

The Essentials Of Spiritual unity

Ronald Knox's Thoughts on his Conversion to Catholicism

By Ronald Knox

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Preface

When I began to be anxious about my position as an Anglican, I felt that I had no right to plunge into Catholicism (although I then held most of its doctrines) without going back over old ground and satisfying myself that I had not unduly neglected the claims of other denominations to a hearing.

Among other experiments in this direction, I began to write down some account of what I meant by "a Church." A Church I was determined to have, but it seemed to me it might clear my mind if I started with the bare idea and definition of a Church and followed out the implications of that idea, wherever (as Plato says) the argument should lead.

My method was not that of Plato, but that of Aristotle, at least in his "Ethics". For Plato knows what he thinks beforehand, and his dialogue form is a literary artifice, but Aristotle seems (at any rate) to set out on no other basis than that of generally received ideas - What do we mean by "good"? What do we mean by "deliberate"? and so on - and, by whittling away the rival explanations that will not do, arrives in the end at the definition he wants. This nice slovenly method I adopted.

When I found myself (as usual) "up against" the Catholic system, I exchanged this experimentalist for an 'a priori' method and began asking: If such and such a system of religious organization is the only tolerable kind of Church, how would such a Church (supposing it to exist) be likely to appear in the records of history? How much should we expect historical and geographical accidents to obscure, at first sight, the principles on which it was based?

The first part was begun as early as August 1915, but the work went on slowly and casually, as the mood took me, and the last part was never really finished - the last page or two I actually wrote in September 1917, just before I was received. I have let it stand as I wrote it, except for half a dozen incidental corrections which were suggested to me. I do not pretend that it is the way in which one ought to arrive at the idea of the Catholic Church; it is merely the way in which one soul did.

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The Essentials Of Spiritual Unity

1. The Church

a selection and one made by an agent from without.

The name ecclesia seems to postulate two points:

first, that the body it denotes should be separated, i.e. there should be at least the human possibility of some people being outside it;

second, that it is called, that is, defined from without, not self-appointed or self-determined like a club or a republic.

2. The principle of selection must be based on some qualities in those selected.

It is thus, in potency at any rate, exclusive. And since in an institution whose essence is concerned with matters of ultimate moment we could hardly expect the selection to be arbitrary, like that of a club, we must suppose the exclusion to be due either to the unfitness of certain people for membership on the ground of morals or belief or else to the wilful refusal of certain people to join the institution, which would be, viewed from inside, the repelling of those who showed no aptitude for membership.

Such unclubableness would be hardly human if the refusal did not base itself upon some tangible objection, an objection to certain qualifications which had been set up as tests for membership.

3. God selects, in the true sense, but this does not mean that man cannot know who have and who have not been selected

It would be well to know at once who is the agent who calls out and in what sense he does it. No form of Christianity would dispute that this agent is God: The difference would be that the Calvinist tendency, insofar as it is present in any view of the Church, makes the selection arbitrary (from our point of view) and based on pre-natal choice on God's part. But even supposing this to be true, the Church as a visible institution must have, if not merits by which its members are to be selected, at least marks by which they are to be recognized, and all Calvinist schools demand an immediate faith in salvation by atonement, most of them also a standard of practice consistent with such beliefs. On the other side, no Christian would claim that his embracing his creed was a matter purely of choice on his own part.

4. At least so far as a visible Church is concerned, there may also be uncovenanted mercies, with which we are not concerned.

Insofar as God calls us, and presumably foreknows us, there is no inherent reason why we should expect to be able to say, this or that man has been called of God - so as long as he knows his own sheep by name, all is well with their salvation. But if the Church is to be a visible institution, guarding common mysteries in its trust, or at the lowest binding people together in conscious fellowship, there must be marks by which they can be recognized. Here, it is almost universally admitted, we can take heart over the case of those who do not qualify for visible membership, yet puzzle us by the fact of their exclusion. God may have called them, but called them by special and uncovenanted paths; it is no business of ours on the one side to emulate or on the other side to despair of them.

5. Underlying causes of non-membership must be (a) some moral weakness, (b) some distortion of moral standards, or (c) some defect of speculative belief.

The actual formula which carries with it membership of the Church is not the explanation of anybody's inclusion or rejection; it is merely (if non-miraculous) the mark or (if miraculous) the means of it. The explanation must lie in some determination of the man's own mind which is inconsistent with the terms of admission. Since there are to be no arbitrary or accidental

qualifications, other than that the applicant should be a rational human being, the grounds of exclusion limit themselves to three.

1.(a) He may, though in theory prepared to accept the moral standards upheld by the society, fall so far short of them in practice that the authorities judge him unfit. 2. (b) He may, through want of sympathy with particular determinations in detail of the moral code, be clearly incapable of entering into the spirit of the institution. 3. (c) There may be beliefs held by the society which he cannot admit, or vice versa. Some, no doubt, would prefer to see this last, doctrinal test abolished altogether or at least reduced to a minimum. But in any case it must be reckoned with as a possibility.

Note - It might seem that there was a fourth possibility of disqualification, a disciplinary disqualification. The man might do and believe all that the members did and believed, yet refuse to put himself within a circle of like-minded people. But this, it will be easily seen, resolves itself either into a doctrinal or into a moral disqualification. Either he does not wish his own moral standards to be of universal application, in which case his practice is not in fact morally determined, but due to taste, preference, etc., or else, admitting he believes the doctrines, he does not believe in the doctrines being vital, and in this absence of belief in his beliefs he is at variance with the members of the body.

6. The argument for (a) [some moral weakness,] as the only obstacle appears logical, satisfying to moral instincts, biblical, and traditional.

It might seem at first sight that (1) (a) was, if not of sole, at least of primary importance. For all sects agree that, whatever else is significant, moral action, which means precisely living up to the best standard a man knows, is of the very first importance. The Church would thus be a society of people united in the effort after individual perfection, and a man would be a member of it if and insofar as he achieved the standards required of him. This would seem to agree well with Saint Paul's language, when he refers to the members of the Christian community as saints and insists upon charity, etc., as the true test of Christian character. It would also answer to our Saviour's own test, "By their fruits ye shall know them."

If a man can be pronounced good he must 'ipso facto' be pronounced a member of the Church and qualified as the recipient of all its graces. Pressed to its furthest lengths, this argument would claim that all beliefs are a matter of individual conviction, and, precisely because they cannot conscientiously be abandoned or even suppressed to suit the convenience of others, they are not suited to form a test of admission. Pressed even further, it seems we should have to claim that various moral standards must meet with equal respect, provided they were not definitely underdeveloped or demonstrably calculated to militate against the happiness of mankind in general or the society in particular.

Indeed, it is often supposed that the first concern of the apostles was to keep the Church holy, rather than to keep it orthodox or uniform. The weapon of excommunication seems to have been used at first hesitatingly and with reluctance. The heresies Saint Paul combats might be said to have been condemned rather for their anti-social tendency, as putting a barrier between Christian and Christian, than for their false speculative views, whereas the moral discipline of the Church seems to have been at its most severe in the early centuries. Apostasy and adultery, certainly, were viewed so gravely that the author of them was, if not technically deprived of Church membership, at least debarred for life from the exercise of Church privileges.

Logically, then, this principle can claim that in rejecting a candidate for membership you are basing your action on a clear delivery of the conscience, a moral imperative, not on any point of dogma, not on any speculative question about which, after all, you may be wrong and he right.

Sentimentally (to use the term in no unkind sense) it enables you to avoid the feeling that you are rejecting one who is in point of conduct just as good as yourself. Biblically, it corresponds with the emphasis laid on moral purity by our Saviour and his disciples. Historically, it seems to have much in common with what we know of the practice of the earliest centuries.

7. Until it is examined closely. Are we to admit people who live up to any standard, provided they do live up to it?

Preliminary objection to this view. It is clear, however, that there is a point at which it becomes rather difficult to draw the line between difference of moral standard and incompatibility of moral practice. The good Mussulman will have - or at least contemplate having - more than one wife; the good Hindu widow would till lately go further and conceive it a moral duty to defy Christian standards in immolating herself over her husband's pyre; the Japanese, highly civilized in other ways, will commit suicide in grief at the death of their Mikado with the applause of their fellow-countrymen.

It is true we describe these standards of morality as lower standards of morality, but are we sure we are not begging the question? They are at least positive standards, and they do clearly evoke a certain spirit of admiration in us, who have been otherwise educated. Would it be possible to have a Christian society in which two different Christians would conceive their duty, in the same given conditions, in diametrically opposite ways or, at least, would base their outlook on different views of the importance of human life and the relative value of the two sexes?

All this clearly suggests that the moral demands of a religious society are that its members should not merely live up, as far as possible, each to his own standard, but should own to some extent at least common standards. The recognition of common standards in morality brings us suspiciously close to dogma. To put the case in a more concrete and probable form: It seems doubtful if those Friends {Quakers} who are true to the spirit of their institute could fail to regard the bearing of arms against an enemy as anything but a total disqualification for membership.

8. Further, have we a right to judge motives? Can we be sure of distinguishing the penitent from the hypocrite? Discipline may be used in these cases, but exclusion is, precisely here, inappropriate.

But indeed there is a root difficulty, far more serious. We immediately become confronted with the problem of the moral struggle: "I find another law in my members," etc. It is quite certain that the Christian society exists to achieve the individual moral (and spiritual) perfection of its members, but is it certain that this end is best served by debarring the sinner 'in toto' from communion? Is it not rather to be anticipated that the sinner will find means to triumph over his sins through membership, rather than by the fact of exclusion, which may easily induce despair or defiance in his attitude toward the body?

Who is to distinguish between the case of the hypocrite who continually sins and continually feigns penitence and that of the 'recidivus' who constantly falls, yet disowns, and to some extent atones for his faults by genuine contrition? Is not he at least in a better position than the hypocrite who retains his membership by dint of not being found out, by secret sins and insincere confessions? Does not the example of the Friend of publicans and sinners rather suggest, that while demanding a penitent will on the part of the applicant for membership, we shall yet be indulgent to the sins against which

he struggles, but not always successfully? In a word, is not the whole question of motives in action, and responsibility in moral cases, too complicated to decide by hard and fast rules of exclusion?

9. And the tendency to deal with the 'recidivus' by kindness appears to be progressive.

Rightly or wrongly, this would appear to have been increasingly the practice of the Church and under the influence of the Roman hierarchy. So it was a pope who stood out for the rights of the lapsed in the persecutions, and Pius X laid it down that Communion is too valuable a preventive against sin to allow of our dissuading the weaker brethren from its frequent reception. Whatever penances have been imposed, total exclusion has come to be reserved for those who are manifestly impenitent, since they will not abandon the sources of temptation; the harlot will not give up her means of livelihood, the man who has contracted an incestuous marriage will not live apart from his wife, and so on. In a word, exclusion is held to be justifiable only when immorality takes the form of moral obliquity, and the applicant for membership not merely fails to amend but fails to admit even in theory the Christian standard of morals. We are thus forced back again from class (1) (a) of possible obstacles to communion to class (2) (b).

10. We fall back then on the set of obstacles marked (b) [some distortion of moral standards]. But we find that (b), quite as much as (c) [some defect of speculative belief], excludes people from the Church on the ground of their conscientious convictions.

The difficulty then arises, whether class (2) (b) has any existence independently of class (3) (c). Or, to put it differently, whether for our purposes the two varieties of possible obstacles might not have been classed under the same head. As soon as you begin to talk of moral standards, moral values, or moral codes, you have passed out of the region of practice into that of theory.

True, the theory affects the question "How am I to live?" but it is a theory for all that, because it is universal in its application. It might be said that it is at least not a matter of mere intellectual theory, for we speak of apprehending moral values, rather than making moral judgements, but this is beside the point in matters of religious discussion, for spiritual truth, like moral truth (if the term may be used), is a matter of values.

All this does not affect the fact that a man may repudiate monogamy as he repudiates monotheism, as a matter of conviction, and complain, in the one case as in the other, that the Christian society is excluding him by reason of a conviction which he cannot help holding, because it alone satisfies his moral consciousness.

11. Resumption of preceding paragraphs.

It seems, then, that the Church, being a selection from among mankind, not an arbitrary selection, nor a hereditary selection (like the Church of Israel which it superseded), nor yet simply an assembly of good people (for motives, the tares in the wheat of the kingdom, are hard to disentangle, and good and bad must grow side by side till the harvest) must be selected, so far at least as it is a visible Church, on a principle of qualification which involves a common speculative outlook. It still remains for discussion, of course, whether this outlook need be only in the sphere of moral theology, i.e. in matters which affect actual conduct, or in purely speculative and devotional matters as well.

12. A body, which is human in its institution and in the promises which it offers, can include or exclude as it likes, because it is responsible only to itself.

Insofar as any "church" or religious denomination is, as such, of purely human formation, the responsibility of deciding who is to be accepted and who rejected is almost intolerable - would be quite intolerable, but that such a society does not (or should not) profess to be the one Church of Christ and therefore can, like any club or association, direct the disappointed applicant to some other society which is more likely to be in sympathy with his aspirations.

But insofar as a church feels itself to be the one Church and the guardian of certain divine privileges which, normally at least, can be obtained through no other means - to that extent, we must suppose, its authorities will be reluctant to disappoint any candidate, unless his disqualifications are such as have been declared by a supernatural authority to be necessary disqualifications.

The sense of responsibility naturally operates in both directions: A society conscious that it is in the position not of a plenipotentiary, but of a trustee should be more careful as to whom it admits, not merely as to whom it rejects.

Thus, undoubtedly, those religious bodies (the Congregationalists, for example) which claim no special divine charter, but merely the status of cultural associations, feel far more liberty in refusing or in accepting candidates for membership than, for example, the Church of Rome.

13. Is it possible that exclusion from the Church should rest on practical considerations - considerations, that is, of the exigencies of any society which is to have a corporate life?

We have, then, to consider the suggestion that religious tests should be insisted upon only where the failure to accept them would mean the failure to accept a common standard of behaviour necessary to the life and coherence of the religious body in question. Thus, the mere confusion which would be introduced into the social life of a monogamous society by the admission of a person with four wives might be held sufficient reason for refusing membership, without going into the question of ultimate sanctions. Or, again, complete incompatibility of outlook might be pleaded as a bar, if a professional soldier desired, without abandoning his profession, to be enrolled among the Society of Friends. [Quakers]

14. These considerations may be cultural as well as merely moral.

More than this, there may be cultural incompatibility which is not moral incompatibility. Thus, in a religious body whose members laid stress on "the gathering of themselves together," a man conscientiously convinced that all prayer was waste of time, who would consequently refuse to take any part in public worship, would clearly be out of place. Similarly, an observer of the Jewish Sabbath who refused to take any notice of Sunday might be rejected by a body interested in Sunday observance.

15. Answer to the Question at Point 13: Yes, if the body be of human origin and value. No, if it be of divine, for a divine society is too important a thing to be regulated by considerations of its own convenience.

But these purely moral and cultural considerations can be used as a basis of exclusion only if and insofar as the body in question does not profess to be of uniquely divine institution and the sole true representative of fully-revealed religion. Their bearing, so far as we have hitherto considered it, is social only, and, if the spiritual privileges forfeited by exclusion from the body are considerable, it becomes a question whether issues of social convenience should be allowed to weigh; ought not the weaker brother, for all his four wives and his refusal to attend church, to be admitted to membership, if only as a weaker brother?

It appears that he should, unless the taboos which exclude him are of an origin and a certainty no less divine than the privileges from which exclusion debar him. In a word, a society of human foundation, guarding human privileges - a benevolent society, for example - is at liberty to reject applicants on grounds which claim no more than the sanction of human instinct or human theory - such a society may, for example, exclude all except total abstainers. But a society which claims to be of divine foundation and to be the trustee of divine privileges can exclude only where it has a divine sanction for excluding.

16. Instance of the difficulty here raised the sanction of sabbatarianism in the Church of England.

Thus even moral and cultural considerations can be considered a bar in the absolute sense only when their validity is guaranteed by the divine voice. The observance of Sunday in the Church of England is an interesting case in point. If the Church of England appeals only to Scripture, it is doubtful whether the observance of the first day in the week can be justified. If it appeals to the practice of the Church in former times, that is a different matter. But for a frank Erastian [who believes that the subordination has occurred of ecclesiastical to secular power,] it seems it would be possible never to go to church on Sunday at all: He might regard the day as of purely conventional significance, set apart only by the action of the State, to the views of which he is not bound to conform, or, at best, by a consensus of ecclesiastical officials, whose injunctions, as being human injunctions, he may safely disregard.

17. A crucial instance resumed: Why do Christian sects insist on monogamy? Not on any purely ethical ground, for such ground is lacking.

Let us take monogamy as a case in point. On what ground is a Church which claims divine institution to deny access to her privileges to the bigamist? It is very hard to say that the principle is part of the common delivery of the conscience of mankind; the Moslem followers of Islam known as Mohammedans, sanction other practices, so did the ancient Jews - communities where we find clear recognition of the intimate tie between morality and religion. The utilitarian test, always doubtful in this connection, breaks down absolutely in face of a great war [such as {World War I}] that stamps out a large part of the male population.

We might say that in Europe it has become part of the recognized principles of society and could not therefore be abrogated without infinite confusions, but even this return to the practical appeal would be nugatory [trifling] in those African countries where society at large tolerates the principle of the harem and those who desire to become Christians find great social difficulties in consequence. We must have a divine utterance to support us if we are to incur the odium of insisting on this particular taboo.

18. In this case, it appears, we are bound to invoke a supernatural authority, and, if we have once invoked it, we are henceforward its servants, wherever it chooses to lead us.

That is to say, we must invoke an authority. In doing so, we must see clearly what we are doing. In order to plead an authority here, we are submitting to the dictation of our authority (whatever it may be) on all subjects on which it may choose to dictate - not merely on all matters on which we find it convenient to appeal to it, for this is clearly destructive of the very essence of authority. It must be such that we cannot say "I do not agree with it here" - for, if not, our friend with the four wives will ask us to take no notice of it in his case either. In emancipating ourselves from the indecisive rule of King Log - practical convenience, etc. - we are electing King Stork. In appealing to the bramble for a ruling, we are making it king of all the trees - not for this or that occasion, over this or that issue,

but at all times and everywhere alike: With it, not with us, rests the decision as to how far it will carry us. [See Judges 9: 7-20 for some of the literary references.]

19. Three possible ground-works of qualificatory beliefs; reducing themselves to two: (1) a written contract, (2) a living voice.

It does not appear that any religious system has ever appealed to an authority which was not expressed in one of three ways:

1. By supernatural illumination accorded to individuals generally in moments of prophetic exaltation. 2. By the written word, which is really a variant of (1), since it implies illumination granted to an individual (or set of individuals) the content of which has been committed to paper. In some systems the revelation once given is closed for all time; in others, it is capable of being supplemented by fresh illumination accorded later. ["The Principle of the Bible."] 3. By certain powers of inerrant judgement vested in an individual or set of individuals and guaranteed to operate only when such and such conditions are unfilled. It seems clear that any such succession of individuals demands some process of co-optation, in order to insure that the empowered officials C and D are the legitimate successors of A and B. ["The Principle of the Church."]

Reduced to a logical absurdity, principle (1) would mean simply "one man one church." The people who quote the text "All thy people shall be taught of God" do not make this claim, but it is doubtful if they ought not to. If, contrary to Saint Paul's assumption, all were apostles and all prophets, a Church like that at Corinth might divide itself, not simply into followers of Paul and followers of Cephas, but into a number of sects equal to the number of those who had been members of the Church, each regarding the illuminations accorded to himself as of paramount authority and excommunicating the rest if and insofar as they disagreed with him. We might have supposed, of course, that a miraculous consensus of opinion would be granted to all who earnestly ask the guidance of the Holy Spirit, without further ado, but the history of Christendom does not fortify us in this opinion.

As a matter of fact, private inspirations are more usually claimed by a large number of people for some one person of special spiritual gifts; if the content of this revelation is sufficiently startling to make the disciples disown, or be disowned by, the religious body from which they started, the new inspiration, in passing into an institution, necessarily comes to base itself either on the principle of the Bible or on that of the Church.

Either the original founder's words are carefully treasured in writing, and, while susceptible of expansion or of interpretation, are not considered susceptible of alteration or correction, or else a succession of prophets has somehow to be guaranteed, mediating a succession of divine illuminations adequate to any emergency that may arise. We can, in fact, have no quarrel with private inspirations as such - they have been granted to St. Gertrude, St. Teresa, Blessed [now Saint] Margaret Mary, etc.; they do not in reality form a distinct basis of authority until they become the foundations either of a new Bible or of a new Church.

Thus we can neglect the first of our three headings and say that only a Bible or a Church, or some compromise between or combination of the two, can give us the authority which we find necessary to the delimitation of a visible Church.

20. Whether 'a priori' or on grounds of experience, it is difficult not to suppose that a religious body, however much it professes to be purely biblical in its standards, must fall back on some kind of living authority, if only for interpretation.

The difficulty would naturally occur to us, even if we had no history for our guide. What is to happen in the case of a religious body avowing a book as its sole source of religious authority, if two sections of thought should disagree as to the way in which this or that document should be interpreted? The only solution of such a problem seems to be to go to law before the unbelievers and appeal to a purely common-sense tribunal to decide whether faction A or faction B is truer to the letter of the title-deeds.

But, although this may be a necessary step where temporalities are concerned in the dispute, it is obviously an expedient to which any religious body would have recourse only with the greatest reluctance. If there is any meaning in Saint Paul's contrasts between the letter and the spirit, if there is any truth in his contention that the spiritual man has the sole right of interpreting spiritual things, then it is clear that the value of such an appeal is purely a matter of convenience.

No, if there is to be any uniform standard of belief, even supposing the original message to have been delivered in the clearest terms of which human language is capable, a situation is humanly speaking bound to arise in which two rival schools of interpretation will wish to submit their differences, not to a mere arbitration, but to competent judgement.

Since the written letter stands, judgement must be pronounced by some person or body of persons conceived as divinely commissioned to issue a decision - divinely commissioned, because a mere 'consensus theologorum' - and a consensus of this kind is not easily arrived at - would not be accepted by the losing side, who would plead that if the matter were purely one of intellectual conviction, their own failure to see eye to eye with the pundits could not fairly be held to disqualify them for communion. It is unnecessary to elaborate historical instances which illustrate this tendency on the part of every body to appeal to some sort of authority, however vaguely it may in some cases be conceived. Probably only very new religious bodies, such as the Irvingites or the Christian Scientists, have escaped such difficulties.

21. Whatever therefore be avowed as the ground of belief the definient authority from time to time must be a living voice.

It is perfectly possible for a man, asked why he believes this or that, to say, "Because the Bible says so." His Bible or Koran may be the ground of his faith. But if he be challenged with the question, "Why do you believe this rather than that, when the Bible seems to admit of two possible interpretations?" he must appeal to some living voice which has, however vaguely, defined the doctrine in question. This is presumably the substratum of meaning which underlies the very misleading catchword "The Church to teach and the Bible to prove." Whether, in this case, the definient authority does not become also the ultimate authority is a difficult question, but does not concern us here; it is enough for our purposes that any religious body may be forced, and must be prepared to be forced, to produce an authority for what it holds in common, even on questions of morality; this will probably be the fate of most religious bodies soon on the cardinal problem of the dissolubility or indissolubility of marriage.

22. The principle of "one man, one vote" does not solve the problem of authority.

However excellent the purely democratic principle may be in a country or in a fictitious institution such as a club - the principle, that is, of counting heads to avoid breaking them - a "poll of the members" does not seem to be an expedient often adopted by religious bodies. The reason is not difficult to find.

A majority may have a right to decide on a purely practical point - e.g. whether seats should be free or rented - in matters where only the well-being of the body as a human society is concerned. But if the problem be, not to arrive at the will of the society, but to arrive at the will of God, it is not to be wondered at if an appeal to the vote leaves the minority unconvinced and prepared for schism.

"They are slaves who dare not be in the right with two or three." We have no divine guarantee that the voice of the people will be the voice of God; rather, we must be prepared to expect that in any society which is not violently rigorist, the majority will be largely composed of people whose spiritual insight is not of the keenest.

23. A variation of the popular principle - the conciliar theory.

There is, however, a variation of this theory which, discredited as it is now, appears to have commended itself to solid thinkers - the Tractarians. This is the pure conciliar theory, according to which certain representatives of the body, meeting in conclave, were actually prevented by the overruling influence of God from arriving at a false conclusion. Such a body is not representative in the strict sense, for even if all the members of it had been popularly elected, it was still not in virtue of their election, but in virtue of a special gift 'ab extra' that they were preserved from error. The difficulty of this doctrine is twofold.

24. Difficulties of the pure conciliar theory.

1. It does not seem to be claimed by any tradition of the Church that our Saviour himself attached any promise of infallibility to such gatherings. Nor does the Church seem to have acted on the understanding that a decision of this kind was necessarily final. There were still Judaizers after the Council of Jerusalem in communion with Christians who rejected their views, though the tendency to sever communion was constant.

2. We should surely have expected that, if this miraculous guidance was to be bestowed, there would always be an overwhelming majority in favour of the right side, if not complete unanimity. Yet we see that at various periods rival doctrines could claim very nearly the same number of upholders among the bishops.

25. A more modern conciliar view.

The conciliar doctrine therefore seems to have undergone an amendment in recent times, and the decisions of the councils are now claimed as binding (or something like it) not on the ground that the councils were directly inspired, but on the ground that the Church, by no sudden show of hands, but by slow processes of assimilation and rejection, came to hold one view or the other and so ratified the decree.

Such a view can at least claim texts such as "He shall guide you into all truth," "All thy people shall be taught of God," etc. It does not seem difficult to suppose that God has implanted in the hearts of those who endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit an infallible tendency toward, or instinct for, the truth which, like the red corpuscles of a healthy body, ejects naturally the invasions of alien doctrine.

Such a view is also very comfortable at the present day. If we are prepared to look upon the ecclesiastical history of the last four hundred years as an interlude, and to call by the name of Christian all those who seriously claim the title, we can console ourselves with the hope that perhaps after all the questions raised at and since the Reformation are only specially gristly mouthfuls, which the Church is slowly taking her time to digest; nothing is settled as yet, but, being all Churchmen, we shall inevitably, in the end, come to see things in the same light. Probably this view is held, in one form or another, by almost all Christians outside the Roman and Eastern Churches who are seriously exercised about the question of Church unity and Church authority.

26. This view seems to put us back where we were before.

This doctrine, in the form in which it has become popular among Nonconformists and laxiorist Anglicans, is destructive of the whole principle of a visible Church or an audible authority. If we believe what we believe about the Trinity, not in obedience to formulas laid down at Nicaea and elsewhere but because "Christians" have in course of time come to believe such doctrines and found them suited to their religious needs, then we must be prepared to revise those beliefs in conformity with what "Christians" are coming to believe or may come to believe about the divine nature, fortified now by methods of criticism wholly different from those of the Fathers.

Nothing has been defined, nothing ever will be. The "churches" are but a number of philosophical sects within "the Church," holding various but equally tenable opinions on almost all points - whether the Unitarians are to be counted among these, and if not, why not, seems at least a legitimate speculation. Anybody is at liberty to revive the principles of the Agapemonites [Footnote from webmaster's assistant: I had to look that one up. "Sect believed to practice 'free love' on Christian principle, founded in Somerset in 1850"] without forfeiting his title to Christian membership. The one visible Church, if it ever existed, only survived by a few years its divine Founder and can expect a renaissance only in the remote future, when prayerful application to historical documents shall have produced a basis which we all feel conscientiously bound to accept.

27. A refinement of this doctrine seems to confound its own supporters.

There is, however, a refinement of this doctrine commonly held among more rigorist Anglicans. According to this view, although the Church does make up its mind, not by sudden conciliar illumination, but by a gradual process of assimilation, yet the doctrines once so assimilated have become "defined" and therefore irreversible (however much they may admit of interpretation).

The Church may make up her mind, centuries hence, on such a point as the withholding of the chalice or (from their point of view) the Immaculate Conception, but what has once been sealed, in the early ages, is sealed for ever - e.g. the marriage laws, the three creeds, the three orders of the ministry, at least two sacraments, etc. Since the schism between the East and the West, the Church has been unable to formulate any opinion which "counts," seeing that she has been divided.

But we must press for an answer: Do we hold such and such doctrines to be of faith because the Church has come to believe them or because they have been defined by councils? If the former, then what right have we to assume that the Church has finally made up her mind on (say) the doctrine of the Trinity? Why should the process of doctrinal development have petrified? How are we to distinguish between kernel and husk, between what in traditional belief is part of the 'depositum fidei' and what is merely accidental and suited to the needs of an age? We fall back once more on private opinion to determine this, which it does with no certain sound.

If on the other hand we say that the councils are the defining voice, but we accept them not insofar as they spoke in the heat of controversy, but insofar as they registered beliefs which by their time had become unquestioned - if, that is to say, the controversy on circumcision was really settled at Nicaea, and the controversy on Arianism at Constantinople, and so on - then indeed we avoid all sceptical difficulties about "snap votes," "undue influence," and the like, but are we really better off? There still remains the objection that we have no proof that a majority can define a generally accepted doctrine any more than decide a controversy, with the assurance of divine ratification.

28. We are, in fact, still left with a circular argument or a bare confidence in numbers.

In fact, whether it be the continuous history of the councils or the continuous history of the Church at large to which we appeal when we say that this or that doctrine is irreversible, we are still arguing in a circle. Asked what is the orthodox faith, we say, "What was and is believed by the orthodox Church." Pressed as to what the orthodox Church may be, we fall back on defining it as the body which holds the orthodox faith. If all the Episcopal Churches of the world were re-united tomorrow and had a schism the day after, we should be reduced to voting with the majority: This view is supported by "N" prelates - 'Dieu le veult'; that view is supported by "N - (minus) L" prelates - 'anathema sit.' Even then we should have to admit sadly that it was left for our grandchildren to know which party was in the right.

29. Logical outcome of the divided Church theory.

If anybody is disposed to rest content with the view that all appeals for authority should be made to the early and united Church, or at best to a consensus of opinion between the Church of Rome and the Orthodox Churches of the East, he has still to face a difficulty. Let him ask the theologians of the still undivided Church, let him ask any theologian, Western or Eastern, who wrote between the schism and the beginning of this [20th] century, a pertinent question: "Can the true Church of Christ lack the mark of visible unity?" The answer will surely be "No." And thus the very authority to which he appeals will be found to disallow the assumption on which he appealed to it.

30. Logical outcome of the bare-majority theory.

If on the other hand we are disposed to treat the schism between East and West on a line with all other schisms and say that the fragments it left constitute (i) a true Church and (ii) a schismatic body, then, whatever the precise numerical proportion of bishops, it is difficult not to feel that the West has it, as representing more different countries, more active thought, more vigorous life.

We are thrown back on a merely platonic Gallicanism, which (however) insists that the bishops of the Roman communion met in council are infallible, and, if we admit that, then in obedience to them we must admit the whole Roman claim.

31. Logical outcome of pure "consensus-fideliumism."

['Consensus-fideliumism' = theory of the consent of the faithful being a sufficient guide.] Nor do we escape the impasse by appealing from episcopal councils to the general sense of the great body of Christian people. The great body of Christian people, unless we are prepared to suppose that anyone who now claims the title of Christian is necessarily a member of it, must in some way be defined, and the only conceivable definitions of it (if we are taking our stand on historic continuity with the sub-apostolic Church) would be (i) the Church of Rome or (ii) the Orthodox Churches of the East - not both at once, for the faithful of either rite disown the company of the other.

Here again, if we set aside the kudos which, since the division, has accrued to the Orthodox Church through the rise of the political power of Russia, could any casual observer fail to find the true 'fideles' in the communion of Rome - more especially when we remember how intimately the doctrines of the Greek Church seem to have been bound up with those of the reigning Emperor, long after the Church in the West had become, corporately at any rate, independent of such influences?

32. Especial claim to a hearing of the Roman Church if we take the 'consensus fidelium' basis.

The salient difficulty of any 'consensus fidelium' theory is surely this, that, if the test is to be a real test, the term "fideles" must have a definite meaning in extension. While we look in vain for any other definition of their extent which will not be a merely circular definition, the Roman Catholic has a ready answer: "The 'fideles', be they many or few, be their doctrine apparently traditional or apparently innovatory, be their champions honest or unscrupulous, are simply those who are in visible communion with the see of Rome." No doubt in the long run this means the people who are so orthodox that Rome has seen no reason to excommunicate them, so that unity and orthodoxy still react upon one another; but the fact remains that the Roman theory does give a test for defining the 'fideles' without the question-begging preliminary of ascertaining who the 'fideles' are, from an examination of their tenets.

In fact there can be little doubt that in the West our labelling of this party as orthodox and that as heterodox in early Church history comes down to us from authors who were applying this test of orthodoxy and no other and that we, at the Reformation, made our appeal (insofar as we did make any appeal) to the Churches of Jerusalem and Alexandria, meaning thereby not the Nestorian or Monophysite claimants to these sees, but the representatives of the body (hence admitted as "Orthodox") which had remained longest in communion with the Roman Church.

33. The difficulties of principle, which produce these logical results, investigated.

All conciliar theories of the Church (except those which at once fix an arbitrary limit to the number of the councils, neglect the question, "Whence do the councils derive their authority?" and apparently blind themselves to historical phenomena) seem on examination to labour from a single root defect - they attempt to define the Church by the faith, not the faith by the Church. They posit the faith as a known quantity. It may be simply belief that Jesus is God; it may be the doctrines (roughly speaking) of the Judicious Richard Hooker; it may be the Council of Trent; it may be anything betwixt and between.

But in any case you posit the faith as a known thing, defining it by an arbitrary standard, and then say, "Who are there who believe these doctrines? They are my brothers." True, you may insist, in questions like that of ordinations, that the faith shall be attested by corresponding ecclesiastical practice and even that this practice can show continuity (what of the Swedish Church, for instance?), but in any case you assume that Catholicity is something that you instinctively know and can apply as a test to any religious body you examine. By this means you accept the Greek Orthodox and the Old Catholics, while you reject the Nestorians and the Presbyterians. This is (except on the narrow conciliar view above described) what you are doing when you speak of "orthodox" and "heretical" tenets in Early Church history.

But how, apart from pure bibliolatry or miraculous revelation, are we to know what is the minimum of belief and practice that can be called orthodox, unless we have one visible and continuous Church to teach us on the point? How much more satisfactory, if the Church were a body which

leapt to the eye, self-credentialed, so that we could posit it for our starting-point and infer from its teaching what was true and what was false!

34. If there were a single Church, designed to be the standard of the faith (and not 'vice versa'), how should we expect it to be constituted?

It may be following an idle fancy, but it is surely not altogether presumptuous to blot out history as far as possible from the mind's eye and imagine how we should expect the one, indivisible Church to be constituted, so as to be a safe guardian of the faith.

We should expect that either a single body of men, kept in close touch with one another and divinely guaranteed against serious doctrinal disagreement, or (better still) a single man, since in the last resort it is the casting vote that counts, would be selected from among the immediate followers of the Founder, in the last resort the safe camp to pitch your tent under. Let us suppose a single man. We should expect that such a man would be open to advice, even (if he seemed to be hesitating in following his conscience) to reproof from the highest officials round him.

That, as the first missionary work was done, while the Founder's words were still fresh in men's ears and his chosen disciples yet alive, little recourse would be had to such a man or indeed be geographically possible. That while disagreements would be few in that blessed sunrise (except perhaps in connection with some who from the first had misconceived the scope of the whole enterprise), these disagreements would be dealt with locally, on their own authority, by other officials who saw their duty clearly.

That the malcontents in these cases would attempt to plead the authority of the absent X (let us call him) and that the official they were opposing would (while insisting on his own exceptional knowledge of the Founder's intentions) be occasionally at pains to show that his views did not differ from - perhaps even were instrumental in forming - the views of X.

That X would be divinely guided to make the headquarters sooner or later at Y, the most prominent or most central city of the then-known world, where he would very likely be associated for missionary purposes with that official whose task it had been to organize most of the churches on the way to Y from their original starting-point, and that the churches more immediately under the care of this official (Z) would be in close contact with the Church at Y. And now, what happens at X's death?

35. Transmission of the centralized authority.

We might think it probable that X would nominate and solemnly appoint his own successor, guided in his choice by the same infallible assurance which would make it impossible that he should take the wrong side in a doctrinal dispute. But this is to assume that the gift which makes him what he is a sort of habitual grace, which can only be conferred by him who already possesses it. If, on the contrary, the gift were rather in the nature of an actual grace, conferred according to a covenant "on condition of" his holding a certain position, but not in and through the act of his elevation to that position, then the appointment might be left to others - not, in such geographical conditions, it is evident, to the whole Church.

The appointment can safely be made in such conditions and by such electors as would be common in the ordinary election of the officials of the body in local cases, for the gift which determines his special character being a charisma, which overrules (presumably) any natural tendencies in the man which would unfit him for his special office, could be bestowed on any candidate thus appointed,

even were he not "the best man in." It would not be unnatural to suppose, in fact, that the providential character would be conferred on the man whom the Church at Y selected as its head (the bishop, let us call him). They elect and enthrone him, and God immediately bestows 'ab extra' the special grace needed for a special position.

(There are other ways, clearly, in which the thing might be managed, but in the absence of a claim on the part of any other succession of persons to a caliphate of this description, this way of managing it would seem a very natural one.)

36. Early centrifugal influences to be expected.

We should expect that while the congregations in various parts were poor, scattered, and persecuted, there should be little intercourse between the Church at Y and those elsewhere (although it would naturally be mentioned with some deference, when mentioned at all).

That the Church, rather than the bishop, would be the object of respectful allusion, since (1) his power derived from his position, (2) the local church was more of a distinct unit when converts were few, (3) the bishop himself would be likely to live in some obscurity owing to his exposed position in time of persecution.

That we should not find him interfering in the affairs of other churches except those within a fairly easy radius by sea.

That when local quarrels arose, they should be settled by local councils, especially while men were alive who had had speech with the immediate followers of the Founder - it would rather be the innovators who would seek, and would fail to find, recognition for their doctrines at Y.

That old-established or central congregations would naturally come to exercise a sort of local satrapy over other congregations around them.

That bishops of great learning, or such as had showed great courage in persecution or sanctity of life, would be more prominent to the ordinary eye than an official living at a distance.

That minor differences of usage would crop up between various churches, that Y would become involved in them, that Y's first attempts to make regulations of ecumenic force would be resented, and that recriminations would come from both sides where matters of old-established usage were concerned.

That if the bishop of Y seemed to be exercising his presidential prerogative with undue assertiveness, he would be remonstrated with in impatient language.

That he, as having the interests of a wider community at heart, would take a gentler and less rigorist view on matters of discipline than the official of outlying churches.

37. Effects of State recognition on the churches.

If it should so fall out that the chief temporal power in the world should come into the hands of one who was at least sympathetic with if not actually committed to the principles of this Church, he would naturally be concerned with the settlement of any disputes that might arise; in the case of a considerable dispute, it would be he who would facilitate the travels of officials from distant parts to a single centre and be present at the discussion in the person of his representatives to secure "a free field and no favour" in times when bluntness of speech and hastiness of temper were not unknown in high ecclesiastical circles. If the Bishop of Y should, in virtue of the importance of his

see, be unable to be present in person, it is possible that his legates would not occupy the chairman's place, which would be given (no doubt with the bishop of Y's sanction) to another bishop of high standing.

Human nature being what it is it is only natural that this temporal authority should at times be wielded by persons who attempted to exercise a direct influence on the councils of the Church by intriguing for the appointment of this or that candidate for vacant sees, by "summoning" councils in unrepresentative geographical conditions, etc. Owing to the force of the secular arm, the candidate favoured by such a ruler in a given case would be likely to gain the temporalities of the see, and the dispossessed candidate, were he right or wrong in his views, would appeal from this secular compulsion to the bishop of Y.

The secular ruler would therefore make every effort to influence the views of the bishop of Y - would, in an extreme case, persecute him, and try to wring from him a decision against his conscience. If and insofar as such a decision should be given under the influence of physical force or insufficient information, or a combination of the two, then it would be right for those who looked to Y for guidance to stick to his previous and uninfluenced judgements, rather than to any extorted profession, as the norm of right belief.

If the secular authority should build a second city, intended to outstrip Y in dignity, it would be natural that the bishop of this new city (C) should, if worldly-minded or ambitious, try to set himself up as in some way on a level with the bishop of Y. If the secular empire should then be divided between Y and C, the Emperor of C would be all the more inclined to support the bishop of C in such pretensions. The bishops of churches nearer C than Y, accustomed to rally round the bishop of C as their patriarch, might easily come to be more overshadowed in practice (without justification in theory) by the Church at C than by the Church at Y, and law-abiding citizens, in the event of a schism in the Church at C, might be tempted to support the candidate backed by the Emperor of C, without troubling much to inquire which candidate was supported by the bishop of Y. This process, though contrary to the original intentions of the Founder, would take place by insensible stages and largely without conscious revolt: Only at time of open breach between the Bishop of Y and the Emperor of C would the case definitely present itself to the conscience - Is it to be God or Caesar?

For so long as, and insofar as, the churches accustomed to look to C for a lead were united by the unity of faith with the bishop of Y, they would be rightly called "orthodox," but at whatever periods they supported the bishop of C against the bishop of Y they would be formally disobedient, with whatever excuse of deficient information, etc. If at any time a definite and formal breach took place, the party, however large or important, which sided against Y would be guilty of formal schism. However faithfully henceforward they guarded the deposit common to the churches of C and of Y, they would nevertheless be cut off from the unity of the Church.

Msgr. Ronald Knox (1888-1957), a convert from Anglicanism, was famed for his Bible translation and his detective stories.
