

A CATHOLIC'S CONTRIBUTION

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EDWARD OSGOOD BROWN



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Y proper part in the entertainment to-night baffles and embarrasses me. I told the Committee that my friends in the Club might well with surprise exclaim, when I opened my mouth on the subject assigned,

“Is Saul also among the prophets?”

But I am in a worse situation than Saul. If I remember aright, the Son of Kish—unlikely as his friends thought his prophesying to be—had been, without their knowledge, anointed and inspired to that very end before they marveled at his company.

But no coal from the altar has touched my lips, and no chrism, to bring me the grace I need for this undertaking, has been poured upon my head. I am at sea—rudderless and compassless. I did not know when I was asked, I did not know when I

accepted, and I do not know now, what was or is expected of me in the way of "Some Religious Views"; but I was convinced then, and I am still more certain now, that some things that may have been expected of me I cannot do.

I do not believe that it would be interesting to you for me to tell the story of my own religious convictions or of the change in them in my early youth. But even if such an account would be interesting, and even if to obtain it were the purpose with which I was asked to participate to-night, it would not be possible for me to give it. For the very many years that I have been anchored in the faith of Mother Church—Holy, Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic—theological speculations have ceased to occupy me, albeit that which the term religion seems to me to cover has been ever widening. At the best I always had in my makeup what I suppose some of my earlier religious teachers would have called a *mauvais honte*, which closed my mouth in any public place on the subjects which in all right reason, I am willing to concede, might be supposed to be the most important and the most desirable of all subjects to talk about. In my very salad days I used, perhaps, to be rather fond of polemical or controversial conversation, but even then I felt no inclination toward really religious or true theological discussion. Like

the reserved scholar attacked by over-zealous missionary endeavor, I had "no religion to speak of."

And yet it was, I am sure, because I happened to be one of the very small Roman Catholic contingent in our membership, that I was asked to take part in this after-dinner symposium on this very serious subject, and therefore, if I would, in some manner, justify the action of the amiable Committeemen who thanked me cordially for accepting the duty, and sternly refused to release me when I grew panic-stricken, I must connect what I have to say with the Roman Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic faith.

Under the mental conditions which I have indicated, I do not think I can do better, in the few minutes which are allotted to me, than to try to tell you why I can say, like the greatest of the monks of modern times, the Dominican, Lacordaire, with all my heart, and with no feeling of inconsistency, "I hope to die a penitent Catholic and an impenitent Liberal."

I am a Catholic and I am a Liberal. But do not misunderstand me—I am not a Liberal Catholic, but a Catholic Liberal. The distinction may seem nothing to you, but the connotations which spoken and written use have put upon the phrases make it mean much to those of us who, radical though we may be in our ideas of

human policies, and reformers, if you please, even of things ecclesiastical on their human side, yet believe thoroughly and with unreserved interior submission, in what Newman calls "the objectivity of revelation," and have reached habitual moral certainty in the doctrines which express the mind of the Catholic Church on its purely supernatural side.

I seem to myself now to be slipping toward that thin theological ice I am so anxious to avoid, and yet I must venture a little farther in order to make my own position clear, and with certainty to avoid the discussion which I might otherwise seem almost to invite, but which in reality I desire most earnestly to shun.

As to the next dangerous spot on that thin ice that, like the skillful and daring skater, I would fly swiftly over that I may not break through to my bitter discomfiture, I want to borrow a figure which much impressed me in an eloquent sermon I heard at the funeral of my friend Judge Moran, and which in that sermon the preacher applied to the robust and unwavering faith of that eminently clear-minded and logical reasoner.

"We see," said the preacher, in substance, on that occasion, "many a great and beautiful cathedral, built in ages long ago, in which there are gargoyles and cornices, angles and abutments, which seem

to us, so far as we consider or discuss them with ourselves at all, monstrous, useless, and ugly; but with those details and the revolt that, when viewed singly, they excite in our twentieth-century taste and judgment, we trouble our heads but little. The grand church is there, towering into the heavens, a miracle of strength and beauty, its foundations deep down on everlasting rock, in its completeness compelling admiration and reverence." And such to us is the grand system of religion and morality, comprised in the teaching and practice of the living church, the pillar and ground of the truth, the custodian of a divine and objective revelation once delivered to the saints. Neither here nor elsewhere can I ever be induced to engage with critics in any controversial defense of isolated practices, customs, or even detached articles of the generally received beliefs of Catholics. Mayhap I should not disagree with the critics at the end about some of them singly, but at the end we still should differ, for as to the whole body of the Catholic faith, they would be disbelievers, I a believer still.

And again—and this is the last thing in my "foreword," for so in these days we are told to call a preface—I speak always under correction; I represent with authority nobody here or elsewhere in my views; I am no theologian, and I disclaim, as

earnestly as I may, any representative capacity.

Now, the preface being over, I pass to the text, which I hope, against all the canons of consistent composition, to make scarcely longer than the preface.

It is only to emphasize two propositions which I am afraid may seem to most of you but paradoxes, but which I believe with all my heart to be true.

First: That in the true sense, and in her soul and inmost essence, the Roman Catholic Church is democratic; and, secondly, that she is tolerant.

It is because, to my mind, in this world honeycombed with unjust privilege and the cruelty of class power and oppression, the Catholic Church has been throughout her history, and still is, the great democracy of the ages, that she appeals to me most as the greatest of all powers that make for righteousness.

It was almost two thousand years ago that into a world then ruled by privilege and caste, a world in which the masses were in hopeless slavery, the founder of the Church was born in the household of an unlearned carpenter. Seeing the multitude, he had compassion on them, because they were distressed, and lying as sheep having no shepherd. He preached to them the Kingdom of Justice, denounced woe to the Pharisees and the lawyers who loaded

men with burdens that they could not bear, and touched not the packs themselves. He prophesied greater damnation to the Scribes who loved long robes and salutations in the market-place, the first chairs in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts, but devoured widows' houses, feigning long prayers. He told the people to call none but God Father or Master, for they were all brethren. He made a whip of small cords, and drove the money-changers from the temple. He summed up his whole sublime social philosophy in the teaching, "Whatso ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them."

Is it a wonder that the multitude heard him gladly, or that the Pharisees declared that he seduced the common people, scornfully asking, "Is not this the carpenter's son? Who of the Pharisees or rulers have believed on him? But this multitude knoweth not the law and is accursed." What wonder that the privileged classes called him a disturber, an agitator, a demagogue, and a communist, and crucified him between two thieves?

Spread by fishermen and fugitives and slaves his doctrine went forth and destroyed the corrupted civilization it assailed. Against power and persecution it revolutionized the world.

The Church then founded has, as I

believe, in its heart and interior life, in the essence and basic characteristics of its teaching, been the great propounder, defender, and exemplar of democracy ever since. It and it alone has protected and preserved a doctrine which otherwise would have been trampled out of the hearts of all men—the doctrine of the common fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of man!

It would be needless to remind me that many times in the history of the Catholic Church, privilege and caste have sought and have found consecration and support for years, and it may have been for centuries, from that Church which in infancy so fiercely assailed it. But note this thought! The Church claims primarily to deal with the spiritual and eternal—to interfere in temporal affairs only to defend the eternal truths often so intimately bound up with temporal development. But the divine tradition of which she claims to be the custodian and exponent, in so far as it finds expression in words and institutions, has necessarily to be clothed in forms and language borrowed from secular life. The Church has made use of such forms and language and of social forms and conventions in each age and generation, to express her mind to that age and generation. But because these forms and conventions have been accepted in ecclesiastical legislation and institutions at some past

time, the Church is not thereby irrevocably allied to them. Catholic tradition should not be so confounded with mere transient systems with which it has, through necessity or choice, in the past allied itself.

And however so allied, however slow to move toward that which the secular world may deem progress, at any given time, however cautious and conservative in so moving at all times, the Church may be, still it remains true, that the very forces which she may seem to be bending all her energies to repress, forces tending to true democracy, to equality of opportunity, and to the higher and nobler liberty of the individual soul, are but the natural and inevitable product of her unvaried spiritual teaching and sacraments. She preaches for all men the same Father, for all men the same hereafter, for all men the same code of morals and religious rites.

In her sacraments she shares all that she can give to the mightiest kings of Europe, with the humblest savage neophyte of the wilderness.

Not only does it seem to me that this doctrine of the common Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, so insisted upon by the Catholic Church as a basic ground of her teaching, must inevitably tend to a belief in and a movement toward democracy among those who accept it, but the doctrine to me seems the only sound

basis for a belief in democracy. I know that there are men who strive for justice unceasingly and unsparingly, who think they believe in no personal God, and that they acknowledge no such things as natural rights. I have not time here to give my explanation of their position, but I can only say that for myself, outside of the divine law and the rights of man divinely given, I see no criterion of right and wrong higher than expediency and enlightened selfishness, no escape from the inherent righteousness, therefore, of what, from my opposite point of view, I consider the Devil's doctrine—Let him take who may and keep who can!

Even upon the human side of the Catholic Church I desire you to note that from the days of St. Peter, the fisherman of Galilee, to those of Pius X., the son of an Italian peasant, no accident of birth or fortune has ever shut the door of advancement to her highest dignities and offices. I ask you to remember that in an age when in the secular world such a rule must have seemed strange indeed, the normal policy of Catholic faith made the first great monk—St. Benedict—prescribe for the religious life the law that in matters seriously affecting the community welfare, no abbot should act without consulting the whole body of the monks, even to the youngest novice!

And those who know of the history of

the new order of friars established five centuries later, need no reminder that the Sons of St. Francis are grandly democratic in teaching and in practice.

The Church must always, however much she may seem at given times and on given occasions to depart from the very law of her being, in the end reconcile herself to the democratic impulse and trend she herself is continually setting in motion.

A bishop of Quebec once made Catholics who sympathized with the American Revolution do public penance. A plenary council of Baltimore a century afterward declared that the leaders of that Revolution were the chosen instruments of God, raised up for His glory, to execute His will.

This belief of mine, that the Catholic Church is the great bulwark of true democracy in the social organism, has deepened in my mind throughout the third of a century I have been a Catholic; and I shall never believe, however discouraging the temporary action of her local rulers may be in any given case, that the Church which has ever, from the time that her teaching abolished serfdom in Europe to the recent days of her crusade against the trade in human lives in Africa, been the foe of slavery, and which emancipated woman and raised her to a position of religious and social equality, will fail in the struggles to come to give her countenance and aid to the oppressed

masses of our industrial organization. To doubt it, to my mind were heresy and impiety. It is proven by her history. It is a part of her mission.

If this first proposition of mine, that the Catholic Church is the greatest of all the powers that make for democracy and liberty in the world, should seem extravagant to you, what will you say to the second, that the Catholic Church is tolerant? You will exclaim, I am afraid, that I must use the word on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle.

It is certainly true that the Church does not leave us free in things spiritual as she encourages us to be free in things temporal; and with most of the radical libertarians and individualists whom I recognize as comrades in all things pertaining to the political and social organization of the world, I must here part company or cease to be a loyal Catholic.

For the doctrine of an objective revelation, and a living, inspired, and infallible teaching church as the guardian and exponent of that revelation, leaves no place for unlimited and unrestrained speculation on fundamental religious principles or fundamental questions of morality.

For example, if what I understand the Catholic faith to be is the true view, I am not at liberty to deny or disbelieve the doctrine of the Golden Rule nor the brotherhood of man, however free the Church

leaves me to insist that my duty under that rule and with that belief in some particular case, is to stand by an existing order; or, on the other hand, on the principle that resistance to tyrants is obedience to God; to turn myself into an ardent revolutionist.

I am not a fanatic, nor insane. I do not deny, therefore, that persecution and intolerance have been for long periods together distinguishing notes of the spiritual domination of the Catholic Church; but I contend that persecution was never in accordance with her soul or interior life; that she has renounced it long ago, and that the present spirit of her rulers is the spirit with which the Dominican Lacordaire answered Veillot; that he had not striven for religious freedom for Catholics in France that he might, when it was obtained, unfurl the black flag of the Inquisition. Said Leo XIII., in one of his encyclicals: "The Church with all care forbids that any man should be forced against his will to embrace the Catholic faith, as St. Augustine wisely warns us 'that no man can believe unless he is willing.'"

It is no part of my purpose to dwell on this, but to pass to the proposition, perhaps more startling still to you, that not only is the Catholic Church not a persecuting body, but that in her soul and the essence of her teaching she is not intolerant. I use the

word intolerant in no non-natural or minimizing sense.

If the Church held all other religious creeds and modes of faith the offspring of evil, if she proclaimed, as she is, I am afraid, but too commonly supposed to do, the certain and eternal damnation of those who differ from her and reject her teaching, I would admit her to be intolerant. But to these two popular conceptions of her position, I oppose a blank denial.

The Catholic Church does contend that she and she alone preserves the faith entire once delivered to the saints! She claims that she and she alone is the authorized and unerring conduit of divine grace to a sinful and sinning world. But she does not deny that in any sincerely religious body and in the soul of any sincere man, there is present the Holy Spirit of God!

This is the formal teaching of the Church, as you may learn from the writings of such theologians as Manning and Newman, if you will read them.

And when you note what her teachers and doctors have said of the sinfulness of heresy, you should remember what her only formal and authorized definition of heresy is, and that it means and can mean nothing else than that Protestants who are in good faith and desirous of believing the truth are not heretics. Their tenets, the Church declares, are in themselves heretical, but those who

hold them under such circumstances do not incur the guilt of heresy, but are held to belong to the Soul of the Church. And not only does this apply to our separated brethren of the Christian faith. To the Soul of the Church, although not to its material body, its theologians teach, may *every* man belong, whatever his creed or form or want of faith may be, who, through his education and circumstances, is without—or is even the active antagonist of—that body. No man, say the theologians of the Catholic Church (agreeing therein with the sense of justice implanted in our souls by natural religion) can incur moral guilt without intention to transgress God's law. The seeming intolerance of the Catholic formulary (often wrested and distorted from its true meaning and connection), "Without the Catholic Church is no salvation," with such a gloss, fades away into a very different thing.

Nor is the doctrine of the Catholic Church, as I believe, popularly understood among those without her pale (perhaps it is misunderstood by many within it), on that great stumbling-block in these days to great masses of truly religious men and women—eternal punishment, or, in plain words, hell!

She declares indeed that such punishment exists, but she does not define its extent or its conditions; and theologians in her ranks have argued even that it is permissible to

believe that bad as hell must be from its absence of beatitude and the Beatific Vision, it may nevertheless be better than the world we live in. She sets no bounds to the mercy of God. She formally declares we cannot know how many sins which seem grievous to us may be excused by ignorance or want of deliberation, nor how many men who appear to end evil lives with evil deaths may have been enlightened at the last by God's mercy, and died in peace with Him. We cannot even guess, she tells us, how small or how large may be the proportion of the human race that are not finally the partakers of a happy immortality. And so eminent an authority as Cardinal Newman declared that it is the teaching of the Fathers that such suffering as the lost souls do endure may be mitigated by the prayers and good works of the faithful. If this be permissible teaching, then certainly the Church must allow the belief that the mercy of God may be throughout eternity extended to them.

The Catholic Church has never defined precisely the nature of its belief in the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, but its acknowledged theologians have been allowed, without censure, to urge that the doctrine extends only to the proposition that the Holy Ghost has protected the inspired writers of the canonical books from error in matters of faith and morals.

I have said often enough to you that I am no theologian, to escape the misapprehension that I am attempting to tell you which is the more received or the best considered opinion on these subjects in the Roman Catholic Church. I am only trying to suggest to you that where widely differing opinions on matters such as these are held and expounded without censure, there is not that uncritical, unreasoning spirit, nor that bigoted intolerance which lies in the minds of many as the distinguishing feature of our faith.

And I know that through all the Catholic teaching on the subject of dogma runs the idea of development, and that although implicitly at least the teaching of all truth in supernatural matters was intrusted to the Church, the Church has never held that the full counsel of God has been for once and all declared, or that the end of the revelation has been fixed in unchanging form to be forever unmodified, subject to no further construction or evolution.

Eternally the same as the faith is in substance, no creed can be, as it were, absolutely stereotyped in the hearts of men. And upon its human side at least, in all its forms of expression, the Church must be and is from age to age and century to century, touched with the *Zeitgeist*, as the position of the race changes mentally, morally, and materially.

Hear what a distinguished prelate of America declared to a Centennial Conference of Catholics at Baltimore ten years ago:

“I love my age! I love its aspirations and its resolves. I revel in its feats of valour, its industries and discoveries. I seek no backward voyage across the sea of time. I believe that God intends the present to be better than the past, and the future than the present. We should live in our age and be in touch with it. The world has entered into an entirely new phase; the past will not return; reaction is the dream of men who see not and hear not, who sit at the gates of cemeteries weeping over tombs that shall not be re-opened, in utter oblivion of the living world back of them. We should speak to our age of things it feels in the language it understands. We should be in it and of it, if we would have its ear.”

To the attention of those of you who, like me, claim to belong to the party of progress, who hope to do something, however slight, in your lives to make this world a better and happier place to live and work in, I commend these words of one high in that Church, which is the greatest of all the forces you can bring to the field of your endeavor.

It is as energetic to-day as when Leo turned Attila from the City of the Holy

See; as imposing as when Charlemagne was crowned in the Church of St. Peter!

Its voice is heard in every land. It has a garrison in every village and a prince in every capital!

It is the most potent factor in the evolution of morality and civilization. I adjure you not to regard it as an enemy to be fought, but as an invincible ally to be gained in the noble task of ameliorating the material condition of mankind!