

THE GROWTH OF DOGMA

IN these "talks" we have been trying to meet the difficulties of those thousands of people who say they have no use for creeds and dogmas. We have tried to show them that dogmas—doctrinal statements—are necessary because knowledge of God is necessary, and that such knowledge can be conveyed to us only by words. And not only so, but we hold it to be a matter of plain historic fact that it was by words that God has conveyed the knowledge of Himself, of His love and His salvation, to us. We have described, too, the response which that historic Self-Revelation demands of us: the response of Faith.

But a difficulty remains. Granting all that has been said: granted that the truth of God is available to us; granted that we can learn about God through nature, and still more through His Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ—a difficulty still remains. For what, it has been asked, has all this to do with the vast and complex dogmatic system of the Catholic Church of to-day as we find it in her dogmatic formularies and catechisms? What have they to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ? What is it that we claim for these dogmas and formulas? We know that many of them have been drawn up only in comparatively recent times; every one of them subsequently to the time when Our Lord was on earth. What authority do we claim for them? Do we pretend that they were all expressly taught by Him during his earthly sojourn? Or do we claim that God makes new revelations to Popes and Councils and compilers of catechisms, in such wise that they can add to the content of the Catholic Faith which that Revelation demands?

We have already said enough to be able to answer with an emphatic No. The coming into the world of the Son of God is the climax and the completion of God's self-revelation. Beyond that, God's self-revealing to man cannot go. There can be no new doctrine about God beyond what He revealed

in Himself and in His Person. He gave power and authority to His apostles to teach in His name and to teach *His* doctrine; to tell the world whatsoever *He* had taught them, whatsoever *He* had received of His Father from the beginning. No more and no less than that. On this point the teaching and claims of the Church to-day are perfectly clear. There is all the difference between the definition of a dogma and a revelation. When a Pope or a Council define a dogma they do not pretend that they have received a new revelation from God; still less do they pretend that the words in which they frame the dogma are inspired or revealed. What they claim is that the truth which those words enshrine is part and parcel of His historic Revelation of Himself. And in so doing they claim, not a new revelation, not dictation of the words, not inspiration from on high, but divine *authority* to teach, and to teach *infallibly*. They claim that in virtue of the promises which Our Lord made to His Church, in virtue of the power of the Holy Spirit, who, He promised, should lead us into all truth, in virtue of the promise that He Himself would abide with His Church till the end of the world—in virtue of all that—the Popes and the Bishops, the supreme teaching authorities in the Church, cannot make a mistake and lead the entire Church into error. But they make no claim, no pretence, to teach a new doctrine; they claim solely that the doctrine contained in those words is an essential, integral part of the Revelation of Himself to men which God has made once and for all. It is important that we understand that clearly, for much misunderstanding arises from the fact that people confuse infallibility with revelation or inspiration.

Consequently we see that although dogmas are formulated and defined at particular periods in history, some of them quite recently, and although the words which compose them are drawn up by popes and bishops and theologians, and are consequently new when they are formulated, there is no pretence that the doctrine which they claim to enshrine is a new one. On the contrary, the claim is that that doctrine is old, indeed an eternal truth, contained in the Revelation which God has made of Himself in creation, and in the first-born of all creatures, His Son.

Are we then to be forced back to the other position? Are we to say that Jesus Christ taught His disciples, for instance, the doctrine of Consubstantiality as it was formulated by the Council of Nicea? Are we to say that He taught the doctrine of Transubstantiation—with all its antiquated technical scholastic language about substance and accidents—as it was stated by the Council of Trent? That He taught Papal Infallibility in the language of the Council of the Vatican, or the Immaculate Conception in the formula of Pius IX? Are we even to suppose that He expressly taught all these doctrines at all to His disciples?

The answer again is an emphatic No. The theologian no less than the historian will tell you at once that the supposition is ridiculous. How then are we to explain the vast complexity of modern Catholic dogma? How can we pretend that, with all her successive definitions of dogma throughout nineteen centuries, the Church of to-day teaches no more and no less than the teaching of Christ, than the revelation which God made of Himself through Him? We cannot answer this without explaining something of what we mean by the development, the evolution, the growth or the progress of Dogma.

God revealed Himself through Jesus Christ once and for all. He imparted knowledge of God to His followers. He revealed to them what He Himself, Who was before the ages with God, Who was God, knew and saw. He imparted to them His own knowledge. "We have," says St. Paul, "the mind of Christ." The mind of the Church is the mind of Christ; and like His mind, and like all minds, it must grow in wisdom and stature.

The self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ was something of infinite, inexhaustible richness, a revelation which nevertheless was adapted to finite human understanding. It was impossible that all its richness, all its implications, all its infinite applications, should be grasped at once. Our Lord did not present the fishermen of Galilee with a complete, exhaustive theological treatise. He did not want His Church merely to accept blindly whatever He said, and think no more about it. His Mother had not done so. She did not

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merely accept the message from God about the Son she was to bear and think no more about it. We read that she "pondered these things in her heart." She tried to understand, to penetrate into the inner meaning and significance and richness of the Revelation which had been made to her. So it was to be with the followers of Christ, with His disciples and with His Church through the ages. The Spirit of truth was to be given her to lead her into all truth. She was to receive the mind of Christ in receiving the Revelation of Christ; but that Revelation was not a closed static system; it was an inexhaustible, vital, dynamic truth with manifold applications and implications, at first but imperfectly understood, but which were to be more clearly seen as years and ages rolled by, and as Christians realized more fully the richness of the Revelation which had been made to them.

We can see a parallel to this process in our own intellectual development. Our minds grow in knowledge, not only by the acquisition of new data and information, but by seeing new meaning, new applications, of what we already know. A hundred different factors may lead us to penetrate more deeply into the content of what we already know. A hundred different circumstances induce us to define more precisely what we have already held vaguely, perhaps unconsciously. Someone contradicts us; or someone puts forward a theory which we know to be inconsistent with some fond conviction of ours. We are compelled to state our position more precisely, to try to refute arguments which are brought up against it, and in so doing we are making our own position more precise; reflection forces us to examine what we have long instinctively held and to understand it better; we are compelled to bring to the level of consciousness convictions and beliefs which have been unconscious, to give them more exact statement, to define with greater exactness what we have always held, and to work out their implications in and applications to new concrete instances.

A still more helpful parallel is that which we experience in a long friendship of someone dear to us, for, as we have said, the knowledge of God is essentially the knowledge of a Person, of a Friend. Long acquaintance, long friendship and

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affection increase our knowledge of him, not necessarily in the sense that we know any more about him than when we started, but we come to see him under all sorts of new aspects, under all sorts of new circumstances and relationships, in all sorts of new crises and environments. And so seeing him, our knowledge of him deepens.

The Church has undergone a similar process. The little band in Galilee has gone forth into the wide world; it has come up against pagan beliefs and superstitions. They must be contradicted; the inheritance of truth must be reaffirmed, and in being reaffirmed made more precise. Different men of different races with different ideas and outlook raise different questions, new problems. What is the Christian answer? It must be stated anew. Saints and thinkers have arisen within the Church herself: they have penetrated more deeply into the mysteries of faith. Here are further opportunities for stating with greater exactness the content of the belief of the Church. The Christian revelation is of infinite application; it throws new light on all sorts of problems, one consequence of it is drawn from another. As the mind of the infant Church matures, her position becomes stated on a thousand issues with ever-increasing precision and exactness. Thus dogmas are *defined*. Definition does not mean that new information, new data has been given, it means that the consequences of the original data have been worked out; it means that its content has been more exactly stated and understood.

We Catholics of 1937 are the inheritors of a pretty fully developed state of Catholic dogma. Implications and applications which were scarcely dreamed of in the early days of the Church have been threshed out. The Church has been compelled to face issues which had then never occurred. The mind of the Church has grown under the influence and the impact of a thousand different circumstances and factors.

We cannot find God in dogmas and catechisms? But we can, if only we will make some effort to understand them. For as with the Church as a whole, so with us as individuals. Dogma is not something to be merely accepted, it has, we must repeat it, to be lived, to become part of our mental

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make-up, and consequently it has to be penetrated, studied, understood. And it is infinitely worth the trouble, because it is based on God's Revelation of Himself; it is the fruit of centuries of painstaking labour and development; it is the means given us whereby we may *know God*.

That is what is conveyed to us by the creeds and dogmas and catechisms of the Church: God's Revelation of Himself through Jesus Christ—no new revelation—but that Revelation, not merely in its primitive, undeveloped form, but in its developed state as it has been pondered upon and developed through the centuries by the mind of the Church: the mind of the Church stimulated to search out the riches of the potentialities of that Revelation owing to changing circumstances and environments, successive heresies, continuous contemplation and experience of the Faith once delivered to the apostles: the mind of the Church guided by the indwelling Spirit and the promised presence of Christ within her. That is the heritage which has been handed down to us: the heritage which we as individuals must not only thankfully acknowledge, but which we must contemplate in order to work out for our own individual needs its implications and applications in our own lives. So we too may grow in the mind of Christ, "Until we all meet into the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fulness of Christ: that henceforth we be no more children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the wickedness of men, by cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive. But doing the truth in charity we may in all things grow up in . . . Christ" (Eph. iv, 13-15).

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