

THE PLAIN BLUNT MAN

BY RUTH MARY HEAD

IT is usually the boast of the Plain Blunt Man that his religion is a thoroughly practical affair, characterized by what he calls simplicity of faith, a readiness to do a good turn to his neighbour, and an absence of any fixed dogma, which he refuses to have "rammed down his throat ". He has no objection to going to church on occasions, even apart from christenings, weddings and funerals; but he dislikes and distrusts any sort of extravagant demonstration, and considers his religion entirely his own concern. 'After all,' he remarks, 'it's all a personal matter, isn't it? We are all aiming for the same place, and if I can be a perfectly good Christian without attaching myself to any religious body, and learning a lot of doctrine, that is my own affair.' In this way he lulls himself into a sort of spiritual coma—a state of complete and blissful ignorance of the basic facts of Christianity, even to the extent of judging himself to be as good as, or even better than, some of his fellow-men. Unaware that all he says is completely beside the point at issue, he settles down to his ordinary existence, well-intentioned and kind, but utterly in the dark. And so he stays, until the question of religion is again brought to his notice in some way. Then he declares once more his own particular brand of Christianity in no uncertain terms. Of course he prides himself on being "broad-minded" in such things, and can never quite understand these Roman Catholics, who appear to remain aloof and somewhat on a pedestal, refusing to move an inch from their well-established position. They seem to be weighed down with dogma, and yet are quite formidably united all over the world, in a manner which cannot but arouse his unwilling admiration. And so we see him floundering in a veritable morass of misconceptions, half-digested facts and hard-baked prejudices.

Let me say at the outset that it is by no means my intention to sneer at, or judge harshly such a person's confused ideas on the most important of all subjects. But in his own interests, it might be worth while to examine the many flaws in his well-meaning but misguided reasoning, particularly as they relate to the Catholic Church which he finds so maddeningly immovable, and yet so united and so universally exerting her influence and increasing her membership. We can help him best by following him step by step through the maze of confused thought that he has chosen as his path to his eternal destiny.

Simplicity of Faith

'You Catholics have to believe in such a lot of doctrines', says our Plain Blunt friend. 'Now I have a very simple faith,' and with these last words he falls headlong into one of the most popular fallacies of the present time. Simplicity of faith does not depend on how much or how little you believe. In other words, you do not measure simplicity by quantity. What matters is not how much you believe, but rather why you believe it—on whose authority.

Now the Catholic Church teaches that God has spoken to men and has revealed truths about Himself, which, with our own unaided reason we could never have discovered for ourselves. This we call "Revelation", and because it has been given to us by God, we are left with no alternative but to accept it humbly and obediently.

When Our Lord gave His apostles their last instructions to go and preach what He had taught them, He expressly told them that they were to 'teach . . . all things' whatsoever He had commanded; that is to say, it is not left to us to pick and choose what suits our convenience, our particular temperament, or our national characteristics. We are to accept 'all things', remembering continually those solemn, concluding words of our Saviour: 'He that believeth not shall be condemned'.

It is with these words in mind that the Catholic Church stands today, firmly refusing to water down any of the divinely-revealed truths, and remaining adamant in the face of those who seek ever more and more to weaken and dilute the teaching of Christ, in order to fall into line with certain forms of modern thought.

Catholicism and Progress

The Church watches with interest and admiration the advance of scientific discovery, particularly in the field of medicine and the relief of suffering. As the loving mother of a world-wide family, her heart rejoices to see the innumerable charitable works in the world today, the devoted care given to old people, to the sick, to homeless children, and to those who have suffered the inhumanities resulting from world war.

At the same time, there are certain practices advocated in the name of progress which are detrimental to society because they tend to reduce man to the level of animals. Against these the Church takes a firm stand and will continue to do so till the end of time. Euthanasia, or "mercy-killing", for example, gives the right to one human being to "put out of his misery" another who is suffering from an incurable disease. This is a usurpation of a right which belongs to God alone. Likewise, sterilization of the unfit, which allows the mutilation of the human body and denies the natural right of certain individuals to marry. These are no remedies for existing social problems, because they are in direct contradiction to Christian teaching as to the nature of man and his superiority over the animals. It is impossible to remedy one evil by imposing another.

Again, the use of artificial means to prevent the birth of children, far from being any solution to economic problems, is a danger to society and a deliberate abuse of the marital relationship. To those who plead that the world today is no fit place to bring children into, we would ask: Who, then, is to provide a better world in the future? Are we to look forward to a nation of old people?

We must be ready to distinguish between constructive progress of science which will benefit man and assist him to attain the end for which God made him, and that which passes for progress but in actual fact degrades mankind and places him on no higher level than the beasts.

Few of Our Lord's utterances are more applicable to our modern world than these: Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you. Social planning which takes into account the fact of God as the Author of life and the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, will produce a truly Christian society; that which excludes Him can bring nothing but disaster.

So it is that the Catholic Church, firmly established on the rock of Peter, raises her voice above the babel and confusion of our noisy and restless world, and proclaims: 'Thou shalt', and 'Thou shalt not'. Why? Precisely because her Divine Teacher said it before her, and gave her both the authority and the power to hand down, till the end of time, that teaching which was given to the first apostles—the little nucleus of that visible Society we call the Church. It is because we are convinced that the Church has a divine commission to legislate, that we accept without doubt what she teaches. In doing so, we are obeying not man but God.

The Use of Reason

At this juncture it is important to remind our Plain Blunt Man that, contrary to public opinion, the Church of Christ demands of her members that they use their reason rather than their emotions in the study of their faith. There is nothing in her teaching that has ever discouraged the use of reason.

It was, in fact, Martin Luther, who said some unprintable things about this great gift. The Church is mistrustful of sudden emotional revivals and so-called "religious experiences", and certainly never uses them as proofs of any part of her teaching. It is not possible to base an argument on personal feeling; our emotions change too rapidly, according to our surroundings, our state of mind and sometimes of body, and our particular circumstances at the time. But the cold, clear voice of reason persists. Let this be made clear about the Catholic Church: In no circumstances whatever does she "ram down" dogma after dogma, with stern injunctions to ask no questions. This is one of the grossest misrepresentations of the Church that has ever been let loose on the world, and has absolutely no foundation in fact. On the contrary, every Catholic is encouraged, as already stated, according to age and ability, to learn and absorb the teaching of Christ with the deepest thought, so that when occasion arises he can explain it to those outside, many of whom have such totally wrong ideas concerning God's Church. The Catechism, with which every Catholic child begins to learn the facts of his religion, is in itself a reasoned defence of Christian doctrine. Explanatory books without number dealing with every aspect of the Catholic faith can be obtained without difficulty. Add to this the fact that anyone desiring to become a member of the Church is given a course of instruction lasting usually six months, during which time he has every opportunity of asking questions, arguing point after point, and satisfying the demands of his intellect on any point of Catholic doctrine. Alternatively, if for any reason he decides that he would prefer to discontinue his instructions, he is perfectly at liberty to do so. Let it not be said, therefore, that Catholics give a blind assent to their faith, without using that great gift of reason implanted in them by God for the express purpose of exercising it in the pursuit of truth. We must not think, however, that we can approach the question of the true Church

by means of the intellect alone. The convert to Catholicism, whose progress to the Church is often long and indeed sometimes painful, is led by grace throughout the process. His intellect is enlightened in the search for truth; his will is strengthened to continue this work in spite of difficulties he may meet; and so, having eventually reached the stage of intellectual conviction, he requires a further grace of God to prompt his will to make its submission to the truth he has discovered. Whence arises the vital necessity for prayer. We have Our Lord's own words that we have but to ask Him to guide us in this matter, and He will never refuse. Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you.' No one need remain in doubt when we have the powerful weapon of prayer at our disposal. Meanwhile, it is important to realize that while our intellect plays a very important part in our search for truth, the grace of faith and submission can be given to us only by God, who desires that we should ask Him for it. We shall never ask in vain. Many of our noted converts have lingered for years on the threshold of the Church, lacking that divine gift of faith. But when Almighty God has seen fit, in His own time, to hear their prayers and to bestow that gift, they have humbly submitted, not to the voice of man but to God.

Mysteries

There are, of course, in Divine Revelation, mysteries, i.e., truths which are above human understanding but revealed by God, such as that of the Blessed Trinity, Christ's Virgin Birth, the Holy Eucharist, etc., which to our finite minds are unfathomable. It is essential to remember the limitations of the human intellect. We can grasp just so much and no more; how then can we presume to understand the mind of an Infinite God? However, we must not just dismiss these profound mysteries as something beyond our understanding and therefore to be left alone. We have a duty to examine them, to let our minds enter into them as far as is humanly possible. Because we cannot explain a thing fully, it does not follow that we have no need to approach it at all. Our Lord, in giving us the commandment to love Him above all things, bids us love Him with our minds as well as with our hearts. This worship of God with the mind consists in trying to increase our knowledge of Him and of what He has revealed, and does not exclude those mysteries which we can only partly comprehend. Once again prayer will come to our aid. Let us ask God, who gave us our mental gifts, to enlighten our minds and bring us to a deeper knowledge of Him, for to know about God is to love Him more. He has spoken to us through His Church. What response more pleasing to Him can we make than the words of St Peter: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.' When we have humbly said, and sincerely meant, these words, then only can we truthfully claim to have a simple faith.

Do as You would be done by

'There,' says our friend once more, 'is my whole religion in a nutshell. I believe in being kind to my neighbour, and doing him a good turn whenever I can; that is my idea of religion rather than all this dogma and church-going.'

Perhaps the most outstanding of the many flaws in his statement is his assumption that doing good to one's neighbour is an alternative to going to church. One is either a good fellow who helps lame dogs over stiles, or one attends church regularly but has no time for good works. At the root of this transparently false supposition lies that popular and dangerous habit of comparing a "good", (I use the term loosely) citizen who not only keeps the law but is charitably disposed towards his fellow-men without belonging to any religious body, and a known church-goer who, in spite of his attendance at Sunday services (and even week-day ones too!) is discovered perhaps to be self-centred, lazy, or possessed of some other obnoxious habit which makes him the moral inferior of his non-churchgoing friends. Until people cease to make this false and disproportionate comparison, we shall continue to hear the voice of the "practical" man who shouts too loud to hear the repeated call of that human instinct to gather together in the praise and worship of God. It is, of course, undeniably true that many people who are sincere church-goers do not always give the good example that is expected of them. But we must not forget that although the Church of Christ is a Divine Institution by reason of its Divine Founder, it is human in the sense that it is composed of ordinary human beings who can be sinners as well as saints. If membership of the Church depended on an exceptionally high standard of sanctity, how few would be its members! No, we expect the Church to help us to become holy—that is what she is there for. In any case, it is not for us to judge the conduct of those whom we know to be churchgoers. How can we tell what conflict is going on in the souls of these people? They may be making gigantic efforts to overcome their faults, but it

is only when they are, so to speak, "caught out" in some form of wrongful behaviour that they receive attention from those who criticize them. Here is a chance to "do a good turn" to your neighbour! Notice his virtues, look for the good in him, and leave Almighty God to be the judge of his misdeeds.

True Charity is not easy

Another grave misconception in the minds of those whose religion rests solely on the principle of "Do as you would be done by", is that this commandment of Our Lord's to love our neighbour is easy and can be done in the course of our daily lives with the minimum of effort. What a pathetically false conclusion! Make no mistake, it takes nothing less than an abundance of grace and perhaps a lifetime of self-surrender to achieve a real and indiscriminate charity towards our neighbour. Of ourselves we can never acquire it; never, at least, if we are to obey literally the command of Christ and love not only the lovable, but also the unlovable. The practice of Christian charity and forgiveness must extend to those who, in our eyes, have no single redeeming feature in their characters; those undesirable members of society known as "spivs", who make easy money out of the guilelessness of others, the criminal who, for monetary gain will treat with violence aged or otherwise helpless people, the liar, the cheat, the adulterer. These are all God's children for whom He sent His Son to die that they might live. He hates their evil deeds but loves them, and wants their love. Are we ready to forgive these people in our hearts, not by condoning their crime or helping them to avoid just punishment, but by praying for them and wishing them well? The desire to "get our own back" on those who have injured us, however grievously, is a direct contradiction of any claim we may make to be upholders of the virtue of charity. Those who profess that they always help their neighbours, in much the same way as they would say they always take a walk every day, are deceiving themselves if they imagine that without the knowledge and love of God they can quite easily love their fellow-men. We have Our Lord's own word for this, when He tells us that to love God above all things is the greatest and the first commandment, and that the second is 'like to this', that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. True charity consists in seeing the image of God in all our fellow-men, even those who have degraded this likeness and turned their backs on God, and whom we are tempted to treat only with contempt. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Our Lord shows us the virtue of charity in practice, so that we may learn to follow Him the hard way. Christianity was never meant to be easy; very much the contrary; we are told to "take up our cross daily" if we want to experience the ultimate joy of eternal union with God. But the taking up of our cross need not mean a hopeless and gloomy pilgrimage if we use the means that God has given us for sustenance on the journey, and keep our eyes fixed on the everlasting goal for which each one of us was created. St Paul's encouraging words should be always before us: I can do all things in Him who strengtheneth me.'

Why bother with all this Dogma?

It has become the custom to regard the very word 'dogma' with suspicion, rather as if it suggested dry and dusty books full of interminable facts about religion, which only the intellectual man or woman can grasp. The Plain Blunt Man, as we have seen, can do without dogma, for, as he naively proclaims, although he believes in the teaching of Christ, he has no use for what he calls "organized religion". He is, in other words, the founder of his own faith, and needs no one to tell him what to do. Such a man is deserving of the deepest pity and human understanding, for he has missed the whole meaning of Our Lord's three years of ministry on earth. Were he to study the Gospels page by page, carefully and slowly, digesting every word, and with a mind empty of preconceived ideas, he could not but be struck by the fact that throughout all the writings of the evangelists, there is a wealth of divine dogma, precious words from the lips of our Saviour Himself. What else but dogma do we learn from the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, the miracles, the Passion and Crucifixion of Our Lord, His Resurrection from the dead and His Ascension into Heaven? All these events and the teaching that surrounds them are not merely a sort of lofty idealism, all very admirable but rather above our heads; still less are they pretty stories to tell the children. Within the pages of the New Testament lies God's plan for mankind—His "organized religion" which our Plain Blunt friend finds so hard to accept. It is impossible here to set out in detail the lessons we are to learn, the means we are to employ, and the reward which will be ours if we obey humbly the Divine Teacher. But one thing stands out clearly in the pages of Holy Scripture. There is no question of Our Lord pleading for our support; He commands our obedience and teaches dogmatically, leaving

no room for doubt or the arrogant assertion of our personal opinion. He tells us to pray without ceasing, not to worry unduly about our bodily needs but to seek first the Kingdom of God. He warns us to be ready for death, for the Son of Man will come like a thief in the night'. He places on us the obligation of loving our enemies, and bids us forgive and pray for those who persecute and calumniate us. He gives us the promise of His own Flesh and Blood in Holy Communion, with the solemn pronouncement that 'Unless you eat of the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you shall not have life in you.' These are only a very few examples of that Christian dogma by which Christ commands us to live. And finally, when about to leave His disciples, He commits to them the authority and the power to continue His work: Go ye and teach all nations'; He that heareth you heareth Me, and he that despiseth you despiseth Me'; 'As the Father hath sent Me I also send you'; 'Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound also in Heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven'. "Binding and loosing"—where in the Scriptures is there a clearer foretelling of organized religion? And how can Our Lord's promise 'Behold I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world' be fulfilled unless this power is transmitted down the ages? If, in the very beginning of this visible Society, with only twelve men as its nucleus, Our Lord saw fit to choose one of them to be its head on earth, how much more necessary is it in our own day, to have a living voice, an authority, when the Catholic Church, spread all over the world, numbers something like 400,000,000 souls? To suppose that Christ left His Church to run itself, and its members to choose their own doctrine, is stretching the imagination too far. Dogma, provided it has the authority of God, cannot be a burden or a thing degrading to the intelligence, but is rather a guiding light, a signpost, a pillar of truth on which to lean, and a certain guarantee that we are walking in the footsteps of Him who spake as never man spake.

It's all a Personal Matter

Is it? Does our Plain Blunt Man really mean to say that, having accepted the fact of God's existence, it is all a personal matter how we serve Him, or even whether we serve Him at all? The trouble with so many people today is that, although they are quite willing, if asked, to assert that God exists, for them the matter ends there. Actually, their belief in God takes the form of a vague assent, or a state of "not disbelieving" in Him, rather than a reasoned conviction that without God there is no satisfactory explanation of the Universe and Man. Still less are such people aware that God's existence presupposes a duty on all His creatures to serve Him because they owe their very lives to Him; every breath they draw to keep them in existence at all is dependent upon the Will of the God Who made them. Seeing things in this light, is it not foolish in the extreme to neglect to find out what directions God has given us as to how we are to conduct our existence on earth? Surely, having created man as the highest form of earthly life, God wishes that we shall use our mental gifts to know something about Him, on whom we are utterly dependent for everything we possess, both spiritual and material. It is irresponsible to talk about "regulating our own life as we please", and "doing things our own way". It is not "our" life, but God's; we are told by Him to conduct it not in "our" way, but in His. There is nothing to be gained and everything to lose in allowing intellectual pride to blind our eyes to the Supreme Intellect of our Creator, whom we are one day to meet face to face.

In the previous sections of this pamphlet I have endeavoured to show something of what God demands of men, and of the Institution that He founded to help us to know Him and obey what He commands. That He set up a Church on earth is abundantly clear in the pages of Holy Scripture. That He left it to each one's choice whether to belong to it or not, is not merely a debatable point; it is completely false. Therefore, anyone who deliberately rejects any part of the religion taught by Jesus Christ, has no claim to be a Christian at all, let alone a "perfectly good" one, as our friend suggests.

In passing, it is worthwhile to comment that had the twelve Apostles acted on the assumption that religion was entirely a "personal matter", the Gospel of Christ would never have been preached. Why suffer persecution and death for teaching Christianity if it is something to be left to the personal taste of each individual, and a matter of complete indifference to Almighty God whether we accept it or not? Much better "live and let live", certainly much more comfortable and convenient. But the Twelve who had been Our Lord's constant companions for three years had not, in spite of their human weaknesses, failed to grasp that their Master not only had a very real message to give, but that He intended that it should be brought to all the world—even the uttermost parts of the earth'.

We are all acquainted with the Hyde Park orator, the tireless bearer of religious tracts from door to door, and the well-meaning lecturer who sincerely believes he has a message to give the world, and spares no effort in doing so. Yet in many cases we are inclined to treat these people with a sort of pitying contempt. The Hyde Park orator is a "tub-thumper"; the tract-distributor, particularly when he rings our bell and forces us to answer the door, is written off as something of a nuisance who ought to mind his own business, while the lecturer is generally the object of, at first, a mild curiosity, and is then forgotten when something more interesting in the way of entertainment presents itself. Perhaps the only comment drawn from the average man or woman is that anyway it's a free country, so why shouldn't these people make an exhibition of themselves if they want to? But do we ever stop to think that, however misguided they may be, and however contradictory their different approaches to religion, at least they believe in making known what they hold to be true, precisely because they do not think it is a personal matter?

Now there is no suggestion here that every Christian is expected to go round proclaiming his faith either in public places or in the drawing-rooms of his friends. Certainly not. The important thing is to "live" one's religion, to be so continually conscious of it that it is the hall mark of all one's actions, not in an ostentatious manner, or in order to elicit the admiration of others, but because we believe that we, as Christians have a Gospel to preach which is none of our own making, but a precious inheritance which we have received from Christ Himself. There are, however, occasions when we may be drawn into a discussion about religion, and often asked questions about the nature of our belief. Here is the supreme test. Either we shall have nothing to contribute except a vague assertion that of course there must be a God, but we have never really thought about whether He has revealed anything to us, or we shall be ready to explain our faith, firmly and definitely, without hurt to anyone's feelings, but with a certainty that shows we have understood the Divine purpose of the Incarnation of the Son of God.

Summary

In the hope that our Plain Blunt Man will one day find his way from darkness to light, a short summary of the foregoing points may be of help.

(1) Simplicity of faith is determined by our readiness to accept what God has revealed, on His own word. Our faith is not made simple by throwing over one doctrine after another, till we have almost completely divested Christianity of the supernatural element, in order to suit our religion to the ever-changing demands of public opinion. Divine truth is eternal and unchanging.

(2) In order to love our neighbour, it is necessary first to know and to love God, the Author of life and the Giver of all our gifts, in order that we may recognize, even in the least worthy of His children, someone who is the object of undying love, and for whom Christ shed His Blood. To do this is not easy; it may mean a great deal of hardship, criticism by our friends, and loss of social standing. But the grace to carry out this commandment is ours for the asking.

(3) Dogma is the teaching of Christ, handed down through the ages by His Church, which has been given the authority and the power to teach in Christ's Name. If you reject dogma, you reject Christianity.

(4) Our belief in all that Christ taught and has empowered His Church to teach, is by no means a matter of personal choice, but is a solemn obligation on each one of us. If we are aware, however vaguely, that we have not found out exactly what, and through what medium, Christ has taught us, we are bound in conscience to do so at whatever cost to ourselves. No one is justified in attaching himself to any particular religious body because it is a family tradition, or a mark of respectability, or because he enjoys the services or the social life connected with it. There is only one reason why a Catholic gives his allegiance to his Church—because he knows it is true. Wilful negligence in seeking the truth will have to be accounted for when we face the Majesty of an infinitely loving but also infinitely just God.

Religion and the Dying

Here the Plain Blunt Man may well ask what happens to a person who realizes the need for religion only when he is in his last illness, and perhaps at the point of death. He cannot undertake a course of instruction; probably he has hardly enough strength even to formulate a prayer. What chance has he?

This is a reasonable question and demands an answer. The mercy of God knows no bounds. He cannot be outdone

in generosity. Who can know better than He, the anguish of approaching death? In such a case, all that is necessary is that the sick person should, in his heart, be sorry for his sins because they are an offence against the infinitely good God; and he should purpose to amend, given another opportunity. He may be beyond speech, but God can read his heart, and at once the Divine Mercy floods his soul. The lesson of the repentant thief on Calvary should be the greatest consolation to all who in their lives have neglected God but turn to Him in their last hours.

Many a Catholic priest, called to the bedside of a dying person, has experienced the joy of receiving him into the Catholic Church. Within minutes of passing into eternity, this happy soul can be united in the one, true Fold of which Jesus Christ is the Shepherd.

Some Thoughts on Prayer

The Catholic Catechism tells us that prayer is the raising up of the mind and heart to God.' It is the first necessity of our spiritual life. We can pray at any time of the day, without even ceasing our occupation. To turn our minds to Almighty God, even for a few seconds—to thank Him for His favours to us—to ask forgiveness for our wrongdoing—to beg His guidance in any particular difficulty—all this is to pray as surely as if we were on our knees in church. Prayer is not a laborious task suited only to those who have plenty of spare time. It is everyone's way of "keeping in touch" with God. Surely it is the very least that we owe Him, seeing that everything we possess is His gift. We hear much about "give and take" in various walks of life. Are we going to take all from God and give Him nothing? What better way is there of beginning and ending our day than by setting apart a few minutes for talking to our loving Creator, asking His blessing on our day and His protection while we sleep? He does not demand that our prayers should be particularly long or rigidly formal. What He does ask is that, in the rush and turmoil of our busy lives, we should sometimes turn our thoughts to Him who loves us individually, with a love of which no man is capable.
