

READING

An open letter to a Catholic friend

MY DEAR JOHN,

When you came to see me the other day, we talked of the books you had been reading since we last met. You were very full of a book by an Indian philosopher, and you seemed, I thought, rather surprised to find that I, who share your interests, was reluctant to read books of that sort. You probably told yourself that I was hopelessly narrow-minded. True, not one of the books you mentioned was by a Catholic; but there were, you thought, many books, even on subjects like mysticism, in which non-Catholics had shown that they had much to teach us. And there was I, quite impenitently ignorant of this, slightly impatient of that. Did I suppose that everything that came from outside the Catholic Church could be condemned unread? Did I think that a Catholic need take no interest in what able and sincere men were thinking and saying? Was I content to be a self-styled pillar of unconsidered truth, and thus to save myself all effort of mind? I think I caught something of this in your mood.

Now, we all like to seem well-read, and I am not deaf to the reproach of being ignorant of the wisdom of the world; but there is something to be said for my point of view. I will put it in the simplest possible way, and say that it is all a question of time.

If my attitude puzzles you, if you wonder a little that a man for whom you can feel friendship should be so bigoted, your attitude assuredly puzzles me. Consider your case. You are a Catholic, and therefore you are inevitably committed to the belief that a

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divine, *the* divine revelation has been given to the Church. You believe that all other doctrines are either wrong or incomplete. In a sense, of course, this revelation is very simple; children can learn it in their Catechism, and it is the wisdom of millions of unlearned people. Nevertheless, in this simplicity theologians and mystics have for nineteen centuries found unfathomable depths. To-day, as in former ages, men who have been taught to regard the Catholic tradition as fit only for a museum are finding with a shock of surprise that it is fresh, and living, and profound. There is an immense Catholic literature, possessing what, by your own profession, other writings must be held to lack. Now, you must allow me to say bluntly that of this literature you are almost entirely ignorant. You have read thoughtful books by men whose names mean nothing to me; but St. Augustine and St. Thomas are mere names to you, and St. John of the Cross or St. Catherine are not even names. You do not read what the great Catholic writers have written; you do not know what Catholic writers are writing to-day.

This would not surprise me in everybody. There are, I know, Catholics who for lack of education or opportunity do not read at all, in whom we can recognise the divinity of a doctrine that is at once a guide to the simple and inexhaustible by the learned. And there are non-Catholics, with whom I am not now concerned. But you are a Catholic, and you do read; so that in you, and in many like you, this ignorance is strange, and it has results that are not less disastrous for being unrealised. For it comes to this: by the Catholic faith your actions are ruled, and to the Catholic faith you look for the satisfaction of those deeper feelings which that very faith fosters in you; but when you come to think—and you must think—you look outside the Church, and so

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prepare the divorce of mind from heart that may, even with you, end in utter tragedy. Although you would not admit it, it is certainly true that the Catholic religion is to you a matter of simple pious practices, and of beliefs, sometimes obvious, sometimes rather unreal and incredible. Your obstinate loyalty does you honour; yet if you feel that profound speculation, a deep knowledge of humanity, and an exalted mysticism, are to be sought outside the narrow compass of simple orthodoxy, will you not inevitably come to feel that your mind has little to do with your faith? Will not loyalty come to consist in something not unlike the spirit that has been unkindly attributed to the ideal party man in politics? Can a thinking man indefinitely stand the strain of believing that he must deny, in the interests of a blind and unintelligent faith, everything that he considers noblest and most sincere in human thought?

Everything about you has grown since you were a child. Your needs have grown, your responsibilities have grown, your knowledge has grown, and your emotions and passions have grown. In every way you are a man, and your mind is the mind of a man; but, for all your reading, your grasp of your own religion is the grasp of the boy you used to be. You meet a man's needs with a child's religion. You might as well attack an aeroplane with bow and arrows. If there is any grave difficulty, you will think it is your religion that is inadequate; and you will hunt the more after springs that are shallow, or even tainted, while you ignore the wells in your home that are not dried up, but are too deep for you.

'Then,' you say, 'I am to box myself up in my own religious circle, however wide it may be, and I am not to know what other men are thinking?'

I put it to you that it is a question of time. You are a busy man, and you could hardly hope to know

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all that can be known about your own religion. What you so admire in other systems may be in it all the time. Some of the things you admire may be false, and you have no standard of judgment, as a Catholic should have. Is it not reasonable to ask you first to get what understanding you can of your own creed? Just compare your knowledge of your religion with your knowledge of your profession. Are you as well equipped for that by which you live so much more essentially and vitally?

If you read for your own benefit, surely this is the sensible course to follow. If you read to know other men's minds and so to bring them to a knowledge of the truth, what can you do, if you know all they have to say and know nothing of the truth for which they are groping?

I urge, then, that we should look at home before we wander abroad. If we do this, it becomes, as I said, a question of time. Will you have time for the Hindu mystics, the Theosophists, the Buddhists, the Modernists, and all their kind? You seem to me to be a fairly busy man.

Yours sincerely,

A. E. H. SWINSTEAD.