



# CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. I.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 1850.

NO. 12.

DISCOURSES  
TO MIXED CONGREGATIONS.  
BY JOHN HENRY NEWMAN,  
PRIEST OF THE ORATORY OF ST. PHILIP NERI.

DISCOURSE XI.

FAITH AND DOUBT.

Those who are drawn by curiosity or a better motive to inquire into the Catholic Religion, sometimes put to us a strange question,—whether, if they took up the profession of it, they should be at liberty, when they felt inclined, to reconsider the question of its divine authority, meaning by “reconsideration” an inquiry springing from doubt of it, and possibly ending in a denial. The same question, in the form of an objection, is often asked by those who have no thoughts at all of becoming Catholics, and who enlarge upon it, as something terrible, that whoever once enters the pale of the Church, on him the door of egress is shut for ever; that, once a Catholic, he never, never can doubt again; that, whatever his misgivings may be, he must stifle them, nay must start from them as the suggestions of the evil spirit; in short, that he must give up altogether the search after truth, and do a violence to his mind, which is nothing short of immoral. This is what is said, my brethren, by certain objectors, and their own view is, or ought to be, if they are consistent, this,—that it is a fault ever to make up our mind once for all on any religious subject whatever; and that, however sacred a doctrine may be, and however evident to us, we ought always to reserve to ourselves the liberty of doubting about it. I cannot help thinking that so extravagant a position, as this is, confutes itself; however I will consider the contrary, that is, the Catholic view of the subject, on its own merits, though without admitting the language in which it was just now stated.

It is then perfectly true, that the Church does not allow her children to entertain any doubt of her teaching; and that, first of all, simply for this reason, because they are Catholics only while they have faith, and faith is incompatible with doubt. No one can be a Catholic without a simple faith, that which the Church declares in God's Name, is God's word, and therefore true. A man must simply believe that the Church is the oracle of God; he must be as certain of her mission, as he is of the mission of the Apostles. Now would any one ever call him certain that the Apostles came from God, if, after professing his certainty, he added, that, for what he knew, he might one day doubt about their mission? Such an anticipation would be a real, though latent, doubt, betraying that he was not certain of it at present. A person who says, “I believe just at this moment, but perhaps I am excited, without knowing it, and I cannot answer for myself, that I shall believe to-morrow,” does not believe. A man who says, “Perhaps I am in a kind of delusion, which will one day pass away from me, and leave me as I was before;” or, “I believe as far as I can tell, but there may be arguments in the background which will change my view,” such a man has not faith at all. When the Protestants quarrel with us for saying, that those who join us must give up all ideas of ever doubting the Church in time to come, they do nothing else but quarrel with us for insisting on the necessity of faith in her. Let them speak plainly; our offence is that of demanding faith in the Holy Catholic Church, and nothing else. I must insist upon this: faith implies a confidence in a man's mind, that the thing believed is really true; but, if it is true, it never can be false. If it is true that God became man, what is the meaning of my anticipating a time when perhaps I shall not believe that God became man? this is nothing short of anticipating a time when I shall disbelieve a truth. And if I bargain to be allowed in time to come not to believe, or to doubt, that God became man, I am asking to be allowed to doubt or to disbelieve what is an eternal truth. I do not see the privilege of such a permission at all, or the meaning of wishing to secure it; if at present I have no doubt whatever about it, then I am but asking leave to fall into error; if at present I have doubts about it, then I do not believe it at present, or I have not faith. But I cannot really believe it now, and yet look forward to a time when perhaps I shall not believe it; to make provision for future doubt, is to doubt at present. It proves I am not in a fit state to become a Catholic now. I may love by halves, I may obey by halves: I cannot believe by halves: either I have faith, or I have it not.

And so again, when a man has become a Catholic, were he to set about following out a doubt which has occurred to him, he has already disbelieved. I have not to warn him against losing his faith, he is not merely in danger of losing it, he has lost it; from the nature of the case he has already lost it; he fell from grace at the moment when he deliberately determined

to pursue his doubt. No one can determine to doubt what he is sure of; but if he is not sure that the Church is from God, he does not believe it. It is not I who forbid him to doubt; he has taken the matter into his own hands, when he determined on asking for leave; he has begun, not ended in unbelief; his wish, his purpose is his sin. I do not make it so, it is such from the very state of the case. You sometimes hear, for example, of Catholics falling away, who will tell you it arose from reading the Scriptures, which opened their eyes to the “unscripturalness,” so they speak, of the Church of the Living God. No; Scripture did not make them disbelieve; (impossible!) they disbelieved when they opened the Bible; they opened it in an unbelieving spirit and for an unbelieving purpose; they would not have opened it, had they not anticipated, I might say hoped, that they should find things there inconsistent with Catholic teaching. They begin in pride and disobedience, and they end in apostasy. This then is the direct and obvious reason why the Church cannot allow her children the liberty of doubting the truth of her word. He who really believes in it now, cannot imagine the future discovery of reasons to shake his faith; if he imagines it, he has not faith; and that so many Protestants think it a sort of tyranny in the Church to forbid any children of hers to doubt about her teaching, only shows they do not know what faith is,—which is the case; it is a strange idea to them. Let a man cease to examine, or cease to call himself her child.

This is my first remark, and now I go on to a second. You may easily conceive, my brethren, that they who are entering the Church, or at least those who have entered it, have more than faith; that they have some portion of divine love also. They have heard in the Church of the charity of Him who died for them, and who has given them his seven Sacraments as the means of conveying the merits of His death to their souls, and they have felt more or less in those poor souls the beginnings of a responsive charity drawing them to Him. Now does it stand with a loving trust, better than with faith, to anticipate the possibility of doubting or denying the great mercies in which one is rejoicing? Take an instance; what would you think of a friend whom you loved, who could bargain that, in spite of his present trust in you, he might be allowed some day to doubt you? who, when a thought came into his mind, that you were playing a game with him, or that you were a knave, or a profligate, did not drive it from him with indignation, or laugh it away for its absurdity, but considered that he had an evident right to indulge it, nay, should be wanting in duty to himself, unless he did? Would you think that your friend trifled with truth, that he was unjust to his reason, that he was wanting in manliness, that he was hurting his mind, if he shrunk from it, or would you call him cruel and miserable if he did not? For me, my brethren, if he took the latter course, may I never be intimate with so unpleasant a person; suspicious, jealous minds, minds that keep at a distance from me, that insist on their rights, fall back on their own centre, are ever foreseeing offences, and are cold, censorious, wayward, and uncertain, these are often to be borne as a cross; but give me for my friend one who will unite heart and hand with me, who will throw himself into my cause and interest, who will take my part when I am attacked, who will be sure beforehand that I am in the right, and, if he is critical, as he may have cause to be towards a being of sin and imperfection, will be so from very love and loyalty, from anxiety that I should always show to advantage, and a wish that others should love me as heartily as he. I should not say a friend trusted me, who listened to every idle story against me, and I should like his absence better than his company, if he gravely told me that it was a duty he owed himself to encourage his misgivings of my honor.

Well, pass on to a higher subject;—could a man be said to trust in God and to love God, who was familiar with doubts whether there was a God at all, or who bargained that, just as often as he pleased, he might be at liberty to doubt whether God was good or just or almighty; and who maintained that, unless he did this, he was but a poor slave, that his mind was in bondage, and could render no free acceptable service to his Maker;—that the very worship which God liked, was one attended with a caveat, on the worshipper's part, that he did not promise to render it to-morrow, that he would not answer for himself that some argument might not come to light, which he had never heard before, which would make it a grave moral duty in him to suspend his judgment and his devotion? Why, I should say, my brethren, that that man was worshipping his own mind, his own dear self, and not God; that his ideas of God was a mere accidental form which his thoughts took at this time or that, for a long period or a short one, as the case might be, not an image of the great Eternal Object,

but a passing sentiment or imagination which meant nothing at all. I should say, and most men would agree, did they choose to give attention to the matter, that the person in question was a very self-conceited, self-wise man, and had neither love, nor faith, nor fear, nor any thing supernatural about him; that his pride must be broken, and his heart new made, before he was capable of any religious act at all. The argument is the same, in its degree, when applied to the Church; she comes to us, as a messenger from God, how can any one who feels this, who comes to her, who falls at her feet as such, make a reserve, that he may be allowed to doubt her at some future day? Let the world cry out, if it will, that his reason is in fetters; let it pronounce that he is a bigot, if he does not preserve his right of doubting; but he knows full well that he would be an ingrate and a fool, if he did. Fetters indeed! yes, “the cords of Adam,” the fetters of love, these are what bind him to the Holy Church; he is with the Apostle, the slave of Christ, the Lord of the Church; united, never to part, as he trusts, while life lasts, to her Sacraments, to her Sacrifices, to her Saints, to Mary, to Jesus, to God.

The truth is, my dear brethren, that the world, knowing nothing of the blessings of the Catholic faith, and prophesying nothing but ill concerning it, fancies that a convert, after the first fervor is over, feels nothing but disappointment, weariness, and offence in his new religion, and is secretly desirous of retracing his steps. This is at the root of the alarm and irritation which it manifests at hearing that doubts are incompatible with a Catholic's profession, because it is sure that doubts will come upon him, and then how pitiable will be his state! That there can be peace and joy and knowledge and freedom and spiritual strength in the Church, is a thought far beyond its imagination; for it regards her simply as a frightful conspiracy against the happiness of man, seducing her victims by specious professions, and when they are once hers, caring nothing for the misery which breaks upon them, so that by any means she may detain them in bondage. Accordingly it conceives we are in perpetual warfare with our own reason, fierce objections ever rising, and we forcibly repressing them. It believes that, after the likeness of a vessel which has met with some accident at sea, we are ever baling out the water which rushes in upon us, and have hard work to keep afloat; we just manage to linger on, either by an unnatural strain on our minds, or by turning them away from the subject of religion. The world disbelieves our doctrines itself, and cannot understand our own believing them. It considers them so strange, that it is quite sure, though we will not confess it, that we are haunted day and night with doubts, and tormented with the apprehension of yielding to them.—I really do think, that in the world's judgment, one principal part of a confessor's work is the putting down such misgivings of his penitents. It fancies that the reason is ever rebelling like the flesh; that doubt, like concupiscence, is elicited by every sight and sound, and the temptation insinuates itself in every page of letter-press and through the very voice of a Protestant polemic. When it sees a Catholic Priest, it looks hard at him, to make out how much there is in his composition of folly, and how much of hypocrisy. But, my dear brethren, if these are your thoughts, you are simply in error. Trust me, rather than the world, when I tell you, that it is no difficult thing for a Catholic to believe; and that unless he grievously mismanages himself, the difficult thing is for him to doubt. He has received a gift which makes faith easy; it is not without an effort, a miserable effort, that any one who has received that gift, unlearns to believe. He does violence to his mind, not in exercising, but in withholding his faith. When difficulties occur to him, which they may easily do if he lives in the world, they are as odious and unwelcome to him as impure thoughts to the virtuous. He does certainly shrink from them, he flings them away from him, but why? not in the first instance because they are dangerous, but because they are cruel and base. His loving Lord has done every thing for him, and has He deserved such a return? *Popule meus, quid feci tibi?* “O My people, what have I done to thee, or in what have I molested thee? answer thou Me. I brought thee out of the land of Egypt, and delivered thee out of the house of slaves; and I sent before thee face Moses, and Aaron, and Mary; I fenced thee in and planted thee with the choicest vines; and what is there that I ought to do more to My vineyard that I have not done to it?” He has poured on us His grace, He has been with us in our perplexities, He has led us on from one truth to another, He has forgiven us our sins, He has satisfied our reason, He has made faith easy, He has given us His Saints, He shows before us day by day His own Passion; why should I leave Him? What has He ever done to me but good? Why must I re-examine what I have examined once for all? Why must I listen to every idle word which flits past me against

Him, on pain of being called a bigot and a slave, when I should be behaving to the Most High, as you yourselves, who so call me, would not behave towards a human friend or benefactor? If I am convinced in my reason, and persuaded in my heart, why may I not be allowed to remain unmolested in my worship?

I have said enough on the subject; still there is a third point of view in which it may be useful to consider it. Personal prudence is not the first or second ground for turning away from objections to the Church, but a motive it is, and that from the peculiar nature of divine faith, which cannot be treated as an ordinary conviction or belief. Faith is the gift of God, and not a mere act of our own, which we are free to exert when we will. It is quite distinct from an exercise of reason though it follows upon it. I may feel the force of the argument for the divine origin of the Church; I may see that I ought to believe; and yet I may be unable to believe. This is no imaginary case; there is many a man who has ground enough to believe, who wishes to believe, but who cannot believe. It is always indeed his own fault, for God gives grace to all who ask for it, and use it, but still such is the fact, that conviction is not faith. Take the parallel case of obedience; many a man knows he ought to obey God, and does not and cannot,—through his own fault indeed, but still he cannot; for through grace alone can he obey. Now faith is not a mere conviction in reason, it is a firm assent, it is a clear certainty greater than any other certainty; and this is wrought in the mind by the grace of God, and by it alone. As then men may be convinced, and not act according to their conviction, so may they be convinced, and not believe according to their conviction. They may confess that the argument is against them, that they have nothing to say for themselves, and that to believe is to be happy; and yet after all, they avow they cannot believe, they do not know why, but they cannot; they acquiesce in unbelief, and they turn away from God and His Church. Their reason is convinced, and their doubts are moral ones, arising from an act of the will. In a word, the arguments for religion do not compel any one to believe, just as arguments for good conduct do not compel any one to obey. Obedience is the consequence of willing to obey, and faith is the consequence of willing to believe; we may see what is right, whether in matters of faith or obedience, of ourselves, but we cannot will what is right without the grace of God. Here is the difference between other exercises of reason, and arguments for the truth of religion. It requires no act of faith to assent to the truth that two and two make four; we cannot help assenting to it; and hence there is no merit in assenting to it; but there is merit in believing that the Church is from God; for though there are abundant reasons to prove it to us, yet we can, without an absurdity, quarrel with the conclusion; we may complain that it is not clearer, we may suspend our assent, we may doubt about it, if we will, and grace alone can turn a bad will into a good one.

And now you see, why a Catholic dare not in prudence attend to such objections as are brought against his faith; he has no fear of their proving that the Church does not come from God, but he is afraid, if he listened to them without reason, lest God should punish him by the loss of his supernatural faith. This is one cause of that miserable state of mind, to which I have already alluded, in which men would fain be Catholics, and are not. They have trifled with conviction, they have listened to arguments against what they knew to be true, and a deadness of mind has fallen on them; faith has failed them, and, as time goes on, they betray in their words and their actions, the judgment of God, with which they are visited. They become careless and unconcerned, or restless and unhappy, or impatient of contradiction; ever asking advice and quarrelling with it when given; not attempting to answer the arguments urged against them, but simply not believing. This is the whole of their case, they do not believe. And then it is quite an accident what becomes of them; perhaps they continue on in this perplexed and comfortless state, lingering about the Church, yet not of her; not knowing what they believe and what they do not, like blind men, or men deranged, who are deprived of the eye, whether of body or soul, and cannot guide themselves in consequence; ever exciting hopes of a return, and ever disappointing them;—or, if they are men of more vigorous minds, they launch forward in a course of infidelity, not really believing less, as they proceed, for from the first they believed nothing, but taking up, as time goes on, more and more consistent forms of error, till at last, if a free field is given them, they develop into atheism. Such is the end of those who, under the pretence of inquiring after truth, trifle with conviction.

Here then are some of the reasons why the Catholic Church cannot consistently allow her children to doubt the divinity and the truth of her words. Mere inquiry indeed into the grounds of our faith is not to