

VII. TRUTH: (A) THE TEACHING CHURCH

WE have seen that man, by membership of Christ's Church, receives the three things necessary—truth, law, life. The next step is to examine each of these three in more detail. This chapter and the next will be concerned with Truth.

Christ gave to His Church, in the person of its first officials, the apostles, a mass of truth concerning God and man: concerning the nature of God, His three-fold personality, His attributes, His purpose in making man, the means by which His purpose was to be achieved. This teaching, given by Christ to the apostles, was by them passed on to others, who in their turn passed it on. Some of it was, by the inspiration of God, written down. The part written down, what we now call the New Testament, was small in relation to the whole mass of teaching, but of priceless value.

THE SCRIPTURES

In thus inspiring men to write God was continuing in the Church what He had begun with His chosen people. This fact of Inspiration marks off certain books from all other writings in the world. It

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involves a special relation of God to the human author and to the thing written, not to be found elsewhere. God so acted upon the mind and will of the author that what was written was what God wanted written. The inspired writing of the Jews—collected together in the Old Testament—were in sum a record of the Creation and Fall of Man, God's dealing with fallen humanity and the preparation for the coming of a Saviour. The New Testament shows the Saviour actually in the world, doing the work he came to do, and arranging for its continuation to the end of time. It falls roughly into three divisions: (1) The Four Gospels (already touched upon in Chapter V) are records of Christ's life upon earth; (2) *The Acts of the Apostles* and a handful of letters—written mainly by St. Paul—show the Church facing its first disciplinary and doctrinal problems; (3) *The Apocalypse* is a series of visions concerned mainly with the universal conflict of good and evil and its ultimate issue.

DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

The Church then, by the time the last apostle died, had all the mass of truth the apostles had taught. the whole of it by word of mouth, a part of it in writing. She might have simply gone on, through the nineteen centuries since, repeating what had been taught, reading what had been written. In this case she would have been a preserver of truth

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—but scarcely a teacher. She would have been a piece of human machinery, but not a living thing, not the Mystical Body of Christ. In fact, she not only repeated what the apostles had been taught: she thought about it, meditated on it, prayed by it, lived it. And, doing all this, the Church came to see further and further depths of truth in it. And, seeing these, she taught these too. Everything was contained in what Christ had given the apostles to give the Church: but though everything was there, it was not all seen explicitly—not all at once. A rough comparison may make the position clear: a man brought into a dark room begins by distinguishing little: then he sees certain patches of shadow blacker than the rest: bit by bit he sees these as a table and chairs: then, as his eyes grow accustomed to the obscurity, he sees things smaller still—pictures, books, ash trays—and so on to the smallest detail. Nothing has been added to the contents of the room: but there has been an immense growth in his knowledge of the contents. So with the Church. She has, generation by generation, seen deeper and deeper. This development in the Church's understanding of what has been committed to her is not like anything else in the world. Science, for instance, progresses, but its progress consists to a large extent in discovering and discarding its own errors. The teaching of the Church develops by seeing further truths. At every stage the Church adds something: but not at the cost of discarding anything. At every stage all she

teaches is true: at no stage does she teach all that is contained in the Truth.

This development—which we find in theology and nowhere else—combines two things: the work of men's minds, the over-ruling protection of God. In theology, as in science, progress comes by the minds of men working on what they have been taught: but left to themselves, men may simply make further mistakes. In science they do so. In the teaching of the Church they do not: and the reason is that God intervenes, to prevent the teaching of error by His Church. God's actions—whether revelation or sacrament or miracle—are never labour-saving devices: God does not do them to save men the trouble of doing what they can very well do for themselves. In revelation, for instance, God teaches men what they could not (at any rate could not with absolute sureness) find out for themselves: but having given them that, He leaves it to them to meditate upon it and arrive at a clearer understanding of it. He does not do their thinking for them.

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But if we are to say that in the teaching of the Church there are no mistakes, it is necessary to look a little more closely at what we mean by the phrase "the Teaching Church." The first teachers in the Church were the apostles: their successors are the bishops. The bishops are the teaching body of the

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Church. Therefore, since God will not have His Church taught error as to His doctrine, He will not allow the bishops to teach error. This or that bishop or group of bishops may give wrong teaching in theology. But what is taught by the bishops as a body cannot be wrong. On some given subject it might be difficult to know what the bishops as a body do teach: in that case they might be gathered together in a General Council where they could state their teaching and so place it beyond doubt. But however we come by the knowledge, once we do know what the bishops as a body teach, we know the certain truth, for their teaching is guaranteed by God. And that is the ordinary way in which the Catholic does learn God's truth—from the teachers appointed by his bishop. But there is another way—an extraordinary way. The bishops as a body are not allowed by God to teach what is wrong on matters of faith or morals revealed by Him: this is what we mean when we say they are infallible. But one of them, the Head, Christ's representative on Earth, the Bishop of Rome, whom we call the Pope, is infallible,* independently of the other

* This book is concerned with Catholic doctrine from a special point-of view, the view of a map-maker. Infallibility, therefore, is treated only as it bears upon the Catholic's need to learn the truth. It may be useful to consider it for a moment in its effect upon the man who has it. It has no necessary effect at all. His infallibility exists, not for his own sake, but for ours. It is of no more benefit to him than it is to us. It does not make virtue easier for him or sin less attractive. It does not, therefore, make the salvation of his soul any easier. It is simply a way in which God uses him for the preservation of truth. And as it does not affect his character, so it does

bishops. And in case of doubt as to what bishops teach, a definition by the Pope himself is sufficient to inform us of the truth.

But if the body of bishops, with the Pope at their head, are the sole infallible teachers of doctrine, they are not the only people in the Church who are studying doctrine. Every Catholic does it to some extent: theologians give their lives to it. Throughout the ages there has never ceased to be a stream of solid thinking on theology. Now this thinking is the thinking of men: the result of their thinking may be the emergence of some truth not previously so clearly seen; but likewise the result of their thinking may be error. How shall men know which it is? It is for the bishops to decide. If it is true, then they adopt it and teach it. If it is false, God does not allow them to adopt it and teach it. An erroneous view might become current, even widely current. Sooner or later the teaching authority acts and the erroneous view is declared to be erroneous. A theologian who has fallen into error may persist in his error—become a heretic. The very task of refuting him leads to a closer examination and thus to a better understanding of the doctrine at issue.

But the decision of the bishops as a body—or of the Bishop of Rome as head—is final. And that, as we have seen, is watched by God: He does not allow them to teach His Church what is wrong. He does not arise from it. If by chance a bad man is Pope, it is just as necessary for us that he should be prevented from teaching error and just as easy for God to prevent him!

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not add new teaching or fill their minds with new doctrine: for that they must use their minds in the ordinary way of man. But he prevents falsehood from being *taught* by them.

To put this matter in a nutshell. The ordinary man has three courses open to him—he may say what is right, he may say what is wrong, or he may be silent. The infallible man has only two. He is prevented by God from saying what is wrong. He may therefore say what is right, or he may be silent. As to which of these alternatives he shall pursue in a particular case, what is to decide? As between teaching what is right and remaining silent, his infallibility will not help. It prevents him from teaching what is wrong. It can do no more for him. What, then, is to decide whether he shall teach right or remain silent? He can say what is right only if he knows what is right—if, that is, he has made the fullest possible use of all the means of acquiring knowledge. If he does not know the right answer, he must remain silent: and this might very well happen. A Pope does not necessarily by some miracle know the whole of Catholic doctrine, the answer to every doctrinal question that could be raised. The Church, of course, is over-ruled by the providence of God, and if some teaching were at a given moment essential for the Church's well-being, God would see that we had it. But I am concerned here with the human machinery, so to speak, of infallibility. And it remains true that what he does

not know he cannot teach. But in no case can he teach what is wrong: for God will not let him, lest we, the members of the Church, be led into error.

One further thing remains to be said. We believe what the Church teaches because the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, because, therefore, her teaching is the voice of Christ Himself. Among the mass of the things she teaches and the moral laws she propounds, some are, as it were, easy for the human mind, some difficult. For some we seem to see a score of reasons, for some we see no reason at all, some actually might seem to us against reason. But all alike we accept on the one secure ground—that the Church teaches them. We do not accept the easy ones because we can see why, and the others only by an act of Faith. We accept the easy ones—because the Church teaches them; and we accept the difficult ones—because the Church teaches them. When a doctrine or a moral law is presented to us we may ask what are the reasons for it, but only that we may the better comprehend it, not that we may decide whether or not to obey it. For that we only ask does the Church teach it. For it is thus that Christ would have us know the Truths by which our lives are to be lived.

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Discussion Aids

What three necessary things does man receive through membership in Christ's Church? Which of the three is treated in this chapter and the next? What mass of truth did Christ give to His Church in the person of its first officials? What is that part of it called that, by the inspiration of God, was written down?

The Scriptures

How does the fact of Inspiration mark off certain books from all other writings in the world? Define Inspiration. What is the Old Testament? The New Testament? Into what three divisions does the New Testament fall?

Development of Doctrine

At the time of the death of the last apostle did the Church have all the mass of truth the apostles taught? Was it all written down? Did the Church merely *preserve* this truth? What did she do with it? Was all doctrine expressed explicitly in this truth? Illustrate by an example how the implicit

DISCUSSION OUTLINE FOR A MAP OF LIFE

truth came to be known. How does the development in the Church's understanding of truth differ from the development of science in understanding truth? Discuss fully.

The Teaching Church

What is the teaching body of the Church? Can this body teach error? May an individual bishop or a group of bishops teach error? When is the truth taught by the bishops as a body beyond doubt? How is this teaching guaranteed? What is the ordinary way in which the Catholic learns God's truth? What is an extraordinary way? Do the bishops and the Pope do all the thinking that is done in the Church? If not, who else? Is the thinking of theologians always necessarily correct? If such thinking is incorrect, how will it be treated by the Church? Where does the final decision rest? Just what does God's guarantee of truth in His Church mean? In other words, what does infallibility prevent? Does a Pope necessarily know all of Catholic doctrine? Does he have to learn doctrine just as anyone else learns it? Will God ever let him teach error? Why do we believe what the Church teaches? Why does it make no difference whether the doctrines presented to our belief are easy or hard to accept?

Practice: Be able to answer the assertion that one church is as good as another by knowing precisely what Infallibility means.