

The Catholic That Was... And Is No More

By Archbishop Alban Goodier, S.J.

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1. Introduction.

No one who has once realised what it is to be a Catholic can feel anything but sadness for one who has lost the Catholic faith, who once was a Catholic and is now a Catholic no more, no matter what may have been the reason.

It is sad enough to know so many who, through no fault of their own, have not the Catholic faith; whose forefathers lost it for them, and deprived them of their inheritance; who do not know, and have never known, all that it means.

But one who has once known it and has lost it, who has been argued or cajoled out of it, whose life has led him to drop it, who has been careless and let it go, who has surrendered it for something else, — those who know and love such a one, know also that he has lost, thrown away, something for which nothing else can compensate, something more dear than life itself.

Let, then, such a one not be surprised if those who love him are troubled and sad about him; they cannot help it. They long to give him back what he has lost; they spare no pains that he may be as he was before; they look on that reward as worth all the labour and suffering it may entail.

2. The Catholic no more.

Who are they, and how has it all come about?

First, there are the children:

who have never learnt to appreciate the value or beauty of their inheritance;
or whose parents have set them a sorry example and so spoilt them;
or who have learnt their religion as a schoolroom lesson only and it has withered;
or who have never seen that it mattered much one way or the other.

Second, there are young boys and girls:

who have been deluded by the prospect of a happy and free life before them; or who have lived among godless companions, and through shame, through human respect, through banter, through a little coaxing, through temptation, perhaps through sin, have become as they; or who have been carried away by their surroundings, and the faith of their childhood has been ignored or forgotten, and finally rejected.

Third, there are young men and women:

whose study and reading, it may be, in the days when they were not yet mature, nor able to form a proper judgment, has led them to wonder, to doubt, at last to be dissatisfied and turn away; or who have come under some influence stronger than themselves, and they have surrendered;

some unbelieving teacher or friend, whose arguments they could not answer;
some man or woman whom they have loved, and who has made them sacrifice their faith for that love;
some companion who has led them on, till they have lost the reality for the shadow;
or who have found the practice of the faith a hindrance to their ambition in life; to promotion, to association with those who would help them, to the use of such means as their faith will not allow.

Fourth, there are the grown-ups:

who are married, and who find the laws of their faith concerning married life a burden;
or who, having once, slipped away, or having been away so long, are unable to bring themselves back, and prefer to remain where they are;
or who have been antagonised by some opposition, by some scandal, by some regulation, which they have resented.

Fifth, and last, among all these classes, among young and old, there are those:

whom, in a proud and passionate moment, self-will has mastered, and they have said: "I will not serve";
or whom this world with its false fascination has mastered, and they have said: "I will have here my 'reward', yes";
or whom sin and passion have conquered, and they hardened conscience and said: "I will be free, I will have my own way, I will do my own pleasure."

3. The Defence.

Once the step has been taken, it is easy to find reasons to defend it, but the reasons given are seldom those which have brought it about; to say, for instance,

that to have any religion, or not to have it, makes very little difference in practice;
that one knows many who have no religion, yet are far better than many who have;
that one knows many religious people who are among the most uncharitable, the most unscrupulous, even the most wicked, of all their acquaintance.

It is easy, again, to tell oneself,

that if one has lost the faith the fault has not been one's own;
or that one has got on very well without it, and therefore it cannot be necessary;
or that one does not see why one should have to keep all these rules and regulations, while others do not and yet are quite sufficiently good.

It is easy to say,

that religion is all very well for good people, or for those who live in good and Catholic surroundings, or for those who have strong and independent characters; but as for them, they are just ordinary, they must conform to those with whom they live, they must be like those amongst whom, after all, God has placed them;

that there are much better men than their priests, more educated, more learned, more scientific, deeper thinkers, et cetera,

who have no use for religion, who say it is not necessary; that it is mostly superstition, which the present generation has outgrown; that it is a bondage, a hindrance to liberty and progress;

that God cannot have made life practically impossible; by giving us passions which we cannot conquer yet may not indulge; by putting us in intolerable positions unless we disobey His laws; by making it so hard to serve Him under the conditions in which we have been placed.

It is easy, finally, to be defiant and say,

that one's religion is one's own affair, and one is not going to be dictated to by anybody;

that all that is said about the next world, eternal punishment and eternal reward, may or may not be true, and one will run the risk;

that God, if He is what Catholics say He is, is forgiving and merciful, and will show mercy to one who does not know any better;

that at any rate there is plenty of time, and one can think about these things later; meanwhile one has one's own life to live, and must get out of it as much as one can.

4. The Misjudgment.

Such as these are the arguments, by which those who were once Catholics and are Catholics no more, will, if they ask themselves, usually defend their having given up. Of course, there are some who never think at all about it, but it may be doubted whether their number is great. They have just lapsed and there they are, until someone or something wakes them up to what they have lost. Usually these find it easier to come back, from the simple fact that they have never really gone away; their minds have never been warped.

There are others, at the opposite extreme, who positively refuse to think about it; right or wrong, they have made up their minds to remain as they are and will not change. These are hardest to win back; obstinacy is hard to overcome, and obstinacy leads to hatred. Those who crucified Our Lord were of this kind; the Pharisees made up their minds to refuse Him, nothing would convince them, they went on to the grossest cruelty and injustice, all the more because they knew in their hearts that they were wrong. And yet even for such as these Jesus prayed:

“Father, forgive them, for they do not realise what they do!”

But setting these two extremes aside, is there anything behind the arguments here used?

First of all, it is clear that those who speak like this, and would gladly believe what they say, have no idea of what it is they have thrown aside, which is so manifest to us. Their faith is certainly no longer for them, what once, perhaps, it was, “the treasure of great price,” worth the sacrifice of everything else in the world.

They do not see that even in this life it is more valuable than anything else:

that it gives them principles, and standards, and guidance, as to what is right and what is wrong, as to what is for the best and what is not, as to true happiness and false, which no other guidance can give them;

that it gives them the means to making the best of themselves and their lives, the means to their own perfection, above every other guide;

that it brings security, contentment, peace of mind, no matter what may be the trouble one may have to face.

They do not see:

that to be what God wants them to be is a better and nobler thing than to be what man wants them to be, or even than what they want to be themselves;

that the love of God is better than the love of man, and that to do a thing for the love of God is better than to do it for the love of man, still more than to do it for their own satisfaction;

that the practice of the faith is not a matter of obeying rules and regulations; it is obeying the dictates of One,

who loves us with an everlasting love, who would have us love Him in return, who has nothing at heart but our good, who knows, with infinite knowledge and wisdom, what is good for us;

who binds us to Himself by His laws: and these laws are bound up in this: "You shall love!"

who has said: "If you love me, keep my commandments";

who has said: "If any man love me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and will make our abode with him."

They do not see,

that freedom does not mean, and never could mean, doing exactly as we like;

that freedom of this kind, freedom unrestrained, is licence; and licence in the end is self-degradation, and disillusionment, and misery, and ruin;

that all true freedom requires the observance of some law, and that all law requires a sanction;

that God is indeed infinitely merciful, but also He is infinitely just; infinitely loving, but also infinitely true;

that to disobey God, to set Him aside, to make Him of no account, is deliberately to reject His mercy, as well as to challenge His justice; to insult His love, as well as to defy His truth.

But surely they see, for it is only common sense, it is the lesson of experience, it is written on the lives of hundreds of so-called successful people,

that nothing in this world can really satisfy a man, however much he may try, however much he may pretend to himself that he is content;

that the heart of man always longs for something more, and only by forcing it to be content can it be silenced;

that it will never be satisfied till it comes to God. This is what Saint Augustine discovered, after years of searching, of pleasure, of success: "You have made us, O Lord, for Yourself, and our hearts shall find no rest till they rest in You!"

This is true of any thinking man; how much more of any man who believes wholly in God! Of any man who has faith, or who has once had it and thrown it away! For once one has seen, it can never again be as if one had not seen; a man who has known light and has gone blind is more to be pitied than one who has been born sightless. Such a man says:

That his present condition does not trouble him but is it not because he thinks only of the present, and he will not let himself think too far?

That his conscience does not worry him; but is not that because he will not let it speak? Because he is determined that it shall not be roused?

5. An Example.

How many there are who envy Catholics their faith, who see that they have what they themselves have not, and would give anything to gain it!

It was on the battlefield; some officers were sitting round a fire in a tent after dark. There was to be a big engagement next day, and they knew very well that some at least among them would not be alive the night following. One of them, as he smoked his cigarette, carelessly asked the question: "What then?" There was a pause; one broke it.

"I don't know. I have been brought up with no religion. I must die as I have lived. I must take my chance."

Another spoke. He said he believed in God, but did not know what else. If he were to die, he trusted all would go well.

A third was asked what he had to say. "I was brought up a Roman Catholic, but I have given that up long ago."

Immediately the first who had spoken stood up, and said with indignation:

"Then if there is a hell you deserve to go there. If I had been brought up with any faith at all, I would never have thrown it away."

He strode out of the tent. Presently the ex-Catholic followed him. He knew very well what his companions were thinking of him, and he could endure it no longer. Before an hour was over, he was in the chaplain's hut, and made his peace with God. The next day both of those officers were killed.

So mercifully does God deal with those who will hear His voice; He will use the strangest means to win them back.

6. Remonstrance.

There are some who are hard, and whom nothing will bend. To speak to them about the surrender they have made merely irritates them.

For these one can only wait and pray; some day, please God, they will know. If the faith has once been there, with prayer it can be re-awakened, above all if they will pray themselves.

But there are others, by far the majority, who know very well what they have lost, however much they try to make the best of it. For these we are most sorry; deep within they are the most unhappy people in the world.

They know it, and yet they remain where they are. They say:

"I cannot change now.

"I have gone too far.

"I cannot draw back.

"I cannot get myself free.

"I cannot do without these things, as Saint Augustine said to himself when he awoke and tried to put himself right.

"I cannot hope to do better.

"I have made my choice and must abide by it.

"I cannot face the ordeal.

“Confession is impossible.

“To change before others is impossible: what will they say?

“To revive the old practice of the faith is impossible.

“At least I cannot do it now.

“Perhaps I shall do it later.

“At least I can do it at the end.”

Such a one forgets with whom he is dealing. He forgets,

the God who loves with an everlasting love,

who sent His Son into the world that it might be saved through Him,

who was the Friend of sinners,

who laid down His life for sinners,

who said: Come to me all you that labour and are burdened and I will refresh you,

who said: Yet you will not come to me that you may have life,

who prayed for His enemies: Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,

who said to one who repented, though his sign of repentance was no more than an appeal: Amen, I say to you, this day you shall be with Me in paradise.

7. The Further Reason.

For the Catholic that was, and is no more, we have said that we are sad, because he does not realise what he has thrown away.

He has thrown away Jesus Christ, and all that name means:

The friendship of Him who is above all men the greatest, the most lovable, the most inspiring;

The friendship of Him who has given up His all, who has done so much, who has suffered so much, to prove His love;

The friendship of Him whose will is to draw the whole world to Himself and so save it from itself;

The friendship of Him who is the Light of the world, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life;

The friendship of Him in whose name alone this world, and all men in it, can be saved from their own corruption;

The friendship of Him who has asked that men should help Him in the conquest, in the saving of the world;

The friendship of Him who has proved His saving influence in the history of the world since He came;

The friendship of Him who is with the world still, in the world still, saving it in spite of itself;

The friendship of Him who has said: He who is not with me is against me, and he that gathers not with me scatters;

The friendship of Him who has said: Where there are two or three gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them;

The friendship of Him who has said: Behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world;

The friendship of Him who has founded His Church, the Catholic Church, that in it the world may come together and be one;

The friendship of Him who abides with us in the Blessed Sacrament, our comrade, our food, our support;

The friendship of Him who alone is worthy of all a man's love, whose love alone is above every other reward;

The friendship of Him who has asked: Father, I will that where I am they also may be.

8. The Following of Christ.

"I am the light of the world. He that follows me walks not in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

Indeed, it is true; if we choose to look, we can see it about us every day, in the lives of men, women, and even children, in the lives even of nations.

Faith in Jesus Christ, love of Jesus Christ, standing with Jesus Christ, make other things a trifle: poverty becomes an honour, service a delight, suffering a glory, joy puts on a new significance and meaning, even heroic things become easy and happy.

For the sake of Jesus Christ many give up everything, yet are they rich enough;

For the sake of Jesus Christ many live and labour, and die; yet is their death absorbed in victory;

For the sake of Jesus Christ many devote themselves wholly to the good of others: They live, no not they, but Christ lives in them.

These are the great ones of the world; it is to such as these that we owe almost all the real good this world possesses,

not money, it may be, but love, and selflessness, and sacrifice,

not pleasure, in the passing sense, but peace, and happiness which nothing can destroy;

not power, unless it be the power which consists mainly in service.

These are the saints, the fruit of faith and love; and it is in their company I may live, like to them I may grow, by the same faith and love.

Faith, and love, and following of Jesus Christ, make of a man the best that can be made, and nothing else will do it.

Faith, and love, and following of Jesus Christ, make a man able to help his fellowmen as nothing else can make him.

Faith, and love, and following of Jesus Christ, give a man satisfaction, and joy in life, which nothing in the world can give:

"Peace which the world cannot give, I give unto you." — "You shall have joy, and your joy no man shall take from you."

All this is in the Catholic's possession; the Catholic that was, and is no more, has thrown it away, and for what?

9. An Example.

Some little children in the poorest quarter of one of our great cities had been prepared for their first communion. They were accustomed to live in hard poverty; usually they had no shoes on their feet. For the occasion, a generous benefactor had provided all the little group with shoes and stockings. They came to Mass in their glory; but just before the moment came to go to the altar, one small boy

remembered how poor as a child had been the Lord whom he was about to receive. He could not receive Him as he was. He sat down on the bench and took off his new shoes and stockings. The others saw what he was doing and at once understood. They followed his example, they took off their shoes and stockings, and all went together to Communion barefoot.

This is what the love of Jesus Christ will make of us. So can faith and love of Jesus Christ turn sorrow into joy, shame into glory, failure into triumph, bringing down the golden light upon the greatest misery, giving it a meaning and making it worthwhile, when nothing else in the world can do anything.

10. God and Suffering.

But why, if God is good, and if He so loves mankind, does He send to men so much suffering? Why, especially, does He make the innocent suffer in the way they do?

No one knows altogether the inscrutable designs of God; His ways are not our ways. But this we do know, that God does and allows nothing without a purpose; that there is always good, and our good, at the end of everything that He permits; that some day we shall understand, and then we shall thank Him for everything He has permitted us to suffer.

How often do we hear one who has suffered say when it is over that he is glad that he has had to go through it, and would not have it otherwise for anything?

Suffering is the making of a man; for the man who has never suffered anything we are sorry; Suffering brings out the best that is in him; without suffering there could be no bravery, no heroism, and but little love;

Suffering is the most beautiful thing in the world; our artists and our poets make it their constant theme, our theatres are filled with people who come to see examples of suffering nobly borne;

Suffering teaches us what nothing else can teach us;

Suffering softens us, perfects our character, as can nothing else;

Suffering makes us like to Jesus Christ our Lord;

Suffering lets us go shares with Christ our Lord:

“Making up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ.”

Suffering proves a man’s love: love likes to be tested: that is why the saints wanted to suffer.

11. An Example.

But not only the saints, unless we include among them countless heroic sufferers of whom men know nothing.

A box-tender of the Catholic Truth Society was tidying her pamphlet display-case at the back of a church, when a shy woman came up and began to talk to her. She said she was not a Catholic, but that she came to the church because of the peace she said she found there. Evidently a very lonely woman, living her life in the midst of the crowds as in a desert. With hesitation, she acknowledged that she suffered much in body; but she had recently heard it said that it was possible to share in the sufferings of Christ, by uniting her pains to His and so suffer with Him. She did not dare believe a thing like that offhand; what did Catholics think about it?

The box-tender explained; how Christ suffered, and died, and rose again; how having once risen ‘He dies now no more’; how He is, yesterday, today, and the same for ever; how He is with us, even

to the consummation of the world; how those who will receive Him “live, not they, but He lives in them”; how His sufferings are our sufferings, how our sufferings are His sufferings, made one, as we are made one with Him; how by our sufferings we continue to win for mankind the favour of God as He won it.

The poor woman listened; she was quite overcome. “I never dreamt of it like that,” she said; “then suffering is a privilege.” After a minute, she added: “But it makes all the difference” and went off happy, saying Providence had brought her there, rejoicing, like the apostles, that she was “accounted worthy to suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ.”

This is what faith, and faith alone, can do for us. Philosophy may explain the pleasures of life, science may multiply its comforts; both alike may try to eliminate suffering, but faith alone can take it in both hands and find in it a joy and a privilege.

12. Conclusion.

This is how the Catholic looks at life:

“What return can I make to the Lord for all He has given to me?”

He has given me myself,

I can give myself back to Him.

He has given me this life,

I can live it for Him.

He has given me His own Son,

I can receive and welcome Him.

He has given me His Son’s life,

I can live with Him and in Him.

He has given me His Son’s death,

I can make that love my standard.

He has given me His own Fatherhood,

I can be a true son.

I can believe in Him.

I can trust Him.

I can be true to Him.

I can be what He wants me to be.

I can do what He wants me to do.

This what my faith means to me:

It is the key to life’

It is the only key to peace;

“Peace which the world cannot give, I give unto you.”

