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THE SIN OF STRANGE FIRE

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Text: "And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not."—Lev. 10: 1.

Here is a weird and unique incident in the story of the chosen people. The text records a religious tragedy. It transpired during Israel's wilderness wanderings. It followed hard upon one of the sublimest hours in the nation's history.

The descent of the holy fire had just taken place. The tabernacle, that temple-tent of a pilgrim people, had been finished. The altars were complete and the sacrifices had been laid thereon. Around this shrine of their faith gather an expectant people in the solemn act of worship. There stands Moses, the man of God, who had led the nation out of slavery. And there is Aaron, the high priest, whose function is to mediate between the people and eternal mysteries. These two have just lifted their hands in benediction upon the great congregation.

Now will God answer? Every heart is intense. Will Jehovah indicate, by some outward sign, His presence and assure them that the cry of a nation's soul has entered into the heart of the Infinite?

Suddenly, as they wait, a flame of miraculous fire parts from the Shekinah in the holy place, leaps upon the altar, and

Missionary

CUBAN ROMANISM.

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In all Latin countries one of the staple dishes is a stew into which enters almost every imaginable vegetable, sometimes a little more of one and a little less of another, and always with seasoning to suit the taste. In the Roman Catholic Church we find very similar conditions. Its teachings are composed of truth, error, superstition, falsehood, etc., served in conventional quantities, and with the condiments according to requirements.

American Romanism, Cuban Romanism, South American, Mexican and Spanish Romanism are all formed from the same ingredients, yet so completely adapted to conditions that the odor and color are very different.

The purpose of this article is to note from observation the more prominent elements in the Romanism of Cuba which give it the character and tone which it has. Five of these will be indicated.

1. *Truth.* Undoubtedly many of its teachings are true, and in this fact we find the greatest danger. Renan, whose books are scattered broadcast throughout Cuba, taught many truths in a beautiful way, yet his works are dangerous in the extreme. The other day a young man here was operated upon. The physician was skilful, the operation was successful, but soon blood-poison set in because a little bit of virus from an old wound had clung to the knife. An ugly serpent is infinitely

more to be dreaded when transferred to your hands in a beautiful bouquet that is to be admired and placed in the bosom.

The Roman Catholic Church contains much of truth in its doctrines, so much that many who have only seen this part are ready to cry, "We ought not to send missionaries to Catholic countries." So much of truth has it that many good ministers, who are ready to give even the devil something more than his dues, are inclined to condone its faults, forgetting that not so long ago a very godly lot of men, who had had abundant opportunities to observe its workings, declared it the Anti-Christ.

2. *Error.* The second element in Cuban Romanism is error boldly and earnestly taught. On Good Friday of this year I was present at the Catholic church in this town to hear the annual three hours' sermon on the seven statements of Christ while on the cross. I was not surprised at all to hear the preacher say that these new Protestant Churches are nothing more than the headquarters of Satan, even though they may present stereopticon views of the life and passion of the Lord Jesus Christ; yet I confess to a feeling of horror when he declared, "The blood of Jesus is the only power to save from sin, and that only within the Holy Mother Church, for outside of that Church not even the blood of Christ has power to save."

Thus we find the treasonable claim that not even a crucified Redeemer can save without the help of the Romish priest. It is easy to imagine what a tremendous power a priest must wield when he can make his people believe that they are dependent upon him equally with Christ for their salvation.

3. The third element in the Cuban Romish Church is *paganism*. Some one will be horrified to have that word applied to any of the practices of that Church of which some of our most lovable friends are members, yet one instance will convince you that it is rightly applied. Five or six years ago in the town of Carbarien the Chinese colony built and dedicated a new joss house, inviting the parish priest to be present at the dedication. It was to be supposed that he would

refuse and would denounce the false teachings, but instead of refusing, he attended in his official capacity and there in the presence of the great dragon and other symbols of heathenism he sprinkled "holy water" upon the building and blessed it in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Thus he gave his sanction, in the name of the Church which he represented, to this most destructive form of paganism. If the man who stands by and willingly witnesses a murder is an accomplice, then that priest and his Church, which never indicated the slightest displeasure at his action, is an accomplice in Oriental paganism. Had he been invited to a Protestant service where the name of Jesus was to be magnified he would have hurled all the anathemas of the vatican against that heretical sect. Had he been offered a copy of God's holy word he would have resented it as an intended insult, as did one of the priests of this city when visited by a colporter of the American Bible Society.

4. *Immorality.* This is not universal. There are pure men here in the priesthood, but it is so often seen as to cause little comment. A few days ago a judge in one of the small towns of this province and a man of unimpeachable character said to me, "I am glad to see the Presbyterian Church established here, for the Romish priest of this town is undoubtedly the meanest and the most immoral man in Cuba." A member of the Presbyterian Church of Remedios states that his uncle, who was an unmarried priest, was the father of fourteen children, all of whom he himself baptized and recorded in the church archives as his brothers and sisters.

Thirty days ago one of the priests of this city was arrested for defrauding a man of \$13,000. Seemingly the case has been hushed up and he has left town probably to continue his profession in some other city.

5. *Conventionalism.*—By this I mean a readiness to take advantage of any circumstance to fasten the hold of the Church upon the people.

During the Spanish-Cuban War when it was announced that

General Maceo, one of the bravest of the Cuban insurrectionists, had been killed, the Church bells were rung out joyously and a great "te Deum" of delight went up from all sides. A year later when American prowess had driven the Spaniard across the sea these same bells were tolled sadly upon the anniversary of the death of the Cuban hero and a solemn mass was said by these same priests for the salvation of his soul.

The Protestant Churches all stand for something regardless of insurrections and rulers. The Romish Church will sidestep whenever it is to its material advantage to do so.

Near the city of Cardinas there is to be found a famous shrine, known as the "Dead Man's Cave." The story runs that many years ago a man died in the mouth of that cave and that his body was found several days later in a perfect state of composition. Immediately some superstitious person sprang to the conclusion that some saint had his dwelling place in that cave, and that he had protected the body of the dead man. At once the Church laid hold of this idea as an established fact, set its stamp of approval upon this falsehood, and now devout pilgrims are to be seen often wending their way thither to do penance, or to secure some favor from the saint of the "Dead Man's Cave."

All of these illustrations, taken from actual observation, indicate clearly the internal condition of the Roman Catholic Church in this country, and there remains but one thing more to be said. In the midst of it all there is *hope* for the future. Thousands of the Cuban people have broken away from the Church. They are naturally a religious people and will respond to a pure doctrine, when exemplified by the pure life of those who do the teaching.