

## MOTIVES OF CREDIBILITY

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WHEN agents are assigned the duty of establishing the guilt or innocence of a person suspected of having committed a certain crime, they often begin by trying to determine whether or not that person would have a motive for the deed. If they find nothing that would be apt to prompt him to do it, they begin to feel that the suspicion may be groundless, especially if they are sure that the suspect is sane. They know that men generally do not act without some reason, either internal or external to themselves. This is particularly true when that which they do is very much out of the ordinary and may entail serious consequences.

Now a Catholic does a very extraordinary thing, and burdens himself with many grave obligations, when he accepts as believable many mysterious truths, truths which neither he nor those who propose them to him can fully understand. He has no hope that he will ever be able to understand them in this life. Yet he ascribes to them an aptitude to be believed. Since this indeed seems to be such an extraordinary thing to do, we may quite reasonably put the question, "Has he any reason to give for such an action?" If he has none he is of those condemned in the Book of Ecclesiasticus, in the words, "He that is hasty to give credit is light of heart, and shall be lessened."<sup>1</sup> But this cannot be said of him, for he has *motives of credibility*.

Motives of credibility may be defined as sure signs by which revealed religion is made evidently *believable* by divine faith. They are *signs*, because by them is manifested the divine origin of revealed religion. They are *motives*, because it is on account of them that one judges that revealed religion is believable by divine faith. Divine faith is here divided against human faith. In our daily lives we accept many things by human faith, i. e., on the authority of some human person, such as facts of history,

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<sup>1</sup> Eccles., xix, 4.

advice of physicians, etc. But we accept and believe the mysteries of our holy religion by divine faith, i. e., on the authority of God Himself. This thought leads us to distinguish between the *motive of faith*, which is the authority of God revealing, or the *reason why* we believe, and the *motives of credibility*, by which we are convinced that God has made a revelation concerning a certain truth. The latter precede the former, i. e., having motives of credibility we say, "These truths are *believable* because they are confirmed by signs which show us that they are proposed on the authority of God," and we *believe* them because of this authority of God. Since He is Truth itself, He cannot deceive us out of either malice or ignorance. There is no higher authority.

Of the motives of credibility defined above, some are internal and some external to the subject. The internal signs are the individual experience of profound peace, "which the world cannot give," and the wonderful fulfillment of the aspirations of humanity for justice, sanctity, and for God. The external, and more important motives, are the sublimity of doctrine and wonderful life of the Catholic Church, prophecies, and miracles.

Ordinarily the first motive enumerated, the experience of profound peace, is not sufficient in itself, because it cannot be said with certainty in each case that it is supernatural. But it may happen that this motive be sufficient, as it did happen in the cases of the sudden conversion of St. Paul, the call of Matthew, etc. The second internal motive, the fulfillment of the aspirations of humanity, begets a moral certitude of credibility, for it is highly probable that a religion in which these aspirations are satisfied is of divine origin. These two internal motives can perform a twofold office. For the person who does not yet believe, they are a force disposing him to consider the external and surer motives. On the other hand the believer finds in them a confirmation of the external motives. Thus the internal motives of credibility are in a certain sense correlative with the external.

On the first of the three external motives noted above the Vatican Council says, "To the Catholic Church alone pertain all those things which so wonderfully and in so great a number are divinely disposed to the evident credibility of the Christian faith. Indeed the Church by herself, on account of her wonderful propagation, extraordinary sanctity, inexhaustible fruitful-

ness in all good things, her Catholic unity, and invincible stability, is a certain great and perpetual motive of credibility and irrefutable testimony of her own divine mission."<sup>2</sup> And our reason alone would tell us that a God who is infinite, all-powerful, just, and Truth itself, could not allow any religion proposing itself as revealed by Him to show forth all these wonderful signs if it were not in truth revealed by Him. Hence, with Richard of St. Victor, we may cry out, "Lord, if it is an error, it is by Thee we are deceived; for these things are confirmed with such great signs and prodigies as can be caused by Thee alone."

Of all the motives of credibility the Vatican Council stresses particularly the prophecies and miracles. The Apostles themselves, especially St. Matthew, insisted strongly on the value of the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament, where the life and death of Christ were announced beforehand. And Our Lord said of the prophecies which He Himself made, "At present I tell you, before it come to pass; that when it shall come to pass, you may believe that I am He." It would be folly to maintain that it merely *happened* that all the prophecies were fulfilled. They clearly and certainly announced future things in detail, many of which depended on the wills of many persons *who had absolutely no intention of fulfilling any prophecies*. No sensible person would hold that the Jews had in their minds the fulfillment of the prophecies in all their minute details when they persecuted and put Our Lord to death. Yet He had prophesied that they would do so. "The Son of man," He said, "shall be betrayed to the chief priests and the scribes, and they shall condemn Him to death. And shall deliver Him to the Gentiles to be mocked, and scourged, and crucified, and the third day He shall rise again."<sup>3</sup> It may be well to note here that the things that Our Divine Lord did and suffered were not done because they had been prophesied, but they were prophesied because He was to do them. In other words, the Old Law was on account of the New, and not the New on account of the Old.<sup>4</sup> Only God could be the principal author of the prophecies, and if in their fulfillment we find a motive of credibility it must be reliable, for otherwise God would be a witness of falsehood, which is most certainly impossible.

<sup>2</sup> H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum et Definitionum*, No. 1794.

<sup>3</sup> St. Matthew, xx, 19.

<sup>4</sup> St. Thomas, *Commentary on St. John*, xix, 28.

In regard to miracles and their power as motives of credibility, the mind of the Church is clearly stated by the Vatican Council. "If anyone should say that no miracles can be performed—or that miracles can never be known with certainty, or that by them the divine origin of the Christian religion cannot be rightly proved, let him be anathema."<sup>5</sup> The reason for their great value as motives may be seen from the following passage from St. Thomas, "It is natural to man to arrive at the intelligible truth through its sensible effects. Wherefore just as man by his natural reason is able to arrive at some knowledge of God through His natural effects, so is he brought to a certain degree of supernatural knowledge of the objects of faith by certain supernatural effects which are called miracles."<sup>6</sup> One of the first things required of a miracle is that it be evident to the senses. Herein lies its power, because what is evident to the senses is so easily accommodated to the intelligence of all. Even the most unlettered person in the world would recognize the hand of Almighty God in the restoring of life to a dead person or sight to a man who had come blind into the world.

Our Lord Himself worked many miracles and offered them as motives of credibility. "Though you will not believe me," He said to the Jews, "believe the works; that you may know and believe that the Father is in me, and I in the Father."<sup>7</sup> And He sent His disciples into the world to preach, armed with the power of performing miracles in confirmation of the truths they taught. This they did, "Insomuch that they (the people) brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that when Peter came, his shadow at the least might overshadow any of them and they might be delivered from their infirmities."<sup>8</sup> And St. Mark tells us that "They going forth preached everywhere; the Lord working withal, and confirming the word with signs that followed." Even in the Old Law we read that God showed to Moses the miracles he was to work in confirmation of his divine mission, that the Israelites might believe.<sup>9</sup>

The motives of credibility are necessary for an act of faith. The Vatican Council makes this fact evident in the following decree: "In order that the homage of our faith may be in har-

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<sup>5</sup> Denzinger, *op. cit.*, No. 1813.

<sup>6</sup> *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 178, a. I.

<sup>7</sup> St. John, x, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Acts, v, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus, Chapter 4th.



mony with reason, God has willed to add to the interior aids of the Holy Ghost exterior proofs of His revelation, that is, divine facts, and particularly miracles and prophecies, which, demonstrating with evidence the almighty power and infinite knowledge of God, afford in behalf of divine revelation very certain signs suitable to the intelligence of all."<sup>10</sup> And Pope Gregory XVI, in his condemnation of the errors of Bautain, says, "However feeble and obscure the reason is rendered by original sin, there remain in it, however, enough clarity and strength, that it may lead us with certainty to (the knowledge of) the existence of God, of the revelation made to the Jews through Moses and to Christians by the adorable Man-God."<sup>11</sup> Thus we see that in regard to the sure knowledge of the fact of revelation, reason precedes faith. The assent of faith must be so certain that were it required of us, we should be willing to give up our lives rather than call a truth of it into doubt, even though the contrary were preached by an angel. Hence a far greater *credibility*, or aptitude to be believed, is required in the truths to which we assent by divine faith than in those assented to in our ordinary daily lives by merely human faith. The reason finds the evidence of the credibility of the supernatural truths in the motives of credibility.

It must not be understood, however, that the reason, through the motives of credibility, produces faith. There is still required the grace of God, because faith is a supernatural gift, and the natural cannot produce the supernatural. "Of those who see the same miracle, or who hear the same sermon, some believe, and some do not. Hence we must assert another internal cause which moves man inwardly to assent to matters of faith."<sup>12</sup> This internal cause is the grace of God, preparing the will of man, but nevertheless leaving him free. "The act of believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth *at the command of the will* moved by the grace of God, so that it is subject to the free will in relation to God; and consequently the act of faith can be meritorious."<sup>13</sup>

The objection might naturally arise in the mind that the young and the ordinary person in the workaday world cannot have a clear and scientific knowledge of the motives of credibil-

<sup>10</sup> Denzinger, *op. cit.*, No. 1790.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 1627.

<sup>12</sup> *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 6, a. 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 2, a. 9.

ity and of their place and value in relation to the act of faith. But such a scientific demonstration is not required for each one of the faithful. The Vatican Council condemned the contrary of this doctrine, in these words, "If anyone should say—that Catholics can have a just cause for calling into doubt the faith which they have received under the teaching authority of the Church, withholding their assent until they have completed a scientific demonstration of the credibility and truth of their faith, let him be anathema."<sup>14</sup> A moral certainty, that which is had from the sure testimony of reliable teachers, is sufficient. Man depends on this kind of certainty in many of the important affairs of life. "If a man refuse to believe anything that he could not discover for himself, he certainly could not live in this world; for how could anyone live without believing somebody?"<sup>15</sup> And surely the Catholic Church is a reliable teacher, considered even from a merely human point of view.

The Catholic, then, presents a "reasonable service." "The Church exacts faith," says St. Augustine in his letter to Consentius," and because we have so many reasons to believe, strong and urgent reasons, she requires faith and humble submission to all her divine teachings. Let her not be accused, then, of requiring an absolute, blind, unreasoning faith, or of insisting that those who, in order to believe, have used their reason in the salutary manner we have indicated, may not continue to use their reason to render their faith ever more humble, but also more enlightened. God forbid that our submission to all that is of faith, should prevent us from searching and asking the reason of what we believe, since we could not even believe if we were not capable of reasoning."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Denzinger, *op. cit.*, No. 1815.

<sup>15</sup> St. Thomas, *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*.

<sup>16</sup> W. Devivier, *Christian Apologetics*, p. 40.

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