

# WHERE ALL ROADS LEAD.

By G. K. Chesterton.

CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY of London No. C129a (1930).

## Part 1.

### THE YOUTH OF THE CHURCH.

Until about the end of the nineteenth century, a man was expected to give his reasons for joining the Catholic Church. Today a man is really expected to give his reasons for not joining it. This may seem an exaggeration; but I believe it to stand for a subconscious truth in thousands of minds. As for the fundamental reasons for a man doing it, there are only two that are really fundamental. One is that he believes it to be the solid objective truth, which is true whether he likes it or not; and the other that he seeks liberation from his sins. If there be any man for whom these are not the main motives it is idle to enquire what were his philosophical or historical or emotional reasons for joining the old religion; for he has not joined it at all.

### THE CHALLENGE OF THE CHURCH.

But a preliminary word or two may well be said about the other matter, which may be called the challenge of the Church. I mean that the world has recently become aware of that challenge in a curious and almost creepy fashion. I am literally one of the least, because one of the latest, of a crowd of converts who have been thinking along the same lines as I. There has been a happy increase in the number of Catholics; but there has also been, if I may so express it, a happy increase in the number of non-Catholics; in the sense of conscious non-Catholics. The world has become conscious that it is not Catholic. Only lately, it would have been about as likely to brood on the fact that it was not Confucian; and all the array of reasons for not joining the Church of Rome marked but the beginning of the ultimate reason for joining it. At this stage, let it be understood, I am speaking of a reaction and rejection, which was, as mine would once have been, honestly if conventionally convinced. I am not speaking now of the stage of mere self-deception or sulky excuses; though such a stage there may be before the end. I am remarking that even while we truly think that the reasons are reasonable, we tacitly assume that the reasons are required.

Far back at the beginning of all our changes, – if I may speak for many much better than myself – there was the idea that we must have reasons for joining the Catholic Church. I never had any reasons for not joining the Greek Church, or the religion of Mahomet, or the Theosophical Society, or the Society of Friends. Doubtless, I could have discovered and defined the reasons had they been demanded, just as I could have found the reasons for not going to live in Lithuania,

or not being a chartered accountant, or not changing my name to Vortigern Brown, or not doing a thousand other things that it had never occurred to me to do. But the point is that I never felt the presence or pressure of a possibility at all. I heard no distant and distracting voice calling me to Lithuania or to Islam; I had no itch to explain to myself why my name was not Vortigern or why my religion was not Theosophy. That sort of presence and pressure of the Church I believe to be universal and ubiquitous today; not only among Anglicans, but among Agnostics. I repeat that I do not mean that they have no real objections; on the contrary, I mean that they have begun really to object; they have begun to kick and struggle.

### **A YOUNG RELIGION.**

Now I have noted first this common consciousness of the challenge of the Church, because I believe it to be connected with something else. That something else is the strongest of all the purely intellectual forces that dragged me towards the truth. It is not merely the survival of the faith, but the singular nature of its survival. I have called it by a conventional phrase, the old religion. But it is not an old religion; it is a religion that refuses to grow old. At the moment of history it is a very young religion; rather especially a religion of young men. It is much newer than the new religions; its young men are more fiery, more full of their subject, more eager to explain and argue, than were the young Socialists of my own youth. It does not merely stand firm like an old guard; it has recaptured the initiative and is conducting the counter-attack.

In short, it is what youth always is, rightly or wrongly; it is aggressive. It is this atmosphere of the aggressiveness of Catholicism that has thrown the old intellectuals on the defensive. It is this that has produced the almost morbid self-consciousness of which I have spoken. The converts are truly fighting, in those words which recur like a burden at the opening of the Mass, for a thing which giveth joy to their youth. I cannot understand how this unearthly freshness in something so old can possibly be explained except on a supposition that it is indeed unearthly.

It is not true, as the rationalist histories imply, that through the ages orthodoxy has grown old slowly. It is rather heresy that has grown old quickly. The Reformation grew old amazingly quickly. It was the Counter-Reformation that grew young. In England, it is strange to note how soon Puritanism turned into Paganism, or perhaps ultimately into Philistinism.

It is strange to note how soon the Puritans degenerated into Whigs. By the end of the seventeenth century, English politics had dried up into a wrinkled cynicism that might have been as old as Chinese etiquette. It was the Counter-Reformation that was full of the fire and even of the impatience of youth. It was in the Catholic figures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that we find the spirit of energy, in the only noble sense of novelty. It was people like Saint Teresa who reformed; people like Bossuet who challenged; people like Pascal who questioned; people like Suarez who speculated. The counterattack was like a charge of the old spears of chivalry. And indeed the comparison is very relevant to the generalization. I believe that this renovation, which has certainly happened in our own time, and which has certainly happened in a time so recent as the Reformation, has really happened again and again in the history of Christendom.

## A FLAMING TORCH.

Working backwards on the same principle, I will mention at least two examples which I suspect to have been similar; the case of Islam and the case of Arianism. The Church had any number of opportunities of dying, and even of being respectfully interred. But the younger generation always began once again to knock at the door; and never louder than when it was knocking at the lid of the coffin in which it had been prematurely buried. Islam and Arianism were both attempts to broaden the basis to a sane and simple Theism, the former supported by great military success and the latter by great imperial prestige. They ought to have finally established the new system, but for the one perplexing fact, that the old system preserved the only seed and secret of novelty.

Anyone reading between the lines of the twelfth-century record can see that the world was permeated by potential Pantheism and Paganism; we can see it in the dread of the Arabian version of Aristotle, in the rumour about great men being Moslems in secret; the old men, seeing the simple faith of the Dark Ages dissolving, might well have thought that the fading of Christendom into Islam would be the next thing to happen. If so, the old men would have been much surprised at what did happen. What did happen was a roar like thunder from thousands and thousands of young men, throwing all their youth into one exultant counter-charge: the Crusades. The actual effect of danger from the younger religion was renewal of our own youth. It was the sons of Saint Francis, the Jugglers of God, wandering singing over all the roads of the world; it was the Gothic going up like a flight of arrows; it was a rejuvenation of Europe. And though I know less of the older period, I suspect that the same was true of Athanasian orthodoxy in revolt against Arian officialism. The older men had submitted it to a compromise, and Saint Athanasius led the younger like a divine demagogue. The persecuted carried into exile the sacred fire. It was a flaming torch that could be cast out, but could not be trampled out.

## CATHOLICISM ON THE MARCH.

Whenever Catholicism is driven out as an old thing, it always returns as a new thing. . . . It is not a survival. This then is the vital distinction, upon which I have dwelt before going further, because its comprehension concerns the argument later on.

It is not endurance, but the kind of recovery. Doubtless there are, in every such transition, groups of good and even glorious Catholics who have held their religion rather as a thing of the past; and I have far too much admiration for their religious loyalty to insist here on any regrets for their reactionary politics. It is possible to look back to the passing of the monks merely as one looks back to the passing of the Stuarts; it is possible to look back to the passing of the Stuarts merely as one looks back to the passing of the Druids. But Catholicism is not the thing that faded with the final failure of the Jacobites; rather it is a thing that returned with a rush after the relative failure of the Jacobins. There may have been an ecclesiastic surviving from the Dark Ages who did not understand the new movement of the Middle Ages; there certainly were good Catholics who did not see the need for the great raid of the Jesuits or the reforms of Saint Teresa; and they were most probably much better people than we are. But rejuvenation does recur; and it is the

first fact with which I wish to start my argument. . . . For the moment I am content to say that we live in one of those recurrent periods of Catholicism on the march; and to draw a more simple moral from it. The real honour is due to those who were with it when its cause seemed hopeless; and no credit, beyond that of common intelligence, really belongs to anyone who has joined it when it is so evidently the hope of the world.

## **Part 2.**

### **THE CASE FOR COMPLEXITY.**

I began with the power of the Church to grow young suddenly, when she is expected to grow old slowly, and remarked that this power in a creed was one which I could only conceive as thus regularly recurrent under two conditions: first, that it was really true; and second, that the power in it was more than mortal. In the ultimate sense, these are undoubtedly the reasons for what is a revolution that really returns like the revolution of a wheel. But among the secondary and superficial causes of this rejuvenation may be specially noted, I fancy, the very fact of which religious reformers have so constantly complained; I mean the complexity of the creeds. There is a sense in which the Faith is the simplest of religions; but there is another sense in which it really is by far the most complicated. And what I emphasize here is that, contrary to many modern notions, it owes its victory over modern minds to its complexity and not its simplicity. It owes its most recent revivals to the very fact that it is the one creed that is still not ashamed of being complicated.

We have had during the last few centuries a series of extremely simple religions; each indeed trying to be more simple than the last. And the manifest mark of all these simplifications was, not only that they were finally sterile, but that they were rapidly stale. A man had said the last word about them when he had said the first. Atheism is, I suppose, the supreme example of a simple faith. The man says there is no God; if he really says it in his heart, he is a certain sort of man so designated in Scripture. But anyhow, when he has said it, he has said it; and there seems to be no more to be said. The conversation seems likely to languish. The truth is that the atmosphere of excitement by which the atheist lived was an atmosphere of thrilled and shuddering theism, and not of atheism at all; it was an atmosphere of defiance and not of denial. Irreverence is a very servile parasite of reverence, and has starved with its starving lord. After this first fuss about the merely aesthetic effect of blasphemy, the whole thing vanishes into its own void. If there were no God, there would be no atheists.

It is easy to say this of the nineteenth century negation, for that sort of atheism is already one of the dead heresies. But what is not always noticed is that all the modern forms of theism have the same blank. Theism is as negative as atheism. To say with the optimists that God is good and therefore everything is good, or with the universalists that God is love and therefore everything is love, or with the Christian Scientists that God is spirit and therefore everything is spirit, or for that matter with the pessimists that God is cruel and therefore everything is a beastly shame; to say any of these things is to make a remark to which it is difficult to make any reply, except 'Oh',

or possibly, in a rather feeble fashion, 'Well, well'. The statement is certainly in one sense very complete; possibly a little too complete, and we find ourselves wishing it were a little more complex. And that is exactly the point. It is not complex enough to be a living organism. It has no vitality because it has no variety of function.

### **THE OLD BECOMES NEW.**

One broad characteristic belongs to all the schools of thought that are called broad-minded, and that is that their eloquence ends in a sort of silence not very far removed from sleep. One mark distinguishes all the wild innovations and insurrections of modern intellectualism; one note is apparent in all the new and revolutionary religions that have recently swept the world; and that note is dullness. They are too simple to be true. And meanwhile any one Catholic peasant, while holding one small bead of the rosary in his fingers, can be conscious, not of one eternity, but of a complex and almost a conflict of eternities; as, for example, in the relations of Our Lord and Our Lady, of the fatherhood and childhood of God, of the motherhood and childhood of Mary. Thoughts of that kind have in a supernatural sense something analogous to sex; they breed. They are fruitful and multiply; and there is no end to them. They have innumerable aspects; but the aspect that concerns the argument here is this: that a religion which is rich in this sense always has a number of ideas in reserve. Besides the ideas that are being applied to a particular problem of a particular period, there are a number of rich fields of thought which are in that sense lying fallow. Where a new theory, invented to meet a new problem, rapidly perishes with that problem, the old things are always waiting for other problems when they shall in their turn become new. A new Catholic movement is generally a movement to emphasize some Catholic idea that was only neglected in the sense that it was not till then specially needed; but when it was needed, nothing else can meet the need. In other words, the only way really to meet all the human needs of the future is to pass into the possession of all the Catholic thoughts of the past; and the only way to do that is really to become a Catholic.

### **THE RESERVES OF THE PAST.**

In these notes, I do not intend to say anything in very direct criticism of the Anglican Church or the Anglo-Catholic theory, because I know it in my own case to be the worst possible way to go to work. The Church drew me out of Anglicanism as the very idea of Our Lady drew me long before out of ordinary Protestantism by being herself, that is, by being beautiful. I was converted by the positive attractions of the things I had not yet got, and not by negative disparagements of such things as I had managed to get already. When these disparagements were uttered they generally had, almost against my will, the opposite effect to that intended; the effect of a slight setback. I think in my heart I was already hoping that Roman Catholics would really prove to have more charity and humility than anybody else, and anything that even seemed to savour of the opposite was judged by too sensitive a standard in the mood of that moment.

I am, therefore, very anxious not to make that sort of mistake myself. It would be easy to put, in a much shorter and sharper fashion, the conclusion to which I and every other convert have

eventually come. It would be easy to argue merely that our whole position was a common contradiction; since we were always arguing that England had suffered in a thousand ways from being Protestant, and yet at the same time arguing that she had remained Catholic. It would be easy, and in a sense only too true, to call the whole thing a piece of English half-conscious hypocrisy; an attempt to remedy a mistake without admitting it. Nor do I deny that there are High-Churchmen who provoke and perhaps deserve this tone, by talking as if Catholicism had never been betrayed and oppressed. To them indeed one is tempted to say that Saint Peter denied his Lord; but at least he never denied that he had denied Him.

But of most souls in such a transition the truth is far more subtle; and of all I knew far more sympathetic; and I have deliberately approached this problem by a route that may seem circuitous, but which I believe to be the right approach in such a problem of subtlety and sympathy. The first fact to be pointed out, I think, to the honest and doubtful Anglican is that this power of resurrection in the Church does depend on this possession of reserves in the Church. To have this power, it is necessary to possess the whole past of the religion, and not merely those parts of it that seemed obviously needed in the nineteenth century by the men of the Oxford Movement, or in the twentieth century by the men of the Anglo-Catholic Congress. They did discover the need of Catholic things, and they did discover the need of one thing at a time. They took their pick in the fields of Christendom, but they did not possess the fields; and above all, they did not possess the fallow fields. They could not have all the riches, because they could not have all the reserves of the religion.

We have a great many predictions of the future, which are only rather dull extensions of the present. Very few moderns have dared to imagine the future as anything but modern. Most of them have gone mad with the attempt to imagine their great-grandchildren as exactly like themselves, only more so. But the Church is Futurist in the only sane sense, just as she is individualist in the only sane sense, or Socialist in the only sane sense. That is, she is prepared for problems which are utterly different from the problems of today. Now I think the truth about a man who calls himself, as I did, an Anglo-Catholic, may most fairly and sympathetically be stated thus. He is, of course, in strict definition a heretic, but he is not a heresiarch. He is not founding a heresy of the moment; but he is merely fighting a heresy at the moment. Even when he is defending orthodoxy, as he so often is, he is only defending it upon certain points against certain fallacies. But the fallacies are only fashions, and the next fashion will be quite different. And then his orthodoxy will be old-fashioned, but not ours.

### **Part 3.**

#### **THE STORY OF A HALF-TRUTH.**

By this time, it must be obvious that every single thing in the Catholic Church which was condemned by the modern world has been reintroduced by the modern world, and always in a lower form. The Puritans rejected art and symbolism, and the Decadents brought them back again with all the old appeal to sense and an additional appeal to sensuality. The rationalists rejected

supernatural healing and it was brought back by Yankee charlatans who not only proclaimed supernatural healing, but forbade natural healing. Protestant moralists abolished the confessional and the Psychoanalysts have re-established the confessional, with every one of its alleged dangers and not one of its admitted safeguards. The Protestant patriots resented the intervention of an international faith, and went on to evolve an empire entangled in international finance. Having complained that the family was insulted by monasticism, they have lived to see the family broken in pieces by bureaucracy; having objected to fasts being appointed for anybody during any exceptional interval, they have survived to see teetotallers and vegetarians trying to impose a fast on everybody for ever.

All this, as I say, has become obvious, but there is a further development of the truth with which I am more especially dealing here; which concerns not so much the case of these general movements which may almost be called vulgar errors, but rather the case of certain individual ideas that are private inspirations of the individual. A young man may, without any very offensive vanity, come to the conclusion that he has something to say. He may think that a truth is missed in the current controversies and that he himself may remind the world of it in a tolerably lucid or pointed fashion. It seems to me that there are two courses that he can follow; and I wish to suggest them here because there must be a good many young men in that position, because I have been in it myself and because I may be said in some sense to have followed both courses, first one and then the other.

He can take his truth, or half-truth, into the bustle and confusion of the modern world, of general secular society, and pit it against all the other notions that are being urged in this way. . . . . In that case it is likely enough that he will be hailed by journalists as having a 'message'; it is, at any rate, probable that he will have a vogue; but it is not very clear that anything will happen to his idea in the long run . . . . and even though he may have done as well as he could reasonably expect for himself, it is not clear that he has done very much for the world; especially when the world is in a mood that permits nothing but fashions and forgetfulness. But there is a much greater danger in his position. Even supposing that his truth does become a tradition, it will only harden into a heresy. For it can only harden as the half-truth that it is; and even if it was true in its lifetime, it will have become false when it is fossilized. Sometimes a few touches from fanatical followers can turn it into a most extravagant and horrible falsehood. . . . The moral is that the half-truth must be linked up with the whole truth — and who is to link it up? Herod the tyrant must not massacre babies because they would have been glad of a few months of life when they were babes unborn. A man must not be a slave on the plea that even a slave can see a dandelion. A man must not be thrown into gaol in defiance of justice because he will still see a patch of daylight on the wall. In a word, wonder and humility and gratitude are good things, but they are not the only good things; and there must be something to make the poet who praises them admit that justice and mercy and human dignity are good things too. Knowing something of the nature of a modern poet captured by a modern fancy, I can only see one thing in the world that is in the least likely to do it.

I have said that there are two courses for the young man specializing in the half-truth. I have given a personal example of him and the possibility of his horrible end. The other course is that he should take his half-truth into the culture of the Catholic Church, which really is a culture and where it really will be cultivated. For that place is a garden; and the noisy world outside nowadays is none the less a wilderness because it is a howling wilderness. That is, he can take his idea where it will be valued for what is true in it, where it will be balanced by other truths and often supported by better arguments. In other words, it will become a part, however small a part, of a permanent civilization which uses its moral riches as science uses the store of facts. Thus, in the idle instance I have given, there is nothing true in that old childish mood of mine which the Catholic Church in any way condemns. She does not condemn a love of poetry or fantasy; she does not condemn, but rather commands, a sentiment of gratitude for the breath of life. Indeed, it is a spirit in which many Catholic poets have rather specialized, and its first and finest appearance, perhaps, is in the great Canticle of Saint Francis. But in that same spiritual society, I know that optimism will never be turned into an orgy of anarchy or a stagnation of slavery and that there will not fall on any one of us the ironical disaster of having discovered a truth only to disseminate a lie.

(Extracted from a series of five essays contributed to *Blackfriars*, 1922-23.)

\*\*\*\*\*