

A Remarkable Consensus

Michael Dummett

What reason is there for belonging to the Catholic Church, or to any other church, for that matter? An answer that some people would give is: there may be plenty of good *reasons*, but there is no *rationale*. A good reason for belonging to the Catholic Church would be that you had always been a Catholic and that you felt at home in it; another would be that you were living in a Catholic country, and no other Christian church amounted to more than a sect there. These, of course, are personal reasons, applying to some people and not to others; as such, they contrast with any purported rationale. A rationale, if there was one, for belonging to a particular church would be a proposition holding good generally and not relating to certain individuals more than to others, that, in virtue of its truth, constituted a reason, perhaps a compelling reason, for belonging to that church rather than any other. Is it plausible to hold that there is no rationale, in this sense, for belonging to the Catholic Church, or, conversely, for not belonging to it?

We know that men and women have died rather than renounce, or rather than adhere to, the Catholic Church: if there is no rationale in the matter, they were pitifully deluded. There is no sense to be made of the history of Christianity unless we regard one proposition as held in common by Catholics and Orthodox, and rejected by Protestants. The proposition is that it is enjoined on us, whatever the provocation, never to take any step to disrupt the unity of the Church: let us call this proposition the paramouncy of unity. No-one would deny that Christians, and not only the generality of Christians, but the highest authorities of the Christian Church, have often gone woefully astray. The provocations to separate oneself from what appears to have become an unclean, and certainly an unfaithful, body have therefore often been powerful. Often, too, individuals have had the heaviest burdens laid upon them, burdens that have frequently been unjust and have always appeared unjust to them. Some have cast these burdens off by leaving the Church; others have endured them rather than separate themselves from Catholic unity. Even those who left have done so only after great inner turmoil: such turmoil would be senseless if they had not held the paramouncy of unity, if they had thought that there was no rationale for continued membership of the Catholic Church, but had deemed it a

424

matter of personal comfort only.

The principle of the paramouncy of unity does not of itself decide its application: if there is schism, who is breaking away from whom? To which side does the principle then require us to cleave? One of the most poignant aspects of the split between Eastern and Western Christians lies in its having been unclear to either what the answers to these questions were, which is why they have remained divided for a millennium although both accept the principle. But, with the Reformation, there was no such uncertainty: the Protestant Reformers did not even pretend to form a rival Catholic Church that could, with equal right, make the same claim as the Roman Church to continuity with the previously undivided Christian body. It follows that the rationale for *not* belonging to the Catholic Church, or, more accurately, for belonging to a Protestant one, lies in a denial of the paramouncy of unity. Conversely, if that principle is false, if there is no such duty laid upon us, if, rather, we are free, and may in some cases be bound in duty, to break away when the Christian body to which we belong ceases—or its leaders cease—to give recognisable witness to Christian truth, then there is no justification for the continued existence of the Roman Church. In that case the only objective reason for its survival is the tenacity of institutional power: there would then, for example, have been no legitimate answer to the Reformers' objections to the interference of a distant foreign authority in the affairs of the national church.

Indeed, I think that more follows, namely that acceptance of the paramouncy of unity is a condition for membership of the Catholic Church. I do not mean that it is a condition imposed by the authorities of that Church, but that it is a condition of its being decent to remain a member of it. Suppose you reject the principle, and think it of little intrinsic importance to which institutional church one belongs: then respect for the beliefs of others ought to lead you to separate yourself from a church the rationale for whose existence is adherence to the principle; by remaining within it, you are treating unseriously the beliefs of those who do adhere to the principle, and whose acceptance of it may be their chief reason for belonging to that church, and, by implication, treating *them* unseriously, as people who do not matter.

The Roman Church may justly boast that at no time in her history have there been in communion with her only Christians of the Latin rite. Nevertheless, Eastern rite Catholics are, comparatively, so few in number as to appear mere appendages to an essentially Latin Church, an appearance expressed by the disparaging term 'Uniates'. In consequence of this, the Church has been, since the schism, a maimed and incomplete body, no longer vivified by one entire life-source of Christian tradition. Before the Council of Ferrara/Florence, repeated attempts to restore unity with the Christian East had been made. One reason for the failure

of that last attempt, more than half a millennium ago, was Catholic triumphalism: after the Decree of Union was signed at Florence, a plaque was put up in the Duomo, saying, 'Here the Greeks renounced their errors'. Since that failure, there have been no further official negotiations leading to reconciliation; when you have been maimed for nine hundred years, you cease to notice the abnormality of your condition. Yet a healing of this breach is more desperately urgent than ever: if Catholics and Orthodox, who differ so profoundly in spiritual tradition, yet so insignificantly in doctrine, and who share a belief in the paramountcy of unity, cannot overcome the obstacles to communion between them, what hope is there for Christian reunion? The modern ecumenical movement appears stalled, having achieved nothing positive save a change of attitude: it will continue to be stalled until that rent in the Church which preceded the Reformation by centuries is mended.

How can it be mended? The Orthodox are terrified of domination by a monarchical Papacy; but, despite Vatican II, the Papacy remains as monarchical as ever. One effect of the schism with the East has been the blurring of two distinct roles of the Pope: he is universal Pontiff, but he is also Patriarch of the West, and, despite the grossly inflated claims advanced by mediaeval Popes, some of his powers derive from the latter rather than the former function. This can be clearly seen from the Conciliar Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches, according to which the Eastern Patriarchs have the right of appointment of bishops within their jurisdictions. I do not know how healthy it is that, within the Latin churches, the Pope keeps episcopal appointments so firmly in his hands; but it is evident that he does so as Patriarch, not as Pontiff. The near-sighted obsession with the grandeur of the Papacy, to the detriment of the ancient dignity of the Patriarchate, was vividly symbolised by a petty decision made during the Council, that Cardinals take precedence over Patriarchs in procession. Reconciliation with the Orthodox and with other separated Eastern Christians is urgent. It can be achieved only if the Catholic Church starts to dismantle that concentration of power at the centre which is unnecessary for the Pope's role as the focus of unity and which is a side-effect of the schism. In the process, the Eastern Churches already in communion with Rome must cease to be exotic but peripheral appendages; they could, for instance, participate in new missionary endeavours. The Ethiopian Church, for one, is thoroughly African in style and spirit; its separated branch has even made converts among Jamaican Rastafarians, and its Catholic branch could well attract converts in many parts of Africa. The analogue is also true of the Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches in India. At the same time, the dignity of the Patriarchs should be restored: they could be brought into the centre of the Church's government, say by means of a Council of Patriarchs endowed with specific powers. It will take long for such

426

measures to create on the part of separated Eastern Christians the trust in Catholic intentions needed for them so much as to entertain the idea of reunion; but they are long overdue.

If the paramountcy of unity is indeed the will of God, we cannot deduce from that that there are any compensations for the sacrifices it may demand from us: but we have been promised a compensation, all the same. It was not promised us that the apostolic succession would not include hireling shepherds, who would promote grossly unchristian attitudes, modes of behaviour, actions and even beliefs: the history of the Church is full of such mitred and tiaraed hirelings. It was not promised that the leaders of the Church will always give guidance in the face of evil, or that they would have either physical or moral courage: so we should not take it as calling in question whether we are truly in the Church of Christ that, more than forty years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it should be possible to speak about an 'emerging consensus' among Catholic bishops in favour of nuclear deterrence; we were never promised that we should not be afflicted with such lack of leadership or moral cowardice. One promise was made, however: that, if we kept the bond of unity, we should be able to place entire confidence in the Church's solemn pronouncements on the content of our faith. If such confidence is misplaced, the Catholic Church is a fraud; for the Church has reiterated throughout the centuries that that promise is from God. If the Church is a fraud there can be no justification for belonging to it: no justification for complicity with fraud.

Of course, a guarantee that, if one believes a proposition, one will have a true belief is itself a ground for believing that proposition; one could not feel sure that, if one believed it, it would be true, while leaving it open that it might be false if one chose not to believe it. Hence, if one believes the Church not to be a fraud, one is committed to accepting whatever has been solemnly defined to be of faith. Indeed, with or without definitions, one is committed so to understand the faith that, however else it may have gone astray, the Church cannot be seen as having falsified its content. We are bound to maintain unity with one another; we are also bound to maintain unity with the Christians of past times.

This is not to reject the notion of development; but there are limits to what can be viewed as developing out of what. A woman professor of theology at an American Catholic university was recently in trouble with her bishop for denying that Jesus was conceived by a virgin; she was allowed to continue to proclaim her view, on condition only that she did not represent it as part of the Church's teaching. The newspaper account I read reported her as claiming her opinion as a legitimate development of a traditional one. Obviously, it is no 'development': it is a straightforward repudiation of something embodied in two Gospels, in ancient

creeds and in countless liturgical texts.

Equally, questions of interpretation may, and sometimes need, to be raised concerning the doctrinal pronouncements of the Church; but, again, there are limits to what is a possible interpretation. The words 'conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary' cannot possibly be understood to mean 'conceived by Mary, of a human father, before her marriage'; the words 'rose again from the dead on the third day' cannot possibly be understood to mean 'the corpse of Jesus decayed in the tomb, but the disciples had some kind of revelatory experiences that convinced them that Jesus was somehow alive with God'. Hence, if someone's view concerning these matters is represented by the second phrase in each of these pairs, he implicitly believes the Catholic Church to be a fraud.

Unfortunately, reunion with the Orthodox is threatened, not merely by triumphalism and papal monarchism, but by the prevalence, at least on some accounts, of such doctrinal revisionism in some circles in the Western Church. In a review of Hans Küng's *Eternal Life?* in *The New York Review of Books* of 14 June 1984, Thomas Sheehan, Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University in Chicago, spoke of a 'liberal consensus' now dominant among Catholic scholars and taught in most Catholic seminaries. He summarised this consensus as follows:

In Roman Catholic seminaries ... it is now common teaching that Jesus of Nazareth did not assert any of the messianic claims that the Gospels attribute to him and that he died without believing that he was Christ or the Son of God, not to mention the founder of a new religion.

One would be hard pressed to find a Catholic Biblical scholar who maintains that Jesus thought he was the divine Son of God who preexisted from all eternity as the second person of the Trinity before he became a human being. Strictly speaking, the Catholic exegetes say, Jesus knew nothing about the Trinity and never mentioned it in his preaching.

Nor did Jesus know that his mother, Mary, had remained a virgin in the very act of conceiving him, let alone, as Thomas Aquinas thought, that she delivered him while her hymen remained intact. Most likely Mary told Jesus what she herself knew of his origins: that he had a natural father and was born not in Bethlehem but in Nazareth, indeed without the ministrations of angels, shepherds, and late-arriving wise men bearing gifts. She could have told her son the traditional nativity story only if she had managed to read, long before they were written, the inspiring but unhistorical Christmas legends that first appeared in the gospels of Matthew and

Luke fifty years after her son had died.

Moreover, according to the consensus, although Jesus had a reputation as a faith healer during his life, it is likely that he performed very few such 'miracles', perhaps only two. (Probably he never walked on water.) And it seems that he ordained no priests and consecrated no bishops, indeed that he did not know that he was supposed to establish the Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church with St. Peter as the first in a long line of infallible popes. In fact, Jesus had no intention of breaking with Judaism in order to constitute a separate Church. Rather, he restricted his mission to Jews and called on his disciples to repent, to celebrate the dawning of God's kingdom, and perhaps to expect the imminent arrival of an apocalyptic figure called the 'Son of Man', whom Jesus never identified with himself.

Concerning K ng's views, Sheehan reports:

It seems that he (K ng) leaves the corpse of Jesus, corrupted by physical death, in whatever tomb it may now occupy.

He (Jesus) saw himself not as God or the Messiah, but as a Jewish prophet.

The next event (after the Crucifixion) that can be dated in Christian history is not Jesus's emergence from his tomb but the birth of the disciples' faith in him. Shortly after he died, his followers in Galilee came to believe that God had vindicated Jesus, now miraculously alive in heaven, by designating him the future Son of Man. That hazy apocalyptic figure, imminently expected but heretofore unidentified, now took the form of a known human being. Jesus the proclaimer of the kingdom of God became the one proclaimed, soon to appear in glory.

The review goes on to say that the story of the empty tomb and of the Lord's eating with the disciples—in fact, all the Jerusalem appearances—were later additions, 'presumably with the purpose of making the notion of Easter more tangible'. 'New Testament exegetes argue that the authors of the Gospels used these apocalyptic tropes not to describe historical events but to express in imaginative and symbolic language the belief that Jesus was somehow alive with God and would someday reappear. Later generations took the images as literal fact'.

It is of course preposterous to suggest that there was some well-known literary convention by which a story such as that of the discovery of the empty tomb could be recognised as purely symbolic, but that, in a few decades, this convention had been forgotten and the Gospels accordingly misunderstood throughout the centuries until now: even those who suggest it point to no signposts in the texts whereby a reader

versed in the convention could discriminate the symbolic from the factual, and cite no incontestable examples of the supposed convention. Talk of this kind makes no pretensions to plausibility: it is a 'trope' allowing those who engage in it to avoid conceding outright that they regard the New Testament writers as fraudulent. But in the context of so massive an apostasy as that claimed by Professor Sheehan, the point is minor.

Views like those commended by Sheehan might be combined with some religious belief in which Jesus played an important role, but not with anything recognisable as the Christian religion. If, in speaking of the Son of Man, Jesus was not referring to himself, then the Gospel accounts of his words are hopelessly garbled, and we cannot claim to know what he taught. The most orthodox must allow that the time of revelation did not come to a close with the Ascension; in particular, revelation was needed to instruct the disciples that Gentiles were to be admitted to the Christian community by baptism without their having to become Jews. But, if Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah, we ought not to give him the title 'Christ', nor claim that the Messiah has already come; if he did not believe himself divine, then we have no ground to do so, and hence commit idolatry in praying to him; if he knew nothing of the Trinity, then we know nothing of the Trinity, and have no warrant whatever for supposing that there is a Trinity; if he intended to found no community, then the Church has no standing and is an impostor institution; if he conferred no authority upon the apostles, no bishops, no priests and no popes have any status not allotted by men and rescindable by men. I refrain from enquiring whether the consensus of which Sheehan speaks allows that Jesus intended to institute the Eucharist for future celebration by his followers. If he did, he must surely have had some very odd ideas about himself, given all those ideas which we are assured he did *not* have; but, if he did not, one may wonder what those who adhere to the 'consensus' imagine that they are doing when they celebrate Mass (for they must, overwhelmingly, be clergy).

It is easy to understand how someone may come to accept the views reported by Sheehan; it is a straightforward case of loss of faith. Until very recently, those who suffered such a loss would, with pain, or a sense of liberation, or both, have separated themselves from the Church: but it is a grave offence against charity to wish or demand this of anybody without knowing the secrets of their hearts. What, without lack of charity, we may legitimately find astonishing is this: that people who have adopted opinions which imply that, from the very earliest times, the Catholic Church, claiming to have a mission from God to safeguard divinely revealed truth, has taught and insisted on the acceptance of falsehoods, falsehoods enshrined in her most sacred books, and is, accordingly, as much of a fraud as her enemies have always maintained,

should think it proper to teach such views to those in training for the priesthood. And, indeed, their actions are helping to transform the Church into something distinctly fraudulent. On the one hand, we have an official teaching on contraception which, in many Western countries, is, I understand, simply repudiated by most practising Catholics; on the other, a clergy which, to the extent to which Professor Sheehan is right and the seminary teachers are successful, holds a whole battery of Liberal Protestant beliefs which they are chary of revealing to their flocks, so violently do those beliefs conflict with any traditional Catholic understanding of the faith and with most of the laity's understanding of it. The monolithic Church was never a reality and is not an ideal; but the divergence that now obtains between what the Catholic Church purports to believe and what large or important sections of in fact believe ought, in my view, to be tolerated no longer: not if there is to be a rationale for belonging to that Church; not if there is to be any hope of reunion with the other half of Christiandom; not if the Catholic Church is not to be a laughing-stock in the eyes of the world.

Reason, Will and Legalism

Daniel Westberg

Catholic moral theology since Vatican II has largely turned its back on certain aspects of the tradition of moral theology inherited from the time of the Counter-Reformation. What has been rejected is a false view of natural law, legalistic casuistry, and a mechanistic approach to morals which they imply. Quite rightly, theologians have sought more creative, more flexible and above all more spiritual frameworks. We need to be clear, however, about what we are rejecting and for what reason.

For some time, certain Catholic scholars have pointed out the dangers of a voluntaristic view of the nature of law, i.e. seeing law as primarily the product of the will (of man or of God).¹ Francisco Suarez, very important in the development of the theory of natural law, has now become the object of attack, and is being blamed for much of the distortion of the Thomist understanding of law.² William May has