

THE ASSUMPTION OF OUR LADY

A LETTER TO A RECENT CONVERT

Dear X,

I understand your perplexity over the recent announcement that the Holy Father is going to define the Assumption of our Lady as a doctrine *de fide*, and therefore necessary to salvation, for all Catholics—and over the light-hearted headlines in the daily press about the Pope's 'new dogma'. You were taught during your instructions that the whole Faith was given by our Lord to the Apostles and that the Church which he founded upon them was to guard and teach that Faith, but had no power to add to it.

You say that the proposed definition looks very much as if a new fact—the fact that our Lady's body did not see corruption but was taken up to heaven after her death—is after all to be added to the Faith then delivered to the Saints. As a recent convert you confess to having noticed that those brought up in the Catholic tradition with the habit of implicit trust in the Church and her rulers (even people with trained intelligences) do not seem to feel difficulties and to need explanations that are immediately felt and needed by many whose whole previous education has given them a less unquestioning outlook, and who have only lately made their submission to her authority. I will do my best to deal with the difficulty you put forward.

It is of course quite unthinkable that the Pope (or as I should prefer to say, the Church; because we must never get into the way of thinking that there are two infallibilities; there is only one, that of the Church, though it has various modes of expression) can exercise infallibility in faith and morals by adding new truths to what is called the original deposit. To claim that would be in direct contradiction of everything the Church has ever said about herself. There is only one source from which doctrinal definition can come and that is from the declared mind of the Church (her teaching magisterium). This mind may be declared in several ways: by the teaching of her ordinary magisterium, diffused throughout the Church, without specific definition by the highest authority; by a General Council when its definitions have been ratified by the authority of the Church in the person of her supreme Bishop

—the Pope; or by the Pope in consultation with the universal episcopate; or by the Pope alone without such consultation; this latter method might be necessary in emergency, but historically has probably never been used.

The subject matter of this declaration of the mind of the Church must be what is and is not the Faith, i.e. what was or was not originally *deposited* in her mind by our Lord, primarily as a life to be embraced and lived in faith by the faithful (*ecclesia discens*) and to be preached, safeguarded and defined by her authority only in order to implement this life of faith (*ecclesia docens*). But a truth may be 'in the deposit' *explicitly*, as the Virgin Birth was from the very beginning, or *implicitly*, as the Immaculate Conception was before it became explicit and was defined. When we say that a truth is implicit in the deposit of Faith we mean that it is contained, unperceived by the faithful, in some other truth which is held explicitly. In process of time by a deepening of insight in the faithful which is the work of the Holy Ghost in the Mystical Body of Christ, what was formerly implicit comes to be explicitly realised. But there are different ways in which one truth may be implicit in another; it may follow by metaphysical necessity from the nature of the truth in which it is contained; or it may follow not from the nature of things themselves, but because in fact it has seemed good to Almighty God to order things in that particular way. For instance, that Christ is God made man is a truth explicit in the deposit from the first. But the Church at different times has declared certain things to be facts which were implicit in this; that he had a human soul, a human will, a human mind. These facts follow by necessity from the truth that to become man involves the taking of a complete human nature, and a complete human nature necessarily contains a soul, a will, a mind. Thus they are realised and accepted by the faithful through an act of grace-given faith, but logical and metaphysical reasoning has been used in the elucidation of its content. The Church has also declared certain things to be facts which do not follow from the truths in which they are implicit by necessity, but because God wills to order it so. The faithful perceive and accept these as facts by grace-given faith (which includes the working of the gifts of the Holy Ghost) because it creates in them a deeper insight into the ways of God, but here, in the elucidation of the content of this faith, it is not metaphysical reasoning that

has been used by the faithful but an instinct to look for action in God which will be congruous with truths they already know as revealed. In other words, the details have always been in the picture but they are only progressively perceived by the Faith of the whole Mystical Body. The supernatural certitude of Faith, it must be remembered, does not necessarily require a starting-point of human certainty. The natural groundwork of a firm faith may well be a sense of what is fitting, a conjecture or a probability. It can hardly be said even that our faith in our Lord's resurrection has human certainty concerning the empty tomb or the nature of the resurrection appearances as a necessary starting-point.

From all that has been said so far it will, I hope, be clear that there is a good deal of confusion (not always dissipated by the theologians) in the use of the word 'tradition'. Many doctrines in the deposit of Faith have been held explicitly from the beginning; we can see them clearly in the pages of Holy Scripture and are conscious at once that they have been handed down orally from Apostolic times; but even here the mind of the Church has clarified them by her daily magisterium and her official corrections of false teaching. On the other hand many doctrines were in the deposit originally as implicit. These are made explicit by the deepening insight of the faithful (the product of both devotion and theology) under the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this way new insights into already known truths have continuously enlarged the mind of the Church by being incorporated into her consciousness and proclaimed in her teaching. Tradition then is identical with the conscious mind of the Church at any given period of history. It increases, as it were, in volume yet adds nothing to itself but what was latent there from the beginning. From the first the truth that our Lady was full of grace was explicit in the Church's mind; but its implications and more exact meaning have become clearer in course of time in her consciousness, and in consequence she has formulated them with increasing precision under our Lord's promised guidance.

I will now go on to illustrate what has been said so far by showing its bearing on some truths which are part of the deposit of Faith but in the beginning were implicit only. You will see that I have made a selection; the same principles are equally applicable to other truths with which I shall not deal.

(a) The first truth of this kind I have chosen is the perpetual virginity of our Lady. Holy Scripture is quite definite about the fact of the Virgin Birth, but apart from the mind of the Church we have no certain knowledge that our Lady's subsequent virginity is also a fact—Scripture is ambiguous about it. We appeal therefore to tradition; but in what sense? Do we mean that the Church certifies that our Lady handed on the knowledge of her perpetual virginity to St John; St John (perhaps) to St Polycarp and St Polycarp to St Irenaeus and so on in succession down the centuries? Or do we mean that the mind of the Church, having hitherto held this belief as implicit in the Virgin Birth, began, when doubt was cast on it, to see by supernatural insight that it was indeed a fact, the starting point for this realisation being its fittingness and the incongruity of its denial. There is no certain indication, I think, in any ecclesiastical writer that the former alternative is what took place. St Jerome had an argument on the subject with his contemporary Helvidius, and it would seem from the terms in which he answered his opponent that it is the latter which is the more likely.

(b) My second instance is the doctrine that our Lady and the saints hear our prayers. This was a belief of slow growth. It is unlikely, I suppose, that the Apostles practised any kind of invocation of saints. The custom only began to develop apparently with the extensive martyrdoms of the great persecutions of post-apostolic times. The belief is rooted in the doctrine of the communion of saints and that the saints pray for us; but that they hear our prayers and that therefore we should pray directly to them is only congruous with it and does not necessarily follow from it. But the mind of the Church under divine guidance realised its truth and incorporated it into her teaching.

(c) A third doctrine which illustrates our point is the inspiration of Holy Scripture. Did St John, for example, or St Paul know that they were inspired? We do not know. The fact of inspiration was recognised because our Lord's teaching was founded upon the Old Testament Scriptures. We know from the New Testament that the Apostles claimed that they proclaimed the Gospel by a special *charisma* analagous to that which inspired the prophets of the Old Testament. When their preaching was written down in Epistles and Gospels, the Church very early, and possibly before the end of the Apostolic age, began to see that many of these

writings were inspired as the writings of the Old Testament had been. But it is clear from history that the inspiration of some books came to be regarded as certain only by degrees by the deepening insight of the mind of the Church guided by the Holy Spirit. The final and definitive ruling as to the content of the Canon was not made till the Council of Trent.

(d) Last of all we may take the Immaculate Conception as another case in point. We have no means of knowing whether the Apostles had any idea of it. Neither they nor our Lady herself could have known it except by revelation, and there is no evidence in Scripture or Tradition that our Lord told them. It is however clear that very early the mind of the Church, dwelling on the words of the Angel Gabriel to our Lady, 'Hail! full of grace', and on her response to God's message, saw her as absolutely pure and sinless—the absolute opposite of evil. This is the basis of the primitive teaching about our Lady as the second Eve, found in St Irenaeus, so closely related by tradition with St John himself, and in St Justin Martyr. The foundations of this doctrine are firmly laid in Scripture and it contains by implication the complete truth of our Lady's position in the economy of redemption and grace, as it has been drawn out by the mind of the Church through the centuries. During this process controversies arose among theologians as to the exact nature of original sin and as to how our Lady could be both sinless and redeemed. Subsequently as a joint result of devotion and controversy, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit a deeper insight into how this could be was reached and the doctrine of her sinless conception was certified as a fact by the supreme magisterium of the Church.

So it seems to me to be with the Assumption. Did the Apostles know of the fact? They may have done, but if they did there is a complete lack of evidence of it. No trace of the tradition occurs in any ecclesiastical writer till the fifth century, and if it existed in an explicit form from Apostolic days it is difficult to explain an economy so profound and so lasting. The legends which immediately sprang up around belief in it when this did appear are apocryphal and no detail of them is historically reliable. But what is certain is that in the course of history our Lady's place in the economy of redemption, her mediatory and intercessory office, and the implications of her active co-operation in bringing about the Incarnation have become progressively more deeply

realised in the Church's consciousness. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries particularly she has seen with greatly increased clarity that sound faith in the Incarnation itself is indissolubly bound up with belief in our Lady's high place in the economy of grace. Why did the Church insist so strongly on her perpetual virginity? Because Catholic instinct, the product of the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost in Christ's Mystical Body, taught the faithful that to attack that was in the end to attack the Incarnation. Why did the Church come to insist more and more on her complete sinlessness? (The theological controversy was an interlude.) Because Catholic instinct realised that to deny her sinlessness and total exemption from the dominion of sin would lead to the denial of her virginity and in the end to denial of the Incarnation itself. Why, finally, did belief in her assumption become universal in East and West at a comparatively early date? (The legendary element was consequent on and not antecedent to belief in the fact). Because Catholic instinct early saw with deepening insight that incorruption was the fitting concomitant of sinlessness in her from whose flesh Very God drew the flesh of his human nature, and that in consequence this privilege had been granted to God's Mother. And so knowledge of her assumption comes to strengthen faith in her sinlessness, just as faith in her sinlessness and absolute purity is a bulwark of defence to true and strong faith in the Incarnation of her Son.

I confess that up to now I have had no enthusiasm for this definition. Why define, I have asked myself, what is already believed by all? But the Holy Ghost guides the Church and enables her rulers by a special supernatural instinct to sense where danger lies and what is the right method of approach to the solution of the fundamental problems of our age. The denial of the Incarnation and in consequence of our Lord's authority is the root cause of the moral chaos which has brought our world to such a pass, and the greatest obstacle to the recognition, by men of goodwill, of our Lord's authority is the fact that Christians themselves are disunited and at odds with each other. The root cause of this disunion is not disagreement about a number of different doctrines; it is the inability to recognise as true the nature, constitution and government that our Lord created for the Church which he founded and commissioned to preach the Gospel in his name. The definition of a doctrine such as this with great solemnity

is a startling and arresting comment on the nature of Christ's Church on earth and on the reality of her teaching authority. The Church is wiser than we are, and her determination to emphasise by definition this, to the outer world, extravagant doctrine is a guarantee that in the long run the result of her action will be a deepening of faith in the supernatural among those who are capable of it, and will lead them in ways we do not realise to a fuller knowledge of the truth.

I hope that what I have written may be a help.

Yours sincerely,

HENRY ST JOHN, O.P.

THE COLLAPSE OF A CIVILISATION

GERVASE MATHEW, O.P.¹

SHORTLY after the year 400 the poet Prudentius wrote that the Roman Empire had never been more flourishing nor so happy. All the evidence that we possess tends to show that it seemed eternal and impregnable to its citizens. It was impossible for them to conceive of their life without it. The Western provinces formed a single, carefully administered state, covering modern England, France, the Netherlands, Western Germany, Portugal, Spain, Italy, North Africa, and part of the Balkans. All were joined by a common culture, a common way of life, the common use of Latin. There were close economic links with the Eastern provinces of the Empire grouped round the other end of the Mediterranean. Here, Greek was the common language instead of Latin and great cities like Antioch and Alexandria had come to play roles paralleled today by New York and Chicago.

In the year 400, the young Emperor in the East was brother to the Emperor of the West and was thought of as his partner in a single sovereignty. The partnership seemed indissoluble. In the words of the greatest of fourth-century poets, 'All Roman subjects

¹ The text of a talk broadcast in the Overseas Service of the B.B.C.