

TO AN INTENDING CONVERT

“A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I shall not call you servants any longer, for a servant does not know his master's business ; I call you friends...”

John 15 : 15

True faith in God—the Catholic faith—is in the individual as a disposition, and is from God as its source. The soul must dispose itself—and continue to dispose itself—for that gift. The Catholic faith is one because it is from the One, a gift to him who submits himself to Reality and to God. A convert from Lutheranism once told the writer he thought this the key issue in conversion, *submission*. The true faith is the same in every Catholic. Every other instance of religious faith is from man, and is as various as men are.

God—the putative convert must accept—is not something of the mind, but of reality ; more real than he is himself. God is Reality. Indeed, in this life reality is His surrogate. He exists ; He made me ; He keeps me in existence ; He is intimately involved in my being, here ; now ; in this place. I cannot click my fingers unless He does it with me.

Faith is of the mind, not of the will—though it needs the will. It is not of the emotions. It can be as dry as dust. Many converts acknowledge they felt nothing as they made their commitment. Fr Martin D'Arcy SJ, who instructed Evelyn Waugh, said of him:

“Evelyn was never a borrower and had almost too set a mind to accept advice. No one could have made up that mind of his for him no more than anyone could have been co-author of his novels...”
(David Pryce-Jones (ed.), *Evelyn Waugh and His World*, pp. 61-4.)

Waugh wrote to Fr D'Arcy from Ireland:

“I realize that the Roman Catholic Church is the only genuine form of Christianity. Also that Christianity is the essential and formative constituent of western culture... But the trouble is that I don't feel Christian in the absolute sense. The question seems to be must I wait until I do feel this... ?” (Selina Hastings, *Evelyn Waugh : A Biography*, p. 225)

Fr D'Arcy had no difficulty reassuring him.

The champion of the correct understanding of the Faith, of its adequation with reality, is Belloc. After Chesterton had taken the long awaited step of entering the Church, Belloc wrote to him :

“The Catholic Church is the exponent of Reality. It is true. Its doctrines in matters large and small are statements of what is. This it is which the ultimate act of the intelligence accepts. This it is which the will deliberately confirms. And that is why Faith through an act of the Will is Moral.”

Often the intending convert is moved by something he reads. Recognised texts include, most famously, St Augustine's *Confessions* ; *The Book of Her Life* of St Teresa of Avila (which Edith Stein read at a sitting) ; Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*, or Waugh's edited version called *Elected Silence*. There is splendid material in Joseph Pearce's *Literary Converts* (London, 1999) which is available electronically via Kindle—and no laptop or pad should be without it. Notwithstanding what we have said about the lack of emotion, the intending convert may be moved, and led, by Belloc's *The Path to Rome* (London, 1902), which deserves anyway to be read and re-read for its own sake, or by

Chesterton's poem *Lepanto* which celebrates the routing of Muslim forces in the great sea battle in October 1571, the feast day of whose champion, Pius V, we celebrate this day.

The intending convert must understand what the Catholic Church is, and what it is not. Arnold Lunn wrote—

“I discovered... that most of the beliefs with which Catholics were credited were not, in fact, held by Catholics... Why is it that so few people... are interested to discover whether in point of fact Catholics do hold the belief in question?” (Arnold Lunn, *Come What May: An Autobiography*, p. 211-2 ; Pearce, *Literary Converts*, Ch. 15 Converting Converts)

There are a thousand understandings of the Church which are misunderstandings, this one, for instance: despite the fact it is comprised of men, the Church is not something human. The Church is of God, Divine. Its head is Jesus Christ (not the Pope) ; its soul is the Holy Spirit, the Love of God ; its end is God the Father and the union of the faithful soul with Him. Over twenty centuries kingdoms have come and gone but the Church Christ founded has endured, and will endure till the end of time, precisely *because it is not something human*. Belloc put it powerfully—

“One thing in this world is different from all other. It has a personality and a force. It is recognised, and (when recognised) most violently loved or hated. It is the Catholic Church. Within that household the human spirit has roof and hearth. Outside it, is the Night.” (A Letter to Dean Inge, *Essays of a Catholic*, London, 1931)

Understanding that the Church is of God and not of man is critical for the convert in the present age when the general quality of the Church's prelates ranges between the poor and the mediocre. This is in large measure a function of their appalling formation, devoid of any grounding in the Church's philosophy and lacking, in consequence, a sound understanding of the essential elements of her doctrine. This debility has afflicted each of the last four popes. There is a passing reference in Pearce which is to the point. In discussing the conversion of Arnold Lunn he remarks:

“Barbara Reynolds remembered Dorothy L. Sayers, herself a lover of Aquinas, being rather ‘scornful’ of one of Lunn’s public debates in which Lunn and his opponent discussed transubstantiation with ‘neither of them understanding that they were using the word *substance* in the wrong sense.” (*Literary Converts*, Ch. 15, Converting Converts)

Who, among the modern clergy, understands that the substance of a thing is not something material, that it is immaterial ? Who understands that a substance is the only sort of being which exists in its own right, properly defined as 'be-in-self' ? No one can hope to understand the doctrine of transubstantiation who has not grasped these two realities. .

Five centuries after Luther precipitated it and Henry Tudor enforced it, Protestantism is dissolving into the atheism which was ever at its core. The Church's faithful have been afflicted for fifty years now by disorders flowing from their infection by Protestant and worldly values, an infection imported into the lives of the faithful willy nilly by the bishops of the Second Vatican Council. They thought they were opening the world to the Church when what they did was the very opposite. They opened the Church to the world's pernicious influences.

Much is made of the charism of infallibility enjoyed, from time to time, by the Pope, and by the bishops of the Church when they teach in conformity with what is held by the Church *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*. Pope Benedict XVI put the issue well in his first public utterance to the clergy at Aosta, Italy on 25th July 2005, “the Pope is not an oracle, he is infallible on the rarest of

occasions, as we know." Little is made of the one entity which *always* enjoys infallibility, the Catholic Church. The pope is occasionally infallible ; the Church is always infallible. The intending convert must, then, fix his eyes on Christ and His Church and ignore, if they would lead him astray, the witterings of bishops, and even of popes.

It is unlikely that anyone has put the issue for the common man better than Cardinal Manning put it 150 years ago :

"[I]t is a violation of reason not to believe in the existence of God... a violation of our moral sense not to believe that God has made himself known to man... that the revelation he has given is Christianity ; and... that Christianity is Catholicism..." (Henry Edward Cardinal Manning , *The Temporal Mission of the Holy Ghost*, 1865)

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We will close with Evelyn Waugh : first this—

"Conversion is like stepping across the chimney piece out of a Looking-Glass world, where everything is an absurd caricature, into the real world God made ; and then begins the delicious process of exploring it limitlessly." (Pearce, *Literary Converts*, ch. 14, quoting from Michael de la Noy, *Eddy: The Life of Edward Sackville-West*, London, 1988, pp. 237-8)

—and, what may seem trivial, from among the last lines of his *Brideshead Revisited*. The story's narrator, Charles Ryder, has confronted, and overcome, his demons. He has embraced the rigours of a celibate existence in conformity with the demands of Christ, his Saviour, and joined Him in the work of salvation. He has come to a decision.

"I quickened my pace and reached the hut that served us for an ante-room. 'You're looking unusually cheerful today,' said the second-in-command."

The man who has mastered himself and his inclinations is a happy man.

Michael Baker

30th April 2016—*St Pius V, Pope who stood against the Protestant Revolt & the Islamic invasion of Europe*