

THE APPEAL TO SOUND LEARNING—II

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A GAINST the general background, which we attempted to outline in a previous article, it is now possible to fill in with greater detail the main elements of the Catholic approach to truth in contrast with the Anglican appeal to sound learning; and this with no controversial intention, but with the irenic aim, not indeed of resolving the contrast, but at least of showing it less in caricature, and in truer proportions and balance. The true following of Christ, in whatever Christian allegiance it is found, is the result of a union, intimate and ineffable, between two persons; a human person and the Person of Jesus Christ, God made man.

This union begins in the supernatural life of grace received in Baptism. It cannot spring from any power innate in human nature; it is wholly given. There comes a time to all who receive this gift when its purpose, the love of God in Christ, is consciously apprehended. The inmost self-hood is confronted by Christ, who is either rejected, or accepted in the obedience and love of divinely given faith. Where explicit knowledge of his person is absent the encounter would seem to be implicit in what conscience presents as good.¹ The union so completed varies in intensity in each person. In some for a whole lifetime obedience is fitful and love lukewarm; the gift does not grow beyond an inchoate stage. In others it fructifies in a union of deep and perfect friendship. Once embraced it is never wholly lost except by an act of deliberate rebellion which theologians call mortal sin.

This knowledge and love of Christ is mediated to men by the Apostolic preaching, and has been since the day of Pentecost. When recognized as saving truth it evokes the response of faith, and with it the loving obedience which flows from faith. This Apostolic proclamation of the Gospel has been recorded in Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. In the Old Testament are the voices of the prophets giving God's message to his people, recalling them to faithfulness, and foretelling the coming of a Saviour. The sacred history of the people of God is recorded there. His dealings with them foreshadow, in type and

1. The wider question of baptism by desire is not here considered.

symbol, his mighty acts of redemption in Jesus Christ, of which the Apostles were chosen witnesses. The New Testament is the inspired record of this gospel witness, and its authority together with that of the Old Testament, in which it is rooted, is the possession of the believing society, the Church founded upon the Apostles.

The mind of the Church then can alone fully, without error, and with Christ's authority, interpret the gospel witness to the world, and the ever deepening penetration of this interpretation is the Church's tradition, which has remained by divine guidance identical in substance and authority with the Apostolic *Kerygma*, first proclaimed by St Peter and his fellow Apostles on the day of Pentecost. As we have seen, this proclamation is not, in the ordinary sense, history, though it involves historical events. It is an ever present spiritual fact which contains within itself a vital attractive power in no way dependent for its efficacy upon the critical investigation of past events. In the illumination of the Holy Spirit that accompanies the birth of conscious faith in the soul, the Lord's life, death and resurrection are known by a knowledge which the verdict of critical history may prepare for and support, but which it has no power of itself to achieve. The final decisive response is the response not of reasoning but of faith, as it was when Philip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch. 'Then Philip . . . beginning at this Scripture, preached unto him Jesus . . . and the eunuch said: see, here is water, what doth hinder me from being baptized? And Philip said: if thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he answering said: I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God' (Acts 8, 35-37).

This primary belief, expressed in the eunuch's *credo*, and all that follows from it, is presented to men most perfectly when they receive it in the fullness of the fellowship of the Mystical Body. The visible Church is the Mystical Body on earth. Its inner life in Christ is animated by the power of the Holy Spirit and by him safeguarded under the rule of the successors of the Apostles and St Peter their head. The indivisible unity, thus secured to the Church by Christ's ordinance, is necessary for the completeness of its fellowship; for without it there can be no common mind to hold the faith, no common sharing of sacramental grace to quicken it, no common life of study, prayer and worship to penetrate into it and draw out its fullness, no common authority

to protect and interpret it. The unity so secured is not an artificial and external imposition, it is rooted in the very nature of the Church's life, which provides a due balance between personal freedom and the rule and law which guide it and guard it from dissipation.

Outside the visible unity of the Church the fullness of fellowship in the Faith cannot exist. All who are baptized, when confronted with the Person of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures undergo that challenge, the response to which is either the rejection or acceptance of faith. But since the Scriptures are not wholly self-interpreting, the presentation they give of Jesus Christ and his gospel is mediated by the tradition of the religious allegiance in which it is accepted, and these traditions vary in the degrees of their imperfection and error. The tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Churches is a genuinely Apostolic tradition, presenting the faith and sacramental life of the Church as an integral inheritance from the past, though in regard to the former with differences and denials to which schism has given rise. In some sense therefore these Churches share in the actuality of the life of the Mystical Body, though their doctrinal authority is in abeyance owing to their separation from Catholic unity.

The Church of England because of its appeal from the contemporary to the primitive Church, and its claim that sound learning can judge the issues between them, though it preserves important elements of the Catholic tradition rejected by other Churches of the Reformation, presents an eclectic faith with scope for wide differences of choice among its individual members. Moreover, though it has preserved the form of Apostolic Succession, it has lost its reality and in consequence the validity of its sacraments. While in no way denying or even wishing to minimize the personal graces its members receive in their love and service of God, by which in some sense they remain members of the Mystical Body by baptism and desire, we hold that the Anglican Communion as such cannot possess the actuality of its life, or be counted as an integral part of it. For this reason the Anglican Communion cannot share in the doctrinal authority by which, in guarding the deposit of faith, the Church defines the truth and condemns error. What we hold concerning the Anglican Communion we hold to be true also of the Free Churches, and of every religious allegiance that worships Christ as God and reverences

the Scriptures as in some sense God's Word.

It will perhaps be convenient to give a final summary of the conclusions we have drawn in this and the preceding article.

All true faith, wherever it is found, and in whatever circumstances, has its origin in the confronting of a human person with the Word of God in Christ our Lord. It begins in an initiative of grace wholly divine, conferred by the sacrament of baptism.

All revealed truth including the factual and historical element it involves is mediated by faith in this Word of God, which, when known as such, becomes immediately self-evident.

By God's will this Word is embodied in the Scriptures, and the living tradition of the Catholic Church which interprets them.

Those who are outside visible Catholic unity have been deprived, by their separation, of the full, divinely appointed means of distinguishing between God's Word and human judgment, and in consequence their faith is diminished, not necessarily in depth, but in its extent, by their deprivation, and is made liable to error.

Evidence such as can bring certainty in the drawing of historical conclusions, and to assess which is the function of sound learning, is an important element in the means by which the mind of the Church penetrates and gains a deeper insight into the deposit of faith, and is able to draw out and define what is implicit in it. It cannot however originate faith, though it can prepare the mind for it in advance and subsequently corroborate it.

The part thus played by sound learning in the development of the faith presupposes however a single indivisible organic body, which cannot be broken by schism. Its mind, expressed by the episcopate, is divinely safeguarded from error in proclaiming and defining the faith. This conception of the Church is traditional in East and West alike. The claim that critical historical judgment is the final court of appeal in matters of doctrinal truth and error finds no support in these traditions, and the conception of a Church divided by internal schism, to which it has given rise, dates only from the upheaval of the Reformation. Thus external, visible, hierarchical unity, though by no means the only element in the unity of the Mystical Body, is an essential one, for without it the traditional living magisterium, speaking with a single voice, could not exist. This fact confirms the faith of Catholics that Christ our Lord did indeed constitute St Peter and his successors as the centre of that unity in his Church.