

AFTER 33 YEARS : PREFACE TO THE 1958 EDITION OF 'A SPIRITUAL AENEID' (excerpt)

Two questions, evidently, some old comrade-in-arms might ask of me; correlative, indeed, but at least in his mind perfectly distinct. One is, “Are you sorry you left the Church of England when you did?” And the other is, “Did the Church of Rome come up to your expectations?” Well, I might answer in the manner of the Roman authorities, “Negative ad primam, affirmative ad secundam”. But I hope I am not alone in feeling that the questions call for a more elaborate reply.

I must emphasize here, what I think will become plain to anybody who reads the book through, that the *coterie* to which I belonged when I was an Anglican had a peculiar attitude towards conversion. It was thought of (if I may say so without offense) as a kind of threat, useful for bargaining purposes; almost as a kind of blackmail. Very much as the representative of an Eastern European country will insist on having his own way at some conclave of the United Nations, making it clear that if he does not get his own way he will walk out, we thought and talked of submission to Rome as a useful weapon when we were trying to avert scandals in the Establishment. “You mean to admit Nonconformists, publically and officially, to Communion? Very well then, I shall become a Roman Catholic.” When (to put it crudely) your bluff was called, you would have to decide whether or no you really meant it. Thus we used to account for any defection from our own ranks by the unsympathetic attitude of the Anglican authorities; “He went over in the Brighton row” was a typical epitaph.

Consequently, during those long days of indecision before I was received into the Church, my friends were always “getting me wrong”. They imagined that I disapproved of the existing state of Anglicanism, and was making a gesture of disapproval, like some dissatisfied member of a committee, by offering to resign my membership. And in the goodness of their hearts they strove to comfort me, admitting that the Church of England was in a bad way (we were all agreed about that), but pooh-poohing the idea that things were going from bad to worse; nonsense, we had only struck a bad patch. The influence of the Tractarian movement, at various levels, was growing daily stronger; it was only a matter of time before anomalies were ironed out, and unhealthy elements extruded; then we should be in a position to claim, as by right, corporate reunion with the Roman Catholics. Meanwhile, there was a steady return among English people to the practice of religion; materialism was losing its hold. I should look a fool in twenty years’ time, if owing to a mere excess of discouragement, I left the Church of England now.

I may be constitutionally a pessimist, but neither statistics nor impressions, to my mind, bear out any such forecast. All my life people have been telling me that England was becoming more and more Christian; and year by year it has seemed to me that organized religion (which alone admits of statistical treatment) was losing ground. I would give anything to believe I am wrong; but we are concerned, here, not with facts as they are but with the facts as I see them. If, in the year 1917, it had been my ungenerous intention to desert a sinking ship, I might still be searching vainly for evidence that the leak has been plugged. But if you could justify a more cheerful estimate of the prospects that lie before Anglicanism as a religious body – and it has certainly performed wonderful feats of organization in the last thirty years – I think I should remain unimpressed. My nostalgia, if I had any, for the Church of England would be for something which has irrevocably disappeared.

The plain fact is that while England led the world, and the Church of England was effectively the expression of its national life, there was a monumental quality about that partnership which do what you would laid hold of the imagination. Now that the hegemony is in dispute between two other world-powers, one wholly irreligious and the other, seen at its best, a Babel of Christianities, the case is altered; Anglicanism, through no fault of its own, has become sectarian. The plain fact is that while England was an aristocratic country, with squires living on their lands, and well educated, fairly well-to-do parsons helping them to rule the neighbourhood, Anglicanism fitted into the landscape, was part of the body politic. Now that we are ruled by clerks in offices and deafened by the noise of motor-cycles which convey incumbents from church to church, the whole picture is out of proportion. The Anglicanism of my nostalgia (if I had any) would be the Anglicanism of my boyhood, a gracious symbol now lost to the earth.

All this is by way of parenthesis; the step which I took in 1917 is one which I have never had the wish, never even the velleity, to retract. I do not adduce this fact as a piece of startling evidence in favour of the Petrine claims. It is open to anybody to say that I feel like that because I am that kind of person. I am only putting on record the answer of one convert to the question, “Are you sorry you left the Church of England?” It is often said of us converts – a friend of mine heard it said of me, years ago, on the top of an omnibus, “He realizes, now, that he’s made a

mistake". But in fact I have never experienced a mood of discouragement or of hesitation, during these last thirty-three years, that has suggested, even on the horizon of my mind, the possibility of going back where I came from. Faith is a gift, and may be withdrawn; when people whom I know lose (or even seem to lose) the faith, I remind myself that there, but for the grace of God, went I. But on the two or three occasions when converts whom I knew have gone back to the Church of England, I found it quite impossible to follow the workings of their mind. Revealed theology is something which I can only see as an integral whole; only by an abuse of the mind could I abandon one tenet without abandoning the rest.

I have not yet answered the further question, "Did the Church of Rome come up to your expectations?" It would give me great pleasure if I could cut short the discussion by returning a simple "Yes". But a truer analysis demands the more complicated answer, "No, thank God it didn't. Because I was expecting the wrong things."

It is a familiar observation, at least among bicyclists, that when you are coming downhill with an upward slope facing you the eye is somehow cheated, and you see the gradient of that upward slope as much steeper than it really is. Many converts, in their approach to the Church, have an analogous experience. In one way or another, they are in reaction from the world about them, and the Church attracts them, partly at least, because she takes a more intelligible, a more acceptable line. But, commonly enough, they get the perspective wrong, exaggerate the contrast. They are Conservatives, and turn to the Church because she has such firm roots in the past. Or they are internationalists, and turn to the Church as an escape from chauvinism, because she is world-wide. Or they are authoritarians, and turn to the Church because she has such an admirable tradition of discipline. But almost always they exaggerate the extent of her protest, and when they get to know her better, they find her less intransigent than they thought. She has her roots in the past, but she is alive still, and capable of startling initiatives. She transcends national boundaries, yet she has an uncanny knack of letting people realize their own national genius. She is authoritarian, but her own authority is hedged about with precedent, and she will not lose sight of human liberty. Must we say, then, that she does not come up to the expectations of such converts as these? No, because when you become a Catholic you do not stand still; your own character is molded and mellowed by new influences. The Church is better than your expectations, because she puts your ideas right about what you ought to expect.

In my own case, there can be little doubt what the special attraction of the Church was. I write from memory, but I think a perusal of the *Spiritual Aeneid* will bear me out (scripture, as it were, reinforcing tradition). Partly, no doubt, because I was that kind of person, but partly because of the controversies which exercised the religious world at the time, I was intensely preoccupied with the subject of Modernism. Tyrrell was but a few years in his grave, and it seemed as if the attitude of the Church towards liberal interpretations, whether of Scripture or of history, had been once for all defined; an attitude of uncompromising rejection. And, where Rome was marble, Lambeth was wax; in the Church of England you could say what you like, and nobody took action – the merest suggestion of a heresy-hunt was enough to bring out public opinion in arms. I came into the Church, it seems to me, in a white heat of orthodoxy, Manning's disciple rather than Newman's; and when I took the anti-modernist oath, it was something of a disappointment that the Vicar-General was not there to witness the fervour I put into it – he had gone out to order tea.

Since then, the tide of liberalism has receded, and the attitude of Catholic authorities towards the findings of modern scholarship, though it is still one of caution, is no longer one of anxious suspicion. I choose my metaphor deliberately; ebb and flow there will always be in such matters. But the tide has receded, leaving me, you would suppose, high and dry. The Church of Rome, evidently, has not come up to my expectations. So you would think, but you have made no allowance for the principle I laid down just now – that the Church does not just leave us where we were; she molds and mellows us. Or is it merely the effect of old age? Anyhow, I do not find myself high and dry, but comfortably afloat in a fair depth of water. And that is, I think, no uncommon experience among converts who look back over a length of years. You have the curious feeling that the person who came into the Church was not you, but somebody slightly different.

What loss or gain there may be in the process is another matter. Only in the early stages do you set store by the conscious glow of enthusiasm that follows upon a hard spiritual decision. On a longer view, more serious questions arise, about fidelity to grace, about the use made of opportunities. But those questions are not for public discussion; the world's praise and blame are beside the point. For the world's benefit, there is nothing to add to what Maurice Baring wrote in *The Puppet-Show of Memory*: "On the eve of Candlemas 1909, I was received into the Catholic Church by Father Sebastian Bowden at the Brompton Oratory; the only action in my life which I am quite certain I have never regretted".