

FATHER VERNON'S CRITICS—A NEW ISSUE

(AN OPEN LETTER TO AN ANGLO-CATHOLIC.)

MY DEAR X—

You and I have so often found it possible to discuss even matters of religious urgency in an atmosphere not only of truth but of charity that I think I can answer your latest question with no breach of our friendliness.

Like *The Church Times* of late, you are not a little disturbed in mind by two recent happenings: (1) Father Vernon's simple, almost naïve story of his seeking the authority of the Holy See; and (2) the two Anglo-Catholic answers to Father Vernon's story, given respectively by Professor Goudge (articles in *The Church Times*) and by the Rev. Eric Milner-White and the Rev. Wilfrid L. Knox (*One God and Father of All*).

Your question to me is: 'What do you think of these two Anglo-Catholic answers to the story of Father Vernon?'

Let me ask you to recall the recent story of Anglo-Catholicism. It began about a century ago, when rationalistic Liberalism was making an attempt to disendow, disestablish, and secularise the Established Church of England. The Hierarchy of the Church were so admittedly Erastian that they offered no hope to the men within the Church who revolted against the State's last attempt upon its liberty and life. A little group of men—Keble, Froude, Pusey, Newman—had so clear an insight into the weight of the projected attack and the weakness of the hierarchical defence that they boldly threw out Torres Vedras lines,

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which in the event held the attack. Proclaiming the principle that the Church of England was part—though a separated part—of the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church, they defended their ecclesiastical authority from the encroachments of the State, not on the plea that they were English, but on the plea that they were Catholic and Apostolic. In doing this they reassumed what had been the old defence in the age-long struggle between Crown and Church in England, which had begun under William the Conqueror and had been consummated by the victory of the Crown under Queen Elizabeth.

The success of this defence was, for the moment, amazing. Though the Bishops of the Church of England had no manifest gratitude for the little group of stalwarts who had saved the Establishment, they were not unwilling to accept the new honour which was given them as successors of the Apostles.

On the whole, they took kindly to a view of their episcopal authority which laid down, as Newman laid down, the principle that 'a Bishop's lightest word is weighty.' And though here and there were to be found Bishops who looked upon the Royal Supremacy as not merely a civil supremacy in ecclesiastical matters, but even an ecclesiastical supremacy in ecclesiastical matters, yet the Anglo-Catholic view of the Apostolic Succession through the English Episcopate was welcomed by the English Episcopate.

To the conscientious Anglo-Catholic the doctrine of Apostolic Succession meant not merely a due succession of divine Grace through infallible Sacraments of Grace, but a due succession of divine Truth through an infallible organ of Truth. Little as the word 'infallible' was used, the whole Anglo-Catholic doctrine, as proclaimed and successfully used by the men who proclaimed and used it, was that there is a

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teaching Church as well as a taught Church, and that this teaching Church is the Undivided and Assembled Episcopate. This alone was the Catholic position; this alone was the alternative to a Protestant doctrine of the Bible and Private Judgment or to a rationalistic doctrine of Private Judgment without the Bible.

Anglo-Catholicism in theory and practice was a living assumption that the infallible united Episcopate was the Christ-ordained organ for safeguarding a deposit of Truth.

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The simple story of Father Vernon is tragic in its contrast with this greater story of Anglo-Catholicism. As a young man brought up in an Anglo-Catholic atmosphere, indeed in the authentic atmosphere of an Anglo-Catholic parsonage, his only connotation of Anglo-Catholic was Catholic. He did not recognise himself as a hyphenated Catholic as he passed from his Anglo-Catholic home to Oxford, the Home of Lost Causes—and of Anglo-Catholicism. His graduate degree, though no more than was deserved by an undergraduate who took other things more seriously than an academic degree, was a guarantee that the young clergyman of the Church of England would not minister from an empty wallet. If, then, some critics of his little book discredit it, because of its alleged lack of scholarship, perhaps they discredit still more criticism directed against a man with an academic degree whose preaching, charged with experience, was looked upon as of unique influence in the world of University life.

Be that as it may—indeed even granted that Father Vernon's book is a simple, average book—apologists for Christianity make no excuse for the spiritual common sense of the average man. If faith is chiefly con-

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cerned not with **WHAT** we believe but with **WHOM** we believe—that is, not so much with the subject-matter as with the authority and organ of belief, Father Vernon had authentic intuition into the main religious question of the hour—Authority. In words understood of the people he humbly told his fellow-countrymen how in the hour of his almost bewildering success as an Anglo-Catholic preacher he began to ask himself by what authority he was preaching. Some years of thought and prayer, made ascetic by prolonged anguish, convinced him that he could not find cause in reason for, on the one hand, admitting the infallible authority of a teaching Church, and, on the other hand, rejecting the claim of the Roman Episcopate to be that infallible authority. He found that the arguments he thought fatal to the infallibility of the Roman Episcopate were fatal to the infallibility of the Episcopate. When he took the step, thus necessitated by his reason and conscience, Anglo-Catholicism, in one of its most accredited children, was realising the words :

‘A golden aim I followed to its truth.’

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Let me now pass to a nearer view of your question : ‘What do you think of the answer given to Father Vernon’s book by (1) Professor Goudge and (2) the Rev. Eric Milner-White and the Rev. Wilfrid L. Knox?’

I will answer the question at once by saying : In my humble opinion the new Anglo-Catholicism of Father Vernon’s critics has given up **THE BASIS OF ANGLO-CATHOLICISM**—and has thus raised a new issue.

Let me place before you the extracts which seem to witness to this new issue.

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PROFESSOR GOUDGE.

' If Anglo-Catholics are to make any appeal to the mind of England to-day, they must get rid of this false doctrine of the Infallibility of the Church. In the Church of England it is to the best of my belief a new arrival from abroad; and a most undesirable alien it is ' (*The Church Times*, Nov. 29th).

REV. ERIC MILNER-WHITE and REV. WILFRID KNOX.

' The whole conception of a Church which has been entrusted with a fixed set of doctrines and an oracular Authority to interpret them is utterly without support in the New Testament ' (*One God and Father of All*, p. 45).

' There is not a word in the New Testament to suggest that our Lord ever promised His Church an oracular infallibility ' (p. 44).

' The great Christian doctrines have been reached, not by the pronouncements of Popes or COUNCILS, but by the free and unfettered power of the Holy Ghost,' etc. (p. 104).

Now it would be unfair to these men, and indeed to yourself, if you let your judgment on them be warped by your feelings. Epithet-calling will hardly meet their case. You may be so sincere in your Anglo-Catholic acceptance of the doctrine of a teaching Church that any denial of that doctrine within the Anglo-Catholic group may seem to you insincere. When Father Vernon took the step that has occasioned all this discussion, Mr. Kensit sent him a telegram congratulating him on being 'logical and honest'; and devoutly wishing that many more might have the same logic and honesty.

Professor Goudge, the Rev. Eric Milner-White, and the Rev. Wilfrid Knox are quite evidently logi-

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cal and, therefore, presumably sincere in taking up a position against Rome, even whilst they feel it is against the recent tradition of Anglo-Catholicism. Indeed, to give Infallibility to the Anglo-Catholic party within the Church of England, whilst refusing it to the United Church, would be an inconsequence which would revolt their conscience.

These three sincere sons of the Church of England, and, I presume, of the Anglo-Catholic body within the Church, have raised a new issue for Anglo-Catholics. We may suggest the frontiers of this issue by a few questions.

(1) If the Church of God is not infallible—*i.e.*, if the Church of God is not divinely guided to teach the truth in Faith and Morals, what is the value of the Apostolic Succession?

(2) If Councils—even General Councils—of the United Episcopate can err in Faith and Morals, what is the value of the Apostolic Succession?

(3) If modern Anglo-Catholics, in order to refute the claims of Rome, repudiate all the final Teaching Authority of even the United Episcopate, how are they in communion with their predecessors, who met the claims of the State by asserting the final Teaching Authority of the United Episcopate?

(4) In the friendly discussion between Anglo-Catholics and ourselves, are we to accept it as the authoritative Anglican position, that there is no objective ecclesiastical infallibility in Faith and Morals—not even in the United Episcopate?

This would be a new issue; which we would be willing to discuss only if we were assured that, even at the cost of severing their tradition, Anglo-Catholics had made it their own.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.