

## CONVERSION AND DEFECTION

THE second volume of the *Autobiography* of Johannes Jorgensen\* contains an intimate account of his conversion to Catholicism in 1895, his reception into the Church in February 1896, and the subsequent adventures of soul and body. The genius of this distinguished Danish author illuminates the story of his conversion, so that all who care to pursue processes of the mind and spiritual stirrings—hopes and despondencies—will read the tale to the end with avidity. ‘Internal history is the brain stuff of fiction,’ wrote George Meredith. It is certainly the mark of great autobiography, separating it from the reminiscences and recollections—capital reading, too, in their way, many of these—that are concerned with the busy, bustling life of persons of importance in the world of affairs.

Conversion to Catholicism is an event that through the ages holds the interest of mankind. It seems that men and women, whether they be of the household of the faith or stand without the fold, are for ever fascinated when the story of the convert is told. The very rarity of the story no doubt to some extent accounts for the attraction. For the vast majority of converts are inarticulate; to describe the wonders of God is not for them. The event must be set out in literary form to enjoy the lasting attention of mankind. The flash that blinded and revealed on the road to Damascus, the Passionist father knocking on the door that autumn night at Littlemore, the hour when Augustine saw truth clearly and the old errors fell away, these things are written, and as long as books endure will be read. The story of St. Paul’s conversion will be read as long as

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the world endures. The personal element is largely responsible for the high interest. This great tremendous thing, conversion, happened to a human being—a St. Paul, an Augustine, a Newman; the reader, too, if a convert, has had experience of the grace of God, has known the day when the world was counted well lost for the kingdom gained; and the non-Catholic reads of conversion, sometimes with perplexity, puzzled that men should make so much of this admission into a realm which, after all, promised no great advancement; sometimes with sympathy, discerning with the convert an entry into eternal life.

It is this personal element that gives the conversion of Johannes Jorgensen a place in the literature of conversion. Here is evidence that the appeal is still effective, that the travelled road is still open. Zest for spiritual adventure is not exhausted, the tramp of pilgrims in every land has not ceased. Mass conversions at the word of a king, baptisms of whole peoples on the command of authority, these things, we take it, have passed away, and with them national apostasies, establishment of national churches by Act of Parliament, and compulsory attendance at Protestant worship. We can no more look for multitudinous conversions in this pagan and post-Christian civilisation of England and modern Europe, than for wholesale conversions of Hindus, Moslems or Buddhists in Asia. The conversion of individuals, now as ever, is the thing that counts.

But while conversion is, and always will be, of interest, what of defection from the Faith? This defection is also a fact not without significance. From the downfall of Judas deserters from Catholicism can trace an un-apostolic succession. There are times when regiments mutiny. Not one religious order but can name its members who have departed into outer darkness. Laity, no less than clergy, are conspicuous

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on the roll of lost sheep. Each one of us, put to it, can recall the names of priests and layfolk, men and women, Catholics all, of our acquaintance whose faith ebbed; and often enough in these unhappy ones the empty chambers of the soul provided a resting place for the vagaries of spiritism, theosophy, psycho-analysis and—what not.

To charge apostasy would be unjust in the case of many lapsed Catholics. For no deep conviction ever graved their hearts or shaped their minds; they but mislaid their faith much as others mislay an umbrella. They cannot tell how or where exactly they lost their faith; they held it lightly and, somehow, it escaped them. They 'joined the Church'—so they put it—as they might join a tennis club, perhaps for pleasant companionship and the seeming promise of social advantage. Who can unravel the queer motives that brought these feather-heads to make submission? The explanations offered only increase the bewilderment. All we can make out definitely is that the Catholic Church, judged by its members in that particular neighbourhood, did not come up to expectations and so was abandoned. The notion of formal apostasy is quite foreign to this willingness to join and leave as the fancy strikes.

In the case of the clerical apostate we are on very different ground. Here responsibility cannot be ignored, the years of training cannot be swiftly obliterated. Recently to explain a priest's defection the popular phrase was short and somewhat ribald. But it won't do to-day to offer the words of Lawney, that chaplain to the Duke of Norfolk in the reign of Henry VIII, when confronted by The Six Articles in 1535:—

'I cannot tell whether priests may have wives or no; but well I wot and am sure of it, for all your acts, that wives will have priests.'

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Still less can the alternative suffice, expressed by Edmund Burke in his praise of gin-drinking (in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, 1795):—

‘ Under the pressure of the cares and sorrows of our mortal condition, men have at all times and in all countries called in some physical aid to their mortal consolation.’

The demands of the flesh are not relaxed with the passing of centuries, the comfort of physical aid to our mortal consolation does not fail in an age when wine drinkers and gin drinkers alike are inconspicuous. But far more powerful for disaffection is the pride of intellect, far more destructive the arrogance, impatient of authority judged contemptuously as ‘ second-rate.’

In priest or layman alike pride is at the bottom of it when apostasy arrives,—pride, cherished at first secretly, then more openly. A growth that becomes monstrous; fostered by criticism of neighbours, of colleagues, of the hierarchy, of the papacy; till it seems the whole Church is wrong and only the critic right. And once the critic is assured that the Church is sadly in need of reform, badly in want of reconstruction—well, the next thing is the self-imposed task of restoration. Then only a miracle can avert madness from the man who believes himself the one just person in a world of the wrong-headed.

Of course it is peculiarly insidious this pride that devours the heart. The shortcomings of people placed in authority are so obvious that it would be sheer hypocrisy to ignore them. We thank God we are no pharisee, like poor Father A—with his liturgical mind; or narrow and stupid like Father B—with his unwholesome puritanism. The consciousness that the less deserving are preferred before us while we languish in obscurity is, we feel, a just cause of resentment. Talents are ours to be used and accounted for; if the Church does not provide the opportunity for its

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gifted sons and daughters to use their talents to the uttermost, are we justified (cunningly is the suggestion offered by the devil) in remaining in the Church?

Imperceptibly pride ravages the spiritual life, killing all love but self-love, removing the taste for mental prayer till the capacity is gone, insisting on the irksomeness of Catholic obligations, on the folly of asceticism. Why remain a Catholic? The question is not obtruded, it demands no immediate answer. The devil will call again, at a more convenient season; he is in no hurry. As an Anglican friend detected Newman's coming defection from the Church of England by the fact that the late Vicar of St. Mary's was wearing grey trousers at Littlemore, so the beginnings of defection from the faith of Catholics are discerned when Catholic obligations are derided in favour of 'freedom in religion,' and the traditional habits of Catholics are laid aside as out of date, or exchanged for some apparel of more fashionable cut, the tailoring of 'modern thought.' Contempt for the devotions of the multitude, weariness at the divine office—the superior mind becomes more and more doubtful of the utility of the Church's methods. The Mass itself, and the doctrine of transubstantiation—how do these stand in the light of modern science and modern philosophy?

Pride having done its work comforts the apostate by insisting that it is all the fault of the Catholic Church when its children leave her. The Church had only to adapt itself to the needs of Professor C, recognise the transcendent abilities of Dr. D, accept the philosophy of Mrs. E, and these three luminaries would have consented to remain within the household of the Faith, adorning the bride of Christ from their stores of knowledge. Alas! the Church Catholic could not re-shape its creeds and philosophy to meet the requirements of these powerful minds! Deprived of the services of

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the apostate the Church yet has God; and this is what many who depart are apt to forget when they marvel that Rome still endures, surviving its grave losses, and apparently unrepentant.

Perhaps of all conversions and defections none is related with more complacency than by Edward Gibbon in his 'Autobiography.' As a gentleman-commoner of Magdalen, in mid-eighteenth century Protestant Oxford, Gibbon not only tells us that at the age of sixteen 'I bewildered myself in the errors of the Church of Rome,' he will have it that 'I never conversed with a priest, or even with a papist, till my resolution was absolutely fixed' (Bossuet's *Exposition of Catholic Doctrine and History of Protestant Variations*, and more than these the controversial writings of Persons, the Jesuit, in the reign of Elizabeth, seem to have decided the youthful Gibbon to renounce the Anglican communion). Removed by his father from Oxford and placed under the care of a Calvinist minister in Lausanne, Gibbon, six months after his conversion and now seventeen, found that 'the various articles of the Romish creed disappeared like a dream.' With them disappeared all vital belief in the supernatural. But Gibbon cannot help reflecting, and 'with surprise,' that no attempt was made by Catholic clergy 'to rescue me from the hands of the heretics, or at least to confirm my zeal and constancy in the profession of the faith.'

The author of the *Decline and Fall* was a famous man when he wrote his Autobiography. How could he be persuaded that his reception into the Catholic Church at the age of sixteen and a half had not been an event of European importance, that his apostasy six months later had not been a disaster to the Faith so grave that Rome might at least have sought to avert it?

But there it is; the successful author—or for that matter the successful person in many a trade and pro-

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fession—can hardly take a reasonably modest view of the scantiest religious experience; while the Church, entered and subsequently disowned, is bound to be at fault. Gibbon regarded the vagaries of his precocious boyhood with high seriousness; with no seriousness at all the Faith so quickly won, so swiftly lost. In truth it seems that the vast complacency of the self-satisfied not only shrivels the generous impulses of the heart and hides from sight the vision of the City of God, it also consumes humour till nothing is left but a smirk.

JOSEPH CLAYTON.

### *DEI CULPA*

The angered soul self-shuttered from the light  
Upbraideth God, who will not end its night.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.