

CHRISTIAN CONTROVERSY

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CONTROVERSY is a hard word. It connotes polemics; is associated with a chip-on-the-shoulder attitude, with belligerency. Men who have a point to urge would prefer not to be termed controversial. There is something a bit reproachful in such an epithet. One modern writer quite completely anathematizes controversy; outlaws it, remarking that what the Church needs is not controversialists, but Christians. Quite evidently this implies a divorce between the ideas of Christian and controversialist, and frowns on a juxtaposition of the two words. Yet, the fact of the matter is that Christianity and controversy are intimately bound together. The history of the Christian Church stamps upon her this term which the smug complacency of men views with alarm. A controversialist is shied from because it is feared that he might instill dissatisfaction with the existing order of things. That is one reason why Jesus was hung on a Cross,—because He urged truth against the prevailing falsehood. His Church has to do the same even if it means another Cross.

Controversy has one real meaning,—the turning of arguments against the opinions or convictions of another. It implies the uprooting of falsehood and the implanting of truth, but first the uprooting of falsehood. The second cannot live except at the cost of the other's death. When it is claimed that the Church must be controversial, this one thing alone is meant,—she must go right out into the enemy's field, dig up the tares which he thinks are truth but which she knows are not, and plant in their stead the seeds which she knows to be truth. When the Prototype of all Christian apologetes gave His commission to the group of men into whose minds He had tried to drive the truth of things during three long years, that commission was given in language which was not hortatory. The "GO teach" of that sublime command which was an entrusting of something Divine to human beings, was an uncompromising imperative, an order which would abide no palliation were the salt to keep its savor. "Go *Teach!*" Jesus said "teach," not "inspire." The time enduring obligation which was laid upon the Apostles and upon all the apostles to come was not to

be a task of awing men into the Church by miraculous works, nor yet of winning them to the Faith by prayer alone. Miracles there would be aplenty, especially in the beginning, and these might hasten conviction, but miracles, really, were none of the Apostles' business. They were God's concern, and would take place as He willed them. Prayer, too, might be in some cases the only medium through which conversion was obtained. To some would be given visions, to others inspired conviction would come on a sudden, yet to the pioneering Apostles, our models, was given the command, "Go teach."

Often, this truth has been overlooked. In an over ready willingness to discount the part which the Word of God assigned to the words of men in spreading His Revelation, some have underestimated, almost to an extreme devaluation, the rational side (perhaps it would be more correct to say the rational foundation) of the Christian Faith. Controversy as the forerunner of Faith has been branded a stranger at the board of Christianity for fear of shrinking by too human ideas a doctrine which is Divine. But, even He who stressed so often the mystery which enshrouded His Father, did not disdain the light of reason which might lead men to the threshold of accepting that mystery. Far from disdaining it, He used it time and again. Often, the Doctors of the Law—the teachers of Israel—found themselves stunned into silence by the cogency with which the carpenter from lower Galilee met their self-justifying interpretation of the Scriptures. Prejudice, generations old, had cemented into the mentality of people as well as priests, leaders as well as led; notions of God, of the Law, of the Messiah, which only the keen edge of sharp—sometimes incisive—argument could dislodge. Christ did not hesitate to use it. How many times did He take the text, which time-honored interpretation had twisted, and thrust it home, true and straight, to the very heart of their specious reasonings? The pages of the New Testament are redolent with the appeals to human reason of Him who was Divine. Nothing was hid from Him, but it was through the gelatine mask of human thought that He let shine His supernatural doctrines lest the mental eyes of His listeners be blinded.

The God-Man had prepared the way for the victory of Faith in men's hearts by first laying low the embattlements of reason, by razing the barrier of preconceived prejudice. The men of God who carried His message, adopted the same tactics. Because of error men withstood truth. Controversial teaching would be its battering ram. Hardly had the sound of the Pentecostal wind ceased to be heard in the city, when Parthians and Medes and the representatives of other

lands gathered at Jerusalem heard the voice of the new Peter intoxicated with Grace, proclaiming the revelation of Jesus, so lately crucified. Anything to bring the truth home! Anything to open up those minds; to prepare them for the Grace of Faith! Scripture, Tradition, History,—all had some purpose to serve that Jesus Christ might be preached. Paul, in the weary journeys which might do honor to a modern globe-trotter, flung into the teeth of learned and unlettered alike the challenge of his doctrine, now urging the inspired word, again taking up the rapier of dialectic. In the Areopagus, it was one of the Athenians' own phrases that he used as the preamble to his discourse; at Antioch, his major premises were drawn straight from the Old Testament. Always and ever he was ceaselessly urging the reasons for the Faith that was in him. He had written that "Faith cometh by hearing" and he would not contribute to its absence by failing to preach.

The Gospels themselves were but an outgrowth of all this preaching. Each betrays its own distinctive notes and special viewpoint, because they all take their own way of showing the Child of Mary was the Promised One of God and that He gave a message. Matthew wrote for the Jews and his Gospel is replete with citations from the Old Testament prophecies, paraded to show that Christ fulfilled them. In the second account of our Lord's life, the Old Testament plays a minor role. Mark's work was destined for the Pagans and he makes much of the miracles to the end that they might see in Jesus, not the Messiah, but the Son of God. Of Luke it can be said that he is more the historian. He travels over the scene, interrogates the witnesses, sifts the evidence and then lays it out lucidly and succinctly for all to see. The Beloved Disciple, writing last of all and to readers mostly familiar with the story, dwells more upon the teaching of Christ. His object perhaps was not so much to convince men of our Lord's mission as to drive it home deeper and deeper into the minds and hearts of those who lived in the midst of dangerous heresy. Yet even here the element of controversy is not lacking. Ever and again it is to the idea of Divinity that he returns. Jesus was not alone Son of God, but "was with God, and was God." All the Evangelists knew the dust which notions long entertained throw into the eyes of even the best intentioned; they had had familiar experience with it. Jesus had taught; they must teach. He had argued; they must argue.

None of the centuries which followed the Age of Faith is lacking its great controversialist, or apologist,—call it what you will. Atha-

nasius wore out his pen as well as his life in hammering the Arians. Augustine contemned nothing which his prolific mind, versed in all the philosophies of his day, might turn against the Pelagians. His love of God was his life. His discovery of Christ was the open sesame to a happiness which all his earlier knowledge and profligacy had never secured him. Yet, with him the head ever kept pace with the heart, and the intricate representations of his heretic enemies met with a relentless logic which never left the most ingenious knot unraveled. He was after souls, and if he has been called a philosopher of the heart, still it was through the mind that he first tried to reach his victims.

The list is long. It grows with the centuries as the seamless cloak of Christ's doctrine is unfolded by His Church, and as the refinement of knowledge increases. In the thirteenth century, all the learning and all the controversy of the years was crystallized in Aquinas. His Father, Dominic, had given his best years to doing battle with the Albigensians. Indeed, his first taste of apostolic life had been a night long dispute with a heretic, and his daily fare thereafter had been long drawn out controversies with the learned Cathari. Thomas enshrined in his works arguments one thousand years old when he touched them. His smaller *Summa* is quite plainly branded *Contra Gentiles*. The greater is but a highly systematized series of arguments urged against errors old and new. If its texture is expository, it is built on a framework of controversy.

Closer to our own times there is Newman. Through his incursions into history, he aroused England with a movement whose end is not yet. Who will say where the influence of the Tractarian Movement ends? Who can gauge the stream of converts which started to flow towards Rome because of the words penned by the wan and scholarly Cardinal? Too, there is Lacordaire. He was the forerunner of a new and broader outlook toward the Church in erudite circles, when he startled the learned audience of rationalists in the Cathedral of Notre Dame by his appeals to the Reason which they worshipped. He drew them on after him, right up to the portals of Faith, by a rope that was of their own making. His Faith was beyond the ken of mere reason, but when he mounted to Paris' most famous pulpit he knew to whom he spoke. To them the language of Faith, of Theology, was a dead language. To them it meant nothing. Rationalists they were, and were he to point where true rationalism led, it was on their own grounds that he must start. He did.

There is no overlooking here of the distinction between natural

knowledge and supernatural Faith. A man is not fitted into the Faith with a shoe horn of argument as simply as feet are eased into new shoes. This would be naught but heresy. Faith, the belief in God's revelation which is crystallized in the Church, is given gratuitously by the Giver of every good gift. It is not merited, it is not earned. But,—and this cannot safely be overlooked—God's Providence works through secondary causes, and in the case of bringing a man to see the light of truth, He works through men teaching men. If Faith is a door which only the Divine *Fiat* can open, it is ordinarily through the corridor of Reason that the portal is reached. Some believe on a sudden without ever tracing their steps through the tortuous maze of complicated arguments, and without the soul shaking agony of perplexity and wonderment which so often attends such a journey. Others think, enquire, study and learn; yet, to them the door ever remains shut. These are exceptions, a fact to which experience witnesses in the multitudes who have come to sit down in the Kingdom of God on earth through the ministrations and aid of those to whom the Christ committed the office of teaching. Our Doctors and Fathers and teachers established a tradition, left us a heritage. They did not fear that because they partook of controversy they might exchange the inheritance of Faith for the pottage of mere controversy, and we, of the present age, when discussions of religion are so rampant, cannot do better than follow the example of our betters. Their efforts have developed and flowered into our modern science of Apologetics. It is not a variety of histology which places under a microscope the tissue of Faith, but rather a kind of astronomy which charts the interrelation of Reason and Faith. To show that though Faith moves in an orbit of its own, still it never clashes with reason; in a word, to show that Faith is reasonable,—this is the principle function of Apologetics. Is it complicated? Of course! It cannot help being so. The giant telescope on Mount Wilson which is used to mirror the far flung celestial bodies is a very complex instrument indeed. In view of the two thousand years which separate us from Christ and the clouds of obscuring contentions which have intervened between our times and those of Jesus, our manner of bridging those years and piercing those clouds can hardly be less intricate.

This is an age in which Apologetics is peculiarly fitted to the needs of the time. Prejudice is not so militant. General education is better. Truer interpretations of history are being advanced. More people are ready and willing to think out the truth if it is offered. These things, in view of the quiet sanity and confident peace which

marks the claims of the Church while all other voices are strident and discordant, open to the Church quarters heretofore forbidden her. We have a synthesis of thought, a fabric of rational argument, which can not but convince when seriously and sincerely examined. Every opportunity to use it should be grasped. It is not consonant with the Goodness of God that He should bar from His kingdom on earth those who seek it with the best possible intentions. It is our duty to light their journey thither with Christ-like controversy.

What the Church needs is not antagonizing controversialists, and not apathetic Christians, but rather the happy mean, the Christian Controversialist with a head for arguing and a heart for urging. From Christ to David Goldstein, the Church has been forcing herself upon the minds of men that she might get to their hearts and finally possess their souls. If some have been antagonized and discouraged, no matter: the light must not be extinguished because a few have been burned by it. On street corner and in cellar, from motor van and rostrum, the work which started in the temple court and on the Mount must go on. Christ said "Teach," and teach we must. And if the Church seems to be cheapened and vulgarized by our bringing of doctrine out onto the highway, where its exponents are sometimes spit upon, again no matter! It was on the broken cornices of Roman Temples that a despised sect of slaves and foreigners reared the cornerstones of its cathedrals. Controversy in His name was the mission He gave us. It has worked before. It can work again.