

THE PERENNIAL APOLOGETIC OF THE CHURCH

HILAIRE BELLOC defined the attitude of the Catholic apologete to his sources, when he wrote: "I say the Catholic 'conscience' of history—I say 'conscience'—that is, an intimate knowledge through identity: the intuition of a thing which is one with the knower—I do not say 'the Catholic Aspect of History.' This talk of 'aspects' is modern and therefore part of a decline: it is false, and therefore ephemeral: I will not stoop to it."¹

Tertullian, too, was a Catholic apologete in act, when he wrote, of the Church in the third century: "Is it likely that so many churches, and they so great, should have gone astray into one and the same faith? No casualty distributed among many men issues in one and the same result. Error of doctrine in the churches must necessarily have produced various issues. When, however, that which is deposited among many is found to be one and the same it is not the result of error, but of tradition."² As Thomists would express it, more exactly: for this agreement no cause is given except it be one alone, namely the identity of the primitive dogmatic and hierarchic seed set in the world by Christ. This is certain.

The Catholic, the realist, knows things, not aspects, single causes, not hypotheses. His certitude is real certitude—no subjective physiological emotion, but a compulsion, whose sole cause is the object, the evidently true, the thing-itself.

¹ *Europe and the Faith*, Introduction, p. vii.

² *De præscriptione hæreticorum*, xxviii. We assume the essential solidarity of the Church in the third century, the age of Tertullian, with the Catholic Church of to-day. The fact is granted by all great contemporary students of Christian origins, and has been so granted even since the *floruit* of Auguste Sabatier. And one need only mention the name of Harnack. The only notable exception is suggested by the illustrious name of Gore. But falsely, since he did not dissolve the work of his equally illustrious critic, Abbot Chapman. Even that interchange of ideas and source-penetrations is a thing long forgotten. Our emphasis here is upon the link behind that link, and upon the valid mode of approach.

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And not only as a Catholic, but formally as an apologete, the Catholic knows things-themselves not in any impartial, distinterested spirit, but in the biassed, prejudiced, most interested light of supernatural faith. He knows things as a Catholic. He examines his evidence—his motives of belief (*motiva credibilitatis*)—as a Catholic, as defined, indicated, pointed out to him by the Church.

A Catholic alone is a true apologete. For an apologete is a theologian,³ and only a Catholic can be a theologian. His work is to prove the authority for what he believes through faith, and to prove it because he believes, and by means of principles, witnesses, terms, shown him by his faith.

Nevertheless—and this is tremendously important—his proofs are rational, self-contained in themselves, and completely valid and satisfying quite independently of faith. Hence they compel the assent of him who does not believe yet. And we can assert this perfectly safely, just because they are the exact proofs, principles, witnesses, and terms, given to us by our faith, by the authority and tradition of the Church, as the precise and perfect rational vindication of her own supernatural claims.

In short, when the Catholic apologetic draws his picture of the primitive Church, he is knowing a real thing, is capable of appreciative, and therefore intelligent and communicable sympathy with all its moods and phases, and so confidently defining it, delineating it, not under this or that ephemeral aspect, but giving it whole and unchanged to his hearers.

The Church in the third century is just such a complete reality for him as for Tertullian, whose treatise *De præscriptione* is just as valid to-day as then. And it is compelling to-day, as then, because through its principles the apologete takes the concrete organism into his hands, as an expert,

³ St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 1, a. 8. Also R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *De Revelatione*, 3rd Ed., pp. 19-28; P. Gardeil, *La Crédibilité et L'Apologétique*, 2nd Ed., p. xi; Jacques Maritain, *De la Philosophie Chrétienne*, pp. 89 et sqq.

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faith-directed, turning it over and about, this way and that, in exactly the ways indicated by the Church, showing his hearers those structural and organic outlines which cause certitude, building up, not a complex of aspects ambiguous in significance, hypothetical at best, nor a mere situation without background and so without springs for probative strength, but a total reality whose sole explanation is divine causality, whose single historical origin the God-Man—Christ. “And the spirit of God brooded over the face of the waters.” In the pagan background in the third century the apologete, gathering the materials for his minor premiss, sees the provident stirring and disposing of the nations by God to receive Christ in His integrity in the Catholic Church. The scene is set. The germ of the Kingdom has been strewn through the world in the centuries immediately preceding. And now it is springing up and shooting forth great branches, in a way to be known by all men. And behold! That germinated seed was one. Wherever it has rested, the same identical being has grown out of it, proclaiming unity of origin and of nature.

Meanwhile divine activity has been working in the pagan world itself, inclining it towards what God would see it receive and become. He knows that otherwise the supernatural thing cannot be breathed into it, for grace presupposes nature, and, before acting upon it, must gather it up into one straight line with itself, acting on that obediential capacity (*potentia obedientialis*) which lies in all created beings.

So Christ is moving in the nations, that these may move towards Him. He is doing it not only by the preaching, presence, and miraculous witness of His Church, but as well by His provident direction of all things to their end, bringing them to some apprehension of the essentials of salvation according to type, figure, shadow and faintly suspected vision of things to come, and guiding them into intelligent touch with the Catholic reality itself—that preaching, presence, and miraculous witness.

It is a picture of Adam being restored to his integrity. The tragic, questioning soul of the ancient world is being recom-

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posed to prepare it for heavenly life and character, coming transforming into the new Adam, Christ in His Mystical Body.

But with this ascent of streaming, re-unifying life, represented by the names of Rome, Greece, Judæa, there is descent, chaos and decay. The interior, essential decadence, and fatal though prolonged collapse, of the pagan world, from the third century onwards, is the antithesis, the chaotic flux, to all that has been built up and realized.

In the midst is the Christian thing, growing, developing, strengthening, with incredible vigour. This will gather up and retain the ideals and realities constant in the chaos and crisis.

And this Christian thing is a miracle, a perpetual motive of belief in its own reality and genuineness.⁴

The rapid conversion of all kinds of men and women—multitudes of them—drawn by the majesty and fascination of Christ: “For a Person came, and lived and loved, and did and taught, and died and rose again, and lives on by His Power and His Spirit for ever within us and amongst us, so unspeakably rich and yet so simple, so sublime and yet so homely, so divinely above us precisely in being so divinely near—that His character and teaching require, for an ever fuller yet never complete understanding, the varying study, and different experiments and applications, embodiments and unrollings of all races and civilizations, of all individual and corporate, the simultaneous and successive experiences of the human race to the end of time.”⁵

This conversion without force, in face of terrible penalties—persecutions—solely for love and hope of a spiritual reality unseen.⁶

⁴ Cf. Vatican Council (Denzinger, 1794).

⁵ Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, Vol. I, 2nd Ed., p. 26.

⁶ Cf. St. Thomas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, lib. I, c. vi. Also von Hügel's fine passage in *The Mystical Element of Religion*, Vol. I, pp. xxxi, xxxii. It completes and extends the beautiful development quoted above, showing the Saint as an *Alter Christus*, sharing in the majesty and beauty of the character of Christ, and hence extending the compelling “evidential strength” (if so banal an expression may

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The unity and increasing richness of the Church's inward life.

Her penetration of the things of the soul.

Her resistance to corrupting forces and to persecutions.

Her extraordinary identity of creed, organization, liturgy, and peculiar life, throughout the Empire.

Her certainty about her own mind, essence, and purpose.

Her universal obedience—her turning to Rome in all difficulties, as by an "instinct" miraculously implanted in every Church and every member.

She is the real point of the third century, and she is an anachronism and a paradox. An anachronism because the world is tottering, and she is not. On the contrary she is being fashioned quickly by a divine power, and being stood upon her wide base, the world itself. A paradox because she suffers worse destructive forces than the Empire, surviving, refreshed, while the Empire crumbles under the gathering torrent. Rome goes under. The Church rears her head like the pelican—tradition symbol of Christ⁷ and of the Blessed Sacrament—nourishing her little ones with her blood, the merits of Christ and His martyrs, distributed among her members through the Liturgy, her breath and inspiration.

But not only does the Catholic Church stand alone as a perpetual miracle and motive of belief. The apologete does more than show her to be this. He shows her necessary origin in Christ.

He proves it from the same given facts. Not this time by reference to divine causality immediately, but by reference to their sole historical explanation in Him, Christ, the Son of God.

He has outlined the Church in the third century, the "sub-apostolic" generation. He now penetrates to what lies beneath and within this expanding outward-growing organism. It has a centre, an inward, single *raison d'être* in historic

enter here) of His Personality in all its holiness, to His members in the Church, His Body; hence communicating to her the probative, inevitable, "note" of Holiness, compelling assent.

⁷ Cf. St. Thomas' beautiful hymn, the *Adoro te devote*.

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succession and expansion. And this centre is determined, partly by using positive sources—the “Apostolic Fathers” but chiefly by infallible judgments about the third century phenomena alone. The apologete reminds his hearers of that constant unity of creed, spiritual structure, and hierarchic organism, which he has described already. But now he isolates it, as a chemist lifts an angular, unmistakable crystal from its solution, for critical analysis. It is the measurable core of the reality, the essence and source of certitude.

He applies the argument of Tertullian: “When that which is deposited among many is found to be one and the same it is not the result of error but of tradition.” And “this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now.”⁸

For this unity no cause can be assigned unless it be one, namely the identity of the primitive Catholic seed set in the world by Christ. The germinal embryo contains somehow all the structure, organic principles, and potentialities of the grown organism. For a seed propagates itself according to its own kind, and identity is found in the progeny. And the identity of the progeny proclaims the unity of the seed.

To sum up. The Catholic apologete knows things, not aspects, single causes, not hypotheses.

His certitude is real certitude—a compulsion, whose sole reason is the objective thing, the evidently true.

He has a bias, an inevitable preference for evidence—namely what is presented as such by the Church, by tradition.

Hence he describes, turns over, and examines in every light, those historical realities, precisely, which are such evidence, causing that real objective certitude, upon which faith builds. The Christian thing is to him like the crystal to the chemist. And he knows that he cannot use any angle of approach he chooses. He knows one such angle alone—the angle of refraction, which transmits light.

⁸ Irenæus, *Adversus hæreses*, iii, 3.

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And so it is that he arrives at the two dominant traditional lines of approach. First tracing those unmistakable ground-lines of the Christian thing, as itself a perpetual miracle and motive of belief. Secondly working behind these ground-lines to their implied origins in time—the method of Tertullian and Irenæus, the traditional development of the “argument from tradition,” and the apologete’s “*Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus.*”⁹

Choosing thus his angle of approach deliberately, confidently, he attains to the measurable core of the reality, the essence and source of certitude. So expressed, his hearer grasps the Catholic organism in the completeness of its three-dimensional reality. It compels his assent.

Above all, in such approach is a freshness and a living contact—an utterly un-academic satisfaction, unknown and untouched in the mere “bookish,” home-made, apology, of the independent worker, the ephemeral *argumentum ad hominem* of the untrained apologist. The genesis of belief out of the human potentialities of the inquisitive, questioning, seeker after Christ, then takes on something of the childlike excitement, vitality, and freshness, of a tremendous evolving realization and appreciation, a revelatory initiation and reaching out, to an unsuspected source of joy and life—no narrowing sect, no party, but the Body of Christ. There is born a fearful, yet loving, approach. May I know it, partake of it? Can these things be? And then the growth of confidence, and the vindication, and the final, irrevocable, rich, perfect, all-attaining, all-fulfilling certitude. It is! These things are so! This thing is most real! And the whole self goes out to it, in caressing, all-embracing, all-trusting, love.

And how reached, known in its essence, possessed? By exact focussing down upon the object, by the given instrument of analysis, itself more penetrating than any merely human medium. Through it the organic being is touched, in its compelling, inevitable, and immediate, beauty, goodness, truth, and consequently its utterly satisfying certitude.

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⁹ The famous dictum of Vincent of Lerins.