

PROGRESS IN FAITH

BY

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BETWEEN having the faith and not having it, the difference is assuredly clear-cut; and we rightly divide men into believers and unbelievers. But there still remains to be considered the manner in which believers possess the faith. Is it not true that in certain people perhaps in a great number, it is poor, lifeless, distorted? And even if in certain cases faith is strong and steady there is always the danger of routine and distortion. Conversion of people is not everything; it is of primary importance to ensure the rectitude and vitality of the Christian's faith. We should like to offer a few suggestions in this connection. They will be based on theology. For the development of faith among Christians will have all the more chance of being efficacious if it respects the true nature of this virtue; just as a living being grows and becomes stronger by following out the laws inscribed in its organism.

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Faith is established in man as an adherence to the word of God. Its development will thus primarily consist in the ever-increasing subordination, by the Christian, of his faith to this essential motive: God has spoken, and for this reason I believe. How are we to discern this motive and make it efficacious? It is for the faithful to realise that the Church, whose message they are receiving, does not teach in her own name but as depositrix of the divine word. The different acts by which the Church exercises her teaching prerogative, that is—the preaching of the parish priest, the pastoral letters of the bishop, or the encyclicals of the Sovereign Pontiff, even the solemn definitions of the magisterium, are to be understood as so many commentaries, applications or determinations of the word of God. The latter is contained in the Holy Scriptures. To acquire a very high esteem for the Bible is of paramount importance for Christians. No document must be put on the same level. No human word must be preferred to the word of God. The Church is an infallible interpreter. But, as interpreter, she speaks in the name of a teaching which is primordial and in every respect adequate, towards which also the thought of the faithful will move. In short, we do not believe 'because the Church has said so', but 'because God has said so, speaking to us through the Church.'

¹ Translated by K.P.

Our faith is theological in motive and this word is an indication of something of the utmost purity. Let us always be on our guard against thinking that the Church is the ultimate reason for our faith.

Portions of Holy Scripture are read each day at Mass; either some passage from the Old Testament or from the apostolic writings, and some passage from the Gospel. In this way an opportunity is offered to everyone to arouse in himself a 'feeling' for the word of God. One will listen to it with religious reverence (just as it is desirable that it be read or recited reverently too). The rites of the Mass mark a difference between the epistle and Gospel: this will be understood in the sense that Christ is he in whom divine revelation has found its fulfilment: *Multifarium multisque modis olim Deus loquens patribus in prophetis, novissime diebus istis locutus est nobis in Filio* (Heb. 1, 1). This opening sentence of the Epistle to the Hebrews expresses to perfection the conviction with which Christians should be permeated. God has intervened in the history of men. He has created heaven and earth: and this universe here under our very eyes witnesses to his existence. But he has not left man without a guide or master. He has spoken. Throughout the course of Israel's history prophets have heard his voice and what they have heard from him in inspiration they have passed on to the people. Finally Christ, Son of God made man, has made known to us the most sublime words which it pleased God to reveal. Faith consists primarily in maintaining the contact between our mind and this divine revelation. It cannot but be slack and weak among those of the faithful to whom the idea of the word of God is more or less alien. One has the faith only on condition of having one's ears attuned to this word; one only keeps one's faith living on condition that one never forgets the utterer of the word from whom one holds what one believes.

A faith founded on God's word cannot be called obedience in the true sense of the term. One obeys a command and such an act consists in a submission of the will. Faith derives its support from a word in which God translated his thought for the use of men. It signifies a consent of the intellect on the part of the faithful. The word authority which is current in this connection must not be misunderstood. By this is not meant a divine decision in accordance with which it has pleased God to oblige us to believe such and such a proposition. In the matter of faith there is nothing arbitrary on the part of God and on the part of man, no constraint.

The authority in question is that which a higher mind naturally exercises over a lower mind. It is none other than the authority of the truth. In surrendering to it, then, we are giving to our intellect the good for which it is made. We are enabling it to enter into communication with the thought of God and to appropriate to itself in some way that which God knows. Without faith the wonderful truths which God knows and which he holds, so to speak, in his mind would have remained eternally closed to us. Without faith we should have been condemned to intellectual poverty—in spite of all our learning, which is the learning of creatures. Thus, great care must be taken not to regard faith as an act of obedience in which the believer has merely to submit to what God wants. It is more true to say that faith is rather an eminent dignity for the human mind. Not only is it not contrary to human learning but those who claim to depend on the light of reason alone do harm to the human intellect. They enclose man within himself. Faith sets him free and exalts him. The better to verify this assertion one has only to observe the contradictions and uncertainties of human thought when confronted by the fundamental problems about which the mind is troubled. The subject, we realise, is a thorny one and we are not intending to sanction its abuse. But it is true. About God and the world, about our origin and our destiny, faith provides us with answers which are unparalleled for vigour and clarity. Then, too, the faith has been unchanging from the dawn of revelation to our own day; science, on the other hand, and philosophy, change. They have not accomplished and are not yet accomplishing the unity of minds. All the faithful, on the other hand, profess the same truth. Our faith today is that of the apostles. And the apostles believed as accomplished fact what Isaias, Moses and Abraham had believed in figure. The unity of the faith in space and in time is a magnificent thing. How could we do otherwise than regard this faith of ours with the greatest possible pride?

From the foregoing there emerges too the difference between faith and credulity. It would be intolerable for the faith of Christians to be no more than a form of this weakness of mind. Credulity is a disposition to accept as true certain imaginations which one forges oneself or certain stories which one hears. It is a sort of revenge which the irrational wreaks upon us in defiance of the constraints of reality. It carries us away into a world of fantasy which provides a relaxation from daily life. Credulity is an indiscipline of the mind and must be cured by the spirit of criticism. The Christian faith is not that. We give our adherence to it on the word of God. There

is nothing of firmer foundation than this revelation. The faith is not found in minds which are superficial and ever ready to open the door to chimeræ. We are people of sane and healthy minds. Our faith is not a way of granting satisfaction to some taste in us for the irrational and the fabulous. It is a response which we give to God. We must live it as such in the realisation, as we have said, that God has spoken. Provided this is so, it will be as glorious for the mind as credulity is humiliating.

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The development of faith will consist secondly in the attachment of our mind to the actual truths which God has revealed. The previous considerations were concerned with the motive of faith. Those which follow will be concerned with its object. The truths which God reveals are mysterious. We do not understand them. They are beyond the reach of our intellect. It is good and normal that it should be so. The human mind is limited; and if we were to affirm only those truths for which we have evidence, the best would elude us. The object of faith is the invisible. This condition of faith holds in check any pretension we might have of relating everything to the standards of our own judgment. This disposition of mind must, then, be fought against. The best way is to substitute for it the awareness and love of the invisible. We put ourselves in the hands of God. He knows and we do not know. We are not surprised at not knowing. The attachment to the invisible is as yet no more than initiation into a better light. Under this aspect faith is, as it were, the religion of the intellect. Faith brings about in its own order the same renunciation of self-sufficiency in which religion consists (in the sense in which the word signifies an attitude of the human soul), and the same readiness to recognise the superiority of God. Faith is the act of a religious soul. Hence the importance of rooting ourselves in this fundamental disposition. The liberation and uplifting of which we were speaking just now are only possible at this price. They are the compensation of the putting away of self to which the soul which is irreligious will not consent. Work is already begun for the faith and for the adherence of the mind to its mysteries when a man is persuaded to adore God.

Consequently faith does not become love of the absurd. It is one thing to love the invisible mystery, quite another to cultivate and prefer that which is devoid of meaning. The absurd is against reason but mystery passes beyond it. And however disconcerting the truths revealed by God may be, however irreducible to the positive proofs by which one would claim to demonstrate them, reason can never

establish their impossibility. They defy contradiction, whether we consider the mystery of the Holy Trinity, or of the resurrection of the dead, or of original sin or of any other which faith declares. Therefore nothing stands in the way of our believing them, whereas it would be necessary to refuse to believe them if they ran counter to the fundamental principle on which our intellectual life is built up. Further, reasons can be advanced in favour of these mysteries, not, indeed, demonstrative proofs (and it would be no light stupidity to claim to demonstrate them or even to want to go too far in the direction of claiming their conformity with reason), but persuasive arguments: they consist of certain suitabilities and analogies which Christian thought has succeeded in discovering, the wealth of which is stored up for us in theology. It cannot be other than good for all of us to acquire this kind of knowledge in the measure of our capacity. By this means, nothing is taken away from the invisible to which faith is eager to adhere. But in this way its mysteries become more accessible to our minds. Such an advantage would never be obtained if the mysterious were the same thing as the absurd.

The mysteries of faith are contained in the creeds. We frequently recite the apostles' creed and at Mass we hear that of Nicea-Constantinople. It is for us to draw from these formulæ the excellent substance they contain. First of all, one will come to realise the relation of the creeds to Holy Scripture. The latter alone is the word of God and it is essential that faith should finally be ordered to it as such. But it was necessary to gather up the richness and complexity of the inspired books into essential propositions. The creeds are convenient summaries of the faith. The major truths of revelation have been grouped there in short but weighty articles. Without having to explore the very considerable amount of matter in the Scriptures, we have there what God in the Scriptures intended to teach us. Let us make good use of this benefit. But at the same time we should know that the whole value of the creeds is derived from Holy Scripture and lies in their accuracy in relation to this document of divine revelation. And let us cultivate a liking for getting to know, each one as circumstances permit, the words with which God has directly inspired the authors of the holy books: this has been recommended above. As to the differences which we notice between the two creeds, we should understand that they are of the order of a more or less detailed expression of the same truths and consequently in no wise impair the unity of the faith.

Considered in themselves and in the manner of their use, whether

in private prayer, or in liturgical functions, the creeds enable the faithful to concentrate their faith on the things that matter. What we have to believe is contained therein: the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the mystery of the Incarnation, the mystery of our redemption and of the sanctification of souls, the mystery of the consummation of the work of salvation in eternal life. The first thought of Christians will always be to apply their attention to such mysteries, to be interested in them, to find in them the reason for their hope and a stimulus for their fervour. Of course it is useful for Christians to thrash out present-day questions and to form a right judgment on these matters. But how much more necessary is it for them to go back over and over again to the eternal truths of the faith. Further, it is by no means certain that the latter occupy the place which is their due in common piety. People become taken up with forms of devotion which appeal more to the senses; they become exclusively attached to this or that saint; they believe with their whole soul in recent apparitions or revelations. All these things are good and lawful, for the Church approves them. But an order must be respected. Nothing merits our attachment more than the truths contained in the creeds. They convey to us the very thought of God. They make known to us his plan of salvation for us and the ways by which we have to take hold of it. If it were absolutely necessary one could do without the rest. But for Christians to neglect the articles of faith would be an evil without remedy. Because this preference is not invariably observed, the thought of the faithful moves in every direction and becomes subject to all fashions; for there is no lack of these, either in devotion or in the apostolate. Let us have it at heart to preserve in our thought such a hierarchy that the truths of faith, of which the creeds are the definite and certain summaries, prevail over every other opinion. Between pious beliefs and the truths of the faith there is the whole difference that lies between human thoughts and the divine thought. The faith is theological, whether regarded from the point of view of its object or from that of its motive: vigilance is always necessary to preserve this precious quality from any possible contamination.

In us, the truths of the faith are concerned with the intellect. We adhere to them as truths, affirming that it is good that the matter is thus. It would be a serious matter if the faithful were to misunderstand this intellectual character of the faith, and it is with a view to strengthening it in them that we have put forward the foregoing remarks. But one does not believe with one's intellect alone. Faith involves the will. We should understand that certain

affective dispositions are particularly favourable to the act by which we affirm as true what the faith enunciates. The cause of this is that these truths are not of academic interest alone. They concern our destiny. They teach us all there is to learn of man and to what God calls him. It is true that the creeds give us information about God. But the God of whom they speak is no stranger to us. He has created heaven and the earth on which we live. He sent his only Son among us to free us from sin. He gives us his Holy Spirit. He will raise us from the dead. He will open to us the gate of eternal life. It may indeed be said that all the truths of the faith converge towards this eternal life which is the final article of the creed. Thus they are promises as well as truths. Whilst they demand the assent of our intellect they uplift the heart in faith and love. To revivify the faith in us, we should not fail to make use of this inter-connection. Let us bring into play the force of desire which, as Christians, is in our hearts. Is not this companionship with God and the saints in which eternal life consists an incomparable good? Is there not something lacking to all earthly happiness? To men who are sinners, is not a redemption, whose merciful initiative comes from God, necessary? In short we should render desirable to ourselves that very good of which Christianity contains the promise. In such dispositions it is easy to adhere to the truths of the faith and one does so with strength. How different indeed is such an adherence to the faith from the rigid acceptance of a dogmatic formula which is what certain people represent it as being! In the act of faith there is a keenness, a lifting up of the mind, an enthusiasm which are justified by the incomparable blessings of which revealed truth provides us with the guarantee. One believes with one's whole soul, as with one's whole soul one moves irresistibly towards the light, or towards joy. Now enthusiasm is infectious. Was not the creation of the first churches the expansion of the certainties which fired the souls of a St Peter or a St Paul? They won to their own conviction those who were the witnesses of it. It is also very efficacious to cause to be proclaimed in common the faith which each one carries in his heart. In this connection the singing of the *Credo* at Mass should be given particular attention. There should result from it an irresistible impression of strength and joy. What a joy it is to believe when faith fills an immense church with its sound, a sound tremendous yet disciplined.

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It is on faith that the Christian life depends utterly. Where faith is languishing, it is not possible for the virtues to flourish. And even

supposing they were to flourish, they would not be true Christian virtues. Action and devotion in the faithful are the expression and, as it were, the realisation of their faith. The cultivation of this virtue is thus of the first importance; and because it has its own nature, its development is likewise a definite work, depending on special rules. It will be realised that those we have enunciated do not cover everything. They leave room for more detailed methods which each one's own needs and experience will dictate to him. But if the readers of the present article will only make trial of a concrete application of the suggestions put forward, we should be surprised if the latter did not prove their efficacy.



THE LIFE OF GRACE : II

BY

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WHILE Christianity was claiming to have found true wisdom, secular philosophy was still seeking it with all its might. Since Plato with his amazing intuitions had constructed a system of philosophy directed towards the Possession or contemplation of the Unchanging, a current of philosophy had been trying to take the realities of metaphysics by storm and enjoy them, if only for a moment, at the risk of neglecting the patient labour and slow deduction championed by Aristotle.

After painting his splendid picture of the universe, from the One to the lowest degree of being, matter, Plotinus sets up an ideal for the human soul. 'There are as many ways of living possible for the soul as there are levels of reality: at the bottom, life in the world of the senses, whether it be the life of pleasure, in which the soul is entirely passive, or the active life, the rule of which is given by the social virtues.' Higher up comes reflection, in which the soul gives itself up to its autonomous activity, judging and reasoning. The soul is now in command of itself and about to fit itself for reaching intuitive thought; it 'goes up to the level of the understanding', i.e., the level of essences, presupposing nothing before them and being the data of intuition. But the soul can sometimes go higher still, until it comes to the First One; but here there is no longer any question of an intellectual vision or an intuition, since