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IS CHRISTIANITY A FAILURE?

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NABLE to prove the Church a merely human institution and forced to concede some measure of success to her efforts to convert the world, the critic can still affirm that the work she calls her own, the task which was set her by Christ, is yet unaccomplished. Twenty centuries have been lived through, and meanwhile mankind has not been brought together into the one fold under the one shepherd.

THE TASK

Now a condition so puzzling to the Catholic cannot be explained by alleging that outside the pale there are to be found only such as sin against the light. Scholar and saint alike affirm that many a man lives and dies honest but unbelieving. Indeed, there are daily instances of persons above the average in intelligence, and beyond reproach in morals, who remain utterly unmoved by able presentations of Catholic doctrine. We, who behold the Church's appeal falling thus ineffectual, are able to attach blame neither to those who listen nor to those who preach.

A DILEMMA

To some observers this situation presents a serious difficulty. They feel driven to choose between the alternatives of a very ugly dilemma. The Church's failure to win over all honest minds seems to imply either that Catholicism holds no sufficient credentials of its divine origin, or else that some souls have been left by God without the practical ability of arriving at religious truth.

In either event the conscience grows uneasy at the

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suggestion that God's doing is inconsistent with His planning—since one may not take refuge in the principle of indifferentism and suppose that people outside the Church are provided with as many spiritual helps as God permits Catholics to enjoy.

For more than one reason this difficulty deserves attention. First, although dim and unreal to many Catholics, it becomes to others a source of acute annoyance, wearing the look of a mere gratuitous trial of faith and calling for the surrender of that most sustaining of all religious beliefs, the conviction that to those who love God all things work together for good. Again, not a few outside the fold would find progress far easier, perhaps, if the painful burden of this new doubt could be lifted from souls already too heavily laden.

True, the puzzle cannot be completely disentangled, for its deeper roots run back into that ultimate mystery, the problem of evil. As we shall never know exactly why a race incapable of sin could not have brought glory to God as well as—or, rather, far more economically than—the actual creation, so we shall never discover the true reason why God's Kingdom, the Church, is not co-extensive with His kingdom, the world. Yet, although convinced beforehand that we shall have to leave our riddle half unsolved, we may look to wrest from the study of it at least something which will make the situation less uncomfortable.

ACCUSATIONS

Seeking for the motives which may prompt an honest mind to hold out against the Church's claims, we find that most of the really redoubtable objections can be reduced to one or other variation of the charge: "The Catholic Church is not as holy as the Church of God should be." This plea, it is clear, assumes the existence of some lofty standard of moral excellence, to which the Church of God must conform.

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The assumption is indisputably sound, since the voice of any universal instinct calls for recognition with a sort of divine right. With unerring confidence men declare that such an institution as the Catholic Church professes to be, should stand forth the noblest object in creation, a being holy with the holiness of God, an organism endowed with the characteristics proper to the mystical body of Christ, a bride without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

When these demands are made concrete, we find they amount to this: men demand that a divinely framed society should be far more heaven-like in appearance than critical inquirers or sensitive believers will assert the Catholic Church to be, here and now in the world of reality.

In asserting that Catholicism, if it originates from God, should in certain respects be other than it is, men are right. So it should. As divine, it should elect for itself vessels of irreproachable holiness; its pontiffs should be an uninterrupted line of saints, its bishops models of perfection, its priesthood spotless; the Catholic laity should be burnished mirrors of God's sanctity; recrimination, self-seeking, division should be unknown; never should a sacrament or a devotion be aught else than the clasping of God by a human soul; simony, sacrilege, nepotism, canonical trial, should be terms uncoined.

Since in the divine idea the Church possesses the characteristics above enumerated, and since the divine idea itself begets the obligation of conforming to it, any departure from this in actual history implies the existence of what should not be, of what, by its very presence, justifies the charge that something is wrong and some one at fault.

The human mind, then, rightly postulates an obligation on the part of the Church to be more like God's ideal, to be more convincingly divine than Catholicism actually

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is. About the validity of such an assumption we make no question. The staunchest apologist must concede a vast difference between the ideal and the actual, a striking deficiency in what is, as compared with what ought to be.

The one point for discussion is this: does the existing discrepancy imply an essential, and therefore irreconcilable, difference between historical Catholicism and the divine ideal made known through the God-given instincts of the soul?

EVIL EVERYWHERE

In the light of pure *a priori* speculation, we might perhaps be tempted to answer in the affirmative. But after carefully analyzing the instincts involved, and recalling how frequently and how significantly other like anticipations have been corrected by experience, we shall probably be led to conclude that the historical shortcomings of Catholicism, so far from being inconsistent with a claim to divine origin, present an exact analogy to conditions generally prevalent in the world.

Everywhere we find reality marred in the making; everywhere creatures fall short of their innate possibilities; everywhere the absence of such symmetry and integrity as must necessarily have been included in a divine plan seems to belie the heavenly parentage of things. Wherever God's design has been entrusted to man for fulfillment, wherever human co-operation has been required as an element in the establishment of harmony, there perfection is wanting.

Surely all this is as truly a disappointment to heaven-born anticipation, as is the discovery that the Church appears to live a human rather than a divine life.

Deep instincts have bidden us presume that every being which issues from the bosom of God will be good and

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beautiful and true. In the inanimate, as in the living, and again in the spiritual order, we look for this—our expectancy resting upon a principle quite axiomatic in theistic philosophy. Yet what is more painfully evident than the fact that the universe is not all good, not all beautiful, not all orderly?

And from this what other inference can be drawn than that the visible world, though absolutely dependent on God, has been interfered with and partly spoiled by the action of wills not controlled by the divine will; that it has been defaced by creatures endowed with the amazing prerogative of opposing and, to some extent, thwarting the divine intention and foiling the divine plan.

We find God-given potencies checked and stunted, and the currents of life turned into the channels of destruction and death. For order we see substituted a chaotic flux of things out of which, in the progress of history, harmony must be again evolved tediously and laboriously, if at all—and, it may be, imperfectly, even at best. The most childlike trust in the excellence of “the final goal of ill” cannot blind us to this.

Is there any lack of evidence to prove an evil influence at work in the world? Can this universe be identically what God planned it to be, the exact realization of a perfect ideal? Are divine wisdom and goodness adequately manifested by the correspondence obtaining between what does and what should exist? The thought is inconceivable.

Who can accept it as part of the creative purpose that the instincts of the human heart should beget such sins as are written all over the pages of history? Who can believe that God’s will is responsible for the horrors which leave their awful record in city slum and Turk-ravaged village, in the torture-room, the leper-island, and the Oriental harem? As surely as the Almighty Being Who rules creation is wise and good, so surely does the world about

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us fail to reproduce His archetypal ideas, to fulfill His will.

“I found Him in the shining of the stars,
I marked Him in the flowering of His fields;
But in His ways with men I find Him not.”

EFFECT ON THE CHURCH

These facts, so obvious and easy of belief when secular affairs are in question, prepare us for a similar experience when attention is turned to the religious condition of mankind. In nowise then should we be astonished, if we find that the Church of God has suffered from the action of man's imperfect mind and fickle will; that the human element in Catholicism is not convincingly divine; that the mystical body of Christ shines less brightly when material vestments have wrapped it round. In other words, we are ready to view, with more or less equanimity, the spectacle of a Church divinely founded, and yet somewhat obscured in those prerogatives which normally belong to institutions that are of God.

As she comes from the hands of the All-Wise and All-Holy, the Church must possess a beauty and goodness transcending human powers of comprehension. She, the representative and delegate of the Deity, the Bride of the Lamb, the Mystical Body of Christ, must spring into being, pure of blemish or defect, radiant with beauty, holy with an evident holiness that bespeaks divinity.

Within she must possess the potency of a growth that will be merely the progressive unfolding of limitless loveliness and sanctity. No attribute and no circumstance attending her advent can impress the mind as inconsistent with divinity. Every intelligence that grasps the meaning of her native characteristics must perceive the evidence of a divine source of the life within her.

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HISTORY

Let us suppose the Church thus plainly divine at the beginning. Then commenced her human history; and for nineteen centuries she has been submitted to all the torment and humiliation that demonlike men chose to inflict upon her—even as her Founder had previously been put at the mercy of Roman and of Jew. Needless to say, during certain epochs in this history, faith itself has been staggered at the extent and depth and persistence of unholiness in the body of the Church; at the venality, the cruelty, the filthiness, and the hypocrisy of those who, if Catholicism is divine, were holding the keys of the kingdom of heaven as dispensers of God's graces to the souls of men.

This infidelity on the part of the human element has profoundly affected the self-evidence of the Church's claims. Her growth has not been an uninterrupted advance along the lines designed. She, too, has had her Betrayal and her Passion; and the outcome of her agony, like that of her Master's has been an external defilement and disfigurement such as keen-eyed faith alone could disregard.

And as for the powers that rule the world, they have welcomed her much as they welcomed her Master. Her face was set against them, and they did their worst to bring her low. She has been in the thick of a lasting and almost hopeless struggle with the mightiest forces in the kingdom of evil, with the lust of the flesh and the craze of power and the accursed greed of gold.

PRESENT ASPECTS

Little wonder that her look is altered, since foes have been so stubborn, since children have so often fallen away. Little wonder that as she emerges into view from out the shadows of the ages, nothing is plainer on her brow than

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the marks of conflict, nothing more evident than that no Church could come from the hand of God in such a guise.

She is stained with the blood that treason has spilled. Around her, cloudlike, is the smoke of battle—a battle that should never have been, a battle provoked by man's evil will, a battle waged with relentless hatred and no little power. So we find the truth of Catholicism now obscured, the loveliness of Catholicism defaced, the holiness of Catholicism soiled, by the doings of vicious enemies and unworthy children.

As truly as her Lord, she has shed her very life-blood for men; as truly as He, has she been humiliated and left at times without beauty or comeliness.

The splendid evidence of heavenly birth, which might so easily have been detected as she stepped across the threshold of history, now, at the end of nineteen centuries of struggle, is replaced by a dimmer testimony, intelligible to none save the few who realize that to bear thus long the brunt of shock from world and flesh and devil, means to be strong with the strength of God. Only those few understand that nothing merely human could have defied or escaped the forces arrayed against the Church.

To these penetrating minds the analogy of history suggests the probability of just such a condition as that which troubles and disturbs the confidence of men less wise—the condition, namely, of a Church facing a world which, with great show of logical right, demands that further credentials be forthcoming ere allegiance be rendered. In a word, the inconsistency between what God's Church should be and what the Catholic Church is, ceases to appear like a new or surprising problem, and becomes to the reflective student merely another aspect of the ancient riddle that has baffled men since first they began to think:

“Ah, me! for why is all around us here
As if some lesser god had made the world,
But had not force to shape it as he would?”

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SOLVING THE DILEMMA

The answer—if answer there be at all—is that in truth “a lesser god” has, by sin and selfishness, tried to re-make the world, and now is startled at the ruin he has wrought—almost convinced, let us hope, that Nature is greater than man, and that man had best give up the attempt to create a new heaven and a new earth.

Supposing now that, as declared above, the Church’s testimony to her own claim has lost some of its cogency in consequence of her members having failed in duty, is there not something to be adduced also with regard to the weakened capacity of minds which examine that testimony? Undoubtedly!

The human element in the Church—fallible, passable, changeable as it is—must, indeed, bear the responsibility of having obscured the evidences of Catholicism; yet the blame is to be shared by others, too. We may recall that objects grow dim not only when twilight comes, but also whenever one’s visual faculty is impaired. Similarly, a failure to recognize the Church’s claims may be traceable in part to some sort of astigmatism, as well as to the existence of ecclesiastical imperfections.

Long ago the principle was established that isolated reasoning leads no man to the truths necessary for the wise conduct of life; or, rather, that it is altogether impossible for a human being to employ isolated reasoning and to proceed by strictly logical processes in the formation of opinions.

To the construction of a man’s philosophy—and no man lacks one—his whole nature contributes. Inherited tendencies, acquired habits, instinct and emotions, whether developed or repressed, each in its measure takes part, as the will also does, in the laborious search for knowledge. Noble and upright conduct ranks among the chief elements of success in such a quest; and the man of symmetrical

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character, pure affections, and lofty purpose is far better adapted than a reasoning machine would be to attain to notions fairly representative of objective realities.

The most hopeless and helpless of all errors is that which proposes to reject whatever transcends the containing capacity of a demonstrative syllogism. This holds true as well in religion as in other fields. *Qui facit veritatem venit ad lucem*—which is as if to say: “Men’s chances of properly estimating the claims of God’s revelation will be in some sort proportioned to their virtue.”

MAN’S FALL

What, then, shall be expected of a race which, though originally sound, has culpably lost its integrity? Should we wonder if in the pursuit of truth it is halting and unsuccessful—more unsuccessful than one can reasonably suppose God designed it to be? By no means.

That sin is possible at all, may be mysterious enough to engage minds in an eternity of speculation. That men who have violated natural law are mentally in a wretched plight, that sinners stumble and err in doctrine, will scarcely present a new difficulty. It would reflect no discredit on an inventor, and cause no astonishment, if his delicate machine proved to be unworkable when choked with sand or rusted. No more is God’s wisdom questionable because, ever since sin undertook the ruling of the universe, discord has disputed the sovereignty of order and law.

RESULT OF SIN

Sin introduced a foreign element sure to disturb equilibrium. The constitution of things was shattered, the perfect balance lost; and the human soul henceforward corresponded to objective realities in a less adequate way than that which of necessity had obtained so long as man was the unspoiled creature of God.

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The sad mistake which rendered the spirit unholy, left it blinded as well. Both these injuries, by an inevitable fatality, spread infinitely far and laid hold of every being related to the primal transgressors and involved in the original curse. As sin had tainted humanity at the very source, the infection extended to each new member of the race; it injected poison into blood and brain and nerve; it distorted the emotional nature; it unhinged the will; it dulled perception and deadened conscience; and in each of these ways it struck hard at man's power to estimate the value of evidence and to attain to truth.

Moreover, in virtue of the solidarity which makes it impossible that a man should live—or die—unto himself alone, our search for truth is affected not only by the original race-sin inherited by us, but also by individual sins of ancestors, of neighbors, and of the vast millions under whose influence, at whatever distance of time or space, each one of us must fall.

Again, our native ability is further lessened by our own past personal sins, little and great, which have aggravated infirmities derived of inheritance or contagion.

There are some points we cannot attempt to explain. Why God chose that the human will should be free, and that all men should spring of a single stock and be born blood kindred, it is hard to say. What laws control the communion of goods and how God interferes in behalf of a creature inextricably tangled in the meshes of wickedness, are questions difficult to answer.

But one thing does seem to be clear: that the actual state of things is, on the whole, not inconsistent with the teachings of Catholic faith, and cannot be said to imply an unjust equipment of man by God. By some necessity virtue renders the soul more capable of arriving at truth, and vice, contrariwise, makes it less capable. Small reason for amazement, then, that a race and a generation as sinful as—with all its virtues—our own appears to be,

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should stray and stumble in its progress; small wonder if many a one born with a right to freedom and truth dies a bondsman of error.

MORAL WORTH OF CATHOLICISM

The preceding considerations seem to possess a value over and above their possible efficacy to relieve the pain of an awakened doubt. They tend, namely, to throw us back on the world of action for a means of lessening our difficulty still further. What has been said reminds us most emphatically that, in determining the practical success or failure of a religious propaganda, conduct acquires an importance far greater than the mere logic of the situation demands.

In the measure that observers are known to be affected by the moral bearing of an apostle, in that same measure must behavior rise in significance as a test of the apostolic vocation. If conduct weighs heavier than eloquence or learning in the unbelievers' balance, then nobility of life rather than precision of speech is the greater qualification of the propagandist.

The moral worth of Catholicism, its power to better lives, the embodiment of sublime ideals in the persons of its representatives—these are the facts that will preach best to the unconverted world; and they are facts, too, over which we can best exercise control.

Nothing is more absolutely within a man's own power of determination than his goodness or badness of life; and it behooves us to realize how strongly this same goodness or badness tells on the critical minds outside the Church. Each of us, willingly or unwillingly, is always gathering or scattering, standing with Christ or against Him, laboring as a missionary of the gospel or as a promoter of the kingdom of evil. The less sin thrives among us and the rarer selfishness becomes, the farther and the more triumphantly will fare the banner of our faith.

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POWER OF THE LAITY

Hence, in a very potent way, the laity can realize the missionary vocation, not alone by explaining doctrine, distributing literature, encouraging attendance at service, and incessantly praying for conversions; but, with equal truth, by resisting temptation, by striving for holiness, by spurning the solicitations of evil. Each earnest effort to progress spiritually, is less like a blow struck in a private quarrel, than like an impulse which ripples out in ever-widening circles to spread knowledge and love of God as far as the very boundaries of humankind.

That our behavior counts for much is true of the mass and outline of our conduct; it is true of the fine shadings, too. Not merely the observance of the graver precepts, but also the cultivation of sublime ideals and the widespread ambition of heroic virtue, enter as integral elements into the constitution of the Christian character.

As Catholics we are of necessity missionaries, and as missionaries we are bound to aspire to moral nobleness, just as our leaders in turn are bound and irrevocably consecrated to the pursuit of perfection by the acceptance of a vocation which implies that they have been wrapped round with a sacred flame from heaven. What further condemnation is needed of that degenerate philosophy which, under cover of the *laborare est orare* axiom, would make the one concern of the priesthood to be ceaseless activity?—as if external labors alone could suffice for the culture of the spirit, and as if men would not surely regard as spurious a religious system whose advocates lack the halo ever crowning true messengers of God.

THE PRIESTHOOD

Therefore, such as have been personally ordained to preach Catholic truth must take careful account of the instincts which prejudice men in favor of teachings that are

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lived as well as preached. Illogically, perhaps, but at any rate efficaciously, holiness of life attracts the earnest seekers after sound doctrine. Conduct rather than rhetoric, then, will be examined at the final court of inquiry; and only on condition that one has edified even those who knew him best, can he be rewarded as a faithful apostle. So a priest's trust is never adequately discharged while any possible measure of perfection remains unattempted.

And, as with the priest, so with the people—in whom Catholic doctrine must always glow with its proper accompaniments of beauty and holiness. What could be more reasonable?

Surely the man or the society favored with a divine revelation should be proportionately superior to others less favored. In honesty, frankness, prudence, bravery, independence, industry, tenderness, generosity, breadth, tolerance, refinement, learning—in these and in all other good qualities, the children of the faith, compared with others, may fairly enough be required to prove themselves more perfect, to seem better images of that type upon which the Creator modeled man, like which He intended and commanded and has helped him to be.

ELEVATING NATURAL TENDENCIES

Finally, another inference! It would seem evident from what has been said that the work of converting souls must include the attempt to exert over them other influences besides those which tend to draw them directly toward the Church.

The unbelieving not only have to be introduced to Catholic doctrine; they must also be given new power to see it. Since virtuous living is a condition of keen vision, the apostle should devote no little attention to the moral improvement of those outside the fold.

It well becomes a missionary, therefore, to diffuse

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among the people at large those spiritual agencies which the Church has used so successfully in the perfecting of her own children ever since her work began. Catholic asceticism includes more than one principle which may very properly and very effectively be recommended to men for whom as yet there is shining no brighter light than the ethical ideal, or to those for whom as yet Catholicism is simply one of many legitimate forms of Christianity.

Those great means of spiritual development which have been sanctioned by the Church's authority and immortalized in the practice of her saints, will prove, many of them, to be far from repugnant and anything but useless in the educating of souls without the law. Meditation and mortification are instances in point.

Be it noted at the same time that whatever is good in the native tendencies and whatever is elevating in the religious practices of non-Catholics, may help immensely in the work of preparing minds for the truths of faith. Nor are forces of even the merely human sort beneath the notice of the missionary, whose broad and tolerant sympathy should rest upon the principle that men cannot truly rise at all without rising nearer God.

It is in this sense a really apostolic work to teach the multitudes high ideals of citizenship, to advocate on its own merits deep reverence for law and public trust, to inculcate sentiments of decency, humanity, temperance, justice—in a word, to assist the unconverted world to rise higher in its own order and by its own way. Not alone in the interests of a prospective proselyte, but for the uplifting of the whole unlovely and unregenerated mass we have to strive. To the profligate and the wanton and the tramp we are, indeed, debtors; and, if only to render these less brutal and more human, the lives of our bravest and fairest should be offered up unflinchingly.

Timid Christians may quail as the magnitude of this mission looms up, and may hesitate when they are asked

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to believe that on no easier conditions can the apostolic vocation be fully realized; yet hope will hardly abandon such as have pondered the end and purpose of it all. These can conceive of no task too big to attempt.

“To attempt,” we say; because “to accomplish” is of secondary moment. Not to accomplish, but to strive and to persevere in striving, is the purpose for which we were sent into the world. On no soul can be laid a heavier burden. Issues and outcomes are in the hands of God, to be determined by other influences besides those which we control; but as for labor, that is our contribution—wholly ours—to give or to withhold, as we choose.

Once we understand what God wants, those of us who are truly His own, will go heartily to our work, however hopeless of accomplishment it seem. When at last the day is done—whether apparently it has been spent well or vainly—we shall see with a clearness unattainable in the stress of toiling, that God’s dearest wish was one with our highest happiness, and that somehow neither could have been realized in any other circumstances than those which it was our blessed privilege to accept and utilize.

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