

VIRTUOUS CIRCLE

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HE SCRIPTURES attest to the Divine foundation and the infallible authority of the Catholic Church, yet at the same time, the infallible Church stands as the sole source of the confirmation of the authenticity of the Scriptures. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God upon earth¹ and of the Kingdom-Church which He would maintain infallible throughout the ages; on the other hand, saints and Doctors of the Church could say with St. Augustine, "I indeed would not believe in the Gospels did not the authority of the Catholic Church move me."² The argumentation is circuitous: from the authority of the Scriptures to the authority of the Church, from the authority of the Church to the authority of the Scriptures. Whenever a dogma is proclaimed or taught and the Church asserts any proposition, it is imposed upon the faithful as contained in the Scriptures or tradition. If then the validity of the Scriptures is called into question and doubt cast upon them as the word of God, the infallible Church proclaims a solemn and final decision on the matter. There is, therefore, a circle of argumentation in verifying the Church's authority from that of the Scriptures and the Scripture's authority from that of the Church.

This circle of reasoning will either augment or debilitate the certitude of Faith of Catholics and the surety of opinion in favor of the Church which heretics and non-believers may have, inasmuch as it is considered either vicious or virtuous. The charge has frequently been made by both pagans and Protestants that such a method of argumentation—the one most commonly used by theologians and defenders of the Church—is a vicious one. Both to defend the Church from their calumnies and to confirm the faithful in their belief, Catholic apologetics offers a penetrating analysis of the notions involved, of the principles, reasoning processes and conclusions of its theological method.

¹ cf. *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas, Ia IIae q. CVI. a. 4. ad. 4.

² *Contra Epistolam fundamenti*.

The notion of circuitous argumentation is not necessarily an opprobrious one. Since method in science is but the right way to the knowledge of truth, the method of argumentation best adapted to the attainment of truth will seek principles which will cause certitude and strive for a starting point at which there is no fear of error. If then a conclusion which has been formally proved as following from certain, definite principles is itself taken as a starting point from which a uniform regression is made to the principle of that conclusion a vicious circle of argumentation is had. If, on the other hand, the certitude of a conclusion is acquired by one means and a regression is made to one of its principles which is not a cause of the conclusion but rather a condition *sine qua non*, the circle of argumentation may be called virtuous, since it has probative force.

In the mind of many Protestants and moderns the theological procedure of the Catholic Church is not only logically vicious but theologically and morally so. Protestants insist that the Church has arrogated to itself the title of infallibility without having received such credentials from its Founder in the Gospels. The modernists attribute infallibility to the Church much as a man might praise the intellectual acumen of another who agrees with him. They allow to the Church infallibility inasmuch as it sanctions and confirms the opinions of a "christian" conscience, which can change with the evolutions of the religious sense of men, philosophy and science. Both Protestants and Modernists agree in condemning the so-called usurpation of divine prerogatives of institution and teaching power which the Church claims for itself. They allege, furthermore, that the defense which the Church has "concocted" during the centuries suffers from the logical and moral malady which they call a vicious circle.

The living and infallible teaching power of the Church and the Word of God, which it alone adequately defends, have suffered much from these accusations, but they have continued to shine amidst the darkness of error and calumny, confident that the gates of hell will not prevail against them. So that it may once again either bring the erring sheep within the fold or heap upon their heads the coals which divine wrath will ignite in an eternal combustion, the Church not only distinguishes between the vicious and the virtuous circles in argumentation, but goes further to explain its reasoning process with exactitude and untiring care.

The first step in the line of reasoning employed by Catholic apologetes is a comparatively simple one. Jesus Christ, who claimed, "I have come forth from God"³ and proved His Divine Sonship to men of good will, gave the reason for His coming as the founding of a Kingdom Church which should possess a living and infallible teaching power until the end of time. The doctrine of Christ's Church and its attributes lay hidden from the eyes of men until it was revealed by Christ, but when revealed, it was stated so that it should be easily received in a determined sense. Finally, its divine origin was rendered certain by each act which proved to men the divinity of Christ. The faithful may then say, "I believe that the Catholic Church is the living and infallible teaching authority of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for the very reason that He Himself has said it is so." In that statement they would express both what they believe and their precise and undeniable, yet mysterious and supernatural, reason for belief, namely, the authority of God revealing. At this point the process has reached its term, and further pursuit of reasons cannot be carried on, nor further resolutions made, since the formal reason for Faith has been attained. In the line of determining the exact nature of Faith—formal causality—the ultimate has been reached.

To these objective considerations, however, mention must necessarily be made of the complementary subjective element of Faith, namely, the supernatural light of Faith, which provides in the soul of a man the proportion of supernatural grace required both to attain to a supernatural object and to adhere to it infallibly. The Vatican Council assures men that an efficacious assistance is necessary that they assent to the truths of the Catholic Faith and that they "go out of the darkness into His marvellous light."⁴ Among the revelations which require this supernatural light is the dogma of the infallibility of the Church. In fact, it is considered "the pillar and ground of the truth."⁵

The second step of Catholic apologetes, presupposing that the faithful believe the Church to be infallible because of the revelation of Christ—the formal motive of Faith—involves a passage from the authority of the Church to the belief in the

³ John, 16: 28.

⁴ cf. *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, Denziger, No. 1794.

⁵ I Tim. 3: 15.

Scriptures. Herein lies the difficulty.⁶ It is alleged⁷ that the proof of the Church's authority is derived from the Scriptures which are believed only as approved by the Church. Thus the dazzling round of scriptural citations and ecclesiastical definitions and anathemas is in full swing. Only a fine but strong distinction can cut the gordian knot which ties the argumentation end to end. Simply stated, the distinction asserts that while the formal motive for belief in any supernatural truth is the authority of God revealing, the condition *sine qua non* of contemporary belief is the infallible testimony of the Catholic Church which is the instrument of supernatural Faith. The Church does not make the Faith of the faithful, but it is the ordinary means by which they attain this supernatural grace.

The circle of argumentation of the Church, therefore, is not only not vicious, but it is virtuous inasmuch as it has the power of generating certitude in those who view it with eyes which are not blinded by prejudice. Its force lies in the well-attested fact and principle of reasoning that causes are the causes of one another. In its own sphere each cause is supreme, and it is the cause of all other lesser causes under its scope. This interdependence of causes is an ordinary occurrence in the lives of creatures whose wise Creator ordained all things to One End, and abundant evidence to confirm the principle may be found in each of the branches of philosophy and theology. Confidently employing this principle of the mutual relation of causes, apologues claim that the Church, in the Providence of God, is supreme in the order of ministration and proposing of the truths of Faith, while the Scriptures hold their objective sway in the order of formal causality in attesting to the truth, for which God must give the grace for individual assent.⁸

Furthermore, the interrelation of the Church and the Scripture is distinguished in this that the Scriptures—God revealing—are truly a cause of Faith, since they actually flow into the act of Faith itself. On the other hand, the testimony of the Church is a necessary condition but no more than that, since the mere proposing of Faith does not belong to the formal motive of Faith. Not as a prophet or Christ who provided new revelations, but after the Divine act of revelation the Church stands as a minister to conserve and infallibly elucidate the revelations

⁶ cf. *de Fide*, Billuart, I, a2.

⁷ cf. *Cursus Theologicus*, John of St. Thomas, In QI Iae Partis d. I a.3.

⁸ *loc. cit.* John of St. Thomas, a. 3.

already made. It stands rather as the divinely ordained means by which the application of divine grace is made, and its contribution to the final effect is exemplified in the process of applying fire to a combustible substance, in which the mere application does not cause the combustion.

It is, therefore, amply evident that the Church makes no extravagant claims for itself. It does not cause the Faith, but it transmits it as an inviolable treasure. It corroborates its testimony by miracles worked for it by its Divine Founder who would be with it until the end of time.

One phrase from an epistle of St. Paul seems to sum up the argument of centuries. It contains the formal motive for Faith, an indication of the instrument, and mention of the extrinsic confirmation of the instrument for weak and erring men. Accommodated to the interrelation of the Church and the Scriptures, it stands as the symbol of the unerring propagation of the Gospel, "for it was first announced by the Lord and was confirmed unto us by those who heard him, God also according to his own will, bearing them witness by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by impartings of the Holy Spirit."⁹

Conscious, therefore, of the "impartings of the Holy Spirit" which God has continually showered upon it, the Church asserts that although the Gospels were "first announced by the Lord," it is the Catholic Church alone which is the worthy instrument of His truth. It admits, in fact, it unhesitatingly proclaims, the sources of its arguments which seem to cause a circuitous course, yet it affirms and proves that its circle of argumentation is not vicious but virtuous with the probative force and method approved by Divine Wisdom, the Alpha and Omega in the circle of love from God to God.

⁹ Hebrew, 2: 3.