

## BLACKFRIARS

### PLAIN TALKS ON FUNDAMENTALS<sup>1</sup>

#### I. *Our Need for Dogma*

THE most important thing in life is to know God. It is no less necessary than food, clothing and shelter. It is no less necessary, and even more important. "Seek ye *first* the kingdom of heaven . . ." Absolutely necessary.

Necessary for us here and necessary for us hereafter. Hereafter, because "This is eternal life to know Thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." Here, if only because unless we know Him we cannot know ourselves, and if we do not *know* ourselves we cannot *be* what we were intended to be, even as men. It may be true that the proper study of man is man, but it is also true that he knows little of man who knows only man. The very nature of man, the purpose of his strange life, his conflicting desires and interests and yearnings, the meaning of his joys and his pain, the whole bewildering complexity of mystery which we call life, is unintelligible unless we know something of whence he came, whence *we* came, and whither we are destined. And we know that God made us, and that for some purpose of His own. We cannot know ourselves with anything resembling completeness, we cannot know what we are, let alone what we should be, unless we know Him and His ways. Without that knowledge our whole life becomes meaningless. On the other hand, the more we know of Him, the more our life, the meaning of our existence, grows in completeness, in direction, in unity. The more we know God and His ways the more we understand ourselves, and the more we understand ourselves and our destiny the better shall we fulfil the purpose for which we were made and called to labour and rejoice and suffer. It is true to say, I think, that without that knowledge there are only two alternatives for us. One is disintegration leading to despair. The other, the commoner, is in refusing to know God to refuse to know

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<sup>1</sup> The first of a series of instructions given in the chapel of Blackfriars, Oxford.

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ourselves—to refuse to face the elemental facts of our birth and life and death, the reason for our existence, the motives of our acts: to live for the moment on the surface of life, a frustrated futile meaningless existence, atrophying all the nobler powers which are in each one of us.

But we Christians know that there is another reason—a yet more compelling reason—why we should strive to know God. And that is precisely because we *do* know Who made us and why He made us and what He has done for us that we may fulfil the purpose for which He made us. We know that, in some way which utterly passes anything we can imagine or comprehend, God has called us to share in His own eternal divine life, to see Him face to face, to know Him as we are known. And we know that He has already revealed Himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

It follows from this that this study of God, this knowledge of God, is something quite unique, something quite different from the knowledge, say, of a science or a system of philosophy, of history, of mathematics. It is not an academic knowledge or study. It is something more akin to the knowledge we have when we say we *know* a friend, for it is essentially the knowledge of a *person*, of a personal God. Yet it is something much more than the knowledge even of a dearest lover, for it is a knowledge which has got to permeate and dominate our whole life. Somehow or other we are called to share the mind of Christ, to see things as He saw them, and above all to see ourselves in relation to God Our Father in heaven, our beginning and our end.

But at once a difficulty may present itself. What, it may be asked, has all this got to do with that conglomeration of doctrines and creeds and formulas and catechisms which you call the Catholic Faith? I admit, someone may say, that I ought to try and know God; but honestly I can't say that I find all these ancient creeds and definitions and anathemas and formulas help me to know God. Sometimes I may have felt I have got near to God, but it certainly wasn't when I learned my catechism. More likely it was in nature or in art—on the mountains, by the

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sea, in poetry, in a symphony; but never in the smudgy pages of a penny catechism or in reading a papal definition. How can all that complicated archaic jargon, all that obsolete terminology about nature and person and substance and accidents and three persons and one person and two natures and three theological virtues and seven deadly sins and all the rest of it—how is all this to help me to know God? How am I to LIVE all that and make that part of my very being, a dominating, permeating influence in my life?

And perhaps to some of us, to some of us who are good and faithful Catholics even, it has never occurred that it should be so. We are devoted to the Faith; we can sing perhaps quite sincerely about the faith of our fathers, and even about *Our-fathers-chained-in-prisons-dark* and *How-sweet-would-be-their-children's-fate-if-they-like-them-could-die-for-Thee*. But we have never really thought of it as something that is part and parcel of ourselves. We have thought of it as a loyalty which is extrinsic to us, a venerable thing which can be bound up in a book and sold for two-pence—a precious thing, maybe, to be upheld and stuck up for, a loyalty like a family heirloom, the British Constitution or the old school tie. It hasn't really struck us that if the Faith is not worth living, it certainly isn't worth dying for.

But to return to the difficulty. How can "the faith," creeds and dogmas and definitions and catechisms and formulas and the rest of it, help us, still less how can they be necessary for us, in order to know God?

The question is a big one, and much bigger than can be dealt with in one talk. But it is necessary at the outset for us to see that *some* formulas, creeds or dogmas are indispensably necessary for us if we are to believe in and know God.

There are a great many people to-day, religiously-minded people, who have not only scrapped the Catholic creeds and dogmas, but who have scrapped or at least wanted to scrap creeds and dogmas altogether. They want a religion without formulas, without dogmas, without creeds. And it is necessary for us to see at the outset that it simply *cannot be done*.

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I remember once, many years ago, being very impressed by a very wealthy young man, a candidate for Anglican Orders, who had just come down from Oxford where he had taken a good degree in theology. He remarked to me one day, rather portentously, that though he venerated the creeds as historical documents he certainly didn't believe in them. And he added piously, "I believe only in God." I was, I say, impressed. It seemed a very fine thing to refuse to believe in any man-made formula, and to believe only in God, especially when he explained that you couldn't imprison God in a formula and that no human words could express the Infinite and that creeds obscured the vision of God. But there seemed to be a catch in it somewhere, and it occurred to me after a while what it was. Meeting him again a few days later I asked him: "You said you believe in God, do you believe in Jesus Christ?" He said he did. I asked him again: "Do you believe in the Holy Ghost?" Again he said he did. I did not go on to ask him if he believed in the Holy Catholic Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, Amen. I had discovered what I wanted to know—not only that the creedless young man had a creed, but that he believed three articles at least of the Apostle's Creed. In point of fact that young man had a vast and complex creed which made the creed of St. Athanasius and the Catechism of the Council of Trent look child's play. He believed, I am sure, in the entire *Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, he believed unhesitatingly in the *omnia opera* of several dons and German theologians. As he expressed it to me, when I twitted him with believing in a creed after all, "You must express your beliefs somehow."

Exactly. We must express our beliefs somehow. And in point of fact we must express them in some sort of proposition or sentence or formula. Years after I had met the young man I came to study St. Thomas Aquinas; and I discovered that he said very much the same thing. He says that of course it is perfectly true that we do not believe in the creeds in the same sense that we believe in God. The creeds are not, properly speaking the *object* of our faith—the object of our

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faith is God, and God alone. But our human mind is so made that God cannot be expressed to us or by us except in propositions, in formulas, in creeds. It is simply impossible for truth to be conveyed to the human mind or to be expressed by the human mind except in judgments, formulas, propositions, affirmations, denials. And so the truth of God must come to us, and must be expressed by us in carefully worded formulas, in articles of faith, in dogmas, definitions, answers to catechism questions.

Of course, all this does not prove that the dogmas of the Catholic Faith are true and valid, or even that any human formula or words is capable of expressing the truth of God. These are points which I hope to touch upon subsequently. But we have taken already an important step forward in our inquiry. We have discovered in the first place that it is utterly necessary for us to know God, even if only because without this knowledge we cannot know ourselves, if only because we cannot otherwise *live* in any full sense. We have also discovered that that knowledge cannot be conveyed to us except in formulas of some sort—in propositions, in dogmas. It simply cannot be done, because the human mind is incapable of attaining truth about anything in any other way. The very creedlessness of the creedless is a creed. Their very rejection of dogma is a dogma. And we Catholics know that God always acts with us in accord with our nature. He knows that our minds are incapable of attaining to Him except He be made known to them in formulas and dogmas. And we believe that "the Catholic Faith" is the vehicle of God's revelation of Himself to us. That is what we claim for it—no more and no less. And because we believe it is this we know that it is something which, with His grace and help, we have got to be not only prepared to die for, but something which we have got to inquire into and to understand, something which we have got to *live*.

PRÆDICATOR.