



GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON (1874-1936) was a gifted and prolific English journalist, essayist, novelist, and poet. An adult convert to Catholic Christianity, he penned over 60 books, including *Heretics*, *Orthodoxy*, *The Everlasting Man*, and the popular series of “Father Brown” mysteries. He wrote the essay reproduced below in 1926.

UPON THIS ROCK

by G.K. Chesterton

To a Roman Catholic the Roman Catholic Church is simply the Christian religion; the gift of Christ to St. Peter and his successors of a right to answer at all times all questions about what it really is; a thing surrounded at the edge of its own wide domain by various severed fragments of its own substance; consisting of people who for different reasons deny that right to affirm what it really is, and who therefore differ among themselves, indefinitely and increasingly, about what it really is. It may be added that they differ not only about the nature of the ideal Christianity that ought to be substituted, but even about the nature of the Roman Catholicism that is to be defied. To some it is Antichrist; to some it is one branch of the Church of Christ, having authority in certain provinces but not in England or Russia; to some it is a corrupt perversion of Truth from which religion was rescued; to others a necessary historic phase through which religion had to pass; and so on. But it may be noted by the curious that though there is so much difference in the reasons given, there is something common to most of the emotions felt. The reactions to Rome are all reactions to something odd. It is a thousand things, but all things with a sort of thrill in them; a mystery, a *bête noire*, a strange survival, a public scandal, a private embarrassment, an open secret, a tactless topic, a sly joke, a last refuge or a leap in the dark – everything except anything that is like anything else.

To a Roman Catholic there is no particular difference between those parts of the religion which Protestants and others accept and those parts which they reject. The dogmas have, of course, their intrinsic theological proportions; but in his feeling they are all one thing. The Mass is as Christian as

the Gospel. The Gospel is as Catholic as the Mass. This, I fancy, is the fact which the Protestant world has found it most difficult to understand and about which some of the most unfortunate forms of ill-feeling have appeared. Yet it arises quite naturally from the actual history of the Church, which has had to contend incessantly with quite other and quite opposite heresies. She has not only had to defeat these sects to defend these doctrines, but to defeat other sects to defend other doctrines – including the doctrines which these sects rightly hold so dear. It was only the Roman Catholic Church that saved the Protestant truths. It may be right to rest on the Bible, but there would be no Bible if the Gnostics had proved that the Old Testament was written by the Devil, or had littered the world with Apocryphal Gospels. It may be right to say that Jesus alone saves from sin, but nobody would be saying it if a Pelagian movement had altered the whole notion of sin. Even the very selection of dogmas which the reformers decided to preserve had only been preserved for them by the authority which they denied.

It is natural, therefore, for Catholics not to be always thinking of the antithesis of Catholic and Protestant any more than of Catholic and Pelagian. Catholicism is used to proposals to cut down the creed to a few clauses; but different people have wanted quite different clauses left and quite different clauses cut out. Thus a Catholic does not feel the special reverence paid to the Mother of God as any more of a controversial question than the divine honours paid to the Son of God; for he knows the latter was as much controverted by the Arians as the former by the Puritans. He does not feel the throne of St. Peter to be any more specially in dispute than

the theology of St. Paul, for he knows that both have been disputed. There have been anti-popes; there have been Apocryphal Gospels; there have been sects dethroning our Lady and sects dethroning our Lord. After nearly two thousand years of this sort of thing, Catholics have come to regard Catholicism as one thing, all the parts of which are in one sense equally assailed and in another sense equally unassailable.

Now it is unfortunately impossible for a Roman Catholic to state the principle without its sounding provocative and, what is much worse, superior; but unless he does state it, he does not state Roman Catholicism. Having stated it, however, in its dogmatic and defiant form, as it is his duty to do, he may afterwards suggest something of why the system seems, to those inside it, to be not so much a system as a home, and even a holiday. Thus it certainly does not mean being superior in the sense of supercilious; for in this system alone, only the saint is superior because he feels he is inferior. It does not say that all heretics are lost, for it does say that there is a common conscience by which they may be saved. But it does definitely say that he who knows the whole truth sins in accepting half the truth. Thus the Church is not a *movement*, like all those which have filled the world since the sixteenth century; that is, since the breakdown of the collective attempt of all Christendom to state the whole truth. It is not the movement of something trying to find its balance; it is the balance. But the point here is that even those heretics, who snatched at half-truths, seldom snatched at the same half. The original Protestants insisted on Hell without Purgatory. Their modern successors generally insist on Purgatory without Hell. Their future successors may quite possibly insist on Purgatory without Heaven. It may seem a natural sequence to the worship of Progress for its own sake, and the theory that "to travel hopefully is better than to arrive." For the Catholic each of these things may be disputed in its turn, and all will remain.

Nevertheless, in making so short a summary in a world still Protestant by tradition, it will be convenient to assume that the reader is acquainted with the Christian scheme in those features which, until lately, were common to many or most Christian bodies: the Image of God, the Fall, the necessity of Redemption, the Last Judgment, and the

rest; and to describe the Catholic faith (from which all these things really come) as that world sees it, by the chief features that appear distinctive because they are disputed. I will therefore say a word or two of what would still be commonly called the marks of Roman Catholicism. I shall say very little about the greatest of all, because it is admittedly a mystery and an object of faith. Catholics believe that in the Blessed Sacrament Christ is present, not merely as a thought is present in a mind, but as a person is present in a room, veiled only from the actual senses by the appearances of bread and wine. Of its historical aspect it will be enough to say that Roman Catholics are convinced that it is spoken of in this spirit at least as early as St. Ignatius, who was roughly of the next generation to that of the Gospel. The common sense of it, it seems to me, would be to say that if the words of Christ at the Last Supper were misunderstood, they were misunderstood by the twelve Apostles. But the doctrine is so tremendous and transcendental that we cannot complain if some misunderstand it as blasphemous and extravagant. Only they cannot have it both ways. They must not turn round and complain that we claim to possess Christ as a living God by a vital process, absent from the other communions that called the process impossible. They must not grumble at our talking of Christ coming back to a heretic land with the first procession bearing the Host. There must be a difference between Christ's presence in their sense and in our sense, if they are actually shocked and staggered at our sense. A Return which they are driven to call impossible we may surely be allowed to call unique.

For practical purposes in Protestant civilization it is another fact that soars most clearly into sight, towering even over Transubstantiation. It is the Papacy that makes the Papist. For him, at least, it dates from the highly dramatic words about the Rock and the Gates of Hell; it certainly appears, to say the very least, as an admitted seat of superior authority in the debates of the first Fathers and Councils; but it was not logically and literally defined until the middle of the nineteenth century. In this sense it is true that the idea grew; but we can never make anything but nonsense out of the sort of evolution that imagines something growing out of nothing. But in so far as an eternal truth can grow, in the comprehension of men, it has grown

continuously with the increase of the experience of men. The general case for a tribunal to define the truth has been touched upon already. I pointed out that long before Protestants rushed in to preserve their simple Christianity, even that simple Christianity would not have been there to preserve if there had not already been a Church tribunal to preserve it. The question then becomes one of the nature of the tribunal. Even if democracy were applicable to a revelation, there could not really be a democratic tribunal which should be deciding all the time and democratic all the time. It would not be the millions of poor and humble Catholics who would rule; it would be the officials if it were not the official. It would be a Holy Synod. Now every popular instinct Catholics possess seems to them to say that rather than have merely an official order – that is, an oligarchy – it is far more human to have a monarchy – that is, a man. It is indeed remarkable that those who broke with this purely moral monarchy generally set up a material and a rather immoral monarchy. The first great schism in the East was made by men who turned from the Popes to bow down to the Caesars – and the Tsars. The last great schism in the West was made by men who attributed divine right to Henry VIII, not to mention Charles I. Those who thought the papacy too despotic did not even escape despotism.

It is needless to explain, I trust, that the only despotism of the Pope consists in the fact that all Catholics believe that God will guard him from teaching falsehood to the Church on those special and rather rare occasions when he is appealed to to end a controversy with a final statement of faith. His ordinary pronouncements, though naturally received with profound respect, are not infallible. His private character depends on his own free will, like anybody else's. He can commit sins like anybody else; he must confess sins like anybody else; and his having been Pope is nothing to his salvation. But the question is, given our need for such final decision to save Christianity at great crises, what organ of the Church decides? The longer historical experience accumulates, the more profoundly thankful most Catholics are that the organ is a human being; a mind and not a type, a will and not a tradition or tone of a class. The best bishops ruling as a class would become a club, as a parliament does. They would have all of its

scattered responsibility, all its mutual flattery, all its diffused and dangerous pride. But the responsibility of a Pope is so solitary and so solemn that a man would need to be a maniac not to be humbled by it.

Probably the Protestant world would count as the next outstanding feature, after the power of the priests to perform Mass and of the Popes to define doctrine, that other power of the priesthood which is expressed in the sacrament of Penance. The sacramental system is everywhere based on the idea that certain material acts are mystical acts; are events in the spiritual world. This mystical materialism does divide us from all those forms of idealism that hold all good to be inward and invisible and matter to be unworthy to express it. It is needless to note how this applies to the water of baptism, the oil of unction, and so on. But I am deliberately taking the sacrament which our world has most misunderstood; and, strangely enough, it is that one which is least material and most spiritual, consisting of spoken words expressing the most secret thoughts. Of all the sacraments it is, in the modern jargon, the most psychological. And the proof of it is that even the people who abolished it a few centuries ago found that they had to invent a new imitation of it a few years ago. They told the people to go to a new priest, often without credentials, and make confession generally without absolution, and they called it psychoanalysis. Catholicism would say that the lack of the confessional had produced a modern congestion and stagnation of secrets so morbid as to be reaching the verge of madness.

Broadly, it may be said that Roman Catholicism has had the idea, hitherto at least highly unique, of working mankind from the inside. There have been and are any number of external ethical and political systems directing men how to do right in the mass; there is no other that thus gets to grips with why such a system goes wrong with the individual. Most moderns are content to get hold of the plan of Utopia. This is rather like getting hold of the diary of the Utopian and learning the real reason why he does not always behave in a Utopian manner. But, of course, it is quite useless unless he produces his own diary of his own free will. Unless he really wishes it, there can be no sacrament; and unless he really repents, there is no absolution. For the history

of this institution, it follows in its rough outline the same course as the other cases of the Mass and the Papacy. That is, it is undoubtedly *present* as an idea in the very earliest times; there are disputes about the *proportion* of that presence, and there need be no dispute at all that it grew more elaborate, more systematic, and more subtle with the process of experience. What is called Development is the unfolding of all the consequences and applications of an idea; but of something that is there, not of something that is not there. In this sense the Catholic Church is the one Christian body that has always believed in Evolution.

There is barely space to touch on two more of these things which are counted Popish specialties chiefly because they are counted Popish scandals. The first is the idea of asceticism and especially of celibacy. The second is the cult of the Blessed Virgin. Of the former it will be enough to say here that to most ordinary Roman Catholics, who are not called upon to practise special austerities, those examples are valuable not only as examples of heroism, but as very vivid evidences of the reality of religious hopes. Granted that for us the divine light is valued as a daily light, brightening our daily and normal affairs, yet it would not brighten them at all if we did not believe that the light was really divine. If we only believed that religion was useful, it would be of no use. Now nothing could better prove the light divine than that some should live on it as on a food; nothing could more clearly show religion to be real than that for some people it can be a substitute for other realities. We have no difficulty in believing that such people deal more directly with divine things than we, as in the case of those who enjoy directly a divine love instead of indirectly through a human love in marriage. And when we are criticized for this, we remember with some amusement that it was we who said that marriage was a divine sacrament when our critics said it was not.

Of the most popular, the most poetical and the most practically inspiring of all the distinctively Catholic traditions of Christianity, I will say very

little here; indeed, I will say only one thing. The honour given to Mary as the Mother of God is, among a thousand other things, a very perfect example of the truth to which I have recurred more than once: that even what we may call the Protestant truths were only saved by the Catholic authority. Among these is the very necessary truth of the subordination of Mary to Christ, as being after all the subordination of the creature to the Creator. Nothing amuses Catholics more than the suggestion, in so much of the old Protestant propaganda, that they are to be freed from the superstition called Mariolatry, like people freed from the burden of daylight. All the spontaneous spirituality, as distinct from the necessary doctrinal orthodoxy, is on the side of the extension and even excess of this cult. If Catholics had been left to their private judgment, to their personal religious experience, to their sense of the essential spirit of Christ and Christianity, to any of the liberal or latitudinarian tests of truth, they would long ago have exalted our Lady to a height of superhuman supremacy and splendour that might really have imperilled the pure monotheism in the core of the creed. Over whole tracts of popular opinion she might have been a goddess more universal than Isis. It is the authority of Rome that has prevented such Catholics from indulging in such Mariolatry; the strict definition that distinguished between a perfect woman and a divine Man. But if it were a place for expression of feeling, little doubt would be left about which way all our most direct and democratic feelings drive. I have throughout this statement ignored the meaningless affectation of impartiality. It is impossible for any man to state what he believes as if he did not believe it. But I have endeavoured to describe the most familiar features of this one religion in terms of logic not of rhetoric. And on this last matter of the doctrine touching the Virgin I will conclude without further speech. It is only reasonable that a creed presented by one who holds it should be stated with conviction; but anything I wrote on this last topic might be defaced with enthusiasm.