

## THE REPLY TO FATHER VERNON<sup>1</sup>

VERNON JOHNSON'S book, *One Lord, One Faith* really needed no reply. It was not a challenge, not controversial: it was itself a reply to innumerable inquirers who sought to know why he had thought it necessary to leave the Church of England and seek reconciliation with the Catholic Church. In explaining why he had so acted, he made a very simple, straight-forward and sincere statement of what had happened in his own soul. His explanation is written with a very rare courtesy and there is not a word which could be seriously interpreted as offensive to his Anglican friends. The Rev. E. Milner-White and the Rev. W. L. Knox are not satisfied with Father Vernon's explanation. In effect they think he has acted foolishly; but their object is not so much to convince him of his folly as to warn the many readers of his book from following too rashly in his footsteps. This 'Reply' is not studiously courteous nor is there the careful avoidance of giving offence which distinguished Father Vernon's statement. In fact we have heard the book curtly described as 'bad temper, bad history, bad theology, bad morals and bad taste'—a severe indictment, but not entirely unmerited.

Is it good history, for instance, to say that the Churches of England and Rome 'definitely claim unbroken descent from the Apostles through their similar ministries (a claim which history, that is to say, fact, allows to be equally strong in each case)'? And is this good theology? In endeavouring to evade the force of the argument from Jn. xvii, 20-21: 'Father, I pray that they may be one' which is a creative prayer where-

<sup>1</sup> *One God and Father of All; A Reply to Father Vernon.* By E. Milner-White and W. L. Knox. (Mowbray and Co.; pp. 158, 1929.)

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by He, God-made-man, made His Church one, and did not merely petition that it might be so if God thought fit, the writers say that this notion 'would mean that our Lord was simply God, not God-made-man, and therefore subject to the limitations of humanity which made it necessary for him to pray.' 'He,' then, who prayed was not the eternal, infinite, 'unlimited' God but—what? The writers have fallen into Nestorianism which, to put it mildly, is bad theology.

Bad morals: the writers are anxious to minimise the outspoken attitude of the Church on Birth-control. They begin by arguing that the practice is either contrary to the natural law, or not. 'If it is,' they say triumphantly, 'infallibility is not needed to make it wrong;—illuminating! We never knew that it required an ecclesiastical pronouncement to make a thing wrong; in our ignorance we had presumed that in questions of the moral law all the Church did was to point out in doubtful cases or to lax consciences that certain things were wrong. Our readers will hardly believe it, but the argument on this subject is led up to by a disquisition on the obligation of hearing Mass on Sundays! Here again these Cambridge experts in 'Romanism' have dispelled the mists of our ignorance. Hitherto we had thought that the Commandments of the Church stood on quite a different footing from the time-honoured Decalogue. Henceforward we shall keep the Friday abstinence as strictly as the seventh Commandment.

Bad taste: the theologians and Pontiffs of the Church are not men who have been brought up in 'a debating society,' p. 23, nor have they had a 'one year's course of theology.' On the contrary they have been severely trained both as students and as professors, they have been members of various theological Commissions and are in addition first-class lawyers. It is hardly good taste then to speak of the

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Bull of Eugenius IV as 'the error of Pope Eugenius' or of the Encyclical of Pope Leo as his 'blunder.' Nor again is it usual to speak of the writer of a particularly well-informed Catholic Truth Society Pamphlet as a member of 'the Roman Catholic underworld.' One is reminded of the lawyer whose despairing advice was 'Abuse the adversary's Counsel.'

It is impossible here to do more than touch on a few points in this strange admixture of ignorance, shrewdness, special pleading and insolence. In the first place we should like to know what the writers understand by 'the Church.' It is constantly referred to, but at one time they seem to mean the Church of Rome, at others the Church of England; but more often than not we seem to be in the presence of the nebulous theory, that mysterious 'invisible' Church which we had fondly fancied thinking men had long ago consigned to oblivion. Then the writers themselves: what are they? They are certainly not Roman Catholics. Nor do they seem to be 'Anglicans.' Are they members of the reformation Church? Hardly, for they claim to say Mass, whereas the Reformers put people to death for that—though of course they need not feel any fear on that score nowadays.

The writers of this muddled 'reply' will not allow that the Church of Christ—not even their nebulous Church—is infallible. What then, are we to make of this passage: 'The only authority in the Catholic Church which can ultimately preserve the truth is the power of the Holy Ghost to guide theologians in the end to a true understanding of the Faith.' Omit the words 'ultimately' and 'in the end' and you have the Catholic doctrine of the Church's infallibility. What then, do the words 'ultimately' and 'to the end' mean? Another point: 'We,' they say, 'our respective communions, would agree that the first note of the

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Catholic Church must be 'love' ". We rub our eyes. Why did St. Paul take the first four chapters of his Epistle to the Romans to prove that the first essential was faith? Yet these writers know this perfectly well. Why then did they not say it? Whether they realised it effectively or not is not for us to say; but, had they done so, they would have given away their whole case. For if the essential thing, if the keynote to Christianity is that 'sound doctrine' of which St. Paul is always speaking, then the need for an infallible custodian and interpreter of it is so evident that it is only the wilfully blind who will not see it.

Once more: who can resist a smile when he finds that these doughty champions are so hard put to it for arguments that they actually revive Dr. Salmon's threadbare thesis that since a stream cannot rise higher than its source, and since in discovering an infallible authority you must perforce begin with your own fallible reason, you can never find an infallible authority. You might just as well argue that because it is only your reason—though it is more often your imagination—that makes you swear by a certain medical man, you are therefore your own physician!

Our friends are very fond of amiable sneers at Father Vernon's simplicity in his use of the Bible, they talk of him as a 'Fundamentalist,' etc. But the ingenuousness with which they themselves have swallowed the *dicta* of modern criticism is most engaging. For example, Matthew and Luke have absorbed St. Mark, therefore their Petrine passages are simply due to the very man so distinguished and therefore to be accepted with reservations. Again, we are told that it is hard to believe that our Lord did really say, 'The Father and I are one (thing)' though St. John so quotes Him. The reason is one which we presume we are to take as the high-water mark of criticism: 'We do not find the Apostles preaching anything of the

sort at the outset. Had He taught this, they would have preached it.' One feels inclined to ejaculate 'Q.E.D.' What would Lightfoot, whom they rightly laud, have to say to this, or to their statements about St. Clement?

Every page of this incredible 'reply' bristles with statements that challenge and shock by ignorance displayed. For example, one really thought that no self-respecting scholar to-day questioned St. Peter's presence in Rome. Yet these Protestant champions rival Exeter Hall in their endeavours to throw discredit on a tradition of which Lanciani says that none but a veritable ignoramus would doubt it.<sup>2</sup>

But we must close. We shall be told that we have dealt savagely with this little book. But we make no apology. Scholarly, reverent criticism we are prepared to meet on its own grounds; but this book is scurrilous. Yet how sad it is! Here are men who for some inscrutable reason want to be Catholics without the Pope. Why? Can any man answer? One reason may be suggested, the one offered to the Donatists centuries ago by St. Optatus: 'You have never grasped what is meant by the Church of Christ; whence all your confusion.'

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<sup>2</sup> See Lanciani, *Pagan and Christian Rome*, English trans., p. 212; Garrucchi, *Éléments d'Archéologie Chrétienne*, i. p. 330; Cobern, *The New Archaeological Discoveries*, 2nd ed. 1917, p. 520; Wilpert, *Le Pitture delle Catacombe Romane*, Tav. 48 and 252, 1903; Edmundson, *The Church of Rome in the First Century*, The Bampton Lectures for 1911 (I give the title from memory).

<sup>3</sup> *De Schismate Donatistarum*, i. 10: 'Ignoras et quae sit sancta ecclesia, et sic omnia miscuisti.'