that I have written would have occurred to him, and I would not have had to point it out.

Ours, Not Yours.

Most of all, he would have realized how sad a mistake he was making when by his attitude he put the Church in the hands of the clergy and said, almost disdainfully, "That's yours; take care of it." What he would have said had he been even slightly keen or alert or observant, is,

"This church is, of course, mine. I want it to be beautiful. I want it to be fine. I am glad that you, Father, the caretaker, are doing a good job. I should hate to see the church allowed to run down. It would be a terrible commentary on my Catholicity if the motion-picture palace down the street were a thing of exquisitely-cared-for beauty while my church was slovenly and unkempt. How terrible if through financial failure on my part Mass could no longer be said in my church, and the absolution of the priest could no longer be given to the sinful soul, and mothers could no longer find an open door into the presence of the lover of little children, and the old could no longer sit in comfortable pews and dream, and the tabernacle light, flickering for the last time, went out into black, faithless, hopeless darkness.

"Father, never let that happen.

"Here's the money I can afford to give. After all, you have given your life, as have the Brothers and Sisters and the other priests that serve me and my children and the sick and the old and the weary and the hunted of the world.

"I should be ashamed if I did not match with a little money the magnificent sacrifices and gifts of human lives that have made possible the glorious accomplishments of my Church in America."

For Us.

That would make sense.

For money has never been better or more frugally spent than it is in the Church that is Catholic.

No other administrators have ever asked less for the work they have done than have your priests and men and women religious.

And in all they do and in all that the money you give may do, remember that it is not for the priest, the brother, the nun.

It is for you. For the quite simple reason that the Church and the Catholic churches are yours.

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