

AN EVANGELICAL APPROACH TO CATHOLICISM

PRINCIPAL JOHN OMAN, invited to explain why he was not a Catholic, began with the following memorable and instructive words:

For disbelieving anything there may be three good reasons. The first is that it is incredible; the second that it is not proved; and the third that it is inconsistent with beliefs conceived to be higher and more certain. On all three grounds I disbelieve the Roman claims, but I will deal with the last first, because, though less often dwelt upon, it is what is most decisive, and, what is more, it has a right to be. Nothing proves so much the reality of any faith as the making of contrary views incredible. There is a kind of facile catholicity of accepting all sorts of views, which is due merely to no one of them being sufficiently in the light to show that the others are in darkness. Moreover, by their positive direction our lives should be determined: and when we steadfastly pursue what we believe to be the higher road, the others simply reject themselves. In this way, I am not a Roman Catholic, primarily for the reason that all my conclusions regarding life and history are not only inconsistent with it, but seem to me higher as well as more certain.¹

This, the reason which on analysis will be found to be the one that most powerfully withholds men, especially thinking and religious men, from becoming Catholics, is, curiously, the one of which least account is taken by the zealous apostle and apologist. We may do our utmost to try to show that our Faith is not so inherently "incredible"; we may do our utmost to "prove"; we may strive to the best of our ability to meet the other on the same ground and be all things to all men. With the rational will we be reasonable; with the scientist scientific; with the poet poetic: to the Orthodox we appeal to the common ground of the Eastern Fathers and the First Seven Councils; for the Evangelical we shall trot out our "proofs from Scripture." Yet, more often than not, we fail to persuade.

And, more often than not, it is because we have failed to take account of the other's fondest, and perhaps thoroughly

¹ *Why I am and Why I am not a Catholic*, p. 232 (Cassell).

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sound, convictions. We make no impression, not because our argument is faulty, but because the conclusion is felt to be incoherent with what is already held, and perhaps rightly held. What we have to say is felt less to be untrue than to be irrelevant; or, more exactly, to be untrue because irrelevant. But the skilful and understanding apostle will often be less concerned to "prove" Catholicism, to show the credibility of Catholicism, even to remove misapprehensions of Catholicism, than to show the relevance of Catholicism to truths or partial truths already apprehended. For Catholicism, because it is Catholic, is all-relevant.

Hence, quite probably, the failure of much of our apostolic effort among all sorts of non-Catholics; more especially with non-Catholics of profound religious feelings and convictions; but most especially with Evangelical Christians. We quote our texts from our common Scriptures; we do our sum; and we show, we think irrefutably, that the answer is the Church of Rome. In our simplicity we marvel that we do not convince. We have failed to understand that the Evangelical cannot assent because, "prove" what we may, he cannot see that the Church of Rome has anything to do with the Gospel as he has learned it and as he passionately believes it. It is at best irrelevant, inconsistent, and therefore unacceptable. We for our part do not study his faith and are unable, in consequence, to see the relevance of Catholicism to it. So, between those who profess themselves Christians and who have become separated into two great mutually uncomprehending groups as a result of the upheavals of the sixteenth century, a great gulf is fixed. Less are they now two opposed, intolerant and hostile camps than, what is more tragic and less easily remediable, two groups entirely disparate and uncomprehending.

For this reason a book² published early this year, written by the Subwarden of the Anglican Theological College at Lincoln, deserves far more serious attention, even from Catholic readers, than it seems to have received. It well

² *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, by the Rev. Arthur Michael Ramsey, M.A. (Longmans; 7/6).

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sums up the tragic situation that faces us, and the way in which it must be met:

When reunion has been discussed, there has often seemed to be an *impasse* between two types of Christianity. On the one hand, there is the Catholic tradition which thinks of the Church as a divine institution, the gift of God to man, and which emphasizes outward order and continuity and the validity of its ministry and sacraments. To the exponents of this tradition, unity is inconceivable apart from the historic structure of the Church. On the other hand, there is the Evangelical tradition which sees the divine gift not in the institution but in the Gospel of God, and which thinks less of Church order than of the Word of God and of justification by faith. This tradition indeed emphasizes the divine society of the redeemed, but it finds it hard to understand the Catholic's thought and language about order and validity and his insistence upon the historic Episcopate. The two traditions puzzle one another. The one seems legalistic; the other seems individualistic. . .

A fresh line of approach seems needed. Those who cherish the Catholic Church and its historic order need to expound its meaning, not in legalistic and institutionalist language, but in evangelical language as the expression of the Gospel of God . . . (p. 8).

To outline the possibilities of such a fresh line of approach is the task that Mr. Ramsey has set himself: "to study the Church's order not in institutionalist terms but in terms of the Gospel, and to ask (to give one example) whether Episcopacy tells of some aspect of the Gospel which would lack expression if Episcopacy were to be abandoned. Thinking along these lines, the author reached the conclusion that the structure of the Catholic Church has great significance in the Gospel of God, and that Apostolic succession is important on account of its evangelical meaning" (p. vi).

The book falls short of perfection owing to two serious limitations. The first arises from the restriction which the author has imposed upon himself by his very method; in this sense we may say that the strength of the book is also its weakness. The determination to avoid "institutionalist terms" has led Mr. Ramsey to pay too little heed to the explicit "institutionalism" to be found in the New Testament: his treatment of the crucial question of the character of the Apostolic office as conceived and instituted by the Master is, in consequence, inadequate and insufficiently

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convincing. A more serious defect arises from the fact that, in his evangelical approach to Catholicism, the author has not clearly comprehended his *terminus ad quem*. Himself an Anglican, his apprehension of Catholicism is usually inadequate, not seldom mistaken. He is, for example, haunted by the spectre of "a Papacy which claims to be a source of truth over and above the general mind of the Church and which wields an authority such as depresses the due working of the other functions of the one Body" (p. 65). His thoughtful chapter on *The Truth of God*, though containing much that is fundamental, sound and precious, betrays an inadequate idea of verbal revelation and the nature and function of dogma. Here and there the remarkable freshness and originality of outlook and treatment are marred by the repetition of hoary misunderstandings common to the literature of "anti-Roman controversy." The Second Part of the book, an historical sketch which expressly disclaims thoroughness, suffers in particular from misunderstandings of historic Catholicism; though it is to be remarked that many of the author's criticisms of post-Reformation and contemporary Catholic practice are drawn confessedly from Catholic sources.

We prefer, however, to dwell on the book's positive achievements rather than on its shortcomings, grave as many of these may be. Its value lies in the fact that it is a pioneer effort, and in large measure a highly successful effort, to bridge the gulf between the "Catholic" and the "Evangelical" outlooks and mentalities. It succeeds in showing that an organized Catholic Church is not merely contained in the New Testament writings but is the necessary complement of the Gospel message itself, is indeed so much part and parcel of it that without it the Gospel message cannot be understood nor lived except in an emasculated and truncated form which enervates and dilutes its own content. This is a considerable achievement; and it should have the effect not only of making Catholicism (though, sadly, itself in truncated form) intelligible and acceptable to the evangelical, but may well enrich our own understanding of the inexhaustible riches of our Catholic inheritance.

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The earlier chapters, in particular, are superbly done; a masterly example of what may be called synthetic positive theology. They would be remarkable if only for their style, for their simplicity of diction and exposition, for the blending of solid, exact thinking with crisp, vigorous language, for the complete absence of that jargon and dead metaphor which often makes the Mystery of the Church so uninviting in the literature associated with the Liturgical Movement.

Mr. Ramsey sees that, for the modern mind, the problem of "the Church" is the problem of its *relevance*. More precisely, "the Church" does not impinge itself on the modern mind as a problem at all: it is irrelevant; it does not "matter."

Throughout the centuries the Church of God has had both its devoted adherents, who would die for it, and its persecutors, who have sought to destroy it. Thus, both in love and in hatred, men have reckoned with it seriously, and have been compelled to think out their attitude towards it. But at the present time there is a very different mood widespread, one of apathy and bewilderment which asks, "What is this strange thing, the Christian Church? Whatever can it mean? What relation have its services, its hierarchy, its dogmas, its archaic and beautiful language, to the daily troubles of mankind?" This bewilderment leaves many to pass the Church by, since it seems to do and say so little about the things that matter supremely—world peace, social reform, the economic tangle. "And is not the Church itself divided with controversy?" Surrounded by men and women too apathetic even to be hostile, the Christians are driven to think out where the relevance of the Church really lies (p. 3).

One remembers grimly that there are countries where the Church is still regarded as supremely worth the extremes of love and hate; but as an estimate of the situation in our own country the description can hardly be gainsaid. To most of our fellow-countrymen the Church is just one of "the Churches" and all of them are equally irrelevant. The majority, even of Christians, have lost any sense of its real meaning. Mr. Ramsey shows how the real meaning of the Church lies where the Evangelical least expects to find it and feels it to be least relevant: in the Gospel of the dying and rising of Christ. He outlines the divine economy of salvation: its foreshadowing in the Old Testament; its fulfilment in the

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Incarnation, the Passion and the Resurrection. "One died for all." But "therefore all died" and through assimilation to Him in His dying and rising are all to find salvation. That is the Gospel message, for "this event, born in eternity and uttering the voice of God from another world, pierces deeply into our order of time, so that the death and resurrection of Christ were known not only as something 'without' but also as something 'within' the disciples who believed" (p. 28). We are shown the consequences of this: the *social* character of the economy of salvation expressed in the Gospels in the idea of the Kingdom, and in the Epistles in the idea of the mystical Body; how this in turn postulates a universal *Ecclesia*, a Catholic Church, with visible unity, hierarchy, episcopacy, Baptism, Eucharist, liturgy, creeds. Each in turn is seen to be supremely relevant to the Gospel even as the evangelical understands it; each to be its necessary corollary without which the Gospel message is itself incomplete.

We will not attempt to summarize Mr. Ramsey's closely thought-out and closely written achievement; it must be studied, with due critical discernment, in his own pages. But we think that his book is even more important as a promise and a hope than as an achievement; for its suggestions than for its accomplishment. To the apologist and the reunionist alike it should be an inspiration to tackle seemingly insoluble problems in a new and more fruitful way. But, above all, it discloses an unfamiliar line of approach to the penetration and appreciation of the Mystery of the Church; and even the Church's own members are not always fully aware and appreciative of her essential relevance to themselves in the divine plan of redemption.

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