

THROUGH ANGLICANISM TO THE CHURCH

THE STEPS TO A CONVERSION

By The Right Hon. SIR HENRY SLESSER, P.C.

Originally printed in *The Tablet* 20 November, 1948

Catholic Truth Society, London, No. C 277 (1959)

IT is my purpose to set out, so far as I am able, the reasons which have persuaded me at the late age of sixty-five to seek reception into the Holy Catholic Church. The task has been performed before, on many occasions, by persons far more sanctified and competent to express their spiritual enlightenment than am I. Nevertheless, when hesitant, I found it of great use to read, not only such great works as the *Apologia* of *Newman*, but also accounts by quite unimportant people from a worldly point of view, as well as the account of the conversions of Mgr *Knox*, G. K. *Chesterton*, and others of intellectual stature. Each of us has his own difficulties and weakness; to each the appeal comes in a form appropriate to his condition; and, in each case, Grace, which is not to be described in language, illuminates and assists the intellect and the will; to me at any rate, the problems and hesitations of others have been of service and of profound interest - this is my only excuse for adding to the number of works descriptive of conversion. I hope, even, that it may be of some little service to the evangelical work of the priesthood if perchance they come across cases somewhat similar to my own.

I was brought up in a family essentially agnostic. Never did I hear anything hostile to the Christian faith; indeed, the whole ethical atmosphere around me was in a sense devout, though without sanction. My forebears were of the same race as the Apostles, but had long abandoned the Judaic faith; indeed, in so far as it was ever mentioned, it was in a deprecatory sense, as being a particularist racial creed, while my parents were citizens of the whole world. They were liberal, both in politics and in outlook; in learning and in the arts I was encouraged to take a very universal view - prejudice and limitation of outlook were always discouraged, and, above all, the very Christian notion that we were here to serve society according to our vocation was never absent. John Stuart Mill, John Morley and the other 'enlightened' Victorians were my mentors.

To all this I must mention one exception: my old nurse was a devout evangelical; from her I learned of the divinity of our Lord and of His life on earth and His teaching, and indeed of the prophets and saints - nor did I ever doubt her beliefs. She taught me to pray and, what I have never forgotten, that the sole standard of right and wrong in this world is to be found in compliance with or repudiation of the will of Christ. She taught me to believe in judgement, Redemption and Heaven, though, of course, Purgatory was never mentioned; nor prayers for the departed. Of our Lady I learned nothing, save that she was a virgin, nor the Church visible.

All this excellent foundation, I must gratefully admit, save in its dogmatic features, was entirely consistent with the prevailing morality in my home. My parents, when I went to my first boarding school, allowed me to attend church, notwithstanding their own free thought, and when, later, I went to Oundle, I was a member of the choir.

All this time my devotion to the Christian creed grew. I saw life chiefly as a testing time, a period of sacrifice, and was very conscious of my lack of humility, and was concerned by the power which ambition

had over my thoughts and actions. When troubles came upon me - for I was forced at a very early age to take upon myself many financial and other obligations for my family - I found much support and guidance in my faith. Why, then, did I lose it for a time? This temporary dereliction I must now describe.

I think that the temporary decline of assurance came from indiscriminate reading of sceptical books; I studied, being invalided, much history, philosophy and economics, all without any religious corrective. I came to think that many matters which I had assumed as true were either doubtful or definitely false. It is not necessary for me to retail the many works on all aspects of life which tend to make a young student sceptical: they still abound. Having no authoritative teaching to counteract their seductive arguments, I fell into a state of agnosticism in matters of faith - this lasted for some twenty years. During this time, however, I never doubted the Christian moral principle; nor, unlike many of my associates in the Fabian Society (for I had become a Socialist), did I ever yield to the temptations of materialism. Attacks on the sanctity of marriage or personal probity in matters of finance or loyalty to social obligations disgusted me, so also anarchist talk of contempt of law or prevailing custom; I was always a '*bourgeois*' in matters of conventional social behaviour and, despite its present unpopularity, remain so. In philosophy the Platonic conception of absolute values never deserted me.

In so far as I can date the recovery of faith, I must ascribe it to a certain day in 1920, when, walking from Oxford to my home at Bourne End, I took with me two friends, both noble characters, who throughout the two days argued their respective points of view. One was a devout Anglo-Catholic (he was later received into the Catholic Church). The other, a far more important person in the world's estimation, the Principal of an important University, was a learned and consistent sceptic. For some time before, I had been seeking for some authority for the Christian outlook which I still undogmatically retained, and allowed both the contestants to state their case in full while I remained silent but very attentive. Suddenly - I can visualize the place now, near Shillingford Lock on the Thames - I saw that my Christian friend was right. In all matters of practical ethics they agreed, but *Valentine Spalding* satisfied me that in faith alone existed the sanction and authority for all I believed to be right in action. In a moment the whole of my past belief came back to me; how this happened, how much was the result of reason, how much of Grace, I leave for others to determine; for myself the faith which then returned to me has never since departed, however inconsistent my behaviour.

The return of this assurance at the age of thirty-seven had this difference from my earlier childish creed, that now, having pursued the matter with my religious friend, I began to see the place which the Church must take if the Christian creed is to be retained in its fullness. I began to study the Anglican Fathers; so far Rome had not entered into my thoughts; and I learned how our Lord had founded a Church which was His Mystical Body. So far, and for many years, I believed, following Gore and others (and Newman in his Tractarian days), that the Anglican Church was a part of the Church Universal. No Protestant prejudice deterred me; the essential Catholic doctrines, particularly the belief in the Real Presence in the Mass, afforded me no difficulty of belief; so also the priesthood and the power of absolution. From doubt I passed almost directly, without hesitation, into acceptance of the whole sacramental position.

I recall, in 1920, attending the first Anglo-Catholic Conference with my present fellow-Catholic, *Lady Sanderson*, at the Albert Hall, and also going to an Anglican High Mass when the late Dr Weston preached. Chesterton, whom I knew, delivered his last address as an Anglican at the same meeting. From then on I became a regular communicant at the very 'high' church which we had near our home, and soon after was myself asked to speak at the second Congress at the Albert Hall. I collaborated with a number of Anglicans of a like mind to myself in a symposium called *The Return of Christendom*, written very largely under medieval inspiration. Dr Gore furnished a preface and G. K. Chesterton an epilogue. I wrote on 'The Return of Dogma', which, I insisted, was a necessary step in the recovery of faith.

I became acquainted, in the course of my lecture tours for the Anglo-Catholics, with the celibate clergy at Mirfield, who, when I stood for Parliament at Leeds, supported me. By then, though still a member of the Labour Party (I had been their Solicitor-General in 1924), I began to doubt the compatibility of some aspects of Socialism with Christianity. I had read *Belloc and feared a Servile State*, and in fact stood my election largely on the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and the economics of St Thomas. This was not as fatal

to my chances as might appear - many of my supporters were Catholics - but when I was returned to Parliament I felt that I was free to approach economic and social problems from a Catholic standpoint, a liberty which I should not have enjoyed had I not made my position clear to my constituents. But it often resulted in my being compelled to vote against my party, which was then in opposition, and earned me, I fear, the distrust of my very anti-Catholic leader, Ramsay MacDonald. But these matters I have recalled in my reminiscent *Judgement Reserved*; I mention them here only in relation to my religious opinions. I became, also, on the motion of my very devout Anglican friend, Lord Mamhead, vice-president of the Anglo-Catholic Church Union, and prepared an amalgamation for them with other High Church societies at the request of the late Lord Halifax and others. So that, by the time I became a Judge, in 1929, I was in the closest association with the Anglo-Catholic party; indeed, I was Chairman of the Church Union executive committee, an office which I surrendered when I went on the judicial Bench.

My Catholic friends were genuinely perplexed and concerned to understand the position which we Anglo-Catholics assumed. They pointed out to me, courteously, that whatever may have been the case with Henry VIII (who may not have intended to go further in his repudiation of papal spiritual authority than did the Gallicans of his time), by the reign of Edward VI the King and Court were genuinely and aggressively Protestant, and that Elizabeth, though in some ways more accommodating to Catholic sentiment, in reality took up the same position; that it was impossible not to admit a breach of continuity; that the clergy no longer were ordained as sacrificing priests - the ground of their subsequent repudiation by the Papacy as not being in valid orders; that the sacraments were reduced to two alone necessary for salvation; and that many other indications were not lacking illustrative of the complete rejection of Catholicism, by no one accepted more readily than by the Anglican prelates themselves who, for the most part, gloried in the breach.

All these arguments, which I knew historically to be true, for a long time failed to shake my belief in the 'branch theory'. We Anglo-Catholics were a section of the Church of England, almost isolated both in worship and belief from our fellow communicants. We had our own 'high' churches where sometimes the whole Roman ceremonial was followed; some few of us went so far as to accept the doctrine of Transubstantiation, although the Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1927, said: 'We all affirm that the doctrine of Transubstantiation is untrue.' Those of us who, like myself, had never been Protestant in the ordinary sense failed altogether to appreciate the intense dislike which a large part, probably the majority, of clergy and certainly of laymen felt about our 'Romanizing' tendencies. Even among ourselves there was disagreement; some were very anti-Papal - I mention Dr Gore as an example - and others, like myself, were always hopeful of a corporate reunion with Rome.

The Malines conversations, conducted by Lord Halifax and Cardinal Mercier, like the earlier contacts with the Abbe Portal, gave us renewed hope. They started in 1921, the Bishop of Truro (Dr Frere) and the Dean of Wells (Dr Robinson) being at some of them with Lord Halifax. There is no doubt that both the Abbe Portal in 1889, and, later, Cardinal Mercier, never appreciated the precarious and unrepresentative nature of Anglo-Catholicism; they heard of the Anglican Mass, of Anglican monasteries and prayers for the dead; and Portal, when in England, apparently visited only the high churches where, as I have said, Roman ceremonial was in greater or less degree followed, even to the extent of Benediction and invocation of our Lady and the Saints. That these churches were very exceptional, nearly all in towns - a 'Brighton and South Coast religion', as it was once cruelly called - and that the immensely larger number were conducted according to the liturgy of the Prayer Book - itself predominantly Lutheran, as Dr Dix, himself an Anglican, has pointed out in his scholarly *Shape of the Liturgy* - was unknown to Portal and, it seems, to Cardinal Mercier. Nevertheless, at the time, we who did not realize the misconception under which these Catholic priests laboured, and who were ignorant that the Catholic Cardinal Bourne had no part in the discussions, were much impressed and fortified. Any desire for individual conversion was postponed to await the corporate reception of the Church of England which I for one, foolishly as I now see, thought very near.

At the outset the ecumenical authority of the Vatican Council of 1870, with its acceptance of the infallibility of the Pope in faith and morals as there defined, was not accepted by the Anglicans, nor, it would seem, the Council of Trent, where decisions of the *esse* of the Catholic Church were laid down.

The Prayer Book makes an arbitrary limitation of authority to the first six Councils of the Church, thereby excluding, among others, the great Council of the Lateran in 1275 and that of Florence, where even the Greeks accepted the Papal jurisdiction and primacy. The Lambeth criterion of the Scriptures as the 'ultimate standard of faith', thereby excluding tradition, was, of course, not acceptable to the Malines Catholics.

In 1923 the second conversations were held, when it was suggested from the Anglican side that the Archbishop of Canterbury should be recognized as a Patriarch, with power to consecrate Bishops without reference to Rome - this to avoid the prohibition of Papal jurisdiction contained in the thirty-seventh Article of Religion. Papal infallibility and the Immaculate Conception (in which personally I believed) were, despite this proposed patriarchate, to remain outside Anglican recognition. The existing Catholic hierarchy was to continue alongside of this new creation - I shall not, I think, be blamed by anyone today for describing the whole idea, from any standpoint, as fantastic and unreal.

On the question of Papal jurisdiction the Anglicans were not at one; Dr Robinson would accept a general 'Papal superintendence', Dr Gore a spiritual responsibility, a view nearer perhaps to the Catholic view, but in reality very far from the belief in the divine Vicariate of the Holy Father. To Catholics, Rome is the See of Peter, continued by his successors from Linus in unbroken continuity, with all the rights and responsibilities conferred by our Lord on Peter himself; this the Anglicans at Malines (or elsewhere) would never accept. In 1926 Cardinal Mercier died and, says Mr. Oldmeadow in his life of *Cardinal Bourne*, 'the Holy See forbade Catholics to resume' the talks. For the time being, however, they gave me and others a feeling that, while the matter of corporate union was still under consideration, we could well wait and abide the result.

When Cardinal Mercier is reproved for not understanding the strength of the anti-papal forces in the Church of England, I must confess that it was only when the question of the revision of the Prayer Book came under the consideration of Parliament that I myself began to appreciate the real position. For many months we Members had been solicited to vote against that measure, in letters and pamphlets, hortatory and menacing, but it was only when the debate actually took place that I began to realize how utterly unrepresentative was the party to which I belonged. Apart from the general undisguised Protestantism then expressed, I found that the promoters of the measure were far more concerned to set bounds to Catholic practice than to encourage it. Their attempt to incorporate the Greek principles of the *Epiclesis* with the Roman (and Anglican) acts and words of Consecration as an alternative rite was the limit of eclecticism and confusion. Reservation was to be limited to the sick; a limitation which I frankly told the House of Commons I and my fellow Anglo-Catholics could not possibly accept (thereby, as Sir Thomas Inskip gleefully told me afterwards, ensuring the rejection), and, though I voted for the measure, I came away most sad at heart at the utter failure of the Church of England, not to declare itself Catholic - that I scarcely ventured to expect, - but to show any consistency whatever.

It was from that date that I became increasingly uneasy as to our position, but in any case my elevation to the Bench soon after exonerated me from further active participation in Church affairs. The fact that it was necessary in law for the Church of England to submit its liturgical proposals to Parliament was another source of disquiet. In the days of the Reformation it might at least be said that the Monarchs then to be given spiritual authority by Lutherans were Christian princes. Now that the approval of Parliament was essential under the Church Assembly Act, Nonconformists, Agnostics, Jews and others might interfere to any extent with Church government and doctrine. They had always been able to do so by Act of Parliament, but this measure for Prayer Book revision showed clearly that the new method of proceeding by measure had in fact given the Church no new liberty. As things were, as I have said, I voted for the measure, but, looking back, I am not at all sure if I would not have been wiser to have abstained altogether from participating in this Erastian act of power. When a second attempt was made to persuade Parliament to let the Church of England worship as it wished, I stayed away, as did, on both occasions, the Catholic Members in both Houses of Parliament.

In any case, with the exception of Sir Robert Newman (later Lord Mamhead), a very close friend with whom I had been in constant communication, who was also an Anglo-Catholic, though far less 'Roman'

than I was, and possibly Sir Samuel Hoare, a trustee of the Church Union, the whole of the promoters were in no sense Catholic; it was a micro-cosmic revelation of true Anglican opinion.

My next shock arose out of the pusillanimity of the Anglican Church to deal with modernist publications by prelates and others who propounded what to me seemed opinions inconsistent even with those six Councils which the Church of England accepted. Beyond vague speeches of disapprobation nothing was done, and some of the writers, being Anglican Bishops and Deans, continued to act in their respective offices in the name of that Church which claimed for itself the title of 'Catholic and Reformed'.

Finally came the 1948 Lambeth Conference and the assembly of every type of Christian at Amsterdam, save only the Catholics. As to the former, it approved, though excluding it temporarily from the Anglican Communion, the *South India Church*, and thereby seemed to me to reject the Catholic doctrine that episcopacy was of the essence of Church government; it even went further in seeming to encourage similar non-episcopal congregations in Ceylon and other places. The reunion it sought was one with the Nonconformists in some large amorphous Protestant federation; the Amsterdam assembly, with its permanent Council, endorsed this. Indeed, as it appeared to me, the Church of England had finally, after much hesitation, decided to adhere to Protestantism; as I saw it, the work of the Tractarians and Anglo-Catholics had ended in complete failure. Which is not surprising if throughout, unknown to them and to me, they were in fact in a state of heresy, if not of schism. The Church of England may have a future as a Protestant State institution, but then, save in the most technical sense, I never was what is generally called a Protestant.

Another personal matter affected me. As the result of poor health I went to live in the remote country, and thereby was compelled, owing to difficulties of transport, to attend an ordinary Anglican church not very 'low', but representative of normal Church practice and opinion. There it became clear to me that neither the minister nor the congregation had any realization of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. Whatever their dislike of low Church practice, they were in all essentials Protestant. After much meditation and study I felt I could no longer take communion in their establishment. After Whitsuntide, 1948, I absented myself. I declined to take any further part in the work of the Church Union, save for one address (before I had communicated my desire to be received into the Church) to the Church Union on the necessity for a common faith, the Catholic one, before Europe could be reunited save on a basis of expediency, military or economic, which could have no permanence.

Such is the account of one comparatively unimportant person's conversion. I have found in the Catholic Church that authority for the practices and beliefs which I have long held; my chief fault, as I now see it, was the long delay, which kept me outside for so long, but in the sight of the Church time is not of the essence ; what is essential is that, once our ignorance is no longer invincible, we must submit ourselves with joy to the appointed source of divine teaching and sanctification which we derive through the Church and its Holy Father from the Lord of all life.

* * * * *