

JULES CHEVALIER AND THE 19th CENTURY

Indifference and egoism

Jules Chevalier grew up in a society that wrestled very much, even in a cramped way, with the aftermath of the French revolution. It was a country still in turmoil. So how did he perceive his world and how did he react to it?

Already in his seminary days he came across the characterisation of his time as one of 'indifference' and 'egoism'. Indifference had to do with the fact that the people of 19th century France no longer went to church. They did not care about the church any more or, as Chevalier would put it in early sermons, they did not care any more about their own salvation or about eternal life. Egoism was an offshoot of this.

The remedy of this twin evil was the cult of the Sacred Heart. Also this answer did not originate with Jules Chevalier. In 1834 the bishop of Bourges talked already about the cult of the Sacred Heart using the words 'remedy' and 'evils of the time'. In fact, the cult of the Sacred Heart was spreading in 19th century France. It had many propagandists. Even in Issoudun a fraternity of the Sacred Heart existed when Chevalier arrived there in 1854.

Disbelief

A lack of faith lay behind indifference and egoism leading to doubts and disbelief. Even stronger expressions were used. Disbelief led to scorn and disdain, to haughtiness and revolt against the church and Jesus. The lack of faith was moreover associated with a corruption of the heart giving free rein to the passions. This idea can already be found in a papal encyclical of 1832. Chevalier agreed with this type of analysis done from a basically moral perspective.

He sees some other aspects too. For instance that 'shame' is also a factor. When he tried to organise church services for men and got about thirty to attend, they had to face the scornful looks of women afterwards.

Indifference and egoism did not start with the common people. It started with the elite, with the intellectuals from before the revolution and by means of the revolution it trickled down to the masses.

History

The historical roots go back much farther in history. French Catholic writers, whose views were adopted by the Pope, traced the origins of indifference and egoism to Protestantism, Jansenism and the Philosophers. Protestantism was characterised by disobedience and revolt against the church. They had mostly Luther in mind (Calvin who studied in Bourges was hardly mentioned!) and saw him as a rebel. Jansenism was simply a secret form of Protestantism and the philosophers were rationalist, employing scientific reasoning to everything and doing away with piety which was the main pillar of the education Jules Chevalier received.

You may say that his education was poor, uncritical with regard to tradition, romanticising the past before Protestantism, the Christian world of the Middle Ages. In Bourges the

rector of the seminary did his best to improve the quality of the seminary training, but it should not be forgotten that the French revolution had wiped out the monasteries, the Catholic centres of learning, and their libraries were gone. There was only one theological faculty in France at that time, in Paris at the Sorbonne, and that was Gallican in mentality. Moreover the Chevalier of his early years was a poor man. He did not have many books. And most of the books he had were for practical use, to prepare his sermons, conferences and writings. By and large Chevalier received a narrow education. The notes he took during his seminary days do not make an exciting reading. De Lamennais had already been condemned by the church and his interesting ideas, continued by Catholic liberals such as Montalembert, received no attention. Chevalier was interested in history and even managed to write a book about the history of Issoudun throughout the ages. It has even been reprinted a few years ago.

The Sacred Heart as remedy

Chevalier was not discouraged by the sickness of his time, because a remedy was available: the Sacred Heart. The obvious question of how the Sacred Heart could be an effective remedy against indifference and egoism, received the following answer:

1. Those who honour the Sacred Heart partake of the promises given to St Margaret Mary, a whole series of blessings.
2. The cult of the Sacred Heart touches people in their sentiments, in their feelings. It makes them love Jesus, the centre of everything.
3. True love of Jesus makes people interiorise his sentiments attitudes and dispositions. Love of neighbour will follow.

In this three-fold way the cult of the Sacred Heart will change the world.

Salvation History

Jan Kaandorp discovered a pattern in the writings of Chevalier, which can be called a vision on salvation history. It is a scheme of ten points that occurs at least nine times in his writings. The ten points are:

1. A description of the evil world quoting Joseph Demaitre or Juan Donoso Cortés.
2. Chevalier then expresses his own agreement with what these authors say. They give an accurate description of the situation.
3. But there is hope as the Book of Wisdom shows in 1:14. The quotation is according to the Vulgate: *sanabiles fecit nationes* or "He (God) created the nations curable".
4. Chevalier recalls the dialogue of St Gertrude with John the Evangelist. St Gertrude asks John, who rested at the chest of Jesus during the Last Supper, why he did not reveal the feelings or movements of his Heart. John answers that he was told to write about the Logos for a Church being born, but that God will reveal the sweetness of the Sacred Heart in the last times, when the world will be old, in order to rekindle the love that had grown cold.
5. Chevalier then makes reference to St Margaret Mary. The revelation of the Sacred Heart will draw people away from the abyss of perdition. His Heart will be the last life-

saving raft, the last chance people will get for being saved.

6. Is this moment now? Yes, this is the moment, these are the last times.
7. The Sacred Heart is indeed the remedy as confirmed by pope Pius IX in his audience with Jules Chevalier in 1860 and repeated by him time and again: “the only hope for church and society is the Heart of the Lord; he will cure all evils.”
8. The role of Mary in this second redemption is to bring people to the Sacred Heart.
9. Summary of the previous eight points.
10. Jules Chevalier ends with Mary: the redemption will not take place without the collaboration of Mary.

Metaphors

Chevalier uses the language of healing very much, but he also uses that of fight, struggle and battle. The battle is against the evils of the time and it is a battle of apocalyptic proportions. The language can even become militaristic. Nowhere is this clearer than in Letter no. 1116 - B 18841122 that speaks of the Knights of the Sacred Heart, an elite corps of lay people. According to Chevalier it was ‘the great pope’ Pius IX who talked about this during the audience of 1860 and, being an ultramontanist, it meant for him that he should try to fulfil the Pope’s wish. He worked on a plan to realise this new Chivalry. The purpose is “to attack in concert the common enemy, in whatever form he presents himself and to establish everywhere the reign of the Sacred Heart”. It is about the overthrow of liberalism and the re-conquest of the world under the glorious banner of the Sacred Heart.

The attempts of Chevalier to support the Knights of the Sacred Heart came to an end in 1887, when the Pope indicated to him that such an organisation was not opportune at the moment. Perhaps it was a matter politically too sensitive to pursue at that particular time. It smacked too much of a counter-revolutionary movement. For Chevalier the refusal of the Pope to back the Knights was a disappointment and a month later he wrote: “perhaps we still do not merit this favour” .

The Poor

Jules Chevalier was very concerned about the poor of Issoudun. He often visited them and saw the state they were in. Because of this experience he draws a vivid picture of their poverty in his sermons. He tells his congregation, of mostly lower middle-class people, that the poor curse the rich and God. His remedy was faith, because faith inspired charity, one of the sentiments of Christ’s Heart.

One of his points was that the rich are not the owners of their riches and that God had more children than the rich. It was their obligation to share the property of God with the poor. He himself was outstanding in this regard and did more than was expected from an ordinary parish priest.

As a boy Chevalier worked in a shoemaker’s shop. When much later he blessed a workplace, he told the workers that the priests are not their enemies. A Lenten sermon emphasised the important place of the poor in the church. He said that in the world the poor are at the service of the rich, but that it is the other way around in the church: the

rich serve the poor. The poor should not be at the whim of the rich, because the church is the empire of the poor.

Nevertheless, Chevalier had no involvement with the growing socialist movement. In the beginning of this movement the majority of the clergy were sympathetic to it, but as the tensions increased the church and the middle class found each other in a counter-movement for law and order. Jules Chevalier was an ultramontanist, very much against liberalism. Still, he did not see that economic liberalism was at the core of it.

In short, Chevalier was concerned about the poor and wanted to see them happy, but he did not work for a change in their status of life. In his early days as a priest the economy was improving. When young people went to Paris to try their fortune, Chevalier warned against greed and told them to long for spiritual riches. At the time that Pope Leo XIII was facing the social question (he published his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891), Chevalier was too much settled in his ways to make a change. For the labour movement he was born too early.