


Thoughts from Lacordaire.

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FAITH.
REASON AND FAITH.
CAUSES OF UNBELIEF.
NEGATION.
CREDULITY OF UNBELIEF.
INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH.



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THOUGHTS FROM LACORDAIRE.

I. FAITH.

FAITH is an act of confidence, and therefore a product of the heart. It requires in him who accords it the same uprightness as in him who inspires it, and never has the ungrateful man, or the deceitful, or the egotist, or any of those whom the Scripture calls emphatically the *children of unbelief*,* been capable of it. To confide is to give oneself; none give themselves but the magnanimous, or at least the generous. Not that faith excludes prudence, or that we must put our trust in the first word that falls from unknown lips, but prudence being satisfied, there is still necessary a generous effort to bring forth that difficult word: I believe.

Alexander, king of Macedon, was upon the banks of the Cydnus. He was there stricken by a malady which seemed likely to save Persia, and his physician, whom he tenderly loved, prepared for him a decisive draught. But on the previous evening, a letter written by a hand which he knew, warned the sick man to beware of his friend as of a traitor who had bartered his life. Alexander kept his counsel. The next day, when the cup was brought to him, he took from beneath his pillow the accusing paper, handed it to his physician, took the cup and drank its contents at a draught. All antiquity has praised this action of Alexander, and his

*St. Paul to the Ephesians, ii: 2.

most famous victories, Granicus, Issus, Arbela, have not encircled his head with greater glory. Whereupon a celebrated writer, whom I do not wish to name, asks what there was so beautiful in this boasted action: for Alexander was the head of a numerous army within an enemy's territory, the master of a nascent kingdom, the man of Greece, charged with its vengeance and its designs; he ought, on all these grounds, to have respected his life, on which depended the fate of so many others; and what merit was there in exposing it recklessly to the risk of poisoning? But the writer whom I have cited, after having made these remarks, corrects himself, and says: "What is there so beautiful in this action of Alexander! Unhappy man, can you comprehend it, if it must be told you? Its beauty is that Alexander believed in virtue, that he believed in it at the peril of his life!"

Here is a magnificent exposition of the faith of a great heart, and it is also the exposition of all faith, be it addressed to man or addressed to God. Whoever makes an act of faith, whether he knows it or not, drinks the cup of Alexander; *he believes at the peril of his life*; he enters that league of Abraham who was called *the Father of all believers*,* because, in his old age, exhausted in body but not in heart, he raised an obedient sword over his only son who was all his love and all his race, hoping against hope in the word which had promised him a posterity. And if there is a being, who, opposed to these magnanimous memories, has never produced from his soul an act of faith, you can fearlessly accuse him of having dishonored in himself the work of God. For faith is not only a virtue, that is to say, a generous and efficacious effort towards good, it is the sacred portal whereby enter all the virtues, the blood-stained prodrome where the sacrifices commence and whither come the victims meetly immolated at the sanctuary of God. There is not an act of devotedness, an act of love, an act honorable or holy which has not been first an act of faith, and this is the reason why the Scripture declares so often that it is by faith

*St. Paul to the Romans, iv. 11.

that man is justified and saved. The Jews believed that the principle of salvation was the observance of the law in consideration of the recompenses of God. St. Paul reiterates to them that works are powerless if they are not vivified by a superior element. *It is one God*, he cries, *that justifieth circumcision by faith and uncircumcision through faith.** What are works, in fact, if they are accomplished under the impulse of a purely scientific view? Merely a calculation of benefit or of good administration for ourselves and others. Some are just, sober, economical, diligent, faithful to their word, because by acting thus they gain more than they lose; but place these well-regulated minds in presence of the cup of Alexander, that is to say, in the presence of a sacrifice which may be avoided without loss, of a virtue which presents no visible remuneration, then you will see the hollowness of a heart where faith is wanting. I do not even mean divine faith, but that indefinable, nameless, indescribable faith, which is the foundation of all that is great. Therefore, when St. Paul pronounces that sovereign decree, *Without faith it is impossible to please God,*† we may add, or men.

II. REASON AND FAITH.

THERE are two forces in the human mind; reason, having its source in the natural order, and religion, which has been transmitted to us from age to age, by tradition and authority. Now, the system is false which teaches that the author of human nature has implanted in it two forces which conclude contradictorily instead of concurring harmoniously, that is to say, that unity being the law of all beings, and an absolute necessity for all that live, God has placed in the breast of mankind two inimical and irreconcilable forces—this is impossible. Being and unity are one and the same thing, as St. Thomas excellently says. Mankind has not come forth from God in the state of

*Rom., iii: 30.

†Heb., xi: 6.

Manicheism; there are in us two principles which harmonize. Reason and faith have given forth the same sound from all eternity, although in a different way. They are like the two harps, Eolian and Ionian. The Eolian harp, suspended in the forest, moaned to the free action of the winds; the Ionian harp was touched by the skillful hand of the artist; but both harmonized and accorded. Reason is as the harp of Eolia, wild, free, inspired, and animated by the storms; faith is as the harp of Ionia, better regulated, more calm, more divine; but the lyre of nature and that of art, the lyre of men and that of the children of God, both play essentially the same canticle. They speak of God to the universe, they announce Him, they prophesy of Him, they give Him thanks, they uplift man to immortality by their harmonious and unanimous vibration. It is reason, voluntarily proud, which hears not the sounds of faith; it is ignorant faith which hears not the sounds of reason, and fails to render it justice. Yes, as Hippocrates said of the human body, everything concurs and concords in humanity. Reason and faith, the reason of statesmen, the reason of men of genius, the popular reason, all are harmonious, all are brethren and fellow citizens; and if there is strife among them, the cause is not in the elements of our constitution, because this would be to suppose that the principle of our life is contradiction. But contradiction is death, and we have not been created dead but living.

III. THE CAUSES OF UNBELIEF.

You believe not, and you conclude from this that faith is impossible; for my part, I conclude that you do not what is necessary in order to arrive at faith, and I will prove it in a few words.

The first cause of incredulity is voluntary ignorance. Faith can no more than science be acquired without a certain application of mind. When the mind is not applied, it is inert, it ceases to be a power; it is, as regards the object before it, as if it were not. What are

mathematics to an intelligence which has never reflected on the laws of number, of quantity, and of motion? What is philosophy to a man who has never asked himself what is being, what is an idea, what is the absolute, the relative, cause, or effect? And for the same reason, what is faith to a soul which has never seriously thought upon the necessary relations of the creature with God?

Let me ask you, at what age and after what studies did you decide that religion is an error? Was it at forty? No, you decided it in the flower of your age, at the moment when, casting off the apparel of childhood, reason and passion celebrated together their joyous advent to the agitated surface of your being. Up to that time, simple and submissive, a pious worshipper of the thoughts of your mother, you had questioned nothing, denied nothing, you lived by a faith as pure as your heart. But scarcely had the double puberty of man caused its sharp sting to be felt by your senses and your intellect, when, without taking time to mature your power, and impatient of the mysteries of Nature and the mysteries of God, you became ashamed to believe, while at the same time you lost that other shame which is the divine guardian of innocence. Incapable of any act worthy of a man, you passed judgment sovereignly upon God and man; you doubted, denied, apostatized, despised your fathers, accused your masters, summoned before your tribunal the virtues and sorrows of ages—in fine you transformed your soul into a desert of pride. Then, this ruin completed, you chose for your end one of the ambitions of man, the glory of arms or that of letters, or still less high, as chance led you, and every effort of your faculties was directed towards the idolatry of your future. You learned no more than to be one day the effective hero of your dreams; you sacrificed your days and your nights to this egotistical image, reserving of them but a secret and unknown part to the other egotism of man, voluptuousness. And never, during this sad and checkered dream, did religion appear to you but as a futile souvenir of your early years, a weakness or a

hypocrisy of humanity. You did not deign to give to it one hour of study, or one desire; and if sometimes, attracted by a celebrated name, you opened a book or crossed the threshold of a basilica, you did so with the haughtiness of a mind which had judged, and had no idea of reversing its decree. O confidence of youth in error! O security of souls who have yet seen of life but the early dawn! Oh, how good God has been in not calling you away in that hour of ignorance and enchantment! For already you are no longer subject to its crude certitudes; time has brought back to you doubt and the obscure presentments of truth. You see that your unbelief was born of a puerile act, and that, for your honor and your repose, it needs a ratification.

This second labor it is, this labor of return and examen, which lays the foundation of faith in man, and maintains it in humanity. Faith is also, indeed, a gift of childhood; it strikes its root into the soul which has just been born; but it is the slow action of life which brings it to maturity. When man has seen man during long years, when he has known his feebleness and his misery by experiences which no longer permit him to doubt, and already the grand figure of death places nearer to him the final prophecy, then naturally his gaze becomes more profound. He discerns more clearly the trace of the divine, because he knows better what man cannot do, and, moreover, the wearisomeness of present things evokes in him a relish for things unseen. Therefore it is that a writer, whose name escapes me, has excellently said: "At twenty, we believe religion to be false; at forty, we begin to suspect that it may be true; at fifty, we desire that it may be true; at sixty, we no longer doubt its truth." Light and life progress with equal pace, and death, in disabusing us of all, completes the progressive revelation which commenced in our regard on the lips of our mother. The child and the woman are the vanguard of God; the man of mature years is His apostle and martyr; you young men, you are but the deserters of a day.

I know well that voluntary ignorance does not by itself explain the sad phenomenon of incredulity, and

that there are men versed in the things of religion who attain not the happiness of faith. The examples of this are rare, but I have met with them. They are the victims of a passion the most obstinate of all, namely, the pride of science. The pride of science is the infatuation of a spirit inebriated with itself, which admires itself in what it knows, as did Narcissus in his lake, and which, regarding any limit as an insult to its capacity, proposes to treat with God as an equal with an equal. It studies not through love of truth, but in order to oppose it; it delights in creating clouds, in discovering a grain of sand which may serve as a blasphemy, and which it may cast at heaven. If it look up to the stars, it is in order to get from them the secret of the world's eternity; if it descend into the bosom of the earth, it is to seek arms against some great biblical fact; if it interrogate the necropolis of Egypt or the ruins of Babylon, it is only to hear there a voice which denies some most authentic tradition. Its science is but a bitter strife between itself and God.

Who could remain true while possessed by such a passion? Who would accept it as judge? Faith is an act of confidence; it supposes the sincerity of an upright and loving heart. But those of whom I speak would not believe even mathematical demonstrations if their aim and conclusions were truths of religion. Like Jean Jacques, they would prefer declaring themselves fools to declaring themselves convinced. And in truth this is not an imaginary picture. Interrogate the recollections of your conscience. Have you never been filled with joy on discovering in history or in nature something which appeared to you to be marked with an anti-Christian sign? Have you never clapped your hands when somebody said to you, Here is an argument against Jesus Christ? *Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you.** Such is the first condition on which you are to arrive at faith. In vain does the sun appear in the firmament, if his light be for us but a reason for refusing to gaze at him.

*Matt., vii: 7.

Finally, a third cause of incredulity is depravity of morals. I do not mean to say that every weakness of our poor flesh is an obstacle to faith, since faith is itself the principle of chastity, and Jesus Christ has uttered against the Pharisees these divine words: *The harlots shall go into the kingdom of God before you.** There is a humble vice, a vice which knows itself, which despises itself, which strikes its breast. I will not say that it is dear to God; but God can forgive it as He forgave Magdalen. There is, on the other hand, a vice poisoned with pride, a vice which exalts its head, which laughs and mocks; this God hates, and it is an almost invincible obstacle to faith for it is the union of two perversities which naturally exclude one another, and of which the junction destroys in the soul the last resources of good. Pride alone is so insupportable to God that He prefers humble vice to proud virtue. How great must be His hatred of vice inflated with pride? Now nothing is less rare than this lamentable disposition of the heart. Slaves though we may be of the vilest propensities and most shameful practices, we clothe ourselves in the pride of a conscience without reproach, and we appeal to our honor, our probity, our genius, and we cover with the name of amiable weaknesses the prostitution of our every sense to voluptuousness. We employ a half century in perverting around us the ignorance of youth and the beauty of virtue; and after having precipitated into abjection a number of souls of whom we do not even deign to respect the ruins in our memory, instead of saying to God with St. Peter, *Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord,*† we complain of the little light which God has imparted to His works, and we impute to Him our misfortune in not knowing Him and serving Him. Do you think that miracles are due to such complaints, and that God is in fault in replying only by unrelenting silence? Oh yes; *the harlots shall go into the kingdom of God before us*, because nearly all were victims before they became mercenaries, and they are moved to raise to God, from the depths of their abasement, that

*Matt., xxi: 31.

†Luke, v: 8.

suppliant glance of meekness and humility which is more than a feeling of remorse, if it is not yet a virtue. God will hear them; He hears the faintest sigh of sincerity, and He speeds every tear which commences to flow for Him. But the pride of ignorance, the pride of science, the pride of vice, He despises all three; He bears with them until that day when the angels will sing for the second time, in presence of the whole assembled universe, the hymn of God made man: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will!**

IV. NEGATION.

I WOULD not now pause to show you the criminality of negation, after having shown you its power, were it not necessary to point out to you how this intellectual process is vicious in itself, and bears of its own nature poisonous fruits. This appears to be a strange statement, as negation, it may be said, is a logical form as legitimate as affirmation. What harm is it to deny that which we consider not proven? Is not the burden of proof on affirmation, and is it not sufficient simply to deny what is merely affirmed? Doubtless, and I admit it, every affirmation is not a truth; but affirmation is the form of truth, whilst negation is nothing but the resistance of a mind. But the world lives not on resistance, it lives on certitudes, which are at least presumed, and when it is in possession of a doctrine which imparts to it the reason of its duties and the courage of its sufferings, it is a crime to disturb it by an arbitrary negation which wrests from it the foundations of its existence without giving it a substitute. It does not, then, lie on affirmation to put forward its proof, but on negation. For instance, humanity believes in God, in a supreme power, wisdom, and goodness which it does not represent to itself always and everywhere with the same clearness, but the ever-present idea of which, although more or less imperfect,

*Luke, ii: 14.

has nowhere abandoned it. Should a child rise up in the midst of the people and deny the existence of God, think you that it would be necessary to demonstrate it to him? For my part, I think not. I think that it is for him to prove that there is no God. It is for you, I would say to him, for you, the last comer of the ages, for you, whom your mother has nursed in the name of God, for you, whose existence has been protected by this sovereign name, and to which it is indebted for the justice and the tenderness with which it was environed before it merited aught, it is for you to prove to the world that its belief in the divinity has no foundation. The world has lived, it still lives in this belief, it has found in it alone the principle of its duties and the justification of its rights; it has never been able to understand whence life could descend, if it come not from the primitive ocean it calls God, and wherein it has cast the anchor of an invincible hope and an immortal faith. It pleases you to go forth from this communion of minds, to deny your heavenly Father as well as your temporal fathers, to brave the horror which the mere suspicion of atheism has always excited. You may do this, I admit, but I await your proofs. You have them surely, and they are irrefragable; not mere doubts, uncertain lights, probabilities, but great as the idea of God and the faith of the universe. I await them, speak, and if you say nothing to me, if you confine yourself to conjectures, to the state of your soul which gives not back to you the echo of divine things, I will be silent in my turn. You complain that you do not hear the voice which the whole earth hears, that you do not see the light which every intelligence sees.

What I say of the existence of God, I say also of the Catholic Church and of her doctrine. You assert that you do not get sufficient proof of their truth; but do you consider that the Catholic Church exists? Could she present to you neither the prophecies which have prepared her, nor the miracles which have introduced her to the world, nor the chain of events which links her to all that is true in history, nor the visible divinity of her Founder, she exists

nevertheless, and a portion of humanity exists in her and by her. She has formed men and societies; nay more, she has created virtues. And you think it is sufficient to deny her in order to be tranquil with your conscience and with the judgments of God! You ask her to prove to you her legitimacy! It is for you to prove that you are worthy to comprehend her and be reckoned amongst her children. It is for you to establish that your intelligence commands a horizon more vast than hers, that your thoughts have realized in the world more good than hers, that your virtues are greater, your manners more chaste, your authority higher, and that you alone, the being of one day and one idea, counterbalance the ages and the place which she occupies here below. If you do not this, she will be silent. She will have at least the right to be silent. When the Arab, passing at the foot of the Pyramids, hurls at them his lance, the Pyramids are silent.

V. THE CREDULITY OF UNBELIEF.

THE mind being made for truth is affirmative by nature. If it lose the affirmations which have their foundation in God, it surrenders itself easily to the first which are presented to it and bear the stamp of genius, of boldness, or of novelty. The intelligence, enfeebled by the subtraction of its natural sustenance, which are the just and the true, resembles a sea deprived of the tribute of its rivers, and whose diminished waters receive with avidity the impure slime which chance streams bring to it here and there. Everything is good to him who has nothing, and the more profound has been the negation in the mind, the more accessible it is to the seduction of the absurd, so that there is no credulity equal to that of an unbeliever. *They will heap to themselves, says St. Paul, Teachers, having itching ears, and will indeed turn away their hearing from the truth, but will be turned unto fables.** The

*2 Tim., iv: 3, 4.

man who believes not in God believes in a dream; he who believes no longer in Jesus Christ believes in Voltaire. The first system put forward as the origin of things, from the reveries of the gnostics to the theories of Buffon, finds him ready to exclaim, "How marvellous!" Tell him that from all eternity there existed an infinite void peopled with innumerable atoms—he will believe it. Tell him that the atoms, concurring in the void by virtue of a reciprocal attraction, met at length and united, forming the first sun—he will believe it. Tell him that this sun, suspended in space, experienced the effect of an impulsion which determined the orbit wherein his mass revolves—he will believe it. Tell him that some fragments, becoming detached by the rotation, this sun retained them around him at a certain distance, at once attracting and repelling them, thus making them his satellites, whose movements are correlative to his—he will believe it. Tell him that one of these inferior globes, becoming somewhat cooler, attained the temperature of fecundity, and produced plants, trees, then animals of greater and greater perfection, and finally, man—he will believe it. Tell him that the temperature of the earth, becoming subsequently still lower, has lost its primitive energy of production, and has no longer any power save that of sustaining the species already emitted, without the faculty of emitting even one new species—he will believe it. Tell him anything you like, save that God created the world, and he will believe it. His faith will be always proportioned to the ardour of his incredulity; and if he hate God and the Gospel, there is nothing monstrous that issues from the mouth of the impious that he will not receive with a frenzy of adhesion. If you desire to give him proofs, he will tell you there is no need, and that the thing is self-evident.

O you, then, born in an unbelieving age, and who aspire to the glory of founding a doctrine, trouble yourselves no more with the thought that it will not listen to so mediocre a project! If nature has bestowed on you the gift of speaking or of writing, it is enough; and it is not certain that a pen or a tongue of

gold is necessary; lead has often succeeded. Make merry with your friends, and tell this proud age of what you please, the dream which you had yesterday, or that which you will have to-morrow. It asks no more, to believe in you, to love you, to admire you, to call you immortal while you live, and to raise to you a statue when you die.

VI. THE INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH.

Do not regard the infallibility of the Church as a strange and incomprehensible privilege. It is, on the contrary, that which is most simple and most necessary for men, namely, the re-establishment of their relations with truth. There is nothing strange in the fact that truth is communicated by God to the human race by means of a teaching free from error; what is strange is, that this teaching should be despised, notwithstanding our need of it; and the disorder introduced by original sin can alone explain this anomaly. Remember that the Church does not create truth; truth is in God, it is in the word which God has spoken to men; and the sole privilege of the Church is to teach that word without the power of transforming it into error. How can she teach the human race, how can she demand its faith without the possession of this privilege? Moreover, every religion which does not proclaim itself infallible convicts itself of error, by that fact alone; for it admits that it may deceive, which is the highest degree both of dishonor and absurdity in an authority teaching in the name of God. It admits that it is but a philosophy, and will consequently meet with the fate of a philosophy. You have recently had a proof of this; you have seen men pose before humanity as founders of a religion: many of them were men of talent, of enthusiasm and of honesty. What was the end? They failed because they lacked a divine mission and a promise of infallibility. In a body, with their chief at their head, they dared not present themselves before you, and say: Hear and believe, for we are infallible! And

therefore it was that reasoning crushed them. For what causes all to perish nowadays, and makes the world strain its anchors, is reasoning; it is because man believes man no longer, and nevertheless will not submit himself to God. Without a divine authority there is nothing stable, nothing strong; but all is like the wind which passes away while it destroys.

If society is shaken from one end of Europe to the other, what think you agitates it to its foundation? It is not the sword which overthrows princes. The sword is met by the sword, force resists force: when the powers of earth have but to struggle against force, they crush with their armies those who oppose them. But the terrible enemy, that which overthrows everything, and against which neither republic nor king can do aught, is reasoning, reasoning which has no longer the counterpoise of authority and infallibility. And yet, notwithstanding this necessity for infallibility, the Catholic Church alone has dared to call itself infallible. The pagan religions, far from pretending to it, did not even dare to teach a doctrine to their followers; the Mahometan religion contents itself with causing the Koran to be read by its disciples; the Protestants reject infallibility absolutely, and in teaching the people, contradict their principles continually. To teach nothing, or to cause to be read a book reputed divine, these are the only resources of religion which do not proclaim themselves infallible. And if you ask why they do not proclaim themselves infallible, it is because they cannot do so; it is because they know well that their perpetual variations, or the absurdity of their dogmas, would ever betray such a pretension. It is not so easy as we may think to proclaim oneself infallible. Every false religion commences in man; and what man is bold enough to proclaim as infallible his thoughts and those of his successors? How could Luther, for example, proclaim himself infallible, he who attacked the infallibility of every Church? The man who wishes to found a new religion, that is to say, to corrupt an ancient religion—for no one but God has founded a religion upon earth—the man who entertains this design has at once

to face the necessity and the impossibility of proclaiming himself infallible. If he do not proclaim himself and his successors infallible, he will not obtain the faith of his own sectaries; he will perish by reasoning, which will introduce into his doctrine infinite variations. If he proclaim himself infallible, he will be the laughing-stock of the universe. Therefore it is that inventors of false dogma conceal themselves within temples, bury their doctrine in mystery and under symbolical forms; or, on the other hand, reason like the heretics, and build on that moving sand ephmeral churches and fugitive dogmas. The Catholic Church, in proclaiming herself infallible, has done then what is indeed absolutely necessary, but what is beyond the power of man. And this infallibility has really manifested itself in her by an indestructible constancy in her dogmas and her morality, despite the difference of times, of places, and of men.

Why do you not laugh when I tell you that I am infallible, not I, but the Church, of which I am a member, and who has given me a mission? Why, I say, do you not laugh? It is because the history of the Church gives her some right, even in your eyes, to say that she is infallible; it is because, in a career of eighteen centuries amid all the mutations of the human mind, she has been firm as a pyramid. You would indeed make this an occasion of insult; you say: It is but a tomb, and there is in it but a little ashes. Yes, but this tomb is that of Christ; these ashes are ashes which live long and are always the same, and despite of you make you think.

It is, say you, the very principle of infallibility which has produced this result. But in vain will one believe himself infallible, if he be not so in reality, as nothing can resist the variations and contradictions produced by the difference of minds. How does it happen that Gregory XVI and the bishops of his time, although living under influences so novel, have the same thoughts as all their predecessors? It may be natural that the people should believe the same as the chiefs of doctrine, because they regard them as infallible; but the chiefs

themselves, if not guided by a superior, immutable, infinite mind, how could they preserve unity of doctrine? Let us acknowledge, in this accord of facts with principles, the divine character, which alone can explain it. There must needs be in the world a teaching authority; this teaching authority must possess the highest evidences of certitude or moral authority, and, moreover, it must be infallible, that it may command the faith of those whom it teaches, and who cannot be judges of doctrine. But the Church Catholic alone teaches the whole human race, or at least bears the character of catholicity; she alone possesses all the evidences of moral certitude in their highest degree; she alone has dared to say that she is infallible, and the history of her doctrine proves, by its admirable and incomprehensible unity, that she has received this precious gift whereby the primitive union of men with truth has been re-established. Everywhere else we find but local, variable, and contradictory ideas, waves succeeding waves, whilst the Catholic Church resembles the ocean, which surrounds and bathes every continent.



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