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DISCOURSES
TO MIXED CONGREGATIONS.
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DISCOURSE X.

FAITH AND PRIVATE JUDGMENT.

When we consider the beauty, the majesty, the completeness, the resources, the consolations, of the Catholic religion, it may strike us with wonder, my brethren, that it does not convert the multitude of those who come in its way. Perhaps you have felt the surprise yourselves; especially those of you who have been recently converted, and can compare it, from experience, with those religions which the millions of this country choose instead of it. You know, from experience, how barren, unmeaning, and baseless those religions are; what poor attractions they have, and how little they have to say for themselves. Multitudes indeed are of no religion at all; and you may not be surprised that those who cannot even hear the thought of God, should not feel drawn to His Church; numbers too hear very little about Catholicism, or a great deal of abuse and calumny, and you may not be surprised that they do not all at once become Catholic; but what may fairly surprise those who enjoy the fulness of Catholic blessings is, that those who see the Church ever so distantly, who see but gleams or the faint lustre of her majesty, yet should not be so far attracted by what they see as to seek to see more,—should not at least put themselves in the way to be led on to the Truth, which of course is not ordinarily recognized in its divine authority except by degrees. Moses, when he saw the burning bush, turned aside to see "that great sight;" Nathanael, though he thought no good could come out of Nazareth, at least followed Philip to Christ, when Philip said to him, "Come and see;" but the multitudes about us see and hear, in some measure, surely, many in ample measure, and yet are not persuaded thereby to see and hear more, are not moved to act upon their knowledge. Seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not; they are contented to remain as they are; they are not drawn to inquire, or at least not drawn to embrace.

Many explanations may be given of this difficulty; I will proceed to suggest to you one, which will sound like a truism, but yet has a meaning in it. Men do not become Catholics, because they have not faith. Now you may ask me, how this is saying more than that men do not believe the Catholic Church because they do not believe it; which is saying nothing at all. Our Lord, for instance, says, "He who cometh to Me shall not hunger, and he who believeth in Me shall never thirst;"—to believe then and to come are the same thing. If they had faith, of course they would join the Church, for the very meaning, the very exercise of faith, is joining the Church. But I mean something more than this; faith is a state of mind, it is a particular mode of thinking and acting, which is exercised, always indeed towards God, but in very various ways. Now I mean to say, that the multitude of men in this country have not this habit or character of mind. We could conceive, for instance, their believing in their own religions; this would be faith, though a faith improperly directed; but they do not believe even their own religions; they do not believe in anything at all. It is a definite defect in their minds: as we might say that a person had not the virtue of meekness, or of liberality, or of prudence, quite independently of this or exercise of the virtue, so there is such a virtue as faith, and there is such a defect as the absence of it. Now I mean to say that the great mass of men in this country have not this particular virtue called faith, have not this virtue at all. As a man might be without eyes or without hands, so they are without faith; it is a distinct want or fault in their soul; and what I say is, that, since they have not this faculty of believing, no wonder they do not embrace that, which cannot really be embraced without it. They do not believe anything at all in any true sense; and therefore they do not believe the Church in particular.

Now in the first place what is faith? it is assenting to a doctrine as true, which we do not see, which we cannot prove, because God says it is true, who cannot lie. And further than this, since God says it is true, not with His own voice, but by the voice of His messengers; it is assenting to what man says, not simply viewed as a man, but to what he is commissioned to declare, as a messenger, prophet, or ambassador from God. In the ordinary course of this world, we account things true either because we see them, or because we can perceive that they follow and are deducible from what we do see; that is, we gain truth by sight or by reason, not by faith. You will say indeed, that we accept a number of things which we

cannot prove or see, on the word of others; certainly; but then we do not think others speak from God; we accept what they say as the word of man; we have not commonly an absolute and unreserved confidence in them which nothing can shake. We know man is open to mistake, and we are always glad to find some confirmation of what he says, from other quarters, in any important matter: or we receive his information with negligence and unconcern, as something of little consequence, as a matter of opinion; or if we act upon it, it is as a matter of prudence, thinking it best and safest to do so. We take his word for what it is worth, and we use it according to our necessity, or its probability. We keep the decision in our own hands, and reserve to ourselves the right of re-opening the question whenever we please. This is very different from divine faith; he who believes that God is true, and that this is His word, which He has committed to man, has no doubt at all. He is as certain that the doctrine taught is true, as that God is true; and he is certain, because God is true, because God has spoken, not because he sees its truth or can prove its truth. That is, faith has two peculiarities;—it is most certain, decided, positive, immovable in its assent, and it gives this assent not because it sees with eye, or sees with the reason, but because it is told by one who comes from God.

This is what faith was in the time of the Apostles, as no one can deny, and what it was then, it must be now; else it ceases to be the same principle. I say, it certainly was this in the Apostles' time, for you know they preached to the world that Christ was the Son of God, that He was born of a Virgin, that He had ascended on high, that He would come again to judge all the living and the dead. Could the world see all this? could it prove it? how then were men to receive it? why did so many embrace it? on the word of the Apostles, who were, as their powers showed, messengers from God. They were to submit their reason to a living authority. Moreover what an Apostle said, his converts were bound to believe; when they entered the Church, they entered it in order to learn. The Church was their teacher; they did not come to argue, to examine, to pick and choose, but to accept whatever was put before them. No one doubts, no one can doubt this, of those primitive times. Christians were bound to take without doubting all that the Apostles declared to be revealed; if the Apostles spoke, they had to yield an internal assent of their minds; it would not be enough to keep silence, it would not be enough not to oppose; it was not allowable to credit in a measure; it was not allowable to doubt. No; if converts had their own private thoughts of what was said, and only kept them to themselves, if they made some secret opposition to the teaching, if they waited for further proof before they believed, it would be a proof that they did not think the Apostles were sent from God to reveal His will; it would be a proof that they did not in any true sense believe at all. Immediate, implicit, submission of the mind was in the lifetime of the Apostles the only, the necessary token of faith; then there was no room whatever for what is now called private judgment. No one could say, "I will choose my religion for myself, I will believe this, I will not believe that; I will pledge myself to nothing; I will believe just as long as I please and no longer; what I believe to-day I will reject to-morrow, if I choose. I will believe what they have as yet said, but I will not believe what they shall say in time to come." No; either the Apostles were from God, or they were not; if they were, every thing was to be believed; if they were not, there was nothing to believe. To believe a little, to believe more or less, was impossible; it contradicted the very notion of believing; if one part was to be believed, every part was to be believed; it was an absurdity to believe one thing and not another; for the word of the Apostles, which made one true, made the other true too; they were nothing in themselves, they were all things, they were an infallible authority, as coming from God. The world had either to become Christian, or to let it alone; there was no room for private tastes and fancies, no room for private judgment.

Now surely this is quite clear from the nature of the case; but it is also clear from the words of Scripture. "We give thanks to God," says St. Paul, "without ceasing, because, when ye had received from us the word of hearing, which is of God, ye received it, not as the word of men, but (as it really is) the word of God." Here you see St. Paul expresses what I have said above; that the word comes from God, that it is spoken by men, that it must be received, not as man's word, but as God's word. So in another place he says, "He who despiseth these things, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us His Holy Spirit." Our Saviour had made a like declaration already, "He that heareth you, heareth Me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me; and he that despiseth Me, despiseth Him that sent Me."

Accordingly St. Peter on the day of Pentecost said, "Men of Israel, hear these words, God hath raised up this Jesus, of whom we are witnesses. Let all the house of Israel know most certainly that God hath made this Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." At another time he said, "It is fitting to obey God, rather than man; we are the witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Ghost, whom God will give to all who obey Him." And again, "He charged us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He (Jesus) who is constituted by God Judge of the living and the dead." And you know that the continual declaration of the first preachers was, "Believe, and thou shalt be saved;" they do not say, "prove our doctrine by your own reason," nor "wait till you see, before you believe;" but, "believe without seeing and without proving, because our word is not our own, but God's word." Men might indeed use their reason in inquiring into the pretensions of the Apostles; they might inquire whether or not they did miracles; they might inquire whether they were predicted in the Old Testament as coming from God; but when they had ascertained this fairly in whatever way, they were to take all the Apostles said for granted without proof; they were to exercise their faith, they were to be saved by hearing. Hence, as you perhaps observed, St. Paul significantly calls the revealed doctrine "the word of hearing," in the passage I quoted; men came to hear, to accept, to obey, not to criticise what was said; and in accordance with this he asks elsewhere, "How shall they believe Him, whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? Faith cometh of hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."

Now, my dear brethren, consider, are not these two states or acts of mind quite distinct from each other;—to believe simply what a living authority tells you; and to take a book, such as Scripture, and to use it as you please, to master it, that is, to make yourself the master of it, to interpret it for yourself, and to admit just what you choose to see in it, and nothing more? Are not these two procedures distinct in this, that in the former you submit, in the latter you judge? At this moment I am not asking you which is the better, I am not asking whether this or that is practicable now, but are they not two ways of taking up a doctrine, and not one? is not submission quite contrary to judging? Now, is it not certain that it did not consist in judging for oneself? It is in vain to say that the man who judges from the Apostle's writings, does submit to those writings in the first instance, and therefore has faith in them; else why should he refer to them at all? There is, I repeat, an essential difference between the act of submitting to a living oracle and to his book; in the former case there is no appeal from the speaker, in the latter the final decision remains with the reader. Consider how different is the confidence with which you report another's words in his presence and in his absence. If he be absent, you boldly say that he holds so and so, or said so and so; but let him come into the room in the midst of the conversation, and your tone is immediately changed. It is then, "I think I have heard you say something like this, or what I took to be this;" or you modify considerably the statement or the fact to which you originally pledged him, dropping one-half of it for safety-sake, or retrenching the most startling portions of it; and then after all you wait with some anxiety to see whether he will accept any portion of it at all. The same sort of process takes place in the case of a written document of a person now dead. I can fancy a man magisterially expounding St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians or to the Ephesians, who would be better content with his absence than his sudden re-appearance among us; lest the Apostle should take his own meaning out of his hands, and explain it for himself. In a word, though he says he has faith in St. Paul's writings, he confessedly has no faith in St. Paul; and though he may speak much of Scripture truth, he would have had no wish at all to be a Scripture Christian.

I think I may assume, that this virtue, which was exercised by the first Christians, is not known at all among Protestants now; or at least if there are instances of it, it is exercised towards those, I mean their teachers and divines, who expressly disclaim that they are objects of it, and exhort their people to judge for themselves. Protestants, generally speaking, have not faith in the primitive meaning of the word; this is clear, and here is a confirmation of it. If men believed now, as they did in the times of the Apostles, they could not doubt or change. No one can doubt whether a word spoken by God is to be believed; of course it is; whereas any one, who is modest and humble, may easily be brought to doubt of his own inferences and deductions. Since men now deduce from Scripture, instead of believing a teacher, you may expect to see them waver about; they will feel the force of their own deductions more strongly at one time than at another, they will change their minds about

them, or perhaps deny them altogether; whereas this cannot be, while a man has faith; that is, belief that what a preacher says to him comes from God. This is what St. Paul especially insists on, telling us that Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, are given us that "we may all attain to unity of faith," and, on the contrary, "that we be not as children tossed to and fro, and carried about by every gale of doctrine." Now, in matter of fact, do not men in this day change about in their religious opinions without any limit? is not this then a proof that they have not that faith which the Apostles demanded of their converts? If they had faith, they would not change. Once believe that God has spoken, and you are sure He cannot unsay what He has already said; He cannot deceive; He cannot change; you have received it once for all; you will believe it ever.

Such is the only rational, consistent account of faith; but so far are Protestants from professing it, that they laugh at the very notion of it. They laugh at the notion of men (as they express themselves) pinning their faith upon Pope or Council; they think it simply superstitious and narrow-minded, to profess to believe just what the Church believes, and to assent to whatever she shall say in time to come on matters of doctrine. That is, they laugh at the bare notion of doing what Christians undeniably did in the time of the Apostles. Observe, they do not ask whether the Catholic Church has a claim to teach, has authority, has the gifts; no, it thinks that the very state of mind, which such a claim involves in those who admit it, the disposition to accept without reserve or question, is slavish. It calls it priestcraft to insist on this surrender of the reason, and bigotry to offer it. That is, it quarrels with the very state of mind which all Christians had in the age of the Apostles; nor is there any doubt, (who will deny it!) that those who thus boast of not being led blindfold, of judging for themselves, of believing just as much and just as little as they please, of hating dictation, and so forth, would have found it an extreme difficulty to hang on the lips of the Apostles had they lived at their date, or rather would have simply resisted the sacrifice of their liberty of thought, would have thought life eternal too dearly purchased at such a price, and would have died in their unbelief. And they would have defended themselves on the plea that it was absurd and childish to ask them to believe without proof, to bid them give up their education and their intelligence, and their science, and in spite of all those difficulties which reason and sense suggest to the Christian doctrine, in spite of its mysteriousness, its obscurity, its strangeness, its unacceptableness, its severity, to require them to surrender themselves to the teaching of a few unlettered Galileans, or a learned indeed but fanatical Pharisee. This is what they would have said then; and if so, is it wonderful they do not become Catholics now? The simple account of their remaining as they are, is, that they lack one thing,—they have not faith; it is a state of mind, it is a virtue, which they do not recognize to be praiseworthy, which they do not aim at possessing.

What they feel now, my brethren, is just what Jew and Greek both felt before them in the time of the Apostles, and which the natural man has felt ever since. The great and wise men of the day looked down upon faith then as now, as if unworthy the dignity of human nature, "Ye see your calling, brethren," says the Apostle, "that there are not many wise according to the flesh, not many powerful, not many noble; but the foolish things of the world hath God chosen to confound the wise, and the weak things of the world hath God chosen to confound the mighty, and things that are not, that He might destroy the things that are, that no flesh might glory in His sight." Hence the same Apostle speaks of "the foolishness of preaching." Similar to this is what our Lord had said in His prayer to the Father; "I thank Thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto little ones." Now is it not plain that men of this day have just inherited the feelings and traditions of these falsely wise and fatally prudent persons in our Lord's day? They have the same obstruction in their hearts to entering the Catholic Church, which Pharisees and Sophists had before them; it goes against them to believe her doctrine, not so much from want of evidence that she is from God, as because, if so, they shall have to submit their minds to living men, who have not their own cultivation or depth of intellect, and because they must receive a number of doctrines, whether they will or no, which are strange to their imagination and difficult to their reason. The very character of the Catholic teaching and of the Catholic teacher is to them a preliminary objection to their becoming Catholics; so great, as to throw into the shade any argument, however strong, which is producible in behalf of the mission of those teachers and the origin of that teaching. In short, they have not faith.