

## BOSSUET, THE CHURCH AND THE PROTESTANTS

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TOWARDS the middle of the seventeenth century, it began to seem that the differences between Protestant and Catholic in France might soon be settled, and that the great division between Christians, little more than a century old, could be healed. That hope faded, but the Bishop of Meaux was one of those who, having caught it in his student days, never entirely lost it, and whose work for re-union, which made him the greatest Christian peacemaker in Europe, remains as a point of departure for all those who set the same hope before them today.

A great deal of what I have to say is drawn from Canon A.-G. Martimort's book, *Le Gallicanisme de Bossuet*,<sup>1</sup> a richly detailed piece of work which enlightens us about a great expanse of seventeenth-century history at the same time as it isolates and relegates firmly to past history a particular episode in French Catholic opinion. It sends one back to Bossuet, to his sermons and to his controversial and historical writing, and one finds him abundant in material still relevant today, one of those who make the Counter-Reformation period as much a part of the tradition from which we learn as the fathers and scholastics.

At the age of twenty-four, in 1651, Bossuet defended his theses at the Sorbonne for the doctorate of divinity. His minor thesis was on the Church, and already the lines of this part of his life's work were clear. He spoke with the Protestant objections to Catholic Theology in mind, and he approached the subject not as a canonist describing the legal structure of a human society, as some of the Counter-Reformation writers necessarily did, but as a theologian contemplating the divine mystery of the Church as it is to be found in Scripture and in patristic writings. His exposition sought no quarrels, but calmly and clearly allowed the doctrine of the Church to speak for itself.

Thirty years later, Bossuet delivered a sermon at the opening of the *Assemblée Générale du Clergé* of 1681. Louis XIV had hopes

<sup>1</sup> Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1953.

that the decisions of the *Assemblée* would help him in his efforts to extend his control over the Church of France, efforts which were strongly opposed by Innocent XI; and in 1682 it accepted four Articles defining the relations between the Pope, temporal sovereigns, general councils and churches in communion with Rome in a strongly Gallican sense; the last and most important declared that the Pope has the principal share in settling questions of faith and that his decrees are applicable to all churches and to each individual church; that his judgement is not however irreformable, unless it receives the approval of the whole Church.

Such a doctrine has its obvious difficulties, and its attempted application led to years of wasteful quarrelling; but it was approved by Bossuet in the name of antiquity, in spite of all that practical experience should have taught him about its inadequacy as an answer to the problem of the proper relationship between the Pope and the Church.

Catholic thought on this point has moved on since the time of Bossuet; but, to his credit (though we may doubt his wisdom), it must be said that his opinions were partly governed by his concern for the reconciliation of Protestants to the Church. He disliked what he regarded as ultramontane speculations, because he held that they set added difficulties in the way of those whom he hoped would return. If we wish others to receive the gift of faith, we must certainly not burden them by talking of things which faith does not teach; but at the same time it must be borne in mind that the thought of the Church moves according to its own laws. Truth can never be 'inopportune'; we must not be held back in the search for it by those to whom the material in which it is to be found, revelation discerned by faith, has not become available. Bossuet's generosity, however, remains an example; his very mistakes are a guide in our treatment of the same problems; and the richness, power, clarity and penetration of his thought give him an outstanding place among the teachers of the modern Church.

Here is the opening passage of this sermon of 1681, together with some extracts from its first part, which concerned itself with the beauty and unity of the Church as a whole. The second and third parts described the same characteristics in the Gallican church and the means established by God that they might be preserved. Bossuet insisted on the constant loyalty of the French

Church to the Holy See as the centre of unity and arbiter of faith, but defended also those independent rights which he regarded as traditional. These are the parts which are most dated; it is the first section which is still valuable.

'It is wonderful to see how the Christian Church is prefigured by the ancient Israelites; to see her, having left Egypt and the shadows of idolatry, seeking the promised land across an immense desert of fearful rocks and burning sand; no earth, no cultivation, no fruit; a terrible drought; no bread, unless it is sent from heaven; no refreshment, unless it is drawn by a miracle from the heart of a rock; the whole of nature barren for her, who owns nothing that grace has not given. But there are other things, still more astounding, to be seen. In the horror of that vast emptiness she is surrounded by enemies; never marching except into battle; living only in tents; always ready to strike camp and to fight; a stranger whom nothing holds and nothing satisfies, who looks at everything as she passes without ever wanting to stop; happy nevertheless in this state, for she is consoled upon her journey, and will find a peace glorious and unchanging at the end of her course. That is the image of the Church, as she travels through this world. "See that it is made according to the pattern that has been shown thee on the mountain." (Exod. 25, 40.) That is what was said to Moses when he received the order to build the tabernacle. But St Paul warns us that it is not the tabernacle built with human hands which is now to be so carefully contrived and built according to this noble pattern. It is the true tabernacle of God and of men; it is the Catholic Church, in which God dwells; its plan has been drawn up in heaven (Heb. 8, 9). This is why St John, in the Apocalypse, saw both "the holy city of Jerusalem" (Apoc. 21, 10), and the Church which was beginning to establish itself throughout all the earth; he saw it, that is to say, coming down from heaven. It is there that the plans were made: "See that it is made according to the pattern that has been shown thee on the mountain."

'But why speak of St John and Moses? Let us listen to Jesus Christ himself. He will tell us that "he does nothing except what he sees the Father do" (John 5, 19). What then did he see, when he formed his Church? What did he see in the eternal light and in the splendours of the Holy Place where he was begotten before the dawn? It is the secret of the Bridegroom, and none other than the Bridegroom can reveal it.

“Holy Father, I give into thy keeping those whom thou hast given me.” I commend to thee my Church, “keep them in thy name, so that they may be one, as we are one”; and again, “As thou art in me and I in thee, my Father, so may they be one in us.” (John 17.) I hear you, O Saviour; your wish is to make your Church beautiful; you begin by making it perfectly one; for what is beauty if it is not a fitting relationship, a kind of unity? Nothing is more beautiful than the divine nature, in which the number itself, which subsists only in the mutual relationship of three equal persons, is complete in a perfect unity. After the Godhead, nothing is more full of beauty than the Church, in which the divine unity is represented. “One as we are; one in Us”; see that it is made according to this pattern.’

Considerations of this sort, based on the great biblical images of the Church, together with our Lord’s prayer in John 17, are turning countless Christians all over the world in search of unity; they will be drawn still nearer to it when they consider also the instructions our Lord gave about the foundation and government of the Church. Bossuet goes on to discuss them.

‘I have to set before you a great mystery; it is the mystery of the unity of the Church. United within by the Holy Spirit, she is bound together also by her external communion, and must remain united by means of a government representing the authority of Jesus Christ. Thus one unity safeguards the other, and under the seal of the ecclesiastical government the unity of the Spirit is preserved. What is this government? What is its form? Let us not say anything of our own; let us open the Gospel: the Lamb has removed the seals of the sacred Book, and the tradition of the Church has explained what it contains.

‘We shall find in the Gospel that Jesus Christ, wishing to begin to shape the mystery of unity in his Church, chose twelve among all the disciples; but that wishing to preserve the mystery of unity in the same Church, he chose one among the twelve. “He called his disciples”, says the Gospel; there they all are; “and among them he chose twelve”; there is a first separation, and the apostles are chosen. “And here are the names of the twelve apostles; the first is Simon who is called Peter.” There, in a second separation, St Peter is put at the head, and called for that reason by the name of *Rock*, “which Jesus Christ”, says St Mark, “had given him”, to prepare, as you will see, the work which he was planning of

building his edifice upon that rock. All this is still only a beginning of the mystery of unity. Jesus Christ as he began it spoke still to several: "Go, preach, I send you"; *Ite, praedicate, mitto vos*; but when he wishes to put the final touch to the mystery of unity, he no longer speaks to several; he addresses Peter personally, and by the new name which he has given him; it is one man who speaks to one man; Jesus Christ, Son of God, to Simon, son of Jonas; Jesus Christ, who is the true rock and strong with his own strength, and Simon, who is only Rock by the strength which Jesus Christ communicates to him; it is to him that Jesus Christ speaks, and as he speaks to him he acts in him and prints upon him the character of his own strength; "And I", he says, "I say to thee: Thou art Rock"; and, he adds, "on this rock I shall build my Church; and, he concludes, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16, 18). To prepare him for that honour, Jesus Christ, who knows that the faith which one has in him is the foundation of his Church, inspires in Peter a faith worthy of being the foundation of that admirable building, "Thou art the Christ, Son of the living God" (Matt. 16, 16). By this great preaching of the faith Peter draws upon himself the inviolable promise which makes him the foundation of the Church. The word of Jesus Christ, who makes what he wills from nothing, gives this strength to a mortal man. Let no one say, let no one think, that this ministry of St Peter finishes with him; that which is to be the support of an eternal Church can never have an end. Peter will live in his successors; Peter will speak always from his chair; those are the words of the Fathers; they are confirmed by six hundred and thirty bishops at the Council of Chalcedon.'

We need today the splendour and confidence with which Bossuet set the great doctrines of the faith before his hearers:

'Do not weary of hearing of that great mystery which today I must preach to you. People want moral instruction in sermons, and they are right, provided that they understand that Christian morals are founded on the mysteries of Christianity. What I preach to you "is a great mystery in Christ and his Church" (Eph. 5, 32), and that mystery is the foundation of that noble way of life which unites all Christians in peace, obedience and Catholic unity.'

The climax of all Bossuet's work for the return of Protestants to the unity which he saw so clearly was his *Exposition de la*

*Doctrine de l'Eglise Catholique sur les matières de controverse*, published in 1671. M. Jean Orcibal has called it the masterpiece of the French Counter-Reformation.<sup>2</sup> His first book, which appeared in 1655, *Réfutation du catéchisme du sieur Paul Ferry*, prepared the way for it. So moderate was the tone of this work, a product of his pastoral experience at Metz, where Protestants formed half the population, that the minister Paul Ferry was in no way turned against him, and when, eleven years later, conversations were undertaken between Catholics and Protestants in France, it was with him that Bossuet conferred and corresponded. Disturbed by the undiplomatic behaviour of the King's representatives and by the opposition of his fellow-ministers, Ferry withdrew, however; and Bossuet turned his hopes for a return *en masse* elsewhere—successively to Sweden, England, Hanover and Saxe-Gotha. Although there was no such return, his patience was not wasted, for the way he envisaged for the re-union of separated Protestant churches could be trodden also by individuals, and there were many who were helped into the Church by his explanations. Work for 'corporate' and 'individual' return to the Church did not seem to him in any way incompatible or even distinct.

Bossuet describes his method of approach in the first section of the *Exposition*. He was convinced that much of Protestant dislike of Catholics could be traced to a misunderstanding of Catholic doctrine; a clear explanation of the most controverted points of Tridentine teaching would remove false ideas and provide a definite basis for discussion of those real disagreements which remained. He intended his *Exposition* to be an authentic statement of universally agreed Catholic doctrine; this was particularly necessary in that one of the conditions of debate was the general agreement that private views could not legitimately be imputed to a whole body and that separation was only justifiable on account of views officially established. As the book was simply a statement of doctrine, not an attempt to prove it, the only constructive sort of contribution to the discussion would, he said, be a demonstration that he was not expounding received Catholic doctrine, that he had failed to deal with the objections so far made to it, or that the teaching he explained overthrew some fundamental principle of Christianity.

<sup>2</sup> *Louis XIV et les Protestants*. Paris, 1951, p. 33. A most valuable book for any student of ecumenical history and technique.

True worship, the sacraments, the sacrifice of the Mass, justification, the authority of the Church; those are the main subjects discussed. Bossuet's brief clarity cuts right across those false ideas that many still learn about us. 'Will the Church never persuade those of her children who have become her opponents, by explanations of her faith, by the decisions of her Councils, or by the prayers of her Sacrifice, that she places all her hope in Jesus Christ, from whom alone she draws her life? . . . Our opponents would be unreasonable in the extreme if they did not admit that the doctrine which I have explained is enough to teach Christians that the whole glory of their salvation is due to God alone through Jesus Christ.'

The *Exposition* had an immediate success and went through many editions; it was regularly republished until the early years of the nineteenth century. Protestants tried to claim that it was not authentic; they were answered by the Papal approval which it received, besides that of numbers of bishops and religious superiors in France and elsewhere. An English translation appeared in Paris in 1672, and in 1685, when Catholic hopes were raised by the accession of James II, another version was made by Joseph Johnston, chaplain at Saint James's, and had three editions, more than five thousand copies, in as many months. Several Anglican divines published replies—Clagett, Sherlock, Gilbert, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Wake, to whom Johnston wrote a reply. Even Wake did not attain the simplicity and straightforwardness of Bossuet, who was received with hostility by men more ready to find fault than to make peace; Gilbert spoke in his preface of his intention to justify the distance which the Reformed Churches kept from Rome. Now that we are freed from most of the political pressures of the seventeenth century, and are breathing an air cleared by the ecumenical movement, Bossuet is the only one of these writers who can be read with any patience.

Neglected as he was in the recent *History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*,<sup>3</sup> Bossuet remains essential reading for everyone, whether Protestant or Catholic, who thinks about the unity of the Church. The loyalty and persistence with which he pursued his youthful ideal; his rejection of the usual controversial method in favour of calm exposition and a search for agreement

<sup>3</sup> Edited by Miss R. Rouse and Bishop Stephen Neill. S.P.C.K., 1954.

rather than for causes of strife; complete loyalty to defined Catholic doctrine, and, above all, a profound understanding of the mystery of the Church as it is made known to us in the Old and New Testaments and in the commands and the prayers of our Lord; all these gifts are as much needed today.



## THE LITURGY OF THE SACRAMENTS

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**T**O understand the sacramental principle, it is necessary to recall the Plan of Redemption. God, three Persons, knowing and loving each other, exists from all eternity. When he chose to create other beings out of nothing, there was but one model, himself. Therefore, each creature is a unique reflection of God. It is itself and, at the same time, it is, to intelligent beings, a revelation of God. This quality of being real yet symbolic makes every creature, in the wide sense of the Latin word, a *sacramentum*, or, in Greek, a 'mystery'. The correct attitude towards creatures saves their dignity from two false extremes. Some people would make each creature an absolute in itself—unrelated to anything else, no more than its physical constituents. The opposite error limits the creature to its function of symbol, ignores its value as an individual reality, credits it only for the power to suggest something else. Saint John Chrysostom has neatly described the creature as sacrament: 'that of which one aspect is seen and the other aspect is believed'. The sacramental principle may be summed up: Not only are all creatures reflections of God but Christ has given certain signs, which appeal to the senses, that capacity, under certain conditions, of transmitting his divine life.

This statement covers sacrament in the wide sense, anything that reveals divinity, as well as in the technical application to the system of seven channels instituted by Christ to give special graces.<sup>1</sup> In the wide sense, the greatest sacrament is our Lord's humanity. It is a real human nature yet the instrument of his

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, Editorial, June 1955.