

## Old Catholics

The vicissitudes of time and the machinations of men give words strange connotations. Often they no longer fit the mental pictures they create. When Woodstockians looked up to Overlook Mountain and saw high on its slopes the gray clad figures of a religious community rehabilitating the deserted little chapel below Mead's Mountain House, they were puzzled to hear the several young men calling themselves "Old", displaying an evangelistic enthusiasm for a faith they called "Catholic". They were completely nonplused when one of the older men of the community in overalls addressed a similarly clad younger man "Father".

With the passage of days, however, Woodstock had grown to know and like these men as they have grown to like Woodstock more and more. Through the first summer Sundays the bell that echoed down the mountainside from the Church of Christ-on-the-Mount called increasing numbers to worship with the young "Old" Catholics and with the advent of winter a place of worship had to be found in the village. Then in an old red barn, adjoining the Woodstock Country Club on the Saugerties-Woodstock road, whose hand hewn beams and weathered boards teem with memories and the romance of bygone days, they prayed for the common healing of the ills of humanity together with people who have been previously unchurched, dechurched or never-before churched. But with the exception of those with whom their activities have grown, and the friendly folk with whom they visit, the paradox of "Old" and "Catholic" and "young" and "evangelistic" still remains.

Except for the fact that "they never past a collection plate" at Saint Dunstan's Church but believe instead in laboring with their own hands at crafts that are both beautiful and practical many good folk still know little of their past, their future hopes, their unique doctrinal and ecclesiastical position or of their modern and adaptable approach to the world's problems. To let them know that in the first place "Old Catholicism" is not merely a local and new cult but a long existent world wide "Movement" -- that their ministrations are not bound within the limited horizons of creed and denominationalism but extend to the boundless need of people weary of religious disunity and eager for a genuine expression of Christ-likeness, is their own self-desire.

To adequately portray the gray habited Benedictines of the Old Catholic Church necessitates a major historical operation. Out of the pages of Christian history one must find the path that identifies their purpose. Of the various Christian movements in America, few are as little known and as much misunderstood as the Old Catholics. The foundations of their history must be traced to the first centuries of Christianity. To identify them in the contemporary scene of Christian activities, however, means that an orientation in relation to other bodies must be made.

The division of Christendom into two great categories, Protestantism and Catholicism, is familiar to all. But while most people know more or less of the various denominations of Protestantism, what is known as the Catholic Church has its administrative and disciplinary divisions with which few people, not historians or theologians, are familiar. Holding the same essential faith, the Eastern Orthodox Church with 180 million souls and the Roman Catholic Church with its 240 million souls, each hold a different concept of administration. The Old Catholic Church is unique in that it holds the Catholic faith, being in union with the Eastern Orthodox Church, representing the Catholic Church in the western world, but disavowing the administrative peculiarities of the Latin (Roman) Church.

To hold a position of any kind obviously admits that there must be a counter position -- both of which must have been arrived at through the consequences of some action in the past. The touchstone of how closely the Old Catholic movement represents primitive Christianity can only be shown by proving its fidelity to the faith of the undivided Church and through the unbroken succession of its Episcopate (Bishops).

The different conceptions of truth that people hold, like words, are paradoxical. But truth, unlike words, remains unchanging. What was truth in the Apostolic Church is truth today. All Christians should readily admit that the test of any principle of the Christian faith is to present it to the mind of the early Christian Church. It is certain that for the first nine hundred years at least, the Christian world was united in a common bond of faith.

What was Christ's Church like, then, before words like "schism", "heretic", "sect" were used by Christians to describe one another? We know that the Church was one, that its faith was Catholic in the sense best described by St. Vincent of Lerinz, "Such teaching is truly Catholic as has been believed in all places, at all times, and by all the faithful." By this test of universality, antiquity, and consent, all controversial points in belief must be tried.

Until the year 1054 AD when the first unhappy division took place, the Church was as it should be, "One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic." What happened after the division of course appears differently to the mind of every individual and the truth becomes hard to discern. It is safe to say then, that the only way of proving the truth of any contemporary interpretation of Christianity, is to submit it to the examination of the common mind of the Christian Church before its division took place. Was it believed by all Christians everywhere, at all times before the year 1054 A.D.? -- is the test every question of faith should meet.