

REASONABLE SERVICE

THE Catholic concept of religion is radically different from most others because it is born of the realization that the true function of religion is the unique fulfilment of a need rooted in the very essence of human nature. This difference is shown in practice by the willingness of the Catholic to submit to the guidance of the Church, primarily of course in matters supernatural, whether of Faith or Morals, but also in matters which do not appear to have any direct connection with 'religion.' He is ready to recognize the wise authority of the Church in every department of human life whenever the Church sees fit to offer judgment or advice, even though he is aware that such pronouncements are not infallible expressions of revealed truth nor coercive of his assent.

Then we are priest-ridden after all? No, decisively no, it is not that. The truth is that the Catholic recognizes the true function of the Church and its true relation to human life. He looks upon the Church not as representing only a section of his life that is rigidly separated from his daily affairs. He looks upon it not merely as a place where he spends a perfunctory half hour or so on a Sunday, not as a sort of sedative and balance to the rush and clamour of secular affairs. He knows full well that it provides the means of fulfilling an urgent need of his very nature. Far from being extrinsic to his ordinary daily life, he knows that it is the only thing that can save human life from becoming in reality the futile meaningless thing it so often appears to be. He knows that without the Church a man is like one blind, groping about aimlessly unaware of the pitfalls on every side, who knows that he is in a desperate plight and without hope.

God forbid that we should try to 'rationalize' our religion; that is what modern civilization has tried to do, with the result that for many religion has ceased to be anything but a mere name. Nevertheless, it is true to say that a man must look at religion from a rational—*i.e.*, reasonable—

point of view. It is not enough, even, to take it for granted; he must try to see for himself what it is for, what is its real relation to human life, the why and wherefore of it. That is what is meant by being reasonable. That is why the normal Catholic can be said to be eminently reasonable about his religion and in his attitude to the Church. He does not try to prove or criticize the truths of Revelation which are above reason; that would be unreasonable. But he considers the nature of man and its needs, and so is able to judge of the true scope of religion and of the Church that God has given him; that is reasonable. The only reasonable way to discover the function of any society is to discover what it aims at, what need it fulfils, what it is meant to reach and to effect. We do not (or should not) form societies and then try to find some work for them to do. We recognize a need and then establish an organization to meet that need. Similarly as the Church is intended for human beings, we can only really appreciate the scope of religion and of the Church by discovering what need in human nature, if any, it fulfils. There is clearly room and need for thought. Comparatively few people care to think. Thinking is very hard; it is one of the hardest things in life, but it is worth while; it brings us up against hard facts, facts men instinctively shirk, but these too are worth while. The humdrum monotony of earthly life provides ready food for thought. Has it any real purpose? Do the ordinary things of daily life bring real satisfaction? Are they of any real use in themselves? Assuredly unless there is some goal other than these for which to strive, these things in themselves are futile; it is irrational to go on with life at all. But when, in addition to this, a man faces the elemental problems of suffering, disease and death, problems indeed which every sane man will try to solve, what is there in this transient life that will provide the solution?

There is one thing alone that explains man's ceaseless activity, that explains his dread of suffering and horror of death. It is this: the very motive force of human life is a craving for happiness, happiness complete and perfect, un-

changing and without end. He knows by bitter experience that the joys of this life do not bring him such happiness, even love itself does but whet the appetite for happiness. Great though this and other joys may perchance be, they leave still in his soul an aching need for the perfect good. This is what human nature needs, the perfect good that will satisfy its craving for happiness. And the Church of God, instrument of God Incarnate, is the one thing that can lead man to happiness.

The world of to-day is very conscious of what is called *Progress*; and one of the outstanding features of 'Progress' is the replacing of religion by Science. One need not for a moment deny either the advance in scientific knowledge or its possibilities for the help of mankind. But what, in point of fact, has progress in knowledge, in science, in medicine, in mechanics, actually done for the real happiness of man? What has it done to help solve those elemental problems or fulfil those fundamental needs of human life? Has it helped to give us a knowledge of the purpose of human life or of its relation to the universe at large? Because we can hurtle through the air to the ends of the earth, because we can speak with those a thousand miles away, because our telescopes have discovered a little more of the unexplored grandeur of the heavens, because of all the numerous inventions of modern science (poison gas, for example), there are not wanting those who think we are on the verge of solving the great problems of life and death, of finding happiness, as though this progress has done anything but complicate our already complicated existence, making it more unreal, more consuming, more anguished. And withal the realities of disease, of suffering, of death remain, their possibilities increased, and Science and Progress cannot tell us whence we are and whither we go, nor soften the real hardships of our journey.

Progress in natural knowledge should serve to increase the realization of our own ignorance. The wider it reaches, whether to the greater infinite of the universe or the lesser infinite of the microcosmic atom, the more profound and

vast appears the realm of unknown truth and unknown reality that lies still outside our grasp, even in the order of mere natural knowledge. How can men be such fools as to imagine that their puny minds are even on the way to a solution of the riddle of reality? The very knowledge of God and His Existence to which our reason inevitably leads us, leaves us on the threshold of an unknown realm of divine reality, on the threshold of the infinite, of what man has recognized from the beginning of time to contain, somehow or other could he but know it, the explanation of the purpose and ultimate end of life, namely the divine realm of the supernatural. A Catholic is no reactionary; he does not condemn progress. He merely desires to know, as any sane man should, whither progress is taking him, and whether he is really making towards his true objective. He would run, as St. Paul says, but 'not at an uncertainty.' Now the certainty towards which humanity is moving always is Death and the hereafter. If there is a meaning to life, a solution to its many problems, if there is happiness for a man, it is to be found there. Centuries before the coming of our Divine Redeemer, a pagan Greek philosopher discovered this fundamental truth, that true happiness, the essential need of man, could be found only in knowledge of and contact with the Maker and End of the Universe, God. He looked at human nature, its imperfections, its capabilities and its needs, the vast abyss of the soul that craved for perfect knowledge and perfect love, and saw, as any thinking man must see, that the key to the whole question was to be found in man's relation to and need for God. As St. Augustine has put it: 'Thou hast made us, O Lord, for Thyself: and our souls are not at ease till they find rest in thee' (*Conf.* I, ii).

A Catholic's point of view, then, is just that of a sane, reasonable man; he is keenly aware that religion is the one vital and essential necessity of human life, for religion is but a beginning of the knowledge of God, the beginning of contact with God. Religion is not a superfluity in life, it is not a boring duty that convention demands of us, it is not

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an occasional luxury to be resorted to when inclination draws, it is not something apart from ordinary human existence. Looked at even with the cold eye of unbiassed reason, religion is the one desperate need of human life.

Religion is something more, therefore, than the formal exercises of worship, like the Mass, the Sacraments, Prayer, and so on. These indeed play an important part, the most important part of all, but religion means the co-ordination of man's whole life in view of the end to which life is directed. To use a simple analogy, in the case of an athlete his whole activity centres round the race that he aims to win. To prepare he does a certain amount of actual running, but that is by no means all. He does other exercises, he eats certain foods and refrains from others, he does not smoke, and he moderates his drinking. In other words, not only his actual running, but everything that he does, even to the repression of his natural inclinations, is coloured and controlled by the thing he is aiming at. In exactly the same way, because man by his very nature is fashioned for, and if he is reasonable ought to be aiming at, eternal union with God in knowledge and love, not only his formal acts of worship but all the other operations of life are coloured and controlled by this end. It may mean, certainly will mean, that he cannot follow all his inclinations and natural instincts. This is as it should be; a man is superior to an animal; he is to be guided by his intellect, not by his instincts.

How is a man to know what religion should mean for him, how is he to be sure that he is taking the right path through life? He needs a guide, a trainer if you will, and that guide, that trainer, is the Church. For the very reason that religion implies contact with God in the supernatural order, it demands a fully competent teaching authority; and for the very reason that religion covers, in the sense explained, the whole range of human activity, the Church must exercise guidance and control in every branch of human life.

To appreciate the significance of the Church, therefore, it is clear that one must first appreciate the significance

of human nature and its ultimate purpose and destiny. What that purpose and destiny is we can know only by divine revelation, because although it is quite true that, by examining the nature and the needs of man, we can reach the definite conclusion that some contact with God is essential to him, yet we could not possibly know, unless God Himself had told us, for how exalted a destiny He created us. The knowledge and contact with God open to man is shown by revelation to be the intimate personal knowledge of friendship and the intimate personal union of the love of perfect friends. That is the astounding and incomprehensible fact that is revealed to us by God. He loves us and desires us to love Him with the intimacy and equality of the most perfect form of love, friendship.

Whatever else friendship implies, it implies unselfishness and sacrifice. Many of the problems of life can be solved at once by this notion of sacrifice alone. But the whole of life in all its details is given a new meaning and a clear purpose when once it is realized that God intends it as a period of probation in which men may show themselves worthy to receive the reward which nature craves. It is God Who desires our friendship, Who gives us the nature we have. He creates our body and soul with all the ideals, all the desires, all the needs, all the capabilities, all the temptations, all the instincts that go to making up a man. He gives man his lower or animal nature as well as his higher or rational nature, but He gives both for a definite purpose and He intends man's rational nature to guide and control his animal nature, to use its diverse faculties for a definite purpose—and that purpose is the attainment of true happiness, namely Himself. In giving man grace and thus making him capable of these divine things, God does not change or disregard man's nature: He completes and perfects it. Our contacts with God are through the nature He has given us. This is its purpose: for this God intended it.

Let men not be blinded to the truth about human nature by those pseudo-wise who prate of self-expression by the indulging of the natural instincts. Is a drunken sot to

be taken as the model of human self-expression? Why not, if indulgence of the other animal passions is to be so defended? The corporal desires and instincts of man have indeed their purpose and their part to play. There is a voice of conscience in everyone, which even Science and Progress cannot entirely destroy; and any sane man should see, as the Catholic sees, that when these or any other desire or occupation of man draws him away from the main purpose of life, it is wrong, it is in a sense insane. It is through his human nature, and every part of it, that a man shall find happiness, that he shall find God.

It is for this reason that God, wishing to save man from the dreadful results of his own sin, chose the way of the Incarnation, became man, took a human nature like ours. He wished to show us, by His life and His sufferings, as well as by His death, that it is through our human nature that we must reach God. It is precisely for this reason that while yet on earth he founded an organization, a society, whereby man might be able to accommodate his human nature to the great purpose of sharing in the fruits of that Redemption. Having created human nature, He knew its needs and He knew especially its need of help and guidance. It was in view of these needs that he founded what we call the Church.

It is clear, therefore, that the Church has a very definite function, not merely in relation to the formal acts of worship of God, but in relation to human life as a whole. Our divine Lord made a notable reply to the Pharisees who complained to Him that the disciples did not observe the Sabbath. 'The Sabbath was made for man,' He said, 'not man for the Sabbath.' There is a very real sense in which it is true to say that the Church also was made for man, not man for the Church. With its organization and its powers, it was instituted by our divine Redeemer precisely in view of the nature and practical needs of man. It was intended by Him to provide a sure means whereby man might live his life well and so gain the ultimate goal, whereby, as we say, he might work out his salvation. If this

ultimate purpose covers every branch of human operation, it is clear that the full significance of religion and of the Church implies equally a very practical relation and urgent concern with every department of life. From this it follows that the Catholic is right in recognizing the authority of the Church of Christ in the many aspects of life which do not seem to have an immediate connection with the worship of God. In listening to the voice of his Church he is acting like a sane and reasonable man. He is not yielding up his personal liberty. He knows that liberty does not really mean that he can do just as he pleases, especially if in so doing he sins against his own nature. There is a law of nature as binding upon his moral conscience as is the law of gravity upon his body.

The Catholic rightly regards the Church, therefore, as the pivot and centre of his whole life in all its phases, not merely, be it remembered, of his 'religious' life in the narrowest sense of the word, but of his moral, social, yes and even business life. The Catholic's concept of the Church is from this point of view merely that of an eminently reasonable, thinking, sensible man, a man who has not allowed himself to be blinded to the meaning of life, to its difficulties and problems, but tries to see these things in their true light, above all a man who has realized that this life is futile and meaningless and worthless unless it is seen in its relation to eternity; a Catholic's view of the Church is that of a sane man who knows that the material details of this earthly life are not the most important things, that there is no happiness to be found in them; it is that of a man who knows that this life is merely a pathway leading to eternity, either to the eternity of happiness with God or to the eternity of torment without God; it is the sane reasonableness of a man who knows that religion is the supreme and urgent necessity of his life, and that the Church of Christ is the one only society that will guarantee the validity of this religion, that will enable him to shape his life rightly in view of his eternal future. It is, in short, the recognition of the one necessary means of reasonable service.

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