

The Living Core

It is not easy to project one's ideas. Without proof it is unwise to suppose one has succeeded in getting over to others what is in one's own mind. You talk clearly and convincingly and believe that you have conveyed to another mind what is in your own, and yet it is possible to construct something quite different. This affects every department of thought, but here I am applying it to the field of religious instruction.

I refer to a number of discussions, which have recently taken place on this subject. One was in connection with the problem of missionary catechumenates. A bishop of quite exceptional experience proposed to his priests the desirability of increasing the local catechumenate period from two years to three years. His contention was that the existing system was turning out baptised pagans! But simultaneously in another missionary area, where the catechumenate period was three years, the suggestion of raising it to four years was made on the same grounds, i.e. that 'baptised pagans' were being produced. So apparently the mere increasing of the period would not secure the desired result.

And when there is talk of long terms like four years, it is well to consider that the longer the period the fewer will be those who will submit to it or accomplish it. It is possible to demand too much of human nature, and especially this mistake should not be made when that human material is un-baptised and primitive. Why expect from such persons standards of conviction and resoluteness, which would not be forthcoming from an old Christian community?

Other similar discussions relate to more advanced territories. Children judged to have satisfactorily completed the usual long years of religious instruction, have been subsequently shown to be exhibiting: (a) a serious inadequacy in point of actual knowledge; (b) reasonably good knowledge but incapacity to use it; or (c) what I must, for want of a better term, call a lack of the sense of Catholicism. In saying this I hark back to my opening sentences. The teachers of those people had not communicated to their minds the picture of Catholicism, which they themselves possessed. What is in some of those minds is virtually a caricature of Catholicism. In what way? I will try to explain.

Frequently we find with a shock such persons regarding other religions as being rivals to Catholicism in the sense that those religions have their own status, their own range of truth, their own powers to save – and hence that the people in them should be left alone. As the phrase puts it: Do not interfere with their belief! My comment on this is that such a valuation of Catholicism truly denotes a ‘baptised pagan’.

Another variant is to view Catholicism as a sort of test or examination, comprising things to be known or things to be done, which (if finally passed) entitles one to eternal happiness. In other words those persons carry on into

adult life the idea they had of religion when at school, i.e. a knowledge and disciplinary system based upon a whole lot of doctrines (representing 350 questions in one Catechism) which in those persons' minds so lack any principle of unity or connection as to amount almost to chaos.

One supremely competent and authoritative quarter, approaching this entire question from a different angle, has gone so far as to estimate that when the process of teaching the Catechism has been well and truly done, one-third of the work of teaching *Catholicism* has been accomplished! Oh! And what has been left undone at that stage? The missing two-thirds is what that authority described as 'indoctrination,' and which I venture to bring into line with what I have been saying above. I attribute to 'indoctrination' the meaning of easy familiarity, ability to handle, conviction, urge to spread, and kindred ideas. It will be realised how far this conception is from those other ones of Catholicism as a religion among many or as a divine examination set in many unrelated subjects.

I suggest that the mind of very many Catholics is not a little like a builder's yard. In separate heaps lie all the materials for a house. For instance that yard might contain enough roofing for a terrace of houses but little or no wood. Furthermore the intrinsic value of those materials is quite different, for example the Mass and indulgences. Side by side in apparent equality are the vital things, the secondary ones, and the lesser. The teacher who has the Christian idea clear in his mind is seeing all those items assembled into the correct whole. But too often he does not succeed in casting that picture into the mind of the pupil. In the latter's mind is all the confusion and disproportion of the builder's yard; it does not add up

to the Catholic mind. One would have to be fanatically optimistic to believe that such a person will do battle for the Church or sustain the substantial shocks which the waves of the world will administer.

Those various aspects of defect which we have been looking at – i.e. the baptised paganism, the divine exam, the builder's yard and the 'one religion nearly as good as the other' – do not represent a living thing, nor a unity nor a simple idea. Yet our religion must necessarily be this. For Christianity and Christ must be largely interchangeable terms. Have we become too complex? Are we aiming at too much in the case of initial instruction, so that in the end we stack up the builder's yard and miss our aim altogether?

Let us return to the primitive days before formal catechisms were drawn up. Let us try to imagine for ourselves how the catechumens were handled at that time when all instruction was oral, and when minds were not readily open to abstract ideas. I think we can gather accurately enough from the gospel what those pupils were told. It certainly all centred around a person. It would have told of the Fall of our first parents and the promise of the woman and her seed who would redeem what had been lost. The ages pass; the woman comes; her child is born in circumstances which are told in vivid, loving detail. He grows up and enters on his mission – again replete with all the detail – and more – afforded in the gospel. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and buried. He rose again the third day and ascended into Heaven. Then Pentecost and the expansion of the Body of Christ.

And here one had to get over to those simple audiences the idea of the Church as the Living Body of Christ, or as the Church later put it for the sake of greater accuracy, the Mystical Body of Christ.

The Church is of course an institution. It is visible. It has its system of government, membership, teaching and ceremonial. But it is no mere institution. It is the personal action of Christ continued on earth. It is Christ living in us and pursuing his life to a planned fullness. It is plain from the gospel that, whatever clouding attached to that doctrine in later times, it was peremptorily proposed to the primitive Christians. And indeed it is difficult to see in what other way the Christian life can be explained or reduced to one simple, coherent whole.

It is constantly being asserted that the Mystical Body represents select, inaccessible doctrine. Yet St Thomas Aquinas calls it the central dogma of Christianity. True, we cannot probe it, but we can grasp the general idea. Is it any more difficult than the Eucharist, which is proposed to little ones?

Our Lord at the Incarnation attached to himself all those for whom he was going to die, and in such a fashion that they formed one mystical person with himself; and that the acts of any one would affect the body for better or worse. Actually it is quite impossible to understand Redemption without the aid of that idea. Without it, Redemption becomes a most puzzling transaction, for why should the death of another person redeem *us*?

Our Lord expiated our sins because they were the offences of a body which he had taken unto himself. In that body circulates the acts of all its members. Our contribution is a sorry one – mostly sins. But some persons play a worthier role. Some try to act in the spirit of that striking suggestion of St Paul, i.e. that we are called on to make up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ.

In this interchange of contributions Our Lord gives his divinity and his infinite satisfaction. Without that

contribution, all the acts of the body would be unavailing. But granted that contribution, our acts do avail and accomplish things. We are summoned by the divine idea to make *our* contribution, which God exacts at its absolute maximum. We must give what we can towards our own salvation and towards that of others. That is the idea of Redemption, and everything in Christian doctrine takes its position in relation to that fact.

The Church is infallible because it is a case of Christ's voice speaking out of his own body; it claims authority because he is ruling through his deputies. Our prayers have worth because he is praying through them: but for that fact, as Fr Faber puts it, our prayers would have little better value than the querulous crying of the plover. There are miracles, and there have to be miracles, because he is continuing his wonder-working life in us. The Mass is not merely a ritual with varying vestments; it is the prolongation of the awful sacrifice; it is Calvary in our midst. The Eucharist is the food of that body; baptism, matrimony and holy orders provide for its increase. Penance and extreme unction are its remedies. Confirmation is the prolongation of the Pentecostal descent of the Holy Spirit.

Mary's pivotal position in Christianity is due to the fact that she is mother of Jesus and therefore of his body, with the same function, the same necessity.

All that is a pious estimate of what the ancient catechumen would have been taught. It is nothing more than the substance of the gospel. It represents living truth, applying to a living body and centred on a person. It is not difficult to understand it. Rather, anything different is impossible to understand. Depart from that person and that unity, and we swing over to those defective notions

which we have been contemplating with dismay. We are back to silence, inactivity, doubt and defeat! We would have reduced the Church to the level of a mere institution – a sort of religious university.

On the other hand, that idea of the living Body of Christ simplifies, transforms, energises and conquers. What was it caused ignorant spectators, along the martyrs' march to death, to fall in behind them and share their doom; or to make magistrates and guards undertake the martyrdom to which they had just been condemning Christians? It was not the builder's yard; it was one simple, even rudimentary idea: Those people believe in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is truth, is love, is God.

I am not of course contending that all doctrinal teaching should be reduced to the core which I have specified, but only urging that it be recognised as a core; and as such concentrated on; and at the very beginning given to the young and the catechumen without further embellishment. The general notion should be that everything else is only as something growing out of that body, much as the plumage grows out of the bird. Primary preoccupation should be with the living core. We must not let the doctrinal plumage absorb us to the extent of causing us to lose grip of the idea of the Church as the living Christ. If we relax there, we have lost everything that matters. And even the 'plumage' would have lost its value in our eyes. For its only status is that of an outgrowing of the divine life of the body, a putting forth which is necessary for the purposes of that life. Any doctrine divorced from the living Christ would be as plumage without the bird, or as the anatomy book without the man.

When that core or fledgling has acquired some maturity, or in other words when it has been grasped

by the mind, then the plumage can be thought of. The Christian embellishment can take place without danger of confusing or concealing the main fact.

When we think naturally about the Church as that person, and realise that there is very little difference between Christ surrounded by his disciples, and the Church composed of ourselves, then everything comes to life and gains vivid colour. Our hearts melt in us. Our religion becomes an adventure, and we are ready to take seriously that man who says to us: 'Do you love me? Will you lay down your life for me?'