

THE SUPERNATURAL CHARACTER OF THE CHURCH

BELIEF in the holy Catholic Church is required on precisely the same terms and for the same reasons as is belief in the other mysteries and dogmas of the faith, such as the Blessed Trinity and the Incarnation. A passage in St. Matthew's Gospel, the Confession of St. Peter, provides a good analogy for focussing the Mystery of the Church. Our Lord asks of His disciples concerning Himself: 'Whom do men say that the Son of Man is?' The different answers given: John the Baptist, Elias, Jeremias, one of the prophets, imply agreement in one thing, namely that Jesus Christ is a man, evidently a religious man and seemingly one who comes from God. Those Jews who made these judgments were right in confessing the humanity of Christ; they were wrong in not distinguishing Him from other men. For them He was only a man, though worthy to be compared with the great religious figures of their history. But He was also truly God and the Son of God. It is the recognition of this profound truth by St. Peter that moves our Lord to His eulogy that ends with the prediction of St. Peter's position in the Church.

The point of immediate importance, however, is that Peter was enabled to make his stupendous confession of our Lord's divinity only because he had received a direct revelation from God. It needed no more than common observation and human experience to recognise the fact of Christ's humanity and human greatness; but it needed a divine revelation, a direct grace breaking in on St. Peter's mind for him to confess Christ's divinity. By faith Peter was able to grasp the fact that the One before him, man like himself, was truly God. The Jews saw only half the truth, but Peter grasped the whole truth.

To those amongst the disciples who believed in Him the

sacred Humanity was something they could see and understand with their own unaided human powers. But His Divinity of necessity utterly escaped the grasp of human understanding. In other words, while the Humanity of Christ was an object within the reach of the unaided human mind, His Divinity was an object of divine faith alone, an object not of sight, but of belief. And more, without divine faith a true estimate even of the sacred Humanity was not possible. Mere reason would have supposed that along with this human nature there was a human personality. Only divine faith could affirm that the same divine Person was both God and man.

If a question were asked to-day about the Church like the one our Lord put to His disciples, it would provoke the same sort of answer. 'What is the Catholic Church?' It is a society of men, a religious society, claiming to possess God's truth, to make its members holy and to lead them ultimately to Heaven. The Catholic Church is one of the great religions of all time. Some people would align the Catholic Church with other religious bodies. As a visible society, it is the most perfect of the Christian bodies. It has some three hundred and fifty million members, all subject to the same religious authority, with a common religious life, the same faith, the same sacraments. In short, the Church is judged by its externals as a human society, a religious human society, and without a doubt the most perfectly organised and coherent among the many others. As far as it goes, this is true, and all who run may read. But it is only a partial truth. The Church is also something that must necessarily escape any merely human or rational judgment. For the Church is essentially supernatural, an object that can be grasped in its full reality only by divine faith, through such a revelation as was made to St. Peter. Like our Lord Himself, His Church is at once human and divine, the human element easily discernible to rational enquiry, the divine element revealed only to the eyes of faith.

Such a supernatural mystery by very definition remains mysterious and beyond the complete grasp of the human mind so long as man is denied the full vision of God in Heaven. Yet Revelation itself suggests analogies taken from the human sphere which allow the mind to penetrate more deeply into the meaning of any mystery. Our Lord speaks of Himself as the Vine and His disciples as the branches, living with the life of the trunk, living only so far as united to Him. St. Paul has a similar metaphor, that of the Head and the members of the Body. The Vine illustrates the need for union with Christ if one is to live, and the complete dependance of the Christian upon Him. The same idea is present, too, in St. Paul's analogy, but he emphasizes also the idea of community and mutual dependance among the members themselves. A later theology has adopted the Pauline metaphor and called the Church the Mystical Body of Christ.

By faith we know that Baptism, visible to the human eye, works an invisible, supernatural effect upon the soul of the recipient. He is 're-born' into the new life of grace and made 'a partaker of the divine nature,' an adopted son of God. He is put into intimate contact with the grace and merits of Christ, 'incorporated' into Christ, thereafter to grow up to perfect spiritual stature through the pervading power of His grace. He becomes a member of the new race of ransomed men with rights and duties towards his fellow Christians analogous to those obtaining in the natural community of mankind, but of an infinitely higher order. The Church is the society of all baptised men, whose Head is our Lord, for He infuses the life of grace, feeds it with the food of sound doctrine and shepherds it through the perils of this life to present it immaculate to the Father.

The Church the object of human experience and the Church the object of divine faith are one thing. Human and divine are intimately associated and the one may not be divorced from the other. Nor indeed can a man be

incorporated into Christ save by incorporation into the body of the Church. Though it is Christ Who justifies, teaches and rules, yet He works through ministers whom He has Himself appointed and empowered. It is He Who confers grace on the soul, but through the sacraments committed to His priests. It is He Who teaches, yet He created the apostolate to take His Word to the ends of the earth. It is He Who rules, yet through a human authority set up by Himself. 'Going therefore teach ye all nations . . . baptising them . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.'

There is no conflict or contradiction between the influence that Christ exercises on the soul and the action of His ministers. Paul plants, and Apollo waters, but God makes the seed to grow. Whether they dispense the sacraments, teach the Word of God, or shepherd the flock, Pope, bishops and priests are instruments, conscious, free and living instruments, in the hands of our Lord. It has always been a characteristic of God's dealings with the human race, even in His most intimate communications, to act through human intermediaries. The Incarnation is only the supreme example of such a providential disposition. Yet in this co-operation between God and His creature the divine activity is present throughout, and reaches to the very last and the very least detail, and it is God Who gives the creature the power to act. The work of sanctification and all that this entails is fully the work of Christ, though at a lower level it is also the work of His ministers. Nor is God's activity limited by the particular laws of any providential institution. He can and does act above and outside the laws of His ordinary Providence. Though the visible Church is the normal means of salvation in the world, Christ's power is not limited by it. He who alone is intimately present to the soul supplements the activity of the Church by special graces, inspirations and illuminations according to the needs of the individual Christian. He may even act independently of

the Church to bring about the conversion of a man whom the Gospel teaching does not reach.

The only true and complete knowledge of the Church is that disclosed by faith. Even the human element which is the object of study and enquiry can be correctly assessed only from the standpoint of faith, for thus the Church appears not merely as the most coherent and highly organised of the Christian communities, but as the one divinely created organism, superficially like yet profoundly different from all the others. What appears externally to the mind and the senses is understood as the outward sign of the more inward reality. The hierarchy is the prolongation in the sacramental order of Christ Himself, and the Church as a whole is the material in which the image of Christ is progressively formed. The gathering together of the faithful round the Altar, the liturgical prayer, the public reception of the sacraments, the common profession of faith, the obedience paid to the one infallible authority are so many outward signs of an interior union of the faithful with Christ and with one another. They are visible manifestations of a common supernatural life hid with Christ in God.

Catholic faith in the Church should be nourished by contemplation of the whole truth that the dogma embodies. It is easy to confine all thought to the human element, and even then to be obsessed by such blemishes in the Church as are rarely absent from anything human. The virtue of faith itself can supply the corrective, for, as a theological virtue, faith takes the mind first to God and then, in the light of His revelation, to creatures. It alone enables a man to see God and other things as they are in God's sight, and thus to see all things as they are in very truth.

BRENDAN MAGINTY, O.P.