

What The Church Means To Us

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I. — WHAT WE MEAN BY THE CHURCH.

CHILDREN are often puzzled by the way in which they hear their elders use the word “church.” In Ireland until quite recent times (and the usage still lingers in many places) “the church,” in the common speech of the people, meant the Protestant place of worship, “chapel” being reserved for the Catholic.

Church and ‘chapel’.

This way of speaking is not in accordance with Catholic practice the world over. The word “church” (or its equivalent in various languages) is used of a public place of worship where Mass is regularly said, while a “chapel” is a more or less private place of worship, belonging, say, to a convent, or else a portion of a church containing a separate side-altar. It is desirable that the incorrect use of “church” and “chapel” should be given up, first, because it is out of harmony with universal Catholic usage, but still more because it gives the word “church” an indefinable Protestant flavour which is apt to chill the feeling of affection which that word ought to arouse in us.

But, even where the word “church” is quite correctly used, children, for a time at least, are puzzled by uses of the word, which clearly cannot apply to the object which they first learned to call church, namely, the building to which they used to be taken to hear Mass or go to Confession. They hear it said, for instance, that the Church teaches this or that, and they wonder how it can. Of course, they sooner or later come to the chapter in the Catechism about the Church, and to the question, “What is the Church?” They find that the answer says nothing at all about a building, still less about the particular building, which they have always called “the church.” It says that the Church is “the congregation of all the faithful,” et cetera. Of course, all depends on how the teacher explains this answer to them. Left to themselves they might puzzle over the word “congregation,” which for them had hitherto meant the people hearing Mass or listening to a sermon.

Perhaps the teacher does not always tell them the very important fact that the Church is a society, a visible society, and explain to them the significance of that fact. A society is an organised body of human beings with definite membership and somebody in authority over it — in other words, a body of members and a head. Thus a club, an association, a league, a trades union, a religious Order, a kingdom, a republic — all these are societies, though of different kinds. All consist of a recognised authority — a president, a governor, a king, a parliament, an executive council, according to the case, and a number of people who are members of the body in question. So it is with the Church. Its members are men and women, baptised in infancy (or later) as Catholics, as long as they do not by their own act deliberately give up their membership of the Church. And its head on earth is our Holy Father the Pope. For a Protestant the universal Church is not a visible society at all, and has no head on earth.

The Church, then, is a society, but, as we have seen, there are societies of many different kinds. As a rule, the best way to distinguish one from another is to enquire what is the purpose for which one or the other has been founded. Their very titles often tell us that. Thus, the Gaelic Athletic Association obviously exists to promote Gaelic games and athletics. The titles of political organisations do not so clearly reveal their purposes, nor do those of religious Orders. To find out what is the real purpose of these latter, the best way is to study the lives of their founders, and then see if they have not stated the purposes, objects, aims, of their Order in the rules that they have laid down for the guidance of its members. Thus it is with the Church. Its Founder was our Divine Lord. And we find in His Life, as written in the Gospels, the purposes for which He founded His new society, the Church. It was to go on doing what He had come to do, namely, to teach men the great truths of religion, to rule and govern them in all that concerned religion, and to help and guide them along their way during this mortal life, so that in the end, they might save their souls and enter into a happy eternity.

II. — WHAT TO THINK OF THE CHURCH.

WHAT WE THINK about any given thing, our feelings about it, our mental attitude towards it, all that influences very much our way of acting in regard to it. Of course, considerations of prudence or politeness may prevent us from putting our views and feelings into words or deeds. But, if we really dislike and distrust a person or an institution, it is nearly impossible for us to act towards them as if we were full of affection and loyalty. And vice versa.

Now what are we to think about the Church? That, after all, is just the same kind of question as Our Lord once put during His lifetime here below, “What think ye of Christ?”

Now, when men have given quite honest and straight-forward answers to this question, their answers have varied to an astonishing extent all down the ages. All depended on whether they were loyal members of the Church or pagans or heretics or renegades.

For Luther and his followers no language was strong enough to express their abhorrence and contempt. The Church for them was the Scarlet Woman of the Apocalypse, and the Pope was Antichrist. What worse could be said? Such violence is characteristic of apostates. Modern enemies of the Church have exhausted the language of vituperation and the resources of calumny. And this has come not only from atheists, communists, and the like, but from men professing themselves Christians. Irish Catholics living in certain parts of the North of our country are only too well aware of what is there thought and said about the Church and its Ruler.

All that was to be expected. The Church is and ever will be, as her Founder was, a “sign to be contradicted.” And Christ’s prophecy to His disciples will be fulfilled even to the end of time, “You shall be hated by men for my name’s sake.”

Yet strange to say this Church that has been so hated and reviled at every period of history has numbered even among those outside her fold, sincere and even enthusiastic admirers. It has been found possible to fill a book with their testimonies.

(Footnote: One such book is: *Tributes of Protestant writers to the Truth and Beauty of the Catholic Church*. Edited by J. J. TREACY. (Saint Louis: Herder.)

And what of those within? What one can come to think of the Church is perhaps best seen in the writings of men who saw Catholicism as a new thing, or something that broke in upon them with a new light — converts to the Church. Again and again these newcomers to the Faith, whither it be

(Blessed John Henry) Newman and Frederick Faber and Robert Hugh Benson or the great French converts of recent years, shame us “born” Catholics with the intensity of their enthusiasm and their admiration for the Church. Yet they were fully aware of what had been written against the Church. They were fully aware, too, of the shortcomings of Catholics, high as well as low, of the sins and scandals that have tarnished the fair name of the Church, made up as she is of weak and erring and sinful men and women. Yet, for all that, they greeted her as Catholic tradition has always greeted her — as the Bride of Christ or as “our holy Mother the Church.” Here is what just one such convert has written:

“When I am asked what I have found within the Catholic Church superior to what Protestantism gave me, I find that language is inadequate to express it. One thinks of the familiar metaphor of a stained glass window in a vast cathedral. Seen from without by day, this seems to be an unintelligible mass of dusky glass. Viewed from within, however, it reveals a beautiful design where sacred story glows resplendently in form and colour. So it is with the Church of Rome. One must enter it to understand its sanctity and charm.

“When I reflect upon that Church’s long, unbroken continuity, extending back to the very days of the Apostles ; when I recall her grand, inspiring traditions, her blessed sacraments,, her immemorial theological language, her changeless creed, her noble ritual, her stately ceremonies, her priceless works of art, her wondrous unity of doctrine, her ancient prayers, her matchless organization, her Apostolic authority, her splendid roll of saints and martyrs reaching up like Jacob’s ladder and uniting earth and heaven; when I reflect upon the intercession for us of those saints and martyrs, enhanced by the petitions of the Blessed Mother of Our Lord; and last, but not least, when I consider the abiding presence of the Saviour on her altars — I feel that this one, holy, apostolic Church has given me certainty for doubt, order for confusion, sunlight for darkness, and substance for shadow.

“It is the bread of life and the wine of the soul, instead of the unsatisfying husks: the father’s welcome with the ring and the robe, instead of the weary exile in the desert of doubt. It is true, the prodigal must retrace the homeward road, and even enter the doorway of the mansion on his knees; but within, what a recompense!”

(The writer of these words is the distinguished author, John L. STODDARD. See also *Conquests of Our Holy Faith*; or, *Testimonies of Distinguished Converts*. By J. J. Treacy. (Saint Louis: Herder.)

And now what of average, ordinary Catholics?

You and I.

Ordinary Catholics, what do they think of their Church? Are there some among them who think of it merely as a great and powerful religious organisation spread throughout the world and always actively pushing on its own interests? Do they think of it locally as an institution with which they have but external relations, and these not always of the most pleasant? An institution that requires a great deal of money for its upkeep and is always asking for more; that calls for frequent sacrifices from its members, or again that irksomely controls their conduct, hedging them around with regulations and prohibitions?

It is because I believe that there are Catholics who look upon the Church in some such light that I have written this little booklet. I want to show them that there is another and an utterly different side of the Church.

III. — THE CHURCH AND CHRIST.

LET US GO at once to the very root of the whole question. We shall find that all that has yet to be said rests upon one great fundamental truth, which may be expressed in the shortest possible form of words by saying that the Church is the mystical body of Christ. Let us try to get a firm grasp of this great doctrine. It is deep and even mysterious; but it is not wholly unintelligible, even to our weak intellects. You and I CAN begin to see. The Church and Christ have an intimate identity.

In speaking of any society, you can say that the person who has authority over it is its “head,” and that it has a “body” of members. You can say the same of the Church. In its case Christ Himself is its invisible head, and the Holy Father its visible head. All Catholics form together the body of its members. So far, the matter is quite simple. These two words are transferred from the human body and taken in a figurative sense. But when we come to read the Gospels, and especially the Epistles of Saint Paul, we find that that is by no means the whole of the matter. We find that Christ Our Lord is head of the Church, in a sense far beyond what can be said of the head of any other society, and that the Church may be described as His body in a deeper and more intimate sense than any ordinary meaning of the word could have. We convey this to some extent when we say not only that the Church is a body of which Christ is head, but that the Church is His body — that is, part of His very self.

And that is what Saint Paul says, and says over and over again in many different forms. Thus, he says that God “had subjected all things beneath his (Christ’s) feet and has given him for supreme head to the Church which is his body, the fulness of him who is wholly fulfilled in all.” (Ephesians 1:23. The doctrine is most fully set forth in chapter 12 of Saint Paul’s first Epistle to the Corinthians, verses 12 to 27.) That is to say, Christ and His Church together make one whole personage, formed of head and body. “Ye are all one person in Christ Jesus.” Again, “Ye are [together] the body of Christ and severally His members.” (1 Corinth 12:27.) In other words, Christ Our Lord and the faithful members of His Church are so bound up together that they form but one. It was what Our Lord Himself had said at His last Supper, using a different image: “I am the vine, you are the branches,” for the vine and its branches are really one thing. And again at the moment of Saint Paul’s conversion He identified Himself with His Church by saying to Saint Paul, “Saul, Saul, why persecute you me?”

Now, this marvellous oneness between the Church and Christ is expressed by saying that the Church is His mystical body — that is, it cannot be called His physical body, for that would not be true. And, on the other hand, there is some-thing far more than a close union of sympathy and affection. No, the relationship, the union, is so close and so intimate that the Church and its Head may be looked upon as forming together one person, (Colossians 1:18.) but in a sense so lofty and so spiritual that we must describe it as mystical. Let us now try to understand, as far as we may, the nature of this union.

At the most solemn moment of His life, just as He was about to enter upon His Passion, Christ Our Lord prayed to the Father that when He was gone and throughout all time His faithful might be one as He and the Father were one. Now that prayer has been granted in a marvellous way. Who can deny that Catholics, though differing so much from one another in numberless ways, are even today, after the passage of nearly two thousand years, one in faith and worship, and consequently united in thought and feeling and sympathy. That union, that oneness, breaks out, as it were, openly on such

an occasion as an International Eucharistic Congress. Then it is plainly seen how perfectly they are at one with one another and, as we shall see, one with Christ.

Note — To those who wish to study more fully this Doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ I suggest a book, which appeared not long ago under this very title. It is by the Abbé Anger, and has been translated from the French by FATHER JOHN, J. BURÉE.

IV. — CHRIST AND THE CHURCH.

TRUE CATHOLICS, we have seen, are united in their faith and worship, in their ideas and ideals, and they are so united because all of them are united with their Founder and Master. There is between them and Him a union of perfect understanding and love. But there is something more, as the words of Christ our Lord and Saint Paul clearly give us to understand. We may express it thus At the Incarnation Christ took up into His divine Person a human nature and lived, through it, a new life as man. Now, Saint Paul's teaching about the Church being Christ's body means that, as He lived His natural life on earth in a body drawn from Mary His Mother, so He lives His mystical life today in a body drawn from mankind, a body which is the Catholic Church, so that He still lives, acts and speaks through her. This is not just a notion of some one or two pious writers: it is the common teaching of Catholic theologians.

Let us try to understand a little better this beautiful and consoling doctrine, so that we may come to realize more and more what the Church really means to us.

Christ Living in us.

It might be said of the Founder of a religious Order that, long after he has passed away, he still lives on in his children — that is, in the members of his Order, if those members follow closely his example and live according to his spirit. Now, Christ our Lord lives on in this way in every Christian who is truly such. *Christianus alter Christus*, it used to be said. A Christian is another Christ. But Christ exercises over Christians an influence even more inward and spiritual than the influence of His example, and He is united to them in a more intimate way than any merely human founder could be. This influence He wields through His grace, and it ever tends to produce in the sanctified soul a likeness to Himself. And then this likeness unites us to Him ever more and more closely.

Now Christ our Lord might have chosen to unite Himself thus to each individual soul as though there were not another in the world, and there is a sense in which He does so. But Saint Paul tells us expressly that each and all of us form part of a larger unit, the Church. To use a modern analogy, we are cells in a greater organism. And so we must take it, that, besides the inward influence which He exercises on our individual souls by His grace, there is the influence He exercises on us through His Church, His mystical body. Thus, it is the role of the Church, and indeed her principal role, to bring souls into closest relationship with Christ. Our very membership of the Church makes us members, limbs, cells, if you like, of the body of Christ, and thus lays the foundation of that relationship, that union which becomes closer and closer with our growth in holiness.

How foolish then is the charge so often made against the Church that she comes between us and Christ, that she draws our worship and loyalty to herself instead of to Christ. The real truth, as we have seen, and it is one that cannot be made too much of, is that the Church exists just to lead us to Christ, to unite us with Him. Is there a prayer in her liturgy that does not end with “through Jesus Christ our Lord”? Is He not the centre of her worship, of the Mass, of Communion, of Benediction?

Is not His Presence the very *raison d'être* of her churches? If she had her way, would not His image be in every class-room, and every law court, and every legislative assembly: nay, on the highways and the mountain tops?

And on His side, has He not identified Himself with her? "He that hears you," He said, "hears me." He lives in her and speaks through her voice. And so we need not fear to obey her, or to honour her, or to love her. The more we identify ourselves with her life, her supernatural life above all, the more we shall unite ourselves to Christ and live His mystical life.

V. — THE CHURCH OUR SALVATION.

WE HEAR a great deal too often, in these days of ours, that catch-cry, "Safety first." It is too often taken as meaning that the only thing that really matters is to be on the safe side, and to save one's skin at any cost. It is thus the enemy of all enterprise and daring and risk in noble causes. No, "safety first" is often mean and cowardly. On the other hand, our cry might well be, "Salvation first". Because, though a man may lawfully risk his temporal life in a good cause, he may not deliberately endanger his eternal salvation.

To make sure, as far as in us lies, of our salvation is not cowardice, but ordinary prudence. It is obedience to the will of God.

Naturally, then, we look around us seeking where the salvation of our souls may be secured most easily and most certainly. We find that there is an institution set up by God Himself for this very purpose — helping men to save their souls. You have read in your Bible history the story of the Flood by which mankind, as it then existed, was all but wiped out. And you remember that God provided one means whereby a little group of human beings was to be saved — the Ark. Well, Christ our Lord launched on the waves of the world another means of salvation for His chosen ones — His Church. I have likened it to the Ark because, like the Ark, it is the means of safety for those whom God wills to save, but it is perhaps more like Peter's boat on the waters of Galilee. For Peter is at the helm and Christ Himself is within it. And so it can never founder. For twenty centuries, the storms have beaten upon it and still it rides the waves.

No doubt, men may be saved by God's great mercy through a good life according to their lights, combined with genuine ignorance of the truth, but Peter's bark is Christ's appointed means of safety, and we, who, thank God, are within, are absolutely certain that it cannot fail, because Christ's promise cannot fail. "Behold I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world."

The Church, our way to secure Salvation.

But there is far more to be said than this. The Church is not content with merely providing a place of safety. All her efforts are directed towards securing the salvation of her children.

Now the dangers to men's salvation may be summed up in these two — error or false doctrine and sin.

For her tireless, ceaseless vigilance against religious error — in other words, against heresy — her children can never be too grateful. The Church is absolutely certain of her doctrine — she ought to be after two thousand years of study; she knows that every teaching that contradicts the Faith given her by Christ is false, and she has no hesitation in condemning it in plainest terms.

Our other deadly foe is sin. Now, though individual Christians even in the highest places are all of them but weak mortals and liable to fall, still the Church, as an organization, is at war with sin. Her moral code makes The Church wholly for purity and virtue as against vice and evil in all its forms. Her laws are laws of righteousness. What is her Index of Forbidden Books but a great effort to keep sin and error out of her children's minds and lives? Her pulpits ring with warnings against sin. But her mightiest weapon of all is the confessional. And, as I have spoken of the confessional, let us remember that there are two sides to it — the side of the penitent, which all of us know so well, and the side of the Church, which we sometimes forget. Christ instituted the Sacrament but it is the Church who makes it easy and simple for all, who sends her priests to sit for long, weary hours listening to the sorry and painful stories of the penitents. Let us not forget it and be grateful to her — nor forget to be grateful to them.

VI. — THE CHURCH, A SCHOOL OF HOLINESS.

HAVE YOU ever reflected on the fact, at first sight strange, that nowhere outside the Catholic Church are there to be found men and women who could well be described as what Catholics call Saints? There have been and are, and please God always will be, in other Christian bodies men and women who are pious, God-fearing, charitable, and the rest, but Saints — no; not heroes and heroines of God, not men and women of heroic mortification, purity, humility, charity, love of God. If there have been such, let them be named. At all events, no one will dare to speak of Saint Martin Luther, Saint John Calvin, or Saint John Knox. To speak of Henry VIII or Crammer or Elizabeth in that way would be little short of blasphemy. But the Church numbers her Saints by the thousand in every age and in well-nigh every land.

Why is this? Simply because, thanks to her Divine Founder, the Church is holy herself and is a school of holiness for her children. This holiness Saint Paul set forth in one great sentence: "Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her sake, that He might sanctify her, purifying her in the bath of water by means of the word [Baptism], and that He might present her to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without blemish." Well might she be holy since she is the mystical body of Christ. Not all, alas! of her children are holy, but those that fall from holiness do so in spite of her, and those who are holy are such because sanctified by her. The holiness of her children is the very purpose of her existence.

Notice in the first place how the Church values sanctity. The Saints are her heroes. She treasures their memory. Their names are enshrined in the Mass. The anniversaries of their deaths are celebrated for all time.

Day after day, her priests and her faithful have upon their lips names of martyrs and confessors and virgins who passed from the earth many hundreds of years ago. Priests read daily in their breviary the story of these lives, humble, hidden, long-forgotten by the world, but remembered by the Church for ever. She is never tired of holding them up before us as models. Every canonization is a great sermon to the world. Their faces and their deeds live still in bronze and marble and stained-glass window. Their virtues are retold a thousand times from the pulpits of the Catholic world. Their very relics are preserved with deepest veneration.

Now, the sanctity of saints is to be put down first to the grace of God, and then to their own personal efforts. But in God's Providence His grace is given largely through the Church, and those personal efforts are wonderfully aided by the ways and means of holiness with which Christ endowed His Church. From earliest years the Catholic child is, or would be, if the Church had her

way, guided with holy influences. He is taught the beautiful prayers that he will say the rest of his life. Our Lord, our Lady and the saints become familiar through their pictures. For every action and circumstance of his life, the Church has provided blessings and “sacramentals” — grace at meals, signs of the cross, holy water, and the rest. By her liturgical feasts and fasts, she keeps reminding him of the mysteries of religion and every circumstance of the life of Our Saviour. Then he is taught the “devotions” that have gradually come to flourish in the Church — new in emphasis and form, not in substance — the devotion to our Lady, exquisite model of purity and sweetness and love, — the devotion to the Sacred Heart, with all its marvellous fruits, and so of the rest.

But above all else in their power to sanctify are the Church’s sacraments and sacrifice. There is the sacrament that keeps sin at bay, there is the sacrament that brings the soul into personal intimate contact with the source of all holiness; and there is the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which brings down on the world and on individual souls endless graces and blessings. These things were the mainstay of the lives of the Saints, the sources of their holiness. They may be ours too.

VII. — THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD.

THE WORLD is the enemy of Christ and, consequently, of Christians. “If the world hates you,” He said, “know ye that it has hated Me before you.” What did He mean by the “world”? Not, surely, the sum-total of the human beings inhabiting the earth, but that spirit and trend whereby men centre all their thoughts in this life to the exclusion of the supernatural — with all the consequences to their souls that flow from that. Nowadays it goes by the name of materialism, or secularism, or naturalism. This spirit is spreading everywhere like a hidden disease, leading men little by little to forgetfulness of God and of the supernatural world. There is but one institution, which continues to fight, and fight with success, against this disease — the Catholic Church. This, then, is one more thing the Church means to us — she is our defence against the world.

Such a defence we all need sorely. We are surrounded by the things of sense. We are “up to our eyes,” as we say, in our business, our heads are full of the worries and cares of life. Gradually the supernatural world comes to seem a mere unreal shadow. But the Church is on the watch. She insists upon reminding us of the other world. She calls us to her churches, and there, once a week at least, we find ourselves not in a mere large hall, but in the sanctuary of God, in the actual bodily presence of Christ. And everything around us, if only we will let it, reminds us of the spiritual world. So, too, do the sermons we hear. And then from time to time, there are missions and retreats, which bring the great truths of faith more vividly and impressively before us than ever.

Again, the true spirit of the Church is the very reverse of the spirit of the world. It is only too true that there have been men of the Church — priests and prelates and even Popes who have had more of the spirit of the world than of Christ. But the true spirit of the Church must be judged from her saints, her great writers, her religious Orders, the great army of her zealous and pious clergy the world over, the poor and lowly who are her most faithful children. This spirit is the spirit of the Gospel, of the Beatitudes, of the Sermon on the Mount, a spirit of humility, of love of purity, of charity and unselfishness, of faith and of prayer. And the spirit of the world is the very opposite of all this.

The religious Orders in particular are, taken as a whole, a perpetual challenge and defiance of the world. The less worldly-minded people can understand and admire their charity and works of mercy. Others can appreciate their educational work. But the world in Christ’s sense of the word utterly fails to understand their lives.

It can make nothing out of what is their very essence — the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; with the self-immolation which these vows imply. The poverty of the Franciscan, the hidden contemplation of the Carmelite, the austerity of the Trappist and the Poor Clare, and so on of the rest are meaningless to the world, nay a source of irritation that again and again in the history of the Church has led to the persecution and even the murder of helpless religious. Now, the Church fosters the religious life not for its own sake only, but for the sake of the faithful in general. She knows that its spirit is an antidote to the spirit of the world. And she knows in how many ways they help her in her mission, teaching her children, tending the sick and the poor, helping and guiding the faithful in their spiritual life.

Persecution of Christendom.

Again and again, as Christ prophesied, the Church has suffered for her opposition to the world and its ways. For the first three hundred years of her life she was persecuted by the Roman Empire, and in Rome itself, the centre, she existed only by burrowing underground. And without mentioning the many times she came into conflict with secular powers during the centuries that followed, most of us in our own lifetime have seen her persecuted in France and Spain and Mexico and Portugal and Russia. Irishmen need not to be reminded of the Penal Days nor Frenchmen of the great Revolution and its time of Terror. We have every reason to expect that it will be so to the end.

VIII. — THE CHURCH OUR PEACE.

IN WHAT WAS, perhaps, the most solemn moment of His life our Divine Lord said to the trusted few who surrounded Him at the Last Supper, and who at that moment formed the nucleus of His Church, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you." It was a precious legacy that He thus bequeathed to His Church. But lest they should misunderstand His promise and be disappointed at its apparent non-fulfilment, He straightway added: "Not as the world gives do I give unto you." For the peace He thus gave to His Church was, as we shall see, a very different peace from what human nature, left to itself, might have looked for. From the first, peace was promised as the Saviour's gift to men. Think of that song of the angels on the first Christmas night, "Glory to God and peace on earth to men of good will" (or men of His good pleasure). It was thus, He used to greet His disciples: "Peace be to you."

Peace.

What is this peace, which Christ promised to His Church and which all of us, her children, may possess? Certainly, it is not a mere absence of struggle and strife. The spiritual life must be a warfare, at least at times. Saint Augustine calls peace the tranquility of order, the state of things that prevails when everything is in its right place. Looking at it from our own soul's point of view it is a resting securely in the thought that fundamentally at least things are right; God is in His heaven and must prevail in the end. If we look into things a little more closely, we may say that we possess this peace, the peace of Christ, when we have peace of mind and peace of conscience. Was not this what Saint Paul had in mind when he said: "May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Peace of mind! When is the mind at peace? When it holds the truth and knows it. And by the truth I mean at present not scientific facts, not learning, not general information, but the truths by which one lives, the great truths of eternity. Now Christ has absolutely guaranteed to His Church that, in respect of these great truths, she cannot lead us astray. He has told us to listen to her teaching just as though we were listening to Him: "He that hears you hears Me." She is the very "pillar and ground"

of truth. (1 Timothy 3:15.) How many a weary, restless seeker after truth has found it at last in the Catholic Church, and with it has found peace, “peace through the truth.” The life-stories of converts to the Faith are full of glad testimonies to this deep peace of mind, which they have found at last.

Peace of conscience! Even when our mind is in full possession of the truth, we can yet lose our peace. We may let our peace be upset and disturbed by the petty worries and cares of life, but all the time deep down within us there is peace so long as our conscience, that still small voice that warns us when we have gone astray, does not reprove us. After all, so long as we are right with God, what does all the rest matter? The troubles of life can but ruffle the surface of our soul, like a breeze upon a lake: the depths remain tranquil and undisturbed. We have God’s peace because we are in His grace. And, even if we lose His grace, we can ever regain it through the power of forgiving sins, which Christ has given to His Church.

There are, of course, degrees of peace, and perfect peace is not for this life here below. Only when we find ourselves in our true home shall perfect peace be ours. So long as we are exiles and wayfarers, we must walk the stony ways and feel the thorns of life. But remember, sorrows however bitter, disappointments however keen, need not be the destroyers of our peace, so long as we have the two great gifts which we find within God’s Church, truth for the peace of our minds and forgiveness with restoration to grace for the peace of our consciences.

Let us cling with all our souls to this peace until the day comes when we shall at last “enter into peace,” and the Church shall chant over our poor mortal remains her last blessing: *Requiescat in pace*, may he rest in peace.

IX. — THE CHURCH OUR MOTHER.

THERE IS A CURRENT PHRASE, often heard from the lips of preachers and often to be read in religious works — “Our holy mother the Church.” It is truly a Catholic phrase, and goes back to ancient times. One of the early Fathers wrote: “He cannot have God for his Father who will not have the Church for his mother.” It is used, of course, without any disparagement of the dear mother who bore us or of our Mother in heaven. And it has a consoling and true meaning that is all its own. It means that from birth to death she watches over and nurtures her children, their souls first of all, with the solicitude and anxious carefulness of a mother. Let us, if you will, call her the foster-mother of our souls. This may seem to you a pious exaggeration, but what are the facts?

In the first place, she brings our souls into the spiritual world, for baptism has always been considered a new birth whereby we become the children of the Church. It is for its earthly mother then to fill the opening mind of the child with thoughts of God and holy things, to teach it to lisp the names of Jesus and Mary. Then the Church is ready with her school. It may be a school in which the teachers themselves are priests or nuns or brothers — that is to say, those whose vocation, whose whole business is to care for the moral and religious training of Christ’s little ones.

Millions of Catholic children the world over frequent such schools. Or else, though the teachers are laymen and women, it may be under the management of the clergy, as it is here in Ireland. And, if it is not so everywhere, that is not the Church’s fault. There is nothing she has more at heart than the religious education of the young. And Catholics in almost every country have faced untold sacrifices that they might give their dearest ones into her keeping.

Meantime, like a true mother, from our very early years to the close of our lives, from first Communion to viaticum, she nourishes our souls with that bread which Christ has given her. And

when, despite this nourishment, these souls fall into spiritual sickness, she has remedy to hand — the Sacrament of Penance. Through the Church alone, we have access to the Eucharist, and through the Church alone, we have forgiveness of sins.

She is ready with her help and her blessing for certain great moments and circumstances of our lives. Before we pass out of childhood into manhood and spiritually come of age, there is a sacrament to be received through which the Holy Spirit pours out upon us special graces to hearten and strengthen us for the battle of life. When the young man has made the momentous choice of God's special service for the rest of his days here below, she consecrates and blesses his state by the sacrament of the priesthood. Certain men and women she consecrates in a special way to God by the religious profession and the three vows. While for the many who choose, indeed, God's service, but not in this special, dedicated way, she has another sacrament ready wherewith to bless the union of man and woman, thus hallowing and consecrating the Christian family in its very source. And, when at length the evening of life draws down, we know that she does not forget us, that Christ has put into her motherly hands still another sacrament for that last dread hour. As the bodily strength is fast ebbing away and death stealing upon its victim, her priest comes to anoint the Christian with symbolic oils as for his last combat. The body of Christ, too, is borne to him for the last time. So that he goes to meet his God sealed by holy Church with the sign of salvation and fresh from the embrace of the Saviour Himself. And when the soul has set out upon its journey, how tenderly the Church cares for the poor remains. With what sublime and touching rites she lays it to rest: how humbly and entreatingly she prays for mercy on the departed soul. She is our mother even beyond the grave.

X. — THE CHURCH AND THE BLESSED SACRAMENT.

THE BLESSED SACRAMENT is the supreme gift of Christ to the world. It is a gift, above all His other gifts, straight from His Heart. He gave it once for all that night of His Last Supper. Then He handed it over into the keeping of His Church in trust for mankind. How has she kept that trust? Observe how utterly and completely He gave this gift, which was Himself, into her care. He said: "This is my body, this is my blood. Take ye and eat . . ." and then "Do this in memory of Me." That was all.

He might well have laid down the minutest and the strictest regulations for the due celebration of this awful rite. He might have hedged round His sacramental life with safeguards and restrictions, to keep at arm's length all profanity and irreverence, nay, even all undue familiarity. But no: all was left to His Church.

The Mass.

For what she has done to carry out her Founder's behest, we owe her the profoundest gratitude. For it is we her children who have benefited by it all. In the first place, then, she has given us the Mass. The essence of the Mass, indeed, is the re-enacting of that scene of the first consecration, which was itself, as it were, an anticipation of Calvary. But it is the Church that gradually built up round this core what we call 'the Mass', High Mass and Low Mass, as we have it today according to the rubrics or regulations issued by Pope Saint Pius V. To her, the Church, we owe that solemn, reverent, beautiful ceremony, charged with exquisite symbolism, full of significant and devotional prayer, an act of worship worthy even of God, in that it is the oblation of One who is Himself God. Every rubric or direction to the priest as to his gestures and tones has been thought out under her

direction by minds full of reverence and the spirit of worship. Our glorious liturgy is the creation of the Church, and we can never thank her enough for it.

Then next to the Mass, there is Communion. Our Lord said, "Take ye and eat." To His Church He left it to determine who would be admitted to this heavenly banquet, and when, and how. Was she to reserve it to her priests?

Or, if the faithful laity might receive, was it to be once in a lifetime or once in a year? And must they prepare themselves by seclusion and rigorous fasting and prolonged prayer? Well, she has contrived to combine reverence with the most lavish liberality. Souls in mortal sin or steeped in irreverence and indifference may not approach to receive the God of holiness and purity. But, apart from such, none is too little or too lowly to draw near. He loves especially the little ones and the poor, the sorrow laden and the repentant sinner. His Church, in the spirit of Her Master, bids them come to Him, even every day, and forbids them not.

But, in fulfilling her Eucharistic trust, she has not confined herself to these two essential rites. In the course of the ages she has devised, and encouraged her children to practise, yes, a hundred forms of Eucharistic devotion. She has, first of all, lodged her divine Guest, where all may see His dwelling and come to adore Him, in buildings, grander than all around them, which she has raised in His honour. From this lodging, she brings Him forth and holds Him aloft in golden monstrances amid clouds of incense that He may bless His prostrate people. Or she sets Him high up amid lights and flowers where the faithful can stream in from their daily work the livelong day to spend sweet moments of worship and contemplation. Or she carries Him solemnly with song and pomp and flowers and throngs of surpliced priests through streets of cities or through the summer fields.

She has fostered, encouraged, blessed every effort of her children to honour Him who is above all honour. There is the Feast of Corpus Christi; there are confraternities of the Blessed Sacrament and 'Quarant Ore' (the Forty Hours devotion), nocturnal adoration, and "Crusaders" and Orders of priests and of nuns who have made the Blessed Sacrament the centre and mainspring of their lives. Let us love the Church because she gives us Christ under His sacramental veils.

XI. — THE CHARITY OF THE CHURCH.

THE PRIMARY CONCERN of the Church is with our souls, our eternal welfare. She exists to lead us to God. But she has the true spirit of her Master and Lord, and she knows that in His love for us He is concerned about our temporal wants too, and longs to see us happy even in this life. And so, besides the spiritual, there are the corporal works of mercy. And, besides the charity that ministers to men's souls, there is the charity that ministers to their bodily needs. Indeed, this latter has come to be the common meaning of the word, and it is in that sense chiefly that I am using it now.

The Church, then, has always held it to be part of her divine mission to tend the sick, to relieve the poor, to care for the orphan, the widow, and the aged. Why? There is first the example of the Master who spent a great part of His life in relieving bodily ills and distresses. There is next the precept of the Master who made charity in this sense and almsgiving in particular, part of the Christian duty, and represented man's judgment at the last as turning on its fulfilment. But there is a deeper reason still. Our Lord Himself expressed it in one emphatic sentence: "As often as you have done it to one of these my lowliest brethren you have done it to me." Thus does He identify Himself with the poor and the suffering and the abandoned.

This it is which makes true Christian charity something altogether unique. Mercy and charity were unknown to the world before Christianity. It might almost be said that they are still unknown to the world outside of Christianity. And if there is any semblance of them in the non-Christian world, that is surely thanks to Christianity.

But in the Catholic Church, they have always flourished exceedingly. Some of us may not stand in need of mercy and charity, yet we must not therefore fail to set down as another item of what the Church means to us her children, and what we owe to her, that she is the inspirer of a charity that ministers to every form of human misery.

Look around you and think a little. Where in the world is there anything like Catholic charity? There is the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, spread now in every land. What would the poor do but for it? There are the Sisters of Charity and the Sisters of Mercy to care for the poor and the sick and the orphans. There are the wonderful Little Sisters of the Poor to look after the aged. There are nursing Sisters and Brothers. No sort of want or distress is forgotten — the Magdalen, the blind, the deaf and dumb, the dying, the crippled child, the insane, the widow, the orphan, the criminal. And remember that the greater part of all this marvellous work of love and mercy, and self-sacrifice, is done by those who have given up to it their entire lives. Once for all they have turned their back upon a life of ease and comfort and liberty to live a life of obscure self-denial and lowly service.

All this is going on in our midst and at our very doors, and yet there are many Catholics who scarcely bestow a thought on it. It may be that some great outstanding example comes home to us. We are moved by the story of Saint Peter Claver, slave of the Negroes, or of Father Damien, apostle of the lepers [now canonized]. Now, in the annals of the Church, even down to these days of ours, there are recorded hundreds of such life-stories, and there are many thousands of others that are recorded only in the Book of Life.

How different Catholic charity is from Government relief none know fully but those who have experienced both. We in Ireland are familiar with the great gaunt buildings called poorhouses or (ironically, one would imagine) workhouses, where the paupers (as they were officially called) were herded together, sorted out in classes, and in the old days treated little better than criminals. And there were and are in many countries the State orphanages and reformatories, and so on. How unspeakably different are institutions conducted by Catholic charity, above all by the Nuns. Truly, the poor and afflicted have reason to love the Church.

XII. — THINKING WITH THE CHURCH.

WE HAVE BEEN considering from many points of view what the Church means or ought to mean to every Catholic. Now there are many Catholics, possibly some even among readers of these pages, to whom the Church does not mean, or at all events has not yet come to mean, all that. Why so? Well, in this last chapter I am going to suggest one reason at any rate. It is because they are out of harmony with what I may call the mind of the Church, the Catholic spirit. They have either neglected to gain a real grasp of the Faith or else they have allowed themselves to fall under the influence of their environment, whether that be Protestant, or irreligious, or simply worldly.

Now, I cannot hope to explain in a few pages how our minds may be brought into line with the mind of the Church. I must only take a few leading points as illustrations, and that in the briefest way. First, then, what sort of attitude do you take up when the Church is being discussed and criticised? Is it one of courageous loyalty? Do you stand up for the Church? Now, I do not suggest that Catholics should be quarrelsome or needlessly combative. There may be cases where silence is

best, because to speak would lead to a quarrel and no good would be done. But let me suppose that there is no immediate danger of a quarrel and that you have as good a right as others present to express your opinion. Do you listen to the Church being run down with weak acquiescence? I suggest that you should listen carefully so as to know who and what is being criticised. Is it the doings of some particular priest or group of priests? Well, they are neither infallible nor impeccable, and even laymen may be within their rights in blaming or condemning them, if any good object is to be gained by doing so. Or, on the other hand, is it some teaching or universal practice of the Church? In that case, you know where you are. If you are a Catholic, you believe that the Church cannot err in doctrine or morals. If it is the teaching Church, the Pope, the Bishops of a whole country, or the Roman Congregations confirmed by the Pope that are in question, it is clearly out of place for an individual Catholic to criticise and condemn. Such condemnation hits the Church herself.

The true Catholic believes all that the Church lays down as necessary for belief, that is, all the truths of faith. No doubt, Catholics believe a great many things besides those that are strictly of faith. Such beliefs are on a different footing from the truths of faith.

You are not strictly bound to believe in Lourdes, for instance, or to like this or that devotion, or to accept many things that Catholics commonly believe in connection with even such great truths as heaven and hell and purgatory. But have you any real and genuine reason for being out of sympathy with the Catholic world? People far wiser and more learned than you have found no difficulty in these things.

There are certain fundamental devotions which are the very mark and badge of Catholics — the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, the devotion to the Sacred Heart, the devotion to our Lady. If these mean little or nothing to you, there is something wrong, and very wrong, with your Catholicism. And there is likewise something wrong with the Catholicism of a Catholic who lets himself be so influenced by the surrounding Protestant atmosphere as to be half ashamed of those very things that Protestants (and free-thinkers) most dislike: for instance, the dogmatic character of the Catholic religion (what after all is a dogma but the accurate statement of a teaching which the Church believes and knows to be true?), or Catholic devotion to the Saints, or indulgences, or stipends offered in connection with Masses for the dead, and so of many other things.

Lastly, the true Catholic is always mindful that he must not only accept with his mind the teaching of the Church, but bow his will to her commands. For she has authority from Christ Himself over the souls of men in all that pertains to their eternal welfare, and she herself is the sole judge of the limits of her authority. Let us not only obey, but trust, her wholly.

(Thanks to the Irish Messenger.)
