

THE UNCONSCIOUS CATHOLIC

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Every Sunday, more or less, you are told how fortunate you are to be Catholics. And it is almost impossible for us, in listening to such expositions, not to be held up occasionally by a distracting thought: "That's all very well, and it seems full of consolations for us; but after all, what about the other people? Most of us here are going about all day with people who aren't Catholics and aren't, as far as we can see, even on the way to becoming Catholics. They are nice people, good-living people many of them; nearly all, if you come to look beneath the surface, have excellent qualities tucked away; where exactly do they get off? Is there no chance for them in eternity? And if there is, how much of a chance is it, and how does it come to them? If we are going to accept the doctrine as apparently we must accept it, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, isn't it going to make us feel rather unhappy about our non-Catholic friends?" So I thought I would devote some time to a consideration of that question. It is all familiar ground, I hope, to most of you; and it is pretty dull going. But it is important, I think, to have an answer to such difficulties as these, ready for those occasions when our Protestant friends say, "Of a course, you think I'm going to hell; you have to." Let's just make certain that we don't lay ourselves open to the charge of stuffiness on the one side, or land ourselves in theological misstatements on the other.

The gateway of all sacramental grace, as we know, is baptism. First of all, then, what is the position of the unbaptized? After all, for innumerable centuries before Christ the human race had to get on without the sacrament of baptism, and even now there are plenty of people in the world who have never had the chance of being baptized. If it comes to that, there are probably a good many of our friends who have never been baptized; the Jews and the Quakers for example, and the people whose parents didn't hold with going to church at all. Well, when you are considering people like that, it is a very important to keep two principles in mind. One is, that baptism is not necessarily baptism by water; there is such a thing as baptism of desire. It is quite certain, I mean, that a person who at the time of his death was anxious to be baptized, but could find nobody to do it for him or no water to do it with, would nevertheless become a member of Christ's Mystical Body through his desire of baptism. And we can't, evidently, be certain how far that principle may not extend; it's certain that the Holy Patriarchs who died in the hope of a Messiah were saved through that hope, and it isn't for us to say how many of the heathen may have been saved through some distant inkling of the same truth; may not be saved in that way even now, provided that the chance of embracing the Christian religion has never effectively come in their way.

And that's where the other principle comes in; it's quite certain that nobody ever has gone to hell or ever will go to hell except through his own fault. It's not the legacy of original sin, it's one's own actual sins, that bring the sentence of eternal reprobation. And if it's true that all men sin, it is equally true that contrition is open to all men as the remedy for sin. Therefore we've no right to assume that anybody has been eternally lost because there is no record in his life that he ever had or desired baptism. I should certainly be very much surprised if I found myself in a heaven which didn't contain Socrates and Plato and Virgil and plenty of other people who, at first sight, would have no right to be there. How is it that such souls come to be saved we don't know. Some have thought that at the very moment of death, and perhaps even after the moment at which a doctor would give a certificate of medical death, an illumination is given to them which, if they accept it, will achieve the baptism of desire. Others prefer to think that the desire of baptism can be implicitly contained in an act of love towards God, even an act that is confused, even an act that is inarticulate. We don't know; all we do know is, that it is theologically indefensible to say of any man, Nero, for example, or Mahomet, "That man went to hell"; we've no right, even in the extreme case, to despair of God's infinite mercies.

All that, as you see, is only a kind of Christian agnosticism. But when we come on to the case of people who have been baptized but don't ever become Catholics, our ground is much more certain. Every child that is baptized becomes, *ipso facto*, not only a Christian but a Catholic. A child that dies unbaptized, having done nothing to deserve eternal punishment, will enjoy, according to the more common opinion, a state of natural happiness in

eternity which falls short, indeed, of the supernatural happiness reserved for Christ's elect, but is nevertheless adequate to its human aspirations. A child which dies after baptism cannot be supposed to achieve the brightness of glory which belongs to those who have striven, and merited, and obtained. But it belongs to the Mystical Body of Christ, and wins its heaven.

Now, supposing that the child lives, how long does it go on being a Catholic? Until it reaches the age of reason; it is quite certain that there are no Protestants in the world under the age of five. You cease to be a Catholic only when, with the full use of your reason, you consent, at least externally, to embrace the beliefs of some other religion; or when you begin to hold, with the full use of your reason, philosophical beliefs opposed to the doctrines of the Church. If you could imagine a child that was baptized and then grew up without giving a single thought to religion for better or worse – that child has become, in strict theory, a very slack Catholic; not a Protestant. And in strict theory, if such a person wanted to join this congregation at the age of nineteen, say, he ought to be given conditional baptism in case his baptism in childhood was for some reason invalid; but he oughtn't to be received into the Church with the official form for the reception of converts. Because that form is essentially a renunciation of errors; and the person in question, *ex hypothesi*, has never held any.

What normally happens, of course, is that the child grows up to be seven or eight, and then he is packed off to Sunday school and starts learning to be a Protestant. Whether you say that he does so willingly is, of course, a matter of definition; probably he kicks a good deal at first, especially if it means putting on a clean collar. But the fact remains that he goes; in doing so, does he commit a sin of schism? Materially he does, formally he does not. Let us get those two terms right, because the common instinct of English speech is to use them the wrong way round. If you eat, on a Friday, out of a jar which is labeled POTTED SHRIMP but which really contains the remains of a cab-horse, you are committing a material sin by eating meat on Friday, but you are not committing a formal sin, because you had no way of knowing that the cab-horse was there. And, of course, although you may mention it in confession if you find out about it afterwards, you are not bound to confess it, nor will it be brought up against you at the day of judgment; a sin does not lie upon your conscience unless you are conscious of committing it, and it is by your conscience that you will be judged. Similarly, the ordinary Englishman who has been validly baptized proceeds, later in life, to join in worship which is, as matter of fact, heretical and schismatical; but he is not blamed for it in the sight of God, because he has not, then at least, any means of finding out that he is doing so. The sin is merely a material one. Mark you, we no longer describe him as a Catholic; because we have to judge whether a person is or is not a Catholic by his outward actions. But has he ceased to be a member of the Mystical Body of Christ? No; not at least while he makes faithful use of the opportunities he has of worshipping God, according to the light given him. That means that there are quantities and quantities of people who, as far as we can determine, are already members of the Mystical Body of Christ without knowing it.

And now, how is it possible for such a person to lose that unconscious membership of Christ's Church? He can, of course, suspend the operation of grace, just as we Catholics can, if he commits mortal sin. On the other hand, he regains his lost state of grace if he makes an act of perfect contrition, just as a Catholic does. Only, whereas the Catholic is bound to make his sin known in confession, even though by God's grace it may already have been forgiven him, a Protestant is not so bound, because he either knows nothing about confession, or thinks that he can satisfy his obligation by confessing his sins to an Anglican clergyman, or to his friends in the groups. But there's another way in which he can lose his membership of the Mystical Body. He does so when the claims of the Catholic Church are fully proposed to him, and he sees that they are justified, but does not become a Catholic in spite of his knowledge. Pride, or indolence, or the hope of worldly advantage prevents him from taking the step which his conscience knows to be right. Then, in that hour, he becomes a heretic and a schismatic, formally as well as materially; he has refused grace.

Are there many people in that position? I don't know; my own impression is that there are very few Protestants who are Protestants in bad faith. They are in good faith, so long as they remain outside the Church through invincible ignorance. That's a phrase of ours that worries people frightfully; when we tell them they are the victims

of invincible ignorance, they always look as if we had said something rude. But if you are arguing with a friend, and are driven to tell him in the last resort that invincible ignorance is what he is suffering from, don't let him go away with the impression that you are being rude, and that invincible ignorance means a sort of cretinous stupidity. If you've got a tutorial at six, and your watch tells you it's half-past five, and you're pretty sure your watch is wrong, and there's a clock in the next room you know to be right – then that ignorance of the time which makes you half an hour or so late for your tutorial is not invincible ignorance. It is vincible ignorance; you could have overcome it if you had taken the trouble to look at the clock in the next room. So your friend's ignorance would be vincible, if he already had a pretty shrewd idea that the Catholic position was right, but refused to read the Catholic Truth Society tracts you offered him because he jolly well knew he was going to lose a legacy if he became a Catholic. But that's not his position; a hundred accidents of parentage, education, misconception, sentimental prejudice and so on make him so far from the Church that his conversion would seem a kind of miracle; he really knows nothing about Catholics except that you are one, which may or may not be an inducement – very well, his ignorance is invincible. It is the kind of ignorance he could not get rid of by taking any steps which he could normally be expected to take. So he's all right.

By now, as I well know, you are all bursting with an objection. It always crops up in these discussions. If (you say) this rosy picture of yours is true about the dispositions of Protestants and their chances of eternal salvation, what exactly is the use of being a Catholic? Aren't Catholics, by your account of the matter, rather in the position of men who laboriously climb up the rugged slopes of a mountain, to find when they got to the top that their Protestant friends have got ahead of them by means of a funicular railway whose existence they themselves had never been taught to suspect? Here am I (you complain) tied down by all sorts of restrictions and regulations which interfere seriously with my enjoyment of the present life; and here are these Protestants, invincibly ignorant of all these rules and regulations, and therefore having all the fun which I miss, and no worse off when it comes to a future life than myself? Your attitude, in fact, is very much that of the laborers in the vineyard whom we read about in the Gospel, who complained that they had borne all the burden of the day and the heats, and at the end of it found themselves on exactly the same footing as the casual laborers who had been raked in from the marketplace at the last moment.

Well, that opens up rather a large subject. You see, it isn't true that Protestants are exempt from the law of God, from the Ten Commandments for instance; and it isn't true that Protestants can be invincibly ignorant, to a full extent, of what God's law requires of them. Their consciences are doubtless confused; but don't be too ready to believe them when they say they see no harm in doing this or that which you know to be wrong. There's a great deal of self-deception going about, when people say they "see no harm" in doing something they very much want to; it's not invincible ignorance when a man puts blinkers on his conscience. We are not to judge our Protestant friends in such cases; judgment lies with Almighty God, to whom each soul is responsible. But you mustn't think it true for a moment, or allow other people to think it true for a moment, that there is one Divine Law for Catholics and another for Protestants. However, that takes us away from our subject. Let us admit that where the law of the Church is concerned you are bound and your Protestant friends are not. They can do certain things which you can't do; they can eat a mutton-chop on a Friday, they can be Freemasons, they can get married in a registry office, they can leave directions in their wills to say they want to be cremated, and so on. From all these riotous pleasures you are excluded. And you want to know whether it isn't bad luck you should be excluded when they aren't. Or, putting the thing in a rather more altruistic way, why (you ask) should we bother to convert Protestants? Since they are in good faith, wouldn't it be better to leave them in good faith, and let them get to heaven in their own way, mutton-chops and all?

The immediate answer to that difficulty is this – that although we ought always to hope, for the sake of charity, that this or that Protestant is in good faith, we can't be sure that he is in good faith, nor, for that matter, can he. Therefore we should always encourage the conversion of a Protestant, if only for safety's sake. But, you know, even if you could be certain that some friend of yours was in good faith, and was on the whole a clean-living sort of person, so that there was no great reason to worry about him, it isn't true to say that you and he enjoy exactly the

same supernatural advantages. First, you have the certainty of faith; you are spared the anxious uncertainties which often assail him; he's not certain whether there is a future life, whether his life's worth living, whether anything you do or say really matters much – from these doubts you are set free. Second, you have access, where he has no access, to sacramental grace; he can win forgiveness for his sins (for example) only by an act of perfect contrition, and who can be certain that he is making an act of perfect contrition? Whereas for you attrition suffices, as long as you make use of the sacrament of penance. Third, you have the merits of the Church at your disposal; you can go out to Rome in the vacation and get a plenary indulgence, or (if your dispositions are not sufficient for that) an indulgence of some kind; he can go out to Kamchatka and he won't get off a day's Purgatory for it. The reason why you don't realize your privileges as Catholics is because you don't use them more.

As a matter of fact, even if there were no heaven and no hell, it would still be our duty to try and convert heretics, even those who are only in material heresy, for a different reason – that truth is truth, and has a right to be told. Spiritual truth, which is the highest of all, is something we must necessarily want to impart to other people if we possess it ourselves. I don't mean by that that I want you to go straight back to your College and try and convert the two people you are sitting next to in Hall. Indiscriminate attempts to convert other people mean, at the best, that you give people a dislike for Catholicism; at the worst, that you shake what faith they have in Christianity altogether, so that the last state of them is worse than the first. No, your duty is to defend the faith to the best of your power where you can see it is being misrepresented, and to help your friends when they begin to take an interest in the Catholic religion, by lending them books, by introducing them to a priest, or in some similar way.

There's one other point. If you are asked, "What is the exact meaning of the maxim, No salvation outside the Catholic Church," what are you to say about it? The simplest way to put it, I think, is this – there is no other religious body in the world except the Catholic Church which makes a supernatural contribution to a man's chances of salvation. He may receive natural help from some other source; his conscience may be stirred by the preaching of the Salvation Army, or he may learn a useful habit of mental prayer from the Buchmanites, or his sense of worship may be stimulated by the beauty of the ceremonies which he witnesses at the Church of the Cowley Fathers. But there's only one religious body whose membership, of itself, tends to procure our salvation, and that is the Catholic Church. If anybody is saved without visible membership of it he is saved, not because he's an Anglican, not because he's a Methodist, not because he's a Quaker, but for one reason only – because he is a Catholic without knowing it.

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