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# Is the Church Arrogant?

By

**WILLIAM I. LONERGAN, S.J.**

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The Other Pamphlets in this Series are:

- I. Is the Church Intolerant? III. Is the Church  
Un-American? IV. Is the Church Officious?  
V. Is the Church a National Asset?*

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# Is the Church Arrogant?

**I**N another pamphlet<sup>1</sup> we asked ourselves the question, "is the Catholic Church intolerant?" Briefly, our answer was yes and no:—yes, so far as faith and morals are concerned; no, on every other score. Assuming the correctness of the claims of Catholicism to be the one true Church of Christ, logically she cannot put up with religious dogmas and doctrines at variance with her own and must be intolerant of every other creed. On the other hand, precisely because her one reason for existence is to apply Christ's saving graces to all mankind without exception, she is not and may not be intolerant of any person or individual. With that simple distinction the question is answered.

What is popularly referred to as the Church's intolerance is, when rightly understood, but the honorable fulfillment of her Divine mission and a failure basely to swerve from the path of duty. Because she is the custodian of a set of unchangeable principles, because she has no authority to substitute human vagaries for the infallible truths revealed by the Man-God, because she cannot compound with error, doctrinally or morally, she may not be a "Liberal." This, however, far from being anything for Catholics to be ashamed of or offering reasonable grounds to those outside the Fold for fault-finding, is a glorious tribute to her perpetual indefectibility.

A further popular contemporary charge against Holy Mother the Church is that she is arrogant: she makes claims for herself that no other institution on earth has ever made. There are many counts to the indictment.

## THE CHARGE

The Catholic Church, we are told, claims that she is the only true Christian Church; that all others, so-called, are

<sup>1</sup> This is the second of a series of pamphlets by Father Lonergan under the title, "The Modern Indictment of Catholicism." The others are: I. Is the Church Intolerant? III. Is the Church Un-American? IV. Is the Church Officious? V. Is the Church a National Asset?

false. The Catholic Church claims that she is infallible; that the Pope, her Head, is Christ's Vicar and, in his official capacity, also infallible in matters of faith and morals. The Catholic Church claims that outside of her there is no salvation. The Catholic Church claims that her priests can actually forgive sins, and change bread and wine into the sacred Body and Blood of Christ Jesus. The Catholic Church claims that she has absolute control over Christian marriage. In fine, the Catholic Church claims that she is the ultimate arbiter of what men must believe and do to be saved.

Admittedly these are tremendous claims for any organization to make and non-Catholics feel that they are extravagant, that they can have their roots only in pride and arrogance. Arrogance, however, is an undue and unwarranted assumption of position or authority. Note those words *undue* and *unwarranted*. One is arrogant only when one makes groundless claims. Hence the fairness or unfairness of the anti-Catholic challenge hinges entirely on the further interrogatory, "Is the Church Divine or a fraud? Has she or has she not the powers she claims for herself, for the Pope, for her clergy?"

Is the Catholic Church, in the first place, the one true Church of Christ, to the exclusion of every other? Absolutely and categorically, yes: she certainly is.

#### PAGANISM AND JUDAISM FALSE

At the outset, so far as Paganism or Judaism being true religions are concerned, the weakness of their position is readily demonstrated. The one point to be established against them is the Divinity of Christ which they all reject. Is Christ Divine? Nothing is more indisputable.

To be certain that Abraham Lincoln was once President of the United States, or Napoleon Bonaparte Emperor of France, or Pontius Pilate Governor of Judea one has merely to inquire if there be any authentic evidence to prove that Lincoln, Bonaparte and Pilate respectively claimed those dignities, exercised the prerogatives of those offices, and were acknowledged as President, Emperor and Governor by their contemporaries.

Testing Christ's Divinity by these same norms we must as logically conclude that He is the Son of God. Opening the Gospels at random we note that Jesus Christ constantly arrogates to Himself Divine nature and Divine attributes—eternity, omniscience and omnipotence; that He vindicates His position by employing that Divine power and that Divine knowledge to utter a long series of prophecies and perform a variety of stupendous miracles; and that His very foes, to say nothing of His friends, confessed His claims. Yes, Christ is Divine, and with this fact established, the claims of Paganism and Judaism to being true religions must be thrown out of court.

At a luncheon meeting sponsored by the National Republican Club in New York City, in the spring of 1929, the question was mooted, "How can we have religious cooperation without uniformity?" In the course of the discussion a distinguished local Rabbi made a stirring plea for the Christian Churches to discontinue sending missionaries among the Jews to attempt their conversion.

"We leave you alone," the metropolitan press quoted him as saying, "and organized Christianity can leave us alone. I think the organized Church should leave every other Church more or less free. Let each one work out its own salvation its own way."

Certainly no Christian denomination that is sincere about its own beliefs, much less Catholicism, can fall in with such a suggestion. It matters not that the Jews "are not heathens, but a spiritual people with the highest ideals." Christ's mission was to establish a more perfect way of worshiping the Father and to give mankind a more complete revelation. In consequence Christianity may not be indifferent to the conversion of the children of Israel. It would be to ignore its commission to carry Christ to the world and to prove recreant to its duty.

#### CATHOLICISM VS. PROTESTANTISM

When we pass from a consideration of Paganism and Judaism over to Christianity, Protestants and Catholics are agreed that our Divine Lord established some sort of a

Church. It is the Catholic position, however, that the Catholic Church is that Church; that the others are not the genuine article; that they are spurious. Certainly this is arrogance if those claims are groundless. Are they?

Obviously and even to one examining the problem superficially and cursorily, all the so-called Christian sects and denominations cannot be Christ's. Historically many of them did not appear till long after His death. As for their teachings, they are often mutually exclusive and contradictory, though truth is always essentially one. One Church, for example, teaches the immutability of dogmas, another denies it and stands for an evolution of dogma; one demands that the Christian Church have a hierarchy and a priesthood, another rejects these; one supports a sacramental system, another ridicules it; one stresses such doctrines as purgatory and hell, another repudiates them; one upholds honoring the Virgin Mother of God, another considers that honor a sort of blasphemy. And so with other things. The divergencies between them are many and marked.

It is the Catholic contention, justified by the Scriptures, Protestant as well as Catholic, and by the traditional practices of the first Christian centuries, that Christ entrusted to the Church which He founded a body of very definite doctrines and moral principles which were to be transmitted unimpaired to His followers until the end of time; that He gave that Church a very specific form of organization; that He instituted for it a complete sacramental system and a rather detailed program of worship. It is her further contention that today, as throughout the centuries, only she measures up to the Divine plans and specifications; that the others, whatever they be and however called, Presbyterian, Congregational, Anglican, Episcopalian, Lutheran and what-not, lack a Divine charter; they are not juridically linked up with apostolic times; they have not the earmarks of the genuine article; they are false.

Open Holy Writ and you will read such pronouncements as these from the lips of our Divine Lord: "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." "Whose sins you shall



forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you." "What, therefore, God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." "It is better for thee to enter into life maimed than having two hands to go into hell, unto unquenchable fire, where their worm dieth not and the fire is not extinguished." Now, in all fairness we may ask, where today is there a Church that safeguards all these dicta, that teaches the utter necessity of baptism, that defends the Real Presence and the obligation of sacramental Communion, that upholds the absolute indissolubility of Christian matrimony, that maintains a tribunal to absolve from sin, that preaches the eternal terrors of hell? Where?

Outside of Catholicism the so-called Christian sects are well-nigh in utter chaos. In a sermon at Lausanne the late Protestant Bishop Brent stated: "The Christ in one church often categorically denies the Christ in the neighboring church. It would be ludicrous if it were not tragic. The situation is suicidal."

#### FUNDAMENTALISM AND MODERNISM

Nominally there are still amongst us all the old European varieties of Protestantism and some extra vintages of American growth. Practically, however, there are but two great camps in the churches, Fundamentalists and Modernists. Neither measures up to the Gospel test of Christ's Church. Both make total shipwreck of His religion. As a Protestant divine in Montreal admitted a couple of years ago, "Our divisions and bickerings are proof of the absence of the Spirit of Christ."

By teaching and upholding most extravagant theories based on a literal, private interpretation of the Bible, Fundamentalism makes Christianity look ridiculous. It ranges itself against commonsense and all scientific progress. The Dayton monkey trial that intrigued the country a few summers ago showed how silly the whole thing was. To maintain that Genesis limits God's creative work to one hundred and forty-four hours, in other words, that the six days mentioned in the Mosaic account were of twenty-four hours

each, is to make the inspired writer appear to talk nonsense, while to interpret the account of the heavenly Jerusalem depicted in the Apocalypse as literally one great jewel palace, or as one spacious orchestra pit or choir loft where everybody is harping on a harp or singing the newest songs, stultifies religion and converts the hereafter into a mere prolongation of our present materialistic existence.

Fundamentalism, however, even at its worst, at least supports some form of Christianity. Modernism, on the other hand, robs it of every vestige of Divinity. It makes Christ only man; Holy Writ, a collection of symbols; religion, an experience; faith, a sentiment; the story of Divine creation, a myth; miracles and the Virgin Birth and the Easter Resurrection, absurdities. This is no exaggeration. So-called Christian pulpits today re-echo the most startling and un-Christian principles and teachings, moral as well as dogmatic. We have such fads as companionate marriage condoned, and we have birth control and the new morality, or rather, immorality, advocated.

One has but to read the Monday papers for evidence of this. It is not so long ago that in a Methodist Episcopal church in New York City the pastor, not satisfied with asserting that Christ was "physically the son of Joseph and Mary," most blasphemously made Him their illegitimate child, destroying at one fell stroke His Divinity and Mary's Divine maternity and virginity. Is that Christianity? Even the sixteenth-century iconoclasts never went that far.

In an otherwise convincing sermon on the Divinity of Our Lord, a Nashville Presbyterian robbed his whole talk of its efficacy by stating: "It may be as we go on that some day we shall discover the secret of the miracles and understand how Jesus in a very natural way healed the blind . . . but if we do the discovery will not take from Him His Godhead, for He never based His claims on the signs He performed." Is that Christianity? One wonders whether the preacher is ignorant that when Our Saviour was asked for a proof of His mission He answered, "The works [miracles] which I do give testimony of me." To take the miracles out of Scripture is to take away from Christ His Godhead, for He did base His claims to Divinity upon them.



Nor is the theology of a Methodist bishop any better when he is satisfied to assert that the Resurrection "is the only miracle that is indispensable to Christianity." What, one is tempted to inquire, of the Incarnation itself?

A Congregationalist tells his people: "The acceptance of a correct Creed cannot possibly be laid down as a condition previously required of those who seek to become Christians." Yet Christ most explicitly states that certain truths must be believed.

How far Modernists go is made plain by Mr. Donald McFayden:

We can no longer entertain the conception of the Holy Spirit which the framers of the Creed undoubtedly held. . . .

The Creed seems to teach that the flesh in which one died will be reassembled to form the resurrection body . . . modern physiology has made it inconceivable.

Finally it looks very much as if scientific history is going to force us to abandon our inherited notion regarding the manner of Jesus' birth.

Such instances might be prolonged indefinitely. There is an increasing number of ministers who conduct services at which no prayers are offered and where no reference is made to God. The old theological terminology is still employed but given a novel and figurative meaning. It was a Reformation slogan that the Bible was the one norm of faith. Today, we are told, it does not matter what one believes; it is what he does that counts. And, as regards Scripture, modern nationalism whittling away first one and then another part of God's word, has practically left nothing of the Bible but the covers. Tested by every doctrinal norm, contemporary American Protestantism fails.

#### ORGANIZATION OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

But Christ not only entrusted very definite doctrines to His Church to be propagated. He gave it also a very specific form of organization. It was to be hierarchical (having members of different ranks) not democratic; composed of a teaching body and a group to be taught. From among His intimate followers He picked twelve and to them He

gave the command, "Going therefore . . . teach ye all nations . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have taught you."

More than that. From among this little group He chose one, Peter, to whom He promised, "Thou art Peter and upon this rock will I build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, and to you will I give the keys of the kingdom of heaven," a promise He unquestionably fulfilled when after His Resurrection He commissioned him individually and personally, to feed the entire Fold, His lambs and His sheep. Moreover, Peter's Primacy was one not merely of honor or responsibility, but of jurisdiction, and from the first, as history unmistakably proves, he and others so understood it. Indeed it was this hierarchical organization and this Petrine Primacy that were to give Christ's Church the authority that would stabilize it.

Look around the world today, and where do you find a hierarchy as established by Christ? Where do you find a Primacy such as He established? Where do you find authority such as He established? Absolutely no place outside of the Catholic Church. Externally, Episcopalianism comes nearest to it, but it lacks that dependence upon the successor of Peter that Christ intended should characterize His foundation, and like the rest of the denominations has no recognized final authority to serve in disputes as a court of appeal and last resort for the truth. A wide divergence in its doctrines and the recent prayer-book episode in England, as well as the troubles inside the church between high churchmen and low churchmen, between Fundamentalists and Modernists in the ranks, clearly show this.

In New York City, for example, a fashionable Episcopal church uptown teaches one thing while in a downtown pulpit doctrines quite inconsistent are often taught, and there is no individual or group competent or courageous enough to settle the dispute. This is even more true with most of the other sects. Which one of them claims, let alone actually has, an authoritative teaching body that can definitely and categorically declare and in such a way as to carry conviction and gain the adherence of its members, this is right, that is wrong, this is true, that is false? Each

minister is practically a law unto himself. And he has to be if Protestantism would remain consistent with its initial foundation principle that the Bible is the sole norm of faith and that the individual is its authoritative interpreter.

### WORSHIP AND THE SACRAMENTS

Moreover, Christ bequeathed to His Church a set form of worship and a sacramental system. Scripture and tradition make this clear. And where have we these things adequately and entirely outside of Mother Church—the Mass and the Sacraments? A small group of high churchmen affect both, though they lack a genuine priesthood with valid Orders, and though many of the brethren at best tolerate these “Romish” practices of the Episcopalian minority.

By every test—in her doctrines, in her organization with its hierarchical and primatial authority, in her worship and in her sacramental system, the Catholic Church fully and completely measures up to the plans and specifications of the Divine Architect who conceived her. In this she stands alone today and has ever so stood. Hence she is not arrogant when she claims that she alone is the true Church of Christ, and that every other so-called Christian denomination is spurious. Scripture and history both justify her claims and it is a strange but curious fact that none of the leading Protestant sects deny that she is truly Christ’s foundation. Any one of them would be willing to admit her to their unity tomorrow. At most they maintain that she is not the only true Church.

### INFALLIBILITY

A second count in the indictment of arrogance against Catholicism is that without warrant she claims for herself and for the Pope infallibility. Now this charge will not stand a logically critical test any better than the first. Holy Writ makes it patent that Christ linked up salvation with the acceptance of His teachings. For all time His doctrines were to be passed on to mankind. But without some Divine safeguard human fallibility would have gone astray

in transmitting those teachings. Therefore, He had to make His Church infallible. And He did this when He promised that He would be with His Apostles in the fulfilment of their mission all days even to the consummation of the world, and again when He assured them that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, would abide with them forever. And what He promised all, He promised in a very special way to Peter. Against the Church builded upon him, the rock, Christ guaranteed that the gates of hell should not prevail. Peter it was who was to confirm the brethren themselves in their faith.

The Catholic Church is not arrogant, then, when she maintains that it is impossible for her to teach error, doctrinal or moral. Were she capable of erring Christ Himself would be a liar. The Faithful, even though sometimes they may not fully understand the Church's pronouncements, unqualifiedly accept them because they know she cannot lead them astray. They seek explanations for her teachings and to have reasons for the faith that is in them; but that is all.

When the Church says that the Virgin Birth or the Immaculate Conception or Transubstantiation or original sin are revealed truths they unhesitatingly assent because she is the channel through which God speaks to them. When the Church tells Catholics that divorce is sinful, while they may not like the decision, they cannot, protestant-like, set up their judgments in opposition and say, it is not, and not sin. When she says, as she has time and again, that artificial birth control is intrinsically immoral, while to abide by that judgment may entail personal hardship or inconvenience, they cannot question her decision and remain loyal Catholics.

#### OUTSIDE THE CHURCH NO SALVATION

Are Catholics arrogant when they claim that outside the Church there is no salvation? Not at all. Christ Himself stated this truth in unmistakable language. "He who is not with me," He said, "is against me." And of His Apostles, His official teachers, He said, "He that heareth you heareth me and he that despiseth you despiseth me."

This does not mean that we Catholics anathematize and damn to hell anyone who differs from us in our belief. There are good non-Catholics, very many of them, who will reach heaven, but it will not be because they are Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, or the rest, for those are not titles to heaven, but only because of their good faith; because they belong, if not by external profession, at least implicitly, in spirit and by baptism, to Christ's true Church. Protestantism gives one no more right to heaven than a Lackawanna or Southern Pacific railroad ticket gives one a title to a ride on a Santa Fe or a New York Central train. If the Church is not Christ's it will no more conduct me to Him than a north-bound train at Buffalo will land me directly in New Orleans.

Protestantism simply does not lead to heaven. It has not the light to show the way; it has not the sacramental helps to carry one along; it has not the key to open the gate. It was to His Apostles, not to Luther, Calvin, Huss, Knox or Cranmer that Christ said, "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world." It was to them He entrusted the administration of His Sacraments through which grace flows into men's souls. It was only to Peter and his successors that He gave the keys of the kingdom.

#### PENANCE, HOLY EUCHARIST, MATRIMONY

There is no arrogance or unwarranted assumption of authority by the Catholic Church when she maintains that her priests can forgive sins or convert bread and wine at Mass into the Body and Blood of the Saviour. Open the Gospel of St. John and read his narrative of the events of the first Easter night. The Apostles are gathered together and of a sudden Christ stands in their midst and after greeting them He breathes on them and says, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." If that be not a commission to absolve as the Church through the ages in the exercise of the sacrament of Penance has understood it, then words mean absolutely nothing. Christ does not say that His priests may declare forgiven

what He forgives or that they may beg forgiveness from God for sinners, but categorically, what they forgive He forgives, and what they retain or refuse to forgive, He retains in heaven.

The same holds with regard to the changing of bread and wine at Mass. After effecting this very thing at the Last Supper, Christ commanded His Apostles, "Do this in commemoration of me," and both they and He, as the history of the apostolic times and the early Church demonstrates, clearly understood that these were not personal prerogatives but privileges to be handed on to their successors, for they were meant for the benefit of the Faithful for all time.

The same may be said of the teachings of the Church with regard to matrimony. They are not arrogant. By the mere fact that our Divine Lord raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament and made it a religious rite and a holy thing, and gave it a supernatural significance, of which, as St. Paul says, His union with the Church is the symbol He brought marriage under the wing of the Church. As far, therefore, as wedlock between baptized Christians is concerned only Christ's Church has anything to say about its validity or invalidity, its lawfulness or unlawfulness; only she can make impediments, only she can adjudicate disputes and decide doubts.

The State can regulate its civil effects, but it cannot touch the essence of the marriage contract or modify its nature or tamper with its unity or indissolubility. So far as sacramental marriage is concerned the State has absolutely no power. What God hath joined together, Christ says, no human power may put asunder. The State may go through the external process of divorcing and remarrying Christians, but in the tribunal of conscience and before God, it is an empty formula, mere dramatics, comedy or tragedy as you like.

#### SUMMARY

Let us sum up briefly what has been said to meet the charge of arrogance against Catholicism, so that you may see the logic of the position of the Church and grasp the objective value of the arguments.



I have listed five distinct counts in the indictment of arrogance against the Church. I reminded you that arrogance can only be charged if claims are unwarranted.

She claims in the first place that she is the only true Church. She substantiates that claim by proving that by contrast with other so-called Christian sects she alone measures up to the Divine plans and specifications as they are drawn in Holy Writ—in doctrine, in hierarchical organization, in worship, in a sacramental system.

She claims, secondly, that she and the Pope, her visible Head, are infallible. Even apart from the Gospel commissions her very nature demands that this should be so in order that each successive generation might have a guarantee that they were getting Christ's undiluted doctrine. In addition, however, there are the actual promises that the gates of hell should not prevail against her, that the Holy Spirit should guide her, that Peter should confirm his brethren, and so on.

She claims, thirdly, that outside of her there is no salvation. This follows because the means to salvation are hers only: others cannot give what they have not.

Fourthly, as for the priestly powers of forgiving sin and Transubstantiation, they are clear from Scripture.

Finally, as for sacramental marriage and her exclusive authority over it as against the State, it flows from the general principle of rendering to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and to God the things that are God's. The Sacraments are not Cæsar's!

The Catholic Church does make tremendous claims, but not a single one of them is arrogant or unwarranted, for she has a Divine charter, a Divine commission, Divine promises, Divine prerogatives, Divine guidance. Let the world indict us if it will, and libel and slander and calumniate our claims. Christ Himself foretold that His Church would be the butt of opposition. There is nothing to fear from the persecution of men. Rather Catholics should be proud that they are members of the true Church. At the same time they must not disdain those not of the Fold. Rather let us pray that they may come to share our privileges.

# The Following of Christ

as written by GERARD GROOTE

*Newly*

translated from  
The Dutch Original  
by Joseph Malaise, S.J.

À KEMPIS was disputed to assemble, edit and translate into excellent Latin, from the original Dutch text, the writings of Gerard Groote, whom he revered. He issued an edition in 1427, and a final edition in 1441. He came to be known as the author of the **Following of Christ**. Investigations pursued since 1921 leave little doubt about the authorship of this priceless spiritual document. The author was the saintly deacon, Gerard Groote.

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