

THE NATURE AND VALUE OF APOLOGETICS

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A. Knowledge and the Sources of Knowledge

1. **We possess all our knowledge in the form of judgments.** —We know something only when we state, at least mentally, that two ideas or concepts, one of which is called the subject, the other the predicate, agree with each other, or do not agree with each other. If I say: "Shakespeare is a dramatist," I assert the agreement of the two concepts "Shakespeare" and "dramatist." If I say: "Men are not angels," I assert the disagreement of the two concepts "men" and "angels."

2. **If our judgment is in harmony with reality, it is a true judgment,** as "Heat expands iron"; if it is not in harmony with reality, it is a false judgment, as "A circle is not round." If our judgments are uttered without fear of error, they are *certain* if they are uttered with fear of error, they are *uncertain*, and therefore mere *opinions*. "Twice two is four," is a certain judgment; "Tomorrow will be rainy," is nothing but an opinion.

3. **Before making a judgment we must have a reason for doing so.**—We get our reasons for forming our judgments from what are called the sources of knowledge. There are of various kinds:

a) Some truths are in themselves so evident as to be clearly understood by all who have the use of reason, as soon as they are put in words. Such truths are called *self-evident*, because they require no demonstration. For example, when once we understand the meaning of the terms, we cannot fail to grasp that "the whole is greater than its part," or that "the radii of a circle are equal," or that "everything which begins to exist must have been brought into existence by something distinct from itself," or that "what is, is, and cannot at the same time not be."

b) From these self-evident and necessary truths another class of truths is drawn by a *process of reasoning*, that is, not by comparing two concepts directly with each other, but by comparing each with a third, on the principle that two things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other.

c) Other things we know to be true from the evidence of our *senses*. We can trust our senses unhesitatingly if the sense we are using, e.g., sight or hearing, is in a normal condition and properly applied to the object.

d) Lastly, there are many things which we do not know of ourselves, but which we accept on the *authority* of other people. If our belief rests on the testimony of man, who can err, it is *human faith*; if it rests on the testimony of God, who cannot err, it is *Divine Faith*.

B. Faith and Its justification

1. **To have Divine Faith** means to hold firmly and without doubting, all that God has revealed and, through His Church, proposes for our belief. The truths of revelation are the *Object* of, Faith; the authority of God, implying infallibility in knowledge, and truth in utterance, is the *Motive* of faith, the reason why we believe what God has revealed. The *Church* is the ordinary and infallible means by which we know the truths revealed by God.

Our reason left to itself gives assent only to such judgments as are evidently true. Hence, since the Articles of Faith are not evident, the *will* plays a very important part in the making of an *Act of Faith*. **Only he can believe who is willing to believe.** The will gives assent to the word of God because it sees in God its highest good. With Simon Peter it says: "Thou hast the words of eternal life" (John 6,69). In giving its assent, the will is elevated and strengthened by the *grace of God*. By grace, our Faith, becomes *supernatural*; by the assent of the will, it becomes a *free, moral*, and, therefore, *meritorious act*.

2. **Our Faith is not an affair of sentiment**, a leap in the dark, or an "abdication of our reason"; on the contrary, it is a "seeing faith," a "reasonable service." Every intelligent Catholic should be in a position to justify his Faith at the bar of his reason and his conscience. He must, in other words, be able to form the following judgments:

- a) **I may and can** believe these truths proposed for my belief, because God has revealed them;
- b) **I must** believe these truths, because God is my supreme Lord and my only salvation.

The first of these judgments, which is called the *judgement of credibility (judicium credibilitatis)* rests on three other judgments:

1. **There is a God** who can neither deceive nor be deceived.
2. **This God has revealed Himself** to us in the Old Testament through the Patriarchs and the Prophets, in the New Testament through Christ and the Apostles.
3. **Christ founded a Church** which He endowed with infallibility for the safeguarding and propagation of Divine Revelation.

These three judgments are called motives of credibility (*motiva credibilitatis*). The first is philosophical, the other two are historical. In the case of the second, viz., that God has revealed Himself to us, it is sufficient to prove that **Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the instrument of Divine Revelation**. He guarantees for us the revelations made in the Old Testament; and by His teaching and the sending of the Holy Ghost on the Apostles, He also guarantees the revelations made through the Apostles.

3. **The Mysteries of our Faith** cannot be proved from reason and history, because they are beyond reason and therefore incomprehensible.

"The divine mysteries," says the Council of the Vatican, "by their own nature so far transcend the created intelligence that, even when delivered by Revelation and received by Faith, they remain covered with a veil of Faith itself, and shrouded in a certain degree of darkness, so long as we are pilgrims in this mortal life, not yet with God."
Vatican Council I (1870)

In regard to these mysteries we must content ourselves with proving that they are not contrary to reason and that they possess an inestimable value for our souls. It is different with the three truths on which the reasonableness of our Faith rests. The existence of God, the Divinity of Christ, and the divine institution of the Church can be proved by philosophical and historical arguments.

C. Nature and Division of Apologetics

The science which proves the reasonableness of the Catholic Faith is called **Apologetics**, from the Greek word *apologia*, "defense," "justification." "Be ready always," says St. Peter, "to *satisfy* everyone that asketh you a reason of that hope which is in you" (I Pet. 3,15).

1. **Apologetics answers three questions.**

1. Why must we worship God?
2. Why must we be Christians?
3. Why must we be Catholics?

2. **In our defense of our Faith we have three classes of opponents to deal with.--**

1. **Atheists, Pantheists, and Materialists**, who deny the existence of a Living, Personal God; i.e. of a Being endowed with intelligence and free will, the First Cause of all things distinct from himself.
2. **Jews, Mohammedans, Deists (Rationalists), and Indifferentists**, who deny the divine origin of the Christian Religion.
3. **Heretics** of various kinds, who deny one or more articles of the Catholic Faith.

D. The Value of Apologetics

1. **Apologetics cannot produce supernatural Faith.**—Faith is a gift of God. In Baptism God even "gives us the eyes with which to see Him." Besides, Apologetics appeals entirely to the

intellect, whereas Faith is a matter both of the intellect and the will. "Faith," says St. Thomas, "*is an act of the understanding* adhering to Divine Truth *by command of the will* moved by the grace of God."

2. **Apologetics does not claim to be able to prove the foundations of Faith with mathematical certainty.**—The proposition "The whole is greater than its part" forces conviction on us because the contrary proposition is unthinkable. But the proposition "Jesus of Nazareth arose from the dead" is not evident in the same way. It is an

historical statement, the contrary of which is not impossible or unthinkable. The highest kind of certainty we can have in regard to it is that which *excludes all reasonable doubt*. Our proofs are conclusive, but not coercive. They carry conviction to those who consider them with open minds, but not to those who are blinded by passion or prejudice.

"Mathematical propositions," says the French philosopher Malebranche, "are not attacked simply because the human passions are not interested in attacking them. But if the Pythagorean proposition imposed any moral obligation, it would certainly be attacked. If some Academy of Science were to set up the Sixth and Seventh Commandments as scientific propositions, the validity of these propositions would immediately be called in question by all the adulterers and thieves in the world."

3. **The real function of Apologetics is twofold.**—(a) to satisfy the intellect of the *honest inquirer*, and, with the aid of grace, to awaken in him the *pius credulitatis affectus*—the pious longing for the Faith; (b) to strengthen in the *believer* the resolve never to barter his holy Faith for the shallow theories of a false philosophy or the mess of pottage of a false morality.

In a letter dated January 6, 1815, Volta, the famous scientist, declares: "I have always believed and still believe the holy Catholic Faith to be the one true and infallible religion. In this Faith I recognize a pure gift of God, a supernatural grace. But I have not neglected those human means which confirm belief and overthrow such doubts as may arise to tempt me. I have given attentive study to the foundations of my Faith. I have read in the works both of defenders and assailants of the Faith arguments for and against it, and have derived thence arguments in its favor which render it most acceptable even to the purely natural reason and prove it to be such that any mind unperverted by sin and passion, any healthy and generous mind, cannot but accept and love it" (Kneller, Christianity and the Representatives of Modern Science, St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., p. 116).

4. **In order to profit by the study of Apologetics**, we must approach it in the right spirit—the *spirit of humility*; for if there is a God, the attitude of our soul towards Him must necessarily be the humble petition: "Lord, that I may see." And we must purge our hearts from the dominion of the passions, for only the pure of heart shall see God—in this life as well as in the next.

5. **The student of Apologetics** should heed the admonition of St. Augustine: "We must not want to solve all the difficulties against the Faith before we believe, in order that our life may not come to an end without faith. Simple faith gives us an ever deeper understanding of the things of faith. By faith we subject ourselves to God. If we subject ourselves to God, we shall live right; if we live right, our heart becomes pure; and if our heart is pure, we shall see the truth of what we believe."

Supplementary Reading: Faith Is a Gift of God

Faith is a gift of God, and not a mere act of our own, which we are free to exert when we will. It is quite distinct from an exercise of reason, though it follows upon it. I may feel the force of an argument for the divine origin of the Church; I may see that I ought to believe; and yet I may be unable to believe. . . . Faith is not a mere conviction in reason, it is a firm assent, it is a clear certainty greater than any other certainty; and this is wrought in the mind by the grace of God, and by it alone. As men may be convinced, and not act according to their conviction, so may they be convinced, and not believe according to their conviction. . . . In a word, the arguments for religion do not compel anyone to believe, just as arguments for good conduct do not compel anyone to obey. Obedience is the consequence of willing to obey, and faith is the consequence of willing to believe; we may see what is right, whether in matters of faith or obedience, of ourselves, but we cannot will what is right without the grace of God.

—NEWMAN, Discourses to Mixed Congregations, p. 224.

The Study of the Science of Apologetics Necessary Especially in Our Day.

Though the existence of God is a truth knowable, and easily knowable, by the light of reason, there are many that

call that truth in question. Professed Agnostics are perhaps more numerous now than they have ever been before. How to account for this increase in Agnosticism, who can tell? The advances made in physical science can give no clue to it.... But whatever the reason may be, Agnosticism is apparently on the increase. It is difficult to avoid contact with Agnostics. They are to be met with in every rank of life. Some of them are aggressive and wish to meet us in discussion. Others profess a wish to believe, and invite us to remove their difficulties. If we ought to be prepared to justify the faith that is in us, much more ought we to be prepared to justify that conviction of God's existence, which is presupposed by all our faith. We ought to be able to defend this conviction against any that might choose to assail it; and still more ought we to be able to extend a helping hand to such as might come to us in the spirit of honest inquiry. We say in a spirit of honest inquiry, for it may very well be that one who has through no fault of his lost belief in God, is now honestly endeavoring to find his way back to the truth.

—GILDER, Introduction to HAMMERSTEIN, Foundations of Faith, St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., p. ix.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY AND REVIEW

- t. In what form do we possess all our knowledge?
2. When are our judgments true? false? certain? uncertain?
3. What is meant by the sources of knowledge?
4. What is meant by self-evident truths? Give examples.
5. How do we acquire knowledge of truths which are not self-evident?
6. When are our senses infallible sources of truth?
7. What is the difference between human and divine faith?
8. Define divine faith. What is its motive? its object?
9. What part does the will play in the act of faith?
10. Is faith an abdication of reason? Why not?
11. What is meant by the judgment of credibility? On what other judgments does it rest? What are these called?
12. What is our position in regard to mysteries?
13. Define Apologetics. What three questions does it answer?
14. Who are the opponents of the Catholic Apologist?
15. What kind of certainty can we attain in regard to the foundations of our faith?
16. What is the real function of Apologetics?
17. Why should we study Apologetics in the spirit of humility?
18. Write a brief paragraph on each of the following: Agnostic, St. Thomas Aquinas, Vatican Council, Malebranche, Volta, St. Augustine. (Consult the New Catholic Dictionary or the Catholic Encyclopedia.)
