

# THE FAITH AND MAN'S MIND

BY

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THE first and most pressing application of the principles at issue described in the preceding section<sup>1</sup>, must be concerned with that assent of the human mind which is claimed for the truths revealed. The Catholic Church has always been explicit in affirming that the truths of Christ were dogmas to be accepted by faith. She has consistently corrected those of her members who have ventured to maintain that these dogmas lay within reach of unaided reason. They are to be received by faith, and faith was to be defined as an assent of the mind, not based upon the intrinsic evidence of the truth accepted, but based upon the word of an authority revealing. It was said to Nicodemus: 'I say to thee that we speak what we know, and we testify what we have seen, and you receive not our testimony. If I have spoken to you earthly things and you believe not, how will you believe, if I shall speak to you heavenly things?' (John 3, 11-2). The Precursor in uttering his own witness had spoken similarly: 'He that cometh from heaven is above all. And what he hath seen and heard, that he testifieth, and no man receiveth his testimony.' (Jn. 3, 31-2.) And Christ himself continuously in his discourse spoke of his own witness which he was sent to give. 'I am come in the name of my Father, and you receive me not; if another shall come in his own name, him you will receive. How can you believe, who receive glory from one another: and the glory which is from God alone you do not seek?' . . . 'There is one that accuseth you Moses, in whom you trust. For if you did believe Moses, you would perhaps believe me also: for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?' (John 5.)

Moreover the statements which Christ made to men were plainly in large part affirmations which directly and of themselves they could not discover. 'For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood abideth in me and I in him' (Jn. 6); 'I will ask the Father and he shall give you another Paraclete, that he may abide with you for ever; the spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because he shall abide with you and shall be in you.' (John 14.) From these and similar passages from the words of Christ two things stand out clearly. The first is that the message he brings on earth is of truths

<sup>1</sup> *Life of the Spirit*, August 1949, vol. iv, no. 39, p. 74.

which can only be received on his word. He was sent on earth, and it was his glory at the end that he had spoken his part, the words that had been given to him. The words they had heard from him were not his, but the Father's who sent him. And they were clothed with a certain obscurity, for they spoke the wisdom not of this world, nor of the powers of this world, but the wisdom of God; therefore uttered in mystery, the evidence of things not seen, veiled under the obscurity of faith. But the second point that stands forth in the statements of Christ is that this revealed truth is some kind of enlightenment, yet not human in cause, not an enlightenment by man: 'flesh and blood hath not revealed it but my Father who is in Heaven'. And this obscure enlightenment is only to those who believe. Hence the traditional creed is propounded and accepted by the members of the Church, and seen while on earth as through a glass in a dark manner; while by others it is not seen at all, but derided as foolishness. St Paul will insist with the Church, that the darkness which shrouds the revealed word, is to the natural mind, darkness complete. Even to the mind enlightened by grace of faith, it remains obscure; afterwards in heaven the truth revealed shall be seen face to face in vision, when immediate sight shall replace faith, and the spoken promises of Christ be fulfilled.

These plain statements of the case, repeated by the Church in every generation, have been and will always be a certain shock for the mind. A superficial hearing of them, and certainly a hostile one, will always consider them to imply an invasion upon the intellectual rights of human nature. From the earliest centuries to our own day they have been a stumbling-block, and the memories of the Church recall recurring crises when men, now her champions, now her opponents, have striven to press her into an easier intellectual alliance with human thought. Earlier even than the Pelagians and as late as the Modernists of yesterday, the same plea and complaint have been raised in protest. The mind of man is his highest and noblest prerogative, autonomous, supreme and authoritative; whatever be outside its sphere, beyond its terms, can make no claim upon him. It is his sovereign power, his absolute rule, and to no external authority may he abdicate its rights.

This is the implicit or explicit protest common to the ancient Pelagians who denied the necessity of grace and to the recent Modernists proclaiming the ultimate independence of the human reason. The Anglican Bishop Gore writes typically: 'We are bound to claim the fullest liberty for science and for reason in all its legitimates, because *reason is at the last resort our only instrument of truth*. Thus we cannot play false to our reason, or be content with any crude antithesis between faith and reason, *faith*, we find,

*being only reason in the making*'. In the same context this same Anglican Modernist could write: 'I have, ever since I was an undergraduate, been certain that I must be, in a sense, a free-thinker, and that either not to think freely about a disturbing subject, or to accept ecclesiastical authority in place of the best judgment of my own reason, would be for me an impossible treason against the light'. . . . But the Modernist school speaking thus is in direct line of descent from the earlier Protestants, who, rejecting all external authority of the Church, enthroned the individual's private judgment and a subjective experience as the ultimate arbiter of objective truth. In much the same way, the subjectivism, idealism, relativism which is the chief mark of modern philosophy, is but a logical development from the Cartesian revolution which cast aside the Aristotelian and Thomist realism of right reason. These parallel developments have gone hand in hand, and by the present they have almost run their full course to the complete chaos and disorder that rules in both religious and philosophical circles outside the Church. *Quot homines tot sententiae* is a fair verdict on the intellectuals of any repute today, and with this world-wide discord there naturally results a practical scepticism and a paralysis of thought. In the remains of the civilisation which the Church has now to address, objective authority has almost everywhere lost credit, intellectual confusion is the chief note of non-Catholic society, and the sects have so multiplied that, while abandoning gradually the remains of their Christian tradition, they have become but ghosts of their earlier power, with little or no doctrinal conviction. Their effect now, at best, is but a purely philanthropic activity.

It is hardly necessary to dwell at any length upon the imaginary and spurious antagonisms that for a whole century have haunted the journalistic debates, and still in English backwaters do service for casual newspaper controversy; except to remark that the popular mind is still necessarily infected by them, and the mechanical and standardised education that prevails is calculated to continue them. It was ignorantly supposed, and is still in this 'educated' community taken for granted, that the Church was antagonistic to all intellectual progress. The development of scientific research was understood as proving fatal to all the claims of religion. Reason, emancipated from Catholic dogma, was to produce the only right development, for the betterment of human society. There was even heard again the ancient gibe that religion had been a useful opiate for the populace, a serviceable superstition for the unreasoning multitude, to protect the security of established society, in which wealth was in the hands of the few, and the labourers, serfs, or the lower orders were kept in their place by the anodyne of piety. But

as men were to be improved by modern education and introduced to the discoveries of science, so they would be emancipated from the impositions of religion, the oppressive legends of dogmas. This fancy was certainly a wide-spread fashion fifty years ago, and indeed the ignorant opposition of science and religion can still be heard in the popular journals of the second-hand scientists. Among the religious debates of a year or two ago, a prominent divine could be heard impugning the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation, on the amazing plea that chemical analysis in a laboratory was unable to detect any difference between the wafer of bread before and after sacramental consecration. To such heights of absurdity had the opponents of the Church reached. But it is well to note that now, not only had they become opponents of the Church, but they were even abandoning any intelligent use of the mind. The science of metaphysics was not only unfashionable, it was practically unknown; its name suggesting the Dark Ages, and futile men pursuing of all unpractical things the most incomprehensible. Logic was at a discount, and truths were expressly rejected *because* they were logical. Mathematicians played at disproving the axioms of Euclid, and physical scientists were so little intelligent of their own sphere and principles as to deny the existence of the human soul because it was not quantitatively and chemically discoverable. The decline of the sciences had definitely set in; their differentiations and the nature of their respective subordinations were no longer a matter of interest, and even the varieties of evidence no longer appreciated.

It must soon be known to all how definitely and strenuously the Church and her students stood out from and against that stream of tendency. In some sense it had been true that in the early post-Reformation period her schools of study had perhaps necessarily and wilfully allowed the subjectivist torrent to pass them by. At all events since the Vatican Council her voice had been almost alone in Europe in defending the rights of human reason, in resisting the waywardness and irresponsibility of unscientific theorists masquerading as scientists, in opposing unverified and often unverifiable hypotheses merely calculated to conceal the bankruptcy of all easy substitutes for the truth. Just as she fearlessly corrected the Fideists, the Traditionalists, the Ontologists within her own communion, so she no less boldly condemned the emotional anti-intellectualism of the Modernists. . . . We need not delay here to emphasise what is becoming every year more and more manifest. For anti-Catholic prejudice will die a slow death, but among honest and serious students it is already dying.

It is our chief purpose in this section to indicate the mutual approaches to the human reason and revealed truth, and to point

out how the full responsibilities of the human mind are not only safeguarded but honoured in its assent to the mysterious dogmas of Christ. In this context we seek again the basis or ledge in our intellectual capacity, which can be fully receptive of divine instruction and supernatural information, not only with no derogation or depreciation of the mental qualities of human nature, but even with an unexpected and gratuitous perfecting of those qualities. God revealing will not be God nullifying the intellectual powers he has himself created, but on the contrary endowing them with added light and calling them into activity and to an attainment to which they could of their own nature make no claim.

In the first place it is significant to note how pointedly the Evangelists record the play of human reason in the reaction of his hearers to Christ. Whether the reaction is on the part of hesitating disciples, or of decisive and hostile opponents, it is given its due place in the Gospel accounts of our Lord's public ministry. Perhaps indeed this is most emphasised in the Gospel of St John, the apostle of divine love. He who in Catholic tradition is rightly remembered as the favoured mystic among the immediate followers of Christ, seems to have been particularly concerned to record the questionings, the cross-examinations, the chief objections which plain human reason and clear human thinking offered spontaneously to the actions and words of the incarnate Word of God. No honest reader can fail to enjoy the parry and thrust, the wit and irony, indeed the sarcasm of the man born blind and miraculously healed, when the Pharisees tried to prove to him that the prophet of Nazareth was no man of God but a sinner who broke the sabbath. A more ingenuous statement of the evidence for the miracle it would be difficult to require. 'If he is a sinner I know not. One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see. They said to him: What did he to thee? how did he open thy eyes? He answered them, I have told you already and you have heard. Why would you hear it again? Will you also become his disciples? They reviled him therefore and said: Be thou his disciple, but we are the disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses: but as to this man we know not from whence he is. The man answered and said to them: Why herein is a wonderful thing, that you know not from whence he is, and he hath opened my eyes. Now we know that God doth not hear sinners, but if a man be a server of God and doth his will, him he heareth. . . . Unless this man were of God, he could not do anything.' (John 9, 25-31). No rationalist could argue more closely or cogently than this mendicant, so fresh a believer. Again in St John's account of our blessed Lord's words to the Samaritan woman at the well, where Christ spoke of the mystical

fount of living water that should spring up into life everlasting, the evangelist is not shy to record the woman's very human, very reasonable, very plain reply: 'Sir, give me this water that I may not thirst nor come hither to draw'. (John 4, 15.) She does not understand the high meaning of his words, but her simple and practical reasoning is effective evidence of a shrewd peasant woman who knows what she wants. But a still better example is when the cultured, educated Pharisee, Nicodemus, voices the clear human reason in his exact reply to the gospel of a divine re-birth: 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born again?' (John 3, 4.) At least he understood a material sense in the new Gospel, and to this he offered a sensible and intelligible difficulty. When later, in the sixth chapter of the same Gospel our blessed Lord proclaims the holy sacrament of Communion, the mystery of the Eucharist, St John writes down the obvious rational objection to that wholly supernatural truth, the same objection that was made in the first century of the Church's history, and is substantially the modern objection restated afresh by the anti-Sacramentalists in England today: 'The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying: how can this man give his flesh to eat?' It is evident enough that they understood what he said; and their reply gives clearly the reason why they reject it. He who had created them, understood their reason and equally their unbelief; but he reaffirmed his dogma even more emphatically: 'Amen, Amen, I say unto you, except you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you'. And hearing this, even many of his disciples exclaimed: 'This saying is hard and who can hear it?' and leaving him, they walked with him no more.



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