

# TO START YOU THINKING

*The Bible / Infallibility / Images / Mass / Confession / Purgatory*

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## INTRODUCTION

AMONG the duties of a Catholic Priest in England there is one which is always of the most absorbing interest and which occupies him sometimes for many hours each week. This is the instruction of those who come to enquire about the teachings of the Catholic Church, of whom a large proportion eventually become members of the Church of Christ.

There is no set form of instruction because each enquirer has his own outlook and religious background, and each has his own peculiar difficulties. Yet most priests have found that there are certain obstacles to be overcome: certain misunderstandings and prejudices which are commonly shared by non-catholics; and it is often found convenient to dispose of these first, before beginning a more systematic course of instruction.

The following chapters have been written to help in this clearing of the ground. Experience tends to prove that those who are outside the Catholic Church are seldom put off by what Catholics really believe. When Catholic teaching is explained to them, they are quick to realise how eminently reasonable and acceptable it is. They discover almost at once that their difficulties have been over what they *thought* Catholics believe, or what they have been told about the Church.

It is not so much, therefore, a question of solving their problems, but rather of showing that these difficulties are unreal and—in so many cases—do not actually exist.

Again, it is a matter of experience that these instructions, though they are of fascinating interest, are not a little exhausting both to the priest and to those who are seeking the truth. Because what the priest must do is constantly to urge the enquirer to *think*, and to think logically and clearly which implies no small mental effort. But there are at present thousands of good Catholics in this country who are happy to bear witness that the effort was tremendously worth while.

### **Thinking for Yourself**

You may have heard it said that Catholics are not allowed to think for themselves; you may even believe it. And as long as you can believe things like that you will remain safely out of reach of any appeal which the Catholic Church could make to your reason.

But someone ought to warn you that if you are beginning to think for yourself, you won't be able to believe it much longer. Your mind, becoming more critical with exercise, will reject this along with a number of other quaint superstitions.

Another point you should consider seriously is this: you may be the kind of person who, having once begun to think about a subject, continues to do so logically until he arrives at certain definite conclusions. This phenomenon today is comparatively rare; but if you *are* that kind of person you will probably accept these conclusions, even although they turn your former opinions upside down, and change your whole outlook. Finally you may decide that these conclusions you have formed are so important that you cannot ignore them, and that you must do something about them. This is one of the penalties of real thinking: and it is a penalty that a man or woman is prepared to face who wishes to live a life which is really human and not just vegetable.

If ever you get as far as this in thinking about the Catholic Church, then you will be in very real danger of becoming a Catholic.

It is only fair to say at once that these chapters are written to stimulate and encourage this process. They are not intended to be anything like a complete account of what a Catholic believes. But they will help you to clear the ground and to appreciate the humour of such cherished superstitions as the belief that Catholics are not allowed to think for themselves.

Since there has been so much loose thinking and talking about it, it might be as well perhaps to examine the notion of

'freedom of thought' because strictly speaking this freedom exists only among the mentally afflicted. If I should lose the discipline of reason, then *I* am free to think anything. *I* may *think* that I am the Archimandrite of Ethiopia or alternatively a poached egg. But as long as *I* retain my reason I am not free to think what I like. I am strictly bound by my nature to accept facts as they are, even although at times *I might* very much like to do otherwise.

The thing which we *must* have: the thing worth fighting for is freedom to think. But how many people really want freedom of thought in this sense? And how many prefer freedom *from* thought? After all, it saves a lot of trouble to *take* our opinions from slogans and headlines, and to retreat from mental strife behind a strong barrier of prejudices.

Real thinking is hard work.

### **Thinking about the Bible**

To begin on what may be familiar ground, how would you like to start thinking a little about the Bible? (Were you going to say: But Catholics aren't allowed to read the Bible?—

—Never mind; that is just another one for the dustbin as we shall see.)

Once upon a time all Christians believed that the Bible is the Word of God: that—in other words—all the writers of Holy Scripture were directly inspired by the Holy Ghost to write down exactly what they did write; so that in this very real sense, God Himself *is* the Author of these writings which we call the Bible.

All Catholics still believe this, and always have believed it. So do some Protestants, but with this difference: a Catholic has a reason for believing it, and a non-Catholic has no reason for doing so. To put it in another way: Catholic belief in the inspiration of Holy Scripture is an act of faith in the Holy Ghost; Protestant belief in the same thing—where it still exists—is a superstition. This may seem to you an outrageous statement to make, but that doesn't matter if only you will start thinking about it, and try to discover for yourself whether or not it happens to be *true*.

Let us begin. The word Bible means 'the book': a most misleading name for it. Why? Because obviously—except in a physical sense—it is not a book at all as we usually understand the word. It is a *collection* of about seventy different works written by a large number of different men over a period of hundreds of years. Among other things it contains works of prophecy, large tracts of Jewish history, sacred songs, some public and private letters, some accounts of the life and teaching of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the first volume of church history ever written.

The important word here is *collection* because it implies that someone did the collecting. But it means more than that. The writings which are included in the Bible are not the only works of their kind. There were others contemporary with them, and very similar in scope and purpose. It was not merely, therefore, a matter of collection but of *selection* as well: some works being included as having God for their Author, and others omitted as being of purely human authorship. As we shall see, this is of the greatest importance.

If, for the purpose of illustration, we consider the New Testament and the Apostolic age, we find that there were, in addition to the Gospels and the Epistles, a number of other writings which were very highly esteemed in the Church at that time. Indeed, they still are.

We have for instance the Epistles of St Ignatius; there are seven of them, and he wrote them while on his last journey from the east to Rome, where he was martyred only about three years after the death of St John the Apostle. St Ignatius was the Bishop of Antioch. He was born less than thirty years after Our Lord's ascension into heaven, and he was a disciple of St John himself. These letters like those of St Paul are full of edification, exhortation and encouragement, and have been treasured by the Church ever since they were written.

After St Paul's death, also, St Clement, Bishop of Rome (who was ordained by St Peter) felt obliged, as St Paul had done, to write an Epistle to the Corinthians because they were still distracted and divided by the same disunity for which St Paul had reproached them. This Epistle of St Clement was written in St John's lifetime in about the year A.D. 96.

We are familiar with the Acts of the Apostles; but—again in the lifetime of St John—another work called the Teaching of the Apostles (the Didache) was well known and highly regarded in the Christian Church.

Along with the Epistles of St Paul, moreover, the Epistle of Barnabas, written in about A.D. 100, was also read by the

faithful.

This is by no means a complete list of the religious literature of the early Church; but it is sufficient to show that the New Testament as we have it now is not only a collection but also a selection from the sacred writings of Apostolic times.

And so we find, for instance, that the Epistle of Barnabas is not included in Scripture, while a small private letter from Paul to Philemon *is*. The Acts of the Apostles are in; the Teaching of the Apostles is out. St Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians are Holy Scripture; the Epistle of St Clement to the Church of Corinth is not.

If you are thinking about this, you must already be asking yourself some very significant questions.

Who did the selecting? When? On what grounds was the choice made? And (most important of all) by what authority did someone presume to say: 'This work has the Holy Spirit for its Author: that one has not'?

Surely, if your belief in the inspiration of Holy Scripture is to be something more than a superstition, you *must* have the answers to these questions. Have you got them? Perhaps the best way I can help you here is to answer the questions myself. You can call them the Catholic answers if you like; but I cannot see any alternative to them. All I ask you to do is to think about them and to judge whether they make sense. If you don't like them, try to find some other answers.

First: there is only one possible way in which we *could* know with certainty whether the Holy Ghost had inspired a certain man to write a particular work: and that is by the Holy Ghost telling us so—or at least telling *somebody*.

Please remember that we are not at the moment concerning ourselves with the *truth* of Holy Scripture, but with its *divine authorship*. The two things are quite distinct. I may have the very best of reasons for believing a certain author's History of England to be absolutely true and reliable. But this would not cause me to think that it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Indeed it would be unreasonable to think so. It would be just as unreasonable for me to believe that any Jewish historian or letter writer—however true and edifying his work may be—was directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, unless I had good reason to believe that God Himself had revealed that this was in fact the case.

*Secondly*: If we assume for a moment that God did inspire certain men to write the Scriptures for our benefit, it is surely unthinkable that He should have failed to give us clear evidence of what those Scriptures are.

The questions we have been asking, therefore, resolve themselves into this: Has the Holy Spirit given us the infallible guidance without which we cannot possibly distinguish with certainty what is truly the Word of God and what is not?

Unless He has done so, *we simply do not know*. Very briefly this is what happened:

It was the Catholic Church, guided unerringly by the Holy Ghost, which gave us the Bible. It was the Pope or, to be more exact, a series of Popes who said in effect: These works, and these only, have God for their author and are therefore Holy Scripture. We will think about Infallibility a little later on; but for the moment I want you to realise that Catholics believe that the Bible is the Word of God *because the Church says so*, and because the same Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of Scripture will not allow the Church to go wrong about a thing like that.

There is nothing to prevent you from studying the history of the Church and finding out exactly how it all happened. Indeed it would be an excellent thing to do; because here I can only give the merest outline of what took place.

To begin with, do not think for a moment that the four evangelists, together with Peter and Paul and the others, had the slightest intention of collaborating to produce a volume called the New Testament. They wrote quite independently at different times, and for quite different and special reasons. St Matthew wrote primarily for the benefit of the Jews; St Luke in order to instruct and reassure the Gentiles. St Paul wrote for all sorts of reasons: to chide the Corinthians, to fortify his beloved Galatians against false teachers, to tell the Thessalonians to get on with their work instead of wasting time waiting for the end of the world, to tell Timothy how to be a good bishop, and so on. (By the way, you should realise that the Catholic Church was founded and surprisingly well organised *before a line of the New Testament was written*.)

How, then, were these writings first brought together?

In a perfectly natural manner. Everything known to be written by the Apostles naturally carried great authority.

These men had known Our Lord personally and had heard His voice. Their eyes had beheld His risen body. They were, moreover, the men to whom He had said: He that heareth you heareth Me.

When, therefore, it became known that there were three eye-witness accounts of His life, and some time later a fourth:

and that some Churches and individuals had received actual letters from the Apostles, full of comfort and instruction, the early Christian communities strove to obtain copies of them. With these, and such spiritual letters as those of Clement, Barnabas, Ignatius and others, those communities who could do so gradually formed their own collections. In at least one case, St Paul particularly asked that his letters should be passed on and exchanged between two of the Churches (as you can read in the fourth chapter of his Epistle to the Colossians.)

Among these works, also, they placed the writings of the prophets, and the other books that make up what we call the Old Testament; because Our Lord had made it clear that He came to fulfil the old law and the prophets, not to destroy them. Moreover, early Christian writers like St Paul and St Clement quoted extensively from the Jewish scriptures.

This was the first phase: the process of *collecting* the sacred writings which were read in the Churches to instruct and edify the Faithful. But we know that these writings did not all enjoy the same degree of importance in the eyes of the Church.

And as the years went by and the number and extent of these collections increased, the feeling grew that the Church must examine them all and, with its divine authority, declare which were to be received as the Word of God, and which were to be regarded as works of merely human authorship.

So began the second phase: the process of *selecting*; and this, like the first, was a gradual one. From the second century lists were being compiled and much was being written on the Canon of Scripture. Great Catholic saints and scholars made it their study, among them St Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Jerome and Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. The most complete list was drawn up at the Council of Hippo in the year 393, and reaffirmed at the third and fourth councils of Carthage in 397 and 418. To this list was appended a request that it should be sent to Rome for approval and confirmation, preferably, it said, “to holy Boniface, Bishop of Rome.” On such an important matter, it was felt that authority, in the person of the Pope, must speak.

At about the same time, we find that St Exuperius the Bishop of Toulouse had written also to the Pope (Innocent I) asking formally for a list of the true books of Scripture. In 405 Innocent replied, and the list he sent was the same as that of the Councils of Hippo and Carthage.

As yet, however, the Church had made no infallible pronouncement on this matter; and so there continued to be a great deal of controversy and discussion; but the same list appears again, proclaimed by the Council of Florence in 1441. Finally at the Council of Trent in 1546, all doubt was removed when the same list once more was formally defined as the Canon of Scripture. For it rested now no longer on the testimony or scholarship even of the greatest saints and scholars, but on the infallible decree of the Church of God guided by the Holy Spirit.

And that—very briefly—is the story of how the Catholic Church preserved, selected and gave us the Scriptures, guaranteeing them to be the Word of God and backing the guarantee with her own infallibility. These are simply historical facts which you can verify. If you are in any doubt about them, you should verify them. But you cannot fail to see what they imply: that our belief in the divine authorship of Scripture rests on the infallible testimony of the Catholic Church. If the Church could be wrong about this, then our faith in the Bible as the Word of God is vain.

### **Thinking about Infallibility**

You probably feel now, after reading the last chapter, that this claim of Infallibility needs a lot of thinking about. It does.

I do not think it would be out of place here to quote a conversation on the subject in which I once took part. My companion was a very earnest and devout Baptist whose name was David; and this fragment—which I can quote almost verbatim—was part of one of many discussions we had on the subject of the Catholic religion. Here it is:

David: I simply cannot understand how you can believe that the Pope is infallible.

Myself: Suppose, David, you were in real doubt about some religious belief—some part of the Christian *Faith*; or about the rightness or wrongness of some course of action according to Christian *Morals*. Suppose that in either case you considered it a matter of spiritual importance. Now a Catholic in that situation would simply ask a priest what the Church

taught about it; and being told would say: Thank you very much; now I *know*.

But how would you resolve the problem?

David: We have our Bible. I should search the Scriptures and find the answer in the Word of God.

(Remember, David hadn't read the previous chapter!)

Myself: But you will agree, surely, that the Bible is not always easy to understand. St Peter himself admitted this; and it is well known that from the time they were written, many have searched the Scriptures, and arrived at very different conclusions about what they mean.

David: I agree with all that; but I should read them prayerfully; and I have enough faith to believe that in such spiritually important matters, God would not allow me to be misled.

At this point, the conversation dissolved in laughter; for David suddenly realised—as you have probably realised—what he was doing. If you really understand what Catholics mean by the infallibility of the Pope, you will see that David was claiming to enjoy an habitual personal infallibility rather in excess of anything which is claimed for the Pope.

It is surprising how many people do the same kind of thing without noticing it; and it suggests a very significant thought: namely, that people like David who care about these things feel instinctively that there ought to be—indeed that there *must* be—a way of knowing the truths of the Christian religion with certainty, and without danger of error. They are right. There ought to be, *and there is*.

I want you to read what follows, and to ask yourself once more whether or not it makes sense.

Harassed and exasperated, Pontius Pilate asked Our Lord why He was born. Jesus replied: “To teach the people the truth.” All through the years of His ministry, that was what He was at such pains to do: to reveal the truth about God, about Himself; about us and the purpose for which we are here, the truth about judgment and heaven and hell. It was not easy. Even His own Apostles were very slow to learn. Read in the Gospels about the events which preceded the death of Our Lord and those which occurred afterwards until the day of His ascension. You will see Jesus striving to make them understand what is happening. The time is running out; there is so much for them to learn; and again and again you will read that they did not understand what He was saying to them.

But Our Lord knew that only after He had gone would they understand everything perfectly; for then the Holy Ghost would come upon them and make clear all those things which He had taught them. This was part of the divine plan. The truth was not to die when Our Lord ascended into heaven. It was to be guarded, preserved and spread through the world by the Apostles and their successors; and the Holy Spirit was to be their unfailing guide.

Let us think now of how Our Lord actually founded His Church, and of the authority with which He invested it. Have you noticed that when He was on earth, with all His meekness and gentleness, Our Lord carried with Him an authority which was completely natural to Him?

See how it impressed the ordinary folk to whom He spoke:

“This man,” they said, “speaks as one having authority, and not like our scribes and pharisees.” The scribes and pharisees noticed it too, and were goaded into asking Him:

“By what authority doest Thou these things, and who gave Thee this authority?” And from the Gospel accounts of Our Lord's trial, it would seem that Pilate also felt the impact of it.

But perhaps the most touching tribute of all was paid to Our Lord by a pagan: the Roman centurion whose servant Jesus healed. This, in effect, is what he said to Our Lord: I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof; and I know that you have no need to do so. For I am a soldier, a man whose life is a life of discipline. I must obey my superior officers, and I expect obedience from my men. I know authority when I see it; and you have authority even over life and death. Give but the word of command, and my servant will be healed.

Such then was the authority with which Our Lord moved and taught. For truth must be taught with authority or not at all. And if one thing is clear from the Gospels it is this: that Our Lord intended His Church to teach with His own authority until the end of time; and that He intended us all to receive her teaching with obedience and faith.

If you have never thought of it in this way before, read carefully His own words to His apostles:

“All authority is given to Me in heaven and on earth. As the Father has sent Me, so also I send you.”

“Go ye forth and teach all nations.., whatsoever things I have commanded you.”

“He that heareth you heareth Me; and he that despiseth you despiseth Me.”

“And, behold, I am with you always even unto the end of the world.”

These are Our Lord’s words taken from the Gospels of St Matthew, St Luke and St John. To me, they seem to mean this: that Jesus came from God the Father with divine authority to reveal to us the truth; that before He left the earth He endowed His Church with the same authority, the same infallibility and the same mission; that He commanded us to accept the Church and its teaching, and guaranteed it until the end of time.

Unless His words mean this, what *do* they mean? And is not this exactly the kind of Church one would expect Him to have left us? If the Church cannot teach with authority, if it is not infallible, of what use is it to you or to me?

The idea of infallibility may perhaps seem strange at first to those outside the Catholic Church; and yet from the beginning the Church has always been conscious of it. It was certainly not strange to the Apostles. If you doubt this, read the first few verses of St Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians. St Paul was a very humble man; he called himself the least of the Apostles, and said that he was not worthy to be called an Apostle. Yet he does not scruple to claim infallibility above the angels of God when he is preaching the doctrines of God as he received them from Christ and from the other Apostles.

And how is it possible when reading the Gospels to avoid the obvious truth that Our Lord gave a primacy of authority to St Peter?

St John tells us in the first chapter of his Gospel that as soon as Jesus set eyes on Simon, He said to him: “Thou art Simon the son of Jona; thou shalt be called Cephas.” (Cephas means ‘the Rock’, and Peter is simply the English translation of it.) Exactly what Our Lord meant by this He told Peter later on when He said: “Thou art Cephas” (the Rock) “and upon this rock I will build My Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven, and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”.

Before He ascended into heaven, Our Lord very solemnly reminded St Peter of his position and his responsibilities, charging him to feed His sheep and to confirm his brethren.

Peter’s successors in the Church are the long unbroken line of Popes; and in the present Holy Father resides the same primacy and infallibility to preserve intact the teachings of Our Lord, so that the gates of hell shall never prevail against His Church, and so that Our Lord’s promise ‘He that heareth you heareth Me’ shall never fail.

### **Thinking about Ritual**

If you attended for the first time a Solemn High Mass in Westminster Cathedral, and then took part in one of those earnest and intimate little prayer meetings in a small non-conformist chapel, the latter might well seem to you much more like an early Christian meeting in Apostolic times than the ceremony in the Cathedral. You might even find yourself thinking something like this: What did Our Lord and His Apostles know of all this ritual and ceremonial? He was born in a manger, He was at home in a humble dwelling at Nazareth; His Apostles met in small upper rooms, the early Christians in catacombs. What shadow of identity is there between this magnificent ceremony and the simplicity of the early Church?

This is certainly worth thinking about, because Catholics do claim that the Catholic Church today is the identical Church which Our Lord founded nearly two thousand years ago.

In passing, it is as well to recall that Our Lord and the Apostles did know quite a lot about ritual and ceremonial. There was plenty of both in the Temple worship to which they were quite accustomed. Our Lord, as we know, reproached the elders, the scribes and the pharisees for many things; but we do not read that He ever criticised them for observing the ancient rites of their religion.

But what of the Catholic Church? Imagine an acorn in the palm of your hand; and then think of a great and spreading oak tree with its vast and complicated structure of innumerable branches, thousands of leaves, and millions of tiny cells—

living, growing, spreading. You must not be deceived by mere appearances. Between the early Church and the Catholic Church today you must expect to find the *difference* as well as the identity between the acorn and the oak. Our Lord said so, except that He used an illustration more familiar to His hearers: that of the tiny mustard seed which grew into a tree large enough for the birds to nest in.

Never forget that the Church is a living, growing organism. It began to grow and to spread, and to organise itself from the moment it was created by Our Lord and illuminated by the Holy Ghost. It must continue to do so until the end of the world.

But what about 'all this ritual'? You might well think about that too; and it will help you to see it in perspective if you begin by realising that you are a confirmed ritualist yourself.

If you reflect a little, you will realise that every single idea which you have in your mind has come to you through one or more of your senses, i.e. through your body. Your mind interprets your bodily experiences in this way and gives them meaning. So to a person who has never been able to see, the word 'purple' could have no meaning at all, and no corresponding idea could exist in his mind. Similarly, if you can imagine a person deprived of the sense of touch, you can understand that he could never have any clear idea in his mind of the meaning of such words as 'rough' and 'smooth'. This is because we are beings composite of body and soul, and in this life, our bodily and spiritual faculties depend on each other.

*But it works the other way as well.* It is impossible for us to express *any* idea which is in our minds or any emotion we may feel except through the medium of our bodies. In fact we are doing this all day long. And this *is* ritual; and it is the most human and natural thing in the world. Moreover the more important and distinguished the ideas and feelings we want to express, the more elaborate this ritual tends to become.

A gentleman passes in the street a lady whom he knows and respects. To indicate his regard for her, he takes his hat off and puts it on again. He meets another man with whom he is very friendly. To signify their mutual delight in the encounter, each grasps the other's hand *and* shakes it up and down with vigour. All this is ritual.

But if a man were privileged to have an audience of Her Majesty, he would know that in greeting his Queen a rather more elaborate ritual would be appropriate and, indeed, necessary. This again is right and natural; to abandon these things altogether would be to return to the jungle.

To realise how ritualistic the English are, you have only to read a book on social etiquette, or listen to the reverent accents of a B.B.C. commentator describing movement by movement the graceful and leisured ceremonies of a cricket match.

When Catholics approach God and communicate with *Him* in their churches, they are conscious that the occasion is a very distinguished one. Their ritual, fashioned by saints and hallowed by the devotion of centuries, is the natural expression of this consciousness. It is their expression of the service and reverence due from man to *his* Creator *and* Saviour

After all, there is no good reason at present (in this country at least) why we should return to the catacombs or creep into upper rooms and bar the doors. But make no mistake: when necessary, we can always do so, and feel quite at home.

### **Thinking about Saints and Images**

EVERYBODY knows, of course, that Catholics worship the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Saints, as well as statues and images. Believe it or not, I have no intention of denying this, because it happens to be true. If this surprises you, it may be because you haven't thought much about the word 'worship'. It comes from two old English words: 'worth' and 'ship', or worth-ship if you like. It is both a verb and a noun, and it means giving to a person—or even to a thing—that worth or honour which is due. It is, for instance, the fidelity and love which is due from a man to his wife, and in this sense it is used in the marriage service. It is the obedience and filial devotion due from a son to his parents. It is the particular honour due to such a civic dignitary as '*His Worship* the Mayor'. It is found in the reverence a man may have for his mother's photograph, or in the feelings of a royalist standing before a statue of King Charles I.

In this perfectly natural way Catholics worship the saints and show reverence and honour to sacred images and holy pictures. But that special worship which we give to God and to no-one else is called *adoration*, and is quite a different thing. It is given to God alone because the first commandment forbids us to give this particular kind of worship to anyone or anything else.

I doubt if many Protestants today are foolish enough to believe that Catholics pray to images; but many of them still have an uncomfortable feeling that we are breaking the first commandment by even *making* such things as crucifixes, statues and holy pictures. But in that case, why are they not equally disturbed over the pictures and graven images of men and women that are to be found everywhere? Why is a statue of Oliver Cromwell outside the Houses of Parliament a good thing, and a statue of St Peter inside Westminster Cathedral a bad thing? Why is it all right for someone to have a photograph on the mantelpiece to remind him of Grandma, and all wrong for me to have a holy picture to remind me of Our Lady?

Another question you might like to ask yourself is this:

Would it have been a perfectly good thing to erect a statue to the memory of England's great Chancellor Sir Thomas More *before* he was canonised and declared a saint,—and sheer idolatry to make a statue of *Saint* Thomas More afterwards?

And if so, why? (Do not worry much about the problems that might arise if all our public men became saints, because then anything could happen!)

And now, in case you may be thinking that I have treated this important subject in too light-hearted a manner, I am going to quote a few lines from St John Eudes which will show you the spirit in which Catholics really pay devotion to the saints of God: "To honour the saints as they should be honoured, we should *adore Jesus* in them; for *He is everything*.... He is their being, their life, their sanctity, their joy and their glory. We must thank *Him* for the glory and the praise that He renders Himself in them and by them. . . . We must offer to *Him* all the honour and love that His saints give Him; and pray *Him* to make us sharers in this same love and in all their other virtues."

I know, of course, that the reason why many Protestants object to our devotion to the saints is a reason which seems to them a very powerful one, namely that this practice detracts from the honour which is due to God and to Him alone. But be sure of this: Catholics understand perfectly that God is Creator, and that Our Lady and the Saints are His creatures, and the work of His hands.

When you declare your admiration of a beautiful cathedral and acknowledge its excellence, you do not detract from the honour due to the architect who conceived and planned it; you simply add to the praise and honour which is rightly his. In a similar way, to honour the saints of God is to render praise to Him who has created them and, by His grace, made them what they are.

### **Thinking about Confession**

MANY non-catholics *feel* very strongly about the Catholic practice of going to Confession; but not so many of them really *think* about it.

It seems to me that if you believe that Jesus Christ is God, there is only one question to settle: Did Our Lord institute this practice (which we call the Sacrament of Penance) and did He intend it to be the *normal* way in which we should have our sins forgiven? Because if He did, there can be nothing to argue about, can there?

Let us think about this now, and recall what He did and what He said. He had risen from the dead, and appeared to His Apostles who had locked themselves in for fear of the Jews. "Peace be unto you" He said; and then "He breathed on them and said to them: 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained'." (Jn 20: 22)

So in a very solemn manner and with grave deliberation Our Lord gave His Apostles the power to forgive sins. Is there any other possible conclusion than that He meant them to *use* it?

But there is more than this. He gave them the power of discretion: to forgive or *not* to forgive. How were they to

decide whether to give absolution or to withhold it? There was only one possible way: by hearing a sinner's confession, and so discovering whether he was in the right disposition to receive absolution or not.

But the question naturally arises now: did the Apostles in fact make use of this power in the Sacrament of Penance? If so, you may be thinking, should we not expect to read quite a lot about it in the Acts of the Apostles? The fact is that in the Acts we read many times that converts came to them in very large numbers to be *baptised*, but we are not told that they went to confession. Is it not strange, then, that the Sacrament of Baptism should be mentioned so frequently, while there appears to be no explicit reference to the Sacrament of Penance?

No, it is not at all strange; nor will we find it surprising when we consider what the Sacrament of Baptism accomplishes in the soul. Baptism itself washes away all stain and guilt of sin; and the Apostles were at pains to make this quite clear to their converts. "Repent", Peter said to them, "and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ *to have your sins forgiven.*"

So you see that when the Apostles were dealing with converts (as distinct from believers who had already been baptised) there was no need of the Sacrament of Penance, since the sins of their whole lives were remitted by Baptism; and this was nearly always the case in the Acts of the Apostles.

As you should expect, it is exactly the same in the Catholic Church today. When a priest receives a convert *who has never been baptised before*, there is no need for confession. Because the sins of his whole life are forgiven in the Sacrament of Baptism when he is received into the Church; and the priest, like St Peter, is at pains to explain this to *him*.

There are indications, however, in the Acts of the Apostles that the case was different in respect of those who had been baptised and *subsequently* fallen into sin. There were, for instance, some rather badly instructed converts at Ephesus who, notwithstanding their conversion, still dabbled in the occult practices of the pagans. When St Paul came among them, he lost no time in putting a stop to this; and St Luke (who wrote the Acts) tells us: "Many *believers* came forward, confessing their evil practices and giving a full account of them." This passage (Acts 19: 8-20) is well worth reading carefully. It would seem that here are all the essential elements of the Sacrament of Penance.

First, there is certainly *Confession*. It appears that there was real *Contrition* too, although the motive for it was fear. The surrender and destruction of bad books worth fifty thousand silver pieces must indicate also (in the circumstances) a firm *purpose of amendment!* Finally, we can hardly doubt that after all this Paul gave them the *absolution* which they earnestly desired.

Yet you may be interested to know—and it is only fair to tell you—that many Catholic scripture scholars do *not* regard this incident as an instance of the administration of the Sacrament of Penance. This shows, does it not, how un-biased is their approach to the study of the Word of God.

But, although we have been thinking about Confession entirely with reference to Holy Scripture, you must not make the elementary mistake of expecting to find in the New Testament an exhaustive explanation of the Sacrament of Penance (or for that matter, of any other article of Christian teaching or practice).

Those who still do make this mistake are forgetting two things:

First, that the Gospels were never written as handbooks of Christian Doctrine. St John tells us explicitly in his Gospel—which is a very informative Gospel—that he records only a comparatively very small number of the things which Jesus said and did while He was on earth. Secondly, that the Apostles were too busy *administering* the sacraments to have time to write treatises about them. "All those who had taken (Peter's) words to heart were baptised, and about three thousand souls were won for the Lord that day." If you try to imagine instructions followed by three thousand baptisms in one day, it will help you to realise how little time the Apostles had to write books on Dogmatic or Moral Theology. These were to come later.

There were naturally some differences in the *practice* of administering the Sacrament of Penance in the early Church and in the Catholic Church today.

It would seem that at first the power of absolution was exercised only by the Apostles and their direct successors, i.e. the Bishops. It appears also that only very grave sins were the subject of confession. In this connection you should notice

that even today, Catholics know perfectly well that they are only *obliged* to confess grave (mortal) sins although they may of course confess lesser (venial) faults if they like. Moreover, there are still some sins of exceptional gravity which are reserved to a Bishop for absolution.

If you read the history of the Church in the first three centuries, too, you will find that there were controversies about the absolution of some sins by the Church: controversies which were finally settled by the authority of the Pope. But you will notice that the question in dispute was whether certain grave sins such as apostasy should be absolved or not. The fact that Our Lord had left with His Church the power to forgive or not to forgive was being taken for granted all the time, and was not being called in question.

What you have been reading is not intended to be a full explanation of the Sacrament of Penance as it is found in the Catholic Church: the purpose of it is merely to start you thinking about it. You might, however, like to know something of the frame of mind in which a Catholic goes to confession.

He knows that in this Sacrament there is no magic which works in spite of himself but that there are certain things which he must do if he is to obtain absolution and the grace of the Sacrament. He must, of course, confess all grave sins without reservation, and be willing to say certain little prayers which the priest will give him as a 'penance'. If he has sinned against justice by unlawfully taking away the belongings or the good name of another person, he must do everything in his power to restore what he has taken away.

All this, in practice, is not difficult. But there is another thing which is sometimes not quite so easy: he must have real *contrition*. That does not mean that he must *feel* sorry for his sins. If he can do so, it is an excellent thing; but we cannot always control our feelings, and anyway contrition is not concerned with the feelings so much as with the *will*. What he must do is not necessarily to feel sorry but to *be* sorry for his sins, and that is quite a different thing. True contrition, or being sorry, involves a determination by the grace of God to break up a habit of sin, and to refrain from offending God in the future. This is called a firm purpose of amendment, and without it there is no contrition; and without contrition there can be no forgiveness of sin.

As you will see, this makes nonsense of an idea in the minds of some people that Catholics go lightheartedly to confession and then feel quite free to start committing the same sins all over again. There is, of course, no doubt at all that Catholics in common with all other men have a natural tendency to repeat their sins. Indeed, Our Lord warns us that after we have repented of our sins and been forgiven, we must be particularly on our guard against a really formidable comeback on the part of the devil. (Matt. 12: 43-45.)

But the point is that a Catholic who goes regularly and frequently to confession realises the danger, and is so concerned over it that he tries continually by the help of God's grace to do something about it, instead of making peace with the situation.

All this you could learn from any well-instructed Catholic. But there is something else which only a priest could tell you, and it is this: It is in the confessional above all that a priest can begin to understand why God loves us as He does, and why He died to redeem us. Because Catholics are at their very best when they come to confession. Filled with the actual grace of God which has prompted them to come, and notwithstanding all the human weakness and sin which they may lay bare, they seem to leave outside the Confessional so many of those defects which mar our human nature. Voices are subdued and gentle, free of all harshness and stridency; pride has been abandoned and its place taken by true humility. All evasion, guile and self-deception have been laid aside and replaced by a childlike frankness and honesty. And whether they are young or old, saints or sinners, men, women or children, they are clothed with a dignity and grace which reveals to a priest the essential loveliness of human beings, and fills him with that compassion for the sinner which constrained God Himself to die on the cross.

As a postscript (and because it is not in our nature to be serious for too long), we might add that Catholics do *not* pay to go to confession, and that any priest who allowed a Catholic to do so would be liable to grave penalties. So if you should read on the notice board of a Catholic Church that confessions on Wednesday will be at three and six, and on Saturday at one and nine: please note that these figures refer to the *times* of confessions. They do not indicate a broad-

minded principle that sin may be committed at half-price during the week-end.

### Thinking about Purgatory

I know some people who think that the Catholic religion would be greatly improved by the abandonment of the doctrine of Purgatory. They seem to think that as long as they keep their eyes closed and their fingers crossed, purgatory will not be there. This is a mode of thinking which is said proverbially to be shared by the ostrich.

You can find the scriptural references to purgatory in any manual of christian doctrine. But it would be a good thing to work it out for yourself; and to see that even if there were no revelation about it in Scripture, human reason alone would conclude that the state which we call purgatory is nothing less than a necessity: a necessity which arises from the very nature of God.

We know that God is infinitely merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. But we must not forget that God is infinitely just also, a just Judge, strong and patient. Have you ever wondered how these divine attributes could be reconciled: or in other words how it is possible for God to be infinitely just *and* infinitely merciful at the same time?

All good men share a love of justice; it is instinctive in us. Even a little child at school will forgive his teachers almost unfairness. And life is full of apparent injustice. David complained about it in the psalms centuries ago. (Ps. 72).

To *him* it seemed almost the rule that the evil-doer flourished while the virtuous man suffered affliction: "I see the ungodly in such prosperity. . . They are in no peril of death, but are lusty and strong. They come into no misfortune like other folk, neither are they plagued like other men. And this is why they are so full of pride and overwhelmed with cruelty." So strongly did David feel about this, that he confesses that he was sorely tempted to do even as they did, until he took the problem to God.

Does not a similar thought occur to most of us at times? Like David, we know that God is just, and that all evil will be punished. And yet God is infinitely merciful; and should the vilest sinner turn to Him in his last agony, he can save his soul and enjoy unspeakable happiness with the saints of God for all eternity. What then, has become of God's infinite justice? Surely the answer is in Purgatory. "Be not deceived: God is not mocked; for what things a man sows those also shall he reap." (Gal 6 : 7). And yet God's mercy is so great that if we have left only the smallest loophole, He will drag us through it to our salvation even though (as Our Lord said) it should be accomplished "yet so as by fire."

Moreover, is it not a fact that we feel instinctively that the majority of us are not good enough for heaven and not bad enough for hell? If we turn to God and die in a state of grace, it is in Purgatory that we are given the opportunity of satisfying God's infinite justice, and of being made completely detached from worldliness and sin.

Many thoughtful people outside the Catholic Church realise this necessity. Of those who die in the friendship of God, C. S. Lewis writes in *The Screwtape Letters*: "Pains (they) may still have to encounter, but they *embrace* those pains. They would not barter them for any earthly pleasure."

For the souls in Purgatory are happy souls. They have the certainty that when their trial is over they will spend eternity in heaven with God. Nothing can now separate them from the love of God; and it is easy to suffer for anyone you love. They are happy also in this: that they are not abandoned, nor are they neglected. Prayers are offered for them continually in the Church; and we beg God's mercy on their behalf when we pray:

'O God the Creator and Redeemer of all the faithful, grant to the souls of Thy servants departed the remission of all their sins; that through our pious supplication they may obtain the pardon that they have always desired, through Christ Our Lord.

Amen.'

You might like to think, too, about a very practical consideration which arises from our belief in Purgatory. We know that whether we will it or not we are all called upon to suffer a good deal in this life from time to time. We cannot escape from it; the only question is : are we going to waste it, or make use of it? We waste our sufferings when we complain about them, resent them, inflict them upon others and make them an excuse for self-indulgence. But we turn them into

blessings when we accept them as coming from God, and humbly offer them to Him for the sins we have committed. In this way it is possible by the grace of God to make some atonement to God's justice here and now.

### **Thinking about Our Lord Jesus Christ**

THE Head of the Catholic Church is Jesus Christ Our Lord. He is the centre, the beginning and end of the Catholic religion. Nothing we believe and nothing we do can be explained or understood without reference to Him. And so the most important question of all to think about is one that Our Lord Himself asked: "What think ye of Christ?"

The Catholic Church teaches that in the one divine Person of Our Lord Jesus Christ there are two distinct and perfect natures: the nature of God which He shares from all eternity with the Father and the Holy Spirit; and the nature of man which He shares with us and which He assumed at the time of His incarnation. In other words, Jesus Christ is truly God, and at the same time truly man.

Most of the errors which have separated men from the Catholic Church have arisen through a failure to understand and accept this doctrine. Yet it is only when we understand it clearly that the Gospels become comprehensible. Unless our minds are first illuminated by this teaching of the Church, the words and actions of Our Lord—as they are recorded in the Gospels—must appear to involve a number of contradictions. He says, for instance, "the Father is greater than I", but He also declares: "I and the Father are one; if you have seen Me you have seen the Father." Our Lord appears also as a man who can suffer temptation, fatigue, hunger, thirst, fear, pain and finally death. And yet He can claim: "Before Abraham was, I AM." He can calmly declare: "I will lay down My life and I will take it up again," and then proceed to do just that. While He is actually doing it, He can cry from the heart:

"My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

Is it any wonder that He was often an enigma to His own Apostles, or that they should ask in awe and amazement:

"What manner of man is this?" Is it surprising that it was not until after He had died, risen again and appeared to them indisputably that Thomas was able at last to confess: "Thou art my Lord and my God."

So it is that Jesus acts and speaks in the Gospels sometimes as God, sometimes as man: "Equal with the Father according to His divinity: less than the Father according to His humanity."

And why did Our Lord, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, become man and die for us? Because it was God's answer to what would have seemed to us a dilemma. Mankind had fallen into sin and lost heaven. And since man had sinned, redemption must be wrought by man. But so great was the affront to God's justice that no man *could* make atonement to God. Not all the merits and sufferings of all mankind would have been enough. Only God Himself was capable of the infinite merit needed for our redemption.

This was the dilemma: Man *must* atone; only God *could* atone. And God's solution was one of great simplicity. Because He is infinitely merciful as well as infinitely just, *God became man*.

O loving wisdom of our God,  
When all was sin and shame,  
A second Adam to the fight  
And to the rescue came.

And as St Paul writes: "by a man came death; and by a man the resurrection of the dead. And, as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive." (i Cor. 15 : 21, 22.)

### **Thinking about the Mass**

As you probably know, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass—during which the consecration of the Body and Blood of Christ takes place—is the central act of Catholic worship. It is a good thing, therefore, to give some thought to this.

The instinct of mankind to sacrifice something to God is as old as man himself; and the Old Testament is full of references to the sacrifices which the Jews offered to God. You can read in the Book of Leviticus how God gave Moses

the most explicit instructions about the nature of these sacrifices and the manner of their offering. But at best they were only types and figures of the perfect Sacrifice which was one day to take their place; and from time to time, through the lips of the prophets, God more than hinted that this was the case. In the forty-ninth psalm, for instance, God says that He does not reprove the Jews for the sacrifices and burnt-offerings which they make to Him: but that He has no need of them really; because every beast of the forest is already His, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. "If I should be hungry, I would not tell you." He says "for the world is Mine and the fulness thereof." (Ps. 49 12.)

And later it was the prophet Malachias who foretold a time when there would be a perfect sacrifice which would replace all offered continually by the Gentiles: "I have no pleasure *in* you, saith the Lord of hosts: and I *will* not receive at your hand. For, from the rising of the sun even to the going down. My name is great among the Gentiles: and in every place there is sacrifice and there is offered to My name a clean oblation."

It is the Sacrifice of the Mass which fulfils this prophecy in every particular. There is no moment during the day or night when there is not a Catholic priest somewhere offering to God the pure oblation, the perfect sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ.

It is in the Mass that the Sacrifice which Our Lord offered on the cross is perpetuated. Christ is the divine Victim, and it is He who offers Himself to the Father. His priests are the instruments whom He deigns to use, and thus they continually obey His instruction: "Do this for a commemoration for Me."

Let us turn then, once again, to the Gospels, and read there how Our Lord actually instituted the Sacrifice of the Mass. The event was not without drama; and to understand it well, it is necessary to think of the circumstances in which it took place.

Each year on the appointed day the Jews celebrated the feast of the Passover. It was to commemorate how God led them out of bondage in the land of Egypt; and God had commanded that they should keep this day in remembrance of their deliverance.

Year by year at the Passover meal, the Jews re-enacted substantially the events of that last night in Egypt, and with a certain ritual which was strictly followed. First a cup of wine was taken; then came the bitter herbs and unleavened bread. The second cup followed, and then the eldest son would ask his father: "What do you mean by this sacrifice?" The father would make the reply: "This is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover. . . . After this, the Paschal Lamb would be eaten. Then followed the third and fourth cups of wine, and finally a hymn.

We do not find in the Gospels all the details of this ritual because something happened during the course of the meal which overshadowed everything else: something which signified the end of the old dispensation, the end of type and prophecy, and the beginning of the New Testament of Jesus Christ. It is this that the evangelists are careful to record. For it was during this Passover meal, on the night before Our Lord suffered, that the institution of the Sacrifice of the New Law took place.

It was most probably after the Paschal Lamb was eaten, and before the third cup was taken that Our Lord, departing from the ancient rite, took bread and as He broke it, gave it to His Apostles and blessed it with these words: "Take all of you, and eat of this, for this is My Body." Then, taking what was most probably the third cup of the Passover feast, He blessed it—not with the usual formula—but with the words:

"Drink all of you of this; for this is My Blood of the New Testament."

Thus it was that Our Lord instituted the Sacrifice of the Mass.

We will notice here that in doing so He was fulfilling a promise which He made after the feeding of the five thousand in the desert: a promise which was not at all well received at the time.

But for the moment—while we are still thinking about the Mass as the Sacrifice of the New Law, I want you to remember that in Britain, as in every other part of the Christian world, the Mass was from the beginning the central act of Christian worship in every church in the land.

Long before St Augustine came from Rome to convert the Anglo-Saxons, the ancient Britons had received (also from Rome) the Catholic faith including the Mass. About three hundred years before the arrival of St Augustine, three Bishops

of the Britons: the Bishops of York, London, and Caerleon went to attend the Council of Arles where they shared in the discussions on the respective functions of priests and deacons at the celebration of Holy Mass.

When St Augustine himself landed in Kent in A.D. 597 he immediately (and naturally) began by seeking and obtaining permission to celebrate Masses; and St Mellitus the first Saxon Bishop of London is spoken of as saying Masses and giving Holy Communion to the people in the Church dedicated to St Paul. You can read about this, with many other references to the Sacrifice of the Mass, in the works of the Venerable Bede, the historian of Saxon times who wrote nearly thirteen hundred years ago.

If therefore the holy Sacrifice of the Mass is a strange and unknown thing to many of the British today, that is due to the national calamity of four hundred years ago which they have been taught to call the 'Reformation.' It was not strange to their forefathers, for to them it was the centre of their religious worship.

But this perfect Sacrifice of the New Law is also something more; it is the *Sacrament* of the Holy Eucharist which is the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ together with His Soul and Divinity under the *appearances* of bread and wine, given to us in Holy Communion to be the food of our souls. This too, as we shall see, was taught by Our Lord; and has been from the beginning a most vital part of the Christian faith.

There was no doubt at all in the early Church—as there is none in the Catholic Church today—that when we partake of this Sacrament we receive Our Blessed Lord. It was one of the things for which St Paul reproached the Corinthians: that they seemed not to realise this, so badly did they behave at the celebration of the Eucharist. He therefore recalled for them what Our Lord said and did at the Last Supper; and he warned them that to receive Holy Communion unworthily was to be guilty of the Body and Blood of Christ. Self-examination was necessary, he told them, as a preparation for the Sacrament. And as for the man who neglects the warning, "he eateth and drinketh judgment to himself, *not discerning the body of the Lord.*" (i Cor. II : 29.)

That this teaching was firmly believed by our ancestors in the ancient British and Anglo-Saxon churches, and continued to be their faith for over a thousand years can be easily shown from the writings of Gildas, Bede, Alcuin, Lanfranc and St Anselm among many others.

So it was that from the beginning, all the members of Christ's Church believed exactly what Catholics believe today: that when they go to Holy Communion they receive Our Lord: that He is really present in the Blessed Sacrament under the forms of bread and wine. They know also that He is always present in the tabernacle on the altars of Catholic Churches where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved.

To those who are received into the Catholic Church this affords the greatest consolation and joy, and it becomes once more what it was to their forefathers: the centre of their religious life. But it is not unusual to find that it is one of the stumbling blocks which lie in their path as they make their first approach to the Church.

This is not at all surprising; because when Our Lord first mentioned it, it shocked His hearers and bewildered His Apostles. The best account of the incident is to be found in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St John. St John, more than the other three Evangelists, is at pains to describe the events of Our Lord's life in the order in which they took place.

You will notice that this discourse on the Bread of Heaven followed the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. After this miracle, Our Lord withdrew Himself from the multitude and crossed the Sea of Galilee, but they all followed Him: and Jesus knew why. He said, "You seek Me not because you have seen miracles, but because you did eat of the loaves and were filled." Then Our Lord went on to tell them that they should not be so concerned about earthly food but rather for the food which gives eternal life, which He has power to give them. They reminded Him then that their forefathers had received manna to eat in the wilderness: "He gave them bread from heaven," they quoted, and asked Our Lord if He could effect such a miracle as that. Then Jesus declared: "I am the Bread of life...I am the living Bread...If any man eat of this bread he shall live for ever."

You should read the whole of this chapter very carefully. You will see how shocked the people were at Our Lord's words; and you will notice how He does nothing at all to reassure them by explaining the words away. On the contrary,

He merely repeats them again and again in stronger terms than ever until, we are told, many of them left Him and walked no more with Him. Notice again that He did not call them back or in any way change what He had said. He simply turned to His Apostles and challenged them: “Will you too go away?” And all Peter could reply was: “To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.”

It is quite impossible to explain away Our Lord’s words on this occasion by saying that of course He intended them to be understood as a figure of speech, i.e. metaphorically. This was not, and *could* not have been his intention. He often spoke of Himself metaphorically, as when He said: “I am the door” or “I am the true vine....” And on these occasions His hearers knew quite well what He was doing. They never asked: How can He be a door, or a vine? But they did ask: “How can this man give us His flesh to eat and His blood to drink?” And because He did not answer, they left Him.

They knew that this time He was not using a figure of speech, and for a very good reason. ‘To eat the flesh’ of a person was already a well-known metaphor in the language Our Lord was using. It meant much the same as our own very similar expression ‘To backbite,’ i.e. to calumniate and speak all manner of evil against someone. David uses it in the psalms when he says: “When my enemies came upon me *to eat up my flesh* they stumbled and fell.”

Now you simply cannot take an established metaphor in any language and use it arbitrarily with a different metaphorical meaning. It would make utter nonsense of conversation: and Our Lord was clearly not using it in this way. So it was indeed a ‘hard saying’. And the question: ‘How can this man give us His flesh to eat and His blood to drink?’ was a very natural one. (In fact it is one of many inevitable questions which show beyond all doubt that the Gospels are by no means wholly comprehensible without the authority of the Church to explain them.)

Here then is what the Catholic Church teaches about the Bread of Heaven: In the Holy Eucharist Our Lord Himself is really present, whole and entire, in His divinity and His sacred humanity under the form of either bread or wine: and is received in this manner by the faithful in Holy Communion. He becomes thus present at the words of consecration which the priest says over the bread and wine during the Sacrifice of the Mass.

These words are the very words which Our Lord Himself used when He consecrated the bread and wine at the Last Supper. It is at the words of consecration that the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ; and this takes place, as the Catechism says, by the power of God to whom nothing is difficult or impossible.

But a non-catholic enquirer—particularly if this doctrine is new to him—might well ask: Does the Church go any further in explaining *how* this change takes place?

The Church does. And to understand the explanation it may be necessary to think rather more deeply than we have been doing. It is necessary first to realise the distinction which exists between a thing itself and its *appearances*. It is not difficult: it is a distinction which all of us are constantly making without even noticing it; it is the distinction between the *substance* of a thing and what are called its *accidents*.

As we have already noticed in another connection, we know a thing by its size, shape, weight, colour, scent, taste and so on. These are its *accidents*: they are not the thing itself. Every housewife knows this. She does not ask for a pound of brown at the grocer’s, nor for a yard and a half of blue at the draper’s. She asks for a pound of brown *sugar*, and a yard and a half of blue *ribbon*; and in doing so, she makes this distinction between *substance* and *accidents*.

The Church teaches that Our Lord is present in the Blessed Sacrament substantially; that at the words of consecration, the *accidents* of the bread and wine (i.e. everything about them which are senses can apprehend) *remain unchanged*. The *substance* of bread and wine in each case *is changed* into the substance of Our Lord, living and entire. This is what we mean by the word Transubstantiation.

And this too is not merely a convenient explanation, but is part of the ancient faith. Like all the rest of Catholic doctrine, it was the faith of our forefathers. More than a thousand years ago, Alcuin—in a letter to a priest—wrote: “I beg you will not forget your friend’s name in your holy prayer. Store it up in one of the caskets of your memory and bring it out in the fitting time *when you have consecrated bread and wine into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ.*”

It follows, of course, from the fact of Transubstantiation that when we go to Holy Communion Our Lord remains really present with us in the Blessed Sacrament which we have received *for as long as the appearances of bread and wine*

*remain unchanged.* That is why Catholics kneel in adoration and thanksgiving for a time after they have received Our Lord in Holy Communion: because then, for a period, Our Lord is truly within them in the Sacrament of His love.

Does this, perhaps, remove your last difficulty?

### **Postscript**

THE purpose of these few chapters has been to start you thinking. If you have enjoyed the exercise, there is a good deal more of it coming to you should you decide to receive instruction from a Catholic priest. But there is something very important to bear in mind from the start: thinking is not enough. You cannot think your way into the Catholic Church. It has to be done by prayer. Faith is a supernatural *gift* of God.

These words which you have been reading might incline you to seek instruction in the Catholic religion. Instruction in its turn can dispose you to receive the gift of Faith. But that faith can come only from God, and it comes by prayer. "Without Me," Our Lord said, "you can do *nothing*."

Pray earnestly then that in all things, and particularly in the matter of your faith, God's will may be done. Offer yourself to Him, and ask Him only to show you the way. He will not fail you.

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