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DISCOURSES  
TO MIXED CONGREGATIONS.  
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## DISCOURSE XIII.

### MYSTERIES OF NATURE AND OF GRACE.

I am going to assert, what some persons, my brethren, those especially whom it most concerns, will not hesitate to call a great paradox; but which nevertheless I consider to be most true, and likely to approve itself to you more and more, the oftener you turn your thoughts to the subject, and likely to be confirmed in the religious history of this country, as time proceeds. It is this:—that it is quite as difficult, and quite as easy, to believe that there is a God in heaven, as to believe that the Catholic Church is His oracle and minister on earth. I do not mean to say, that it is really difficult to believe in God, (God Himself forbid!) no; but that belief in God and belief in His Church stand on the same kind of foundation; that the proof of the one truth is like the proof of the other truth; and that the objections which may be made to the one are like the objections which may be made to the other; and that, as right reason and sound judgment overrule objections to the being of a God, so do they supersede and set aside objections to the divine mission of the Church. And I consider that, when once a man has a real hold of the great doctrine that there is a God, in its true meaning and bearings, then, (provided there be no disturbing cause, no peculiarities in his circumstances, involuntary ignorance, or the like,) he will be led on without an effort, as by a natural continuation of that belief, to believe also in the Catholic Church as God's messenger or Prophet; and he will dismiss as worthless the objections which are adducible against the latter truth as he dismisses objections adducible against the former. And I consider, on the other hand, that, when a man does not believe in the Church, then, (the same accidental impediment being put aside, as before,) there is nothing in reason to keep him from doubting the being of a God.

The state of the case is this;—every one spontaneously embraces the doctrine of the existence of God, as a first principle, and a necessary assumption. It is not so much proved to him, as borne in upon his mind irresistibly, as a truth which it does not occur to him, nor is possible for him, to doubt; so various and so abundant is the witness for it contained in the experience and the conscience of every one. He cannot unravel the process, or put his finger on the independent arguments, which conspire together to create in him the certainty which he feels; but certain of it he is, and he has neither the temptation nor the wish to doubt it, and he could, should need arise, at least point to the books or the persons who had in custody the various formal proofs on which the being of a God rested, and the irrefragable demonstration thence resulting against the freethinker and the sceptic. At the same time he certainly would find, if he was in a condition to pursue the subject himself, that unbelievers had the advantage of him so far as this,—that there were a number of objections to the doctrine which he could not answer, questions which he could not solve, mysteries which he could neither conceive nor explain; he would perceive that the proof might be more perfect and complete than it is; he would find indeed any thing to invalidate that proof, but many things which might embarrass him in discussion, or afford a plausible, though not a real, excuse for doubting about it.

The case is pretty much the same as regards the great moral law of God. We take it for granted, and rightly; what could we do, where should we be, without it? how could we conduct ourselves, if there were no difference between right and wrong, and if one action were as acceptable to our Creator as another? Impossible! if any thing is true and divine, the rule of conscience is such, and it is frightful to suppose the contrary. Still, in spite of this, there is quite room for objectors to insinuate doubts about its authority or its enunciations; and where an inquirer is cold and fastidious, or careless, or wishes an excuse for disobedience, it is easy for him to perplex and disorder his reason, till he begins to question whether what he has all his life thought to be sins, are really such, and whether conscientiousness is not in fact a superstition.

And in like manner as regards the Catholic Church; she bears upon her the tokens of divinity, which come home to any mind at once, which has not been possessed by prejudice and educated in suspicion. It is not so much a process of inquiry as an instantaneous recognition, on which it believes. Moreover it is possible to analyze the arguments, and draw up in form the great proof, on which her claims rest; but,

on the other hand, it is quite possible also for opponents to bring forward certain imposing objections, which, though they do not really interfere with it, still are specious in themselves, and are sufficient to arrest and entangle the mind, and to keep it back for a fair examination of it, and of the vast array of arguments of which it consists. I am alluding to such objections as the following:—How can Almighty God be Three and yet One: how can Christ be God and yet man; how can He be at once in the Blessed Sacrament under the form of Bread and Wine, and yet in heaven; how can the doctrine of eternal punishment be true;—or again, how is it that, if the Catholic Church is from God, the gift of belonging to her is not, and has not been, granted to all men; how is it that so many apparently good men are external to her; why should she pay such honor to the Blessed Virgin and all Saints; how is it that, since the Bible also is from God, it admits of being quoted in opposition to her teaching;—in a word, how is it, if she is from God, that every thing which she does, and says, and is, is not perfectly intelligible to man; intelligible, not only to man in general, but to the reason, and judgment, and taste of every individual of the species, taken one by one?

Now, whatever my anxiety may be about the future, I trust I need at present have none in insisting, before a congregation however mixed, on the mysteries or difficulties which attach to the doctrine of God's existence, and which must be acquiesced in by every one who believes it. I trust, and am sure, that as yet it is safe even to put before a Protestant some of the stupendous wonders which he is obliged to accept, whether he will or no, when he confesses there is a God. I am going to do so, not wantonly, but with a definite object, by way of showing him, that he is not called on to believe any thing in the Catholic Church more strange or inexplicable than he already admits when he believes in a God; so that, if God exists in spite of the difficulties attending the doctrine, so the Church may be of divine origin, though that doctrine too has its difficulties;—nay, I might even say, the Church is divine, because of those difficulties; for, if there be mysteriousness in her teaching, this does but show that she proceeds from Him, who is Himself Mystery, in the most simple and elementary ideas which we have of Him, whom we cannot contemplate at all except as One who is absolutely greater than our reason, and utterly strange to our imagination.

First then, consider that Almighty God had no beginning, and that this is necessary from the nature of the case, and inevitable. For if (to suppose what is absurd) the maker of the visible world was himself made by some other maker, and that maker again by another, you must any how come at last to a first Maker who had no maker, that is, who had no beginning. Else you will be forced to say that the world was not made at all, or made itself, and itself had no beginning, which is more wonderful still; for it is much easier to conceive that a Spirit, such as God is, existed from eternity, than that this material world was eternal. Unless then we are resolved to doubt that we live in a world of beings at all, unless we doubt our own existence, if we do but grant that there is something or other now existing, it follows at once, that there must be something which has always existed, and never had a beginning. This then is certain from the necessity of the case; but can there be a more overwhelming mystery than it is? To say that a being had no beginning seems a contradiction in terms; it is a mystery as great, or rather greater, than any in the Catholic Faith. For instance, it is the teaching of the Church that the Father is God, the Son God, and the Holy Ghost God, yet that there is but One God; this is simply incomprehensible to us, but at least so far as this, it involves no self-contradiction, because God is not Three and One in the same sense, but He is Three in one sense and One in another; on the contrary, to say that any being has no beginning, is like a statement which means nothing, and is an absurdity. And so again, Protestants think that the Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence cannot be true, because, if so, our Lord's Body is in two places at once, in Heaven and upon the Altar, and this they think an impossibility. Now, Catholics do not see that it is impossible at all; they do not indeed see how it can be, but they do not see why it should not be; there are many things which exist, though we do not know how;—do we know how any thing exists?—there are many truths which are not less truths because we cannot picture them to ourselves or conceive them; but at any rate, the Catholic doctrine concerning the Real Presence is not more mysterious than how Almighty God can exist, yet never have come into existence. We do not know what is meant by saying that Almighty God will have no end, but still there is nothing here to distress or confuse our reason, but it distorts our mental sight and makes our head giddy to have to say, (what nevertheless we cannot help saying,) that He had no beginning. Reason brings it home clearly to

us, yet reason again starts at it; reason starts back from its own discovery, yet is obliged to embrace it. It discovers, it shrinks, it submits; such is the state of the case, but, I say, they who are obliged to bow their neck to this mystery, need not be so sensitive about the mysteries of the Catholic Church.

Then think of this again, which, though not so baffling to the reason, still is most bewildering to the imagination;—that, if the Almighty had no beginning He must have lived a whole eternity by Himself. What an awful thought! for us, our happiness lies in looking up to some object or pursuing some end; we, poor mortal men, cannot understand a prolonged rest, except as a sort of sloth and self-forgetfulness; we are wearied if we meditate for one short hour; what then is meant when it is said, that He, the Great God, passed infinite years by Himself? What was the end of His being? He was his own end; how incomprehensible! And since He lived a whole eternity by Himself, He might, had he so willed, never have created any thing; and then from eternity to eternity there would have been none but He, none to witness Him, none to contemplate Him, none to adore and praise Him. How oppressive to think of! that there should have been no space, no time, no succession, no variation, no progression, no scope, no termination; One Infinite Being from first to last, and nothing else! And why He? O, my brethren, here is mystery without mitigation, without relief! The mysteries of revelation, the Catholic dogmas, inconceivable as they are, are most gracious, most loving, laden with mercy and consolation to us, not only sublime, but touching and winning;—such is the doctrine that God became man. Incomprehensible it is, and we can but adore, when we hear that the Almighty Being, of whom I have been speaking, "who inhabiteth eternity," has taken flesh and blood of a Virgin's veins, lain in a Virgin's womb, been suckled at a Virgin's breast, been obedient to human parents, worked at a humble trade, been despised by His own, been buffeted and scourged by His creatures, been nailed hand and foot to a Cross, and died a malefactor's death; and that now, under the form of Bread, He should lie upon our Altars, and suffer Himself to be hidden in a small tabernacle! Most incomprehensible, but still, while the thought overwhelms our imagination, it also overpowers our heart; it is the most subduing, affecting, piercing thought which can be pictured to us. It thrills through us, and draws our tears, and abases us, and melts us into love and affection, when we dwell upon it. O most tender and compassionate Lord! You see, He puts out of our sight that mysteriousness of His which is only awful and terrible; He insists not on His past eternity; He would not scare and trouble His poor children, when at length He speaks to them; no, He does but surround Himself with His own infinite bounty and compassion; He bids His Church tell us only of His mysterious condescension. Still our reason, prying, curious reason, searches out for us those prior and more austere mysteries, which are attached to His being, and He suffers it to find them out; He suffers it, for He knows that that same reason, though it recoils from them, must put up with them; He knows, that they will be felt by it to be clear, inevitable truths, appalling as they are. He suffers it to discover them, in order that, both by the parallel and by the contrast between what reason infers and what the Church reveals, we may be drawn on from the awful discoveries of the one to the gracious announcements of the other; and in order too, that the rejection of revelation may be its own punishment, and that they who stumble at the Catholic mysteries may be dashed back upon the adamant rocks which base the Throne of the Everlasting, and may wrestle with the stern conclusion of reason, since they refuse the bright consolations of faith.

And now another difficulty, which reason discovers, yet cannot explain. Since the world exists, and did not ever exist, there was a time when the Almighty changed the state of things, which had been from all eternity, for another. It was wonderful that He should be by Himself for eternity; moreover it had been wonderful, had He never changed it; but it is wonderful too, that He did change it. It is wonderful that, being for an eternity alone, He should pass from that solitary state, and surround Himself with millions upon millions of living beings. A state which had been from eternity might well be considered unchangeable; yet it ceased, and another superseded it. What end could the All-blessed have in beginning to create, and in determining to pass a second eternity so differently from the first? This mystery, my brethren, will somewhat resign us, I think, to the difficulty of a question sometimes put to us by unbelievers, viz., if the Catholic Religion is from God, why was it set up so late in the world's day? why did some thousands of years pass before Christ came, and His gifts were poured upon the race of man? But surely, it is not so strange that the Judge of men should have changed His dealings towards them "in

the midst of the years," as that He should have changed the history of the heavens in the midst of eternity. If creation had a beginning at a certain date, why should not redemption? and if we be forced to believe, whether we will or no, that there was once an innovation upon the course of things on high, and that the universe arose out of nothing, and if, even when the earth was created, still it remained "empty and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep," what so great marvel is it, that there was a fixed period in God's inscrutable counsels, during which there was "a bond fastened upon all people," and "a web drawn over them," and then a date, at which the bond of thraldom was broken, and the web of error was unravelled?

Well, let us suppose the innovation decreed in the eternal purpose of the Most High, and that creation is to be; of whom, my brethren, shall it consist? doubtless of beings who can praise and bless Him, who can admire His perfections, and obey His will, who will be least unworthy to minister about His Throne and to keep Him company. Look around, and say how far facts bear out this anticipation. There is but one race of intelligent beings which the natural sight knows any thing of, and a thousand races which cannot love or worship Him who made them. Millions upon millions enjoy their brief span of life, but man alone can look up to heaven; and what is man, many though he be, what is he in the presence of so innumerable a multitude? Consider the profusion of beasts that range the earth, of birds under the firmament of heaven, of fish in the depths of the ocean, and above all the multiplied varieties of insects, which baffle our sight by their very minuteness, and our powers of conception by their abundance. Doubtless they all show forth the glory of the Creator, as do the elements, "fire, hail, snow, and ice, stormy winds, which fulfil His word." Yet not one of them has a soul, not one of them knows who made it or that it is made, not one can render Him any proper service, not one can love Him. Indeed how far does the whole world come short of what it might be! it is not even possessed of created excellence in fulness. It is stamped with imperfection; every thing indeed is good in its kind, for God could create nothing otherwise, but how much more fully might He have poured His glory and infused His grace into it, how much more beautiful and divine a world might He have made than that which, after an eternal silence, He summoned into being! Let reason answer, I repeat, why is it that He did not surround Himself with spiritual intelligences, and animate every material atom with a soul? Why made He not the very footstool of His Throne and the pavement of His Temple of an angelic nature, beings who could praise and bless Him, while they did Him menial service? Set man's wit and man's imagination to the work of devising a world, and you would see, my brethren, what a far more splendid design he would submit for it, than met the good pleasure of the Omnipotent and the All-wise. Ambitious architect would he have been, if called to build the palace of the Lord of all, in which every single part would have been the best conceivable, the colors all the brightest, the materials the most costly, and the lineaments the most perfect. Pass from man's private fancies and ideas and fastidious criticisms on the vast subject; come to facts which are before our eyes, and report what meets them. We see an universe, material for the most part and corruptible, fashioned indeed by laws of infinite skill, and betokening an All-wise Hand, but lifeless and senseless; huge globes, hurled into space, and moving mechanically; subtle influences, penetrating into the most hidden corners and pores of the world, as quick and keen as thought, yet as helpless as the clay from which thought has departed. And next, life without sense; myriads of trees and plants, "the grass of the field," beautiful to the eye, but perishable and worthless in the sight of heaven. And then, when at length we discover sense as well as life, what, I repeat, do we see but a greater mystery still? We behold the spectacle of brute nature; of impulses, feelings, propensities, passions, which in us are ruled or repressed by a superintending reason, and from which, when ungovernable, we shrink, as fearful and hateful, because in us they would be sin. Millions of irrational creatures surround us, and it would seem as though the Creator had left part of His work in its original chaos, so monstrous are these beings, which move and feel and act without reflection and without principle. To matter He has given laws; He has divided the moist and the dry, the heavy and the rare, the light and dark; He has "placed the sand as a boundary for the sea, a perpetual precept which it shall not pass." He has tamed the elements, and made them servants of the universal good; but the brute beasts pass to and fro in their wildness and their isolation; no yoke on their neck or "bit in their lips," the enemies of all they meet, yet without the capacity of self-love. They live on each other's flesh by an