

FIRST STEPS TO FAITH

By Donald Drayton Christie

Why do millions of people, some very ordinary, others outstanding, believe so firmly in the Catholic Church? What makes men and women devote their whole lives in missions or monasteries to their Church's service? Above all, what is it that leads them to accept so happily a teaching which may seem to you quite unbelievable, childish, even wrong?— and makes them, moreover, ready to obey rules and regulations affecting their private lives in ways that appear unreasonable and unnecessary ?

These are questions that may well perplex a normally intelligent and adult person. If you ask a Catholic who is well informed, he will tell you that the answer is: By Faith.

Not unnaturally you will wonder what he means by this. To one who is outside the Church, so brief an answer will be insufficient. You will need some explanation if you are to understand all that it implies. When a Catholic speaks of “ Faith “ he means something quite definite. He does not mean “trust”, which is the common meaning of the word, as when we say: ‘I have complete faith in my doctor.’ Nor does he mean “belief” as when we say: ‘I believe in life after death because it seems reasonable — but of course I may be wrong.’

The Gift of Grace

Faith, to a Catholic, is what enables him to believe without doubting truths that cannot be reached through human reason, experience, or experiment. It is rather like the knowledge a blind man has of the visible world. He has to accept the fact that people can tell the shape of distant things without touching them, from what others tell him. For him, sight is outside his natural powers. But he has no doubt that it exists: it is a truth he accepts by an act of human faith in the authority of his fellow men.

Similarly, if there is a reality beyond the reach of all human experience, any certain knowledge which we can have of it must come from outside the natural world. The Catholic is convinced, for reasons to be explained below, that this does happen. His knowledge — and it is knowledge, not guess-work — of truths beyond the reach of his senses is given him by God through “supernatural grace”. The word “grace” here means a freely given gift; and “supernatural” implies something that is beyond, but not contrary to, the natural order of things as we know them.

But like any other gift, supernatural grace can be accepted or rejected, just as the blind man can accept or reject what others tell him about the wonders of sight. You may think that this is begging the question. ‘You may object that it means nothing to you when a Catholic says the firmness of his faith is due to the gift of this “supernatural grace”. The very existence of a supernatural order of things may well appear at the best no more than a vague possibility. This is understandable. But if the Catholic happens to be right, if there does exist a reality beyond that reached by our senses, and if God really does give people the “grace” to know about it, obviously this gift must be given first, before we can believe. The blind man could not know what others saw until he had been told.

At this moment you may honestly doubt whether we can be sure of any truth that cannot be known through human reason. God, however, can still kindle within you, as His free gift, that first spark which, provided you do not extinguish it deliberately, will eventually develop into the steady flame of faith. And if He does, what then? Will your mind be flooded with sudden light, banishing doubt and dissolving all difficulties? Probably not. This can happen — it has happened — but it is certainly not usual, and must not be expected. In all probability the first effect will be no more than a vague feeling of dissatisfaction with one's present state of mind; an urge to know more about the purpose of one's existence. ‘I do not admit what you say about supernatural grace,’ you may say, ‘but if it does exist, then naturally I should like to be sure that it will be given to me. But how can this happen if I don't believe in it?’

The Need for a Response

The answer to this is simple: If you have a genuine desire to know more about the Catholic Church it is a sign that grace is already working. But, like a seed planted in a garden which needs help from the soil if it is to flower, so too, once the first seed of Faith has been planted through grace, cooperation is essential if it is to develop and bear fruit. If, in spite of inward prompting you are disinclined to make an effort to go further, you will prevent its action from becoming effective. A gift does not fulfil its purpose by being given, but by being received.

A man may turn from the teaching of the Church because he shrinks from the consequences of being convinced, like one who prefers to remain snugly in bed although the smell of smoke warns him that his house may be on fire. The risks may be real enough: there may be the danger of losing one's job, or the affection of a dear one; an inheritance might be lost, or theories publicly uttered by word or writing may have to be retracted. Some favourite sin or human indulgence may have to be abandoned or fought against, or a connection with a charitable organization opposed to Catholic teaching broken off. Or a man may be so stubbornly satisfied with his own opinions that he is determined not to change a lifelong habit of judging what is true and good by the light of his own limited experience and uncertain reasoning — like a man who insists on driving in the wrong direction rather than admit he has wrongly read his map.

We should not hesitate to condemn the folly of the man who risked being burnt to death rather than leave the momentary comfort of his bed to face the cold of a winter night in order to save his life : but we all too often forget that temporary inconvenience now is a small price to pay for eternal life. If, however, you are genuinely determined to seek truth, and, if you find it, to take the consequences, you can rest assured that whatever difficulties you may have to face, the grace of faith will make things easier than they may at first appear. The conviction that you have found truth will dwarf those obstacles which to the eyes of doubt seemed giants.

The Conviction of Truth

How are you to obtain that conviction? How, you may ask, can you be sure that what the Church teaches is the truth ? To discover the answer to these questions your active cooperation will be needed. It is no good passively waiting to see if faith will come'. A room with heavy curtains drawn across the windows will remain dark in spite of sunshine outside. If someone within takes the trouble to draw the curtains apart a little, not only will he see the light outside, but its rays will fall on him, and he will share its brightness. But though the light falls on him automatically, it could not have done so had he not done something first to let it in.

Similarly, before the final Act of Faith can be made, something must be done. The mind must be prepared to receive the truth, and to recognize it as truth by a free act of will. This can only happen if the intelligence is convinced through careful enquiry into the teaching of the Church, and into the reasons for her claim to be the only authority appointed by God to teach what we must know and do, and to provide the help we need, that we may be sure of fulfilling the purpose of our existence.

By a "free act of will" is meant our willing consent to cooperate with the grace God may give to help us. Our readiness to do this may be prompted through varied circumstances. Although possibly very ordinary in themselves, these are in reality put in our path providentially, in order to arouse our interest and turn our will in the right direction. Our final consent must be given freely, for God does not force us to accept His aid; but, by giving us encouragement at an opportune moment in our life, He helps us take the all important initial step. We might be put on the right path by the chance overhearing of a remark or reading of a book — this pamphlet for example. We might be influenced through contact with some saintly person; through being the fortunate witness of a cure at Lourdes ; through the conversion of one whom we love, or whose intellectual ability and integrity we admire; or perhaps (as often happens) through an increasing disgust with a life of self-indulgence, grown empty and frustrated.

Cases vary greatly, and rarely is there only one external influence. Few converts can say exactly what it was that set them on the right path, and what influences kept them on it. But whatever these external influences may have been, their effect is to dispose the enquirer to open his mind to the grace offered, and profit from it.

Intellectual Humility

To do this a spirit of intellectual humility will have to be acquired. This does not mean denying the intelligence with which one has been endowed. That would not be true humility. If a man has a vast knowledge of medicine, astronomy or science, for example, it would not be humility to deny this fact. There is no virtue in belittling our talents. The humility required consists in realizing that any talents we may have are — as indeed they are commonly called — “gifts”, given us freely to use as best we can. We are truly humble of mind when, whatever these gifts may be, we readily admit our dependence for them on our Creator, recognizing they have limitations, and that they can be lost.

All our human knowledge is dependent upon limited experience, and is only a small part of the whole of truth. Much that our senses tell us is inaccurate and illusory. Matter appears solid, and we may be forgiven if we are convinced it is. But the physicist knows that matter is almost entirely space. Again, to the eye the television screen appears to present a complete picture, but the expert knows that this is made by a tiny light that sprays the screen with one single spot so quickly that the illusion of a picture is complete.

The deeper we delve into the nature of the natural world the more we find that things differ greatly in reality from what their appearance leads us to suppose. On examination, the little knowledge we imagine we do possess is found unreliable ; and knowing this we shall be more ready to recognize that any conclusion we draw may well be faulty or misleading. When at last we do attain real Faith, it will be found that our personal experience, and such facts as through human means we have been able to ascertain, will fall naturally into their true perspective within the wider view of truth made available to us through the Church, like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle which seem so meaningless at first, but which prove, one by one, to have their place as the whole picture begins to appear.

It is clearly impossible for a single individual to look into every problem himself. In our quest for knowledge we are all more or less dependent upon the work and studies of others — on the historian, the traveller, the scientist and the philosopher. But each can find the answers to his own personal and particular problems, and make certain that, as far as human reason is concerned, the teachings of the Church are based on rational foundations. Having found that the most awkward-looking pieces of our jig-saw fit, we shall not be acting against reason if we accept the obvious conclusion that the others will eventually fit as well.

Faith not Contrary to Reason

Faith must not be contrary to reason, which is an essential element of our human nature. We are intelligent beings, each with an individual personality, and not, like the lower forms of life, intended to be the slaves of instinct or blind chemical reaction. What does in practice appear reasonable to different individuals will depend upon the learning, experience and upbringing of each one. What is accepted as “common sense” to some may appear an almost insurmountable obstacle to others. If you, in your enquiries, feel that you have some problem which makes the acceptance of the teaching of the Catholic Church impossible, it will be well to give this point especially careful examination. You can be sure that every difficulty you are likely to meet has been raised and thrashed out already. It would be hard to believe that the many learned and intelligent men who have lived as Catholics could be ignorant of the difficulties that have been raised about their faith. That they have continued to support the Church — some even with their blood — is evidence that they at least were satisfied that the Church is fully able to hold its own in any argument, and to answer any doubt.

Nearly every problem raised today by individual sceptics or by systems of belief opposed to the Church, has been carefully studied and answered in the past. Scientific discoveries, which at first sight may seem to oppose Catholic teaching, by the time they have filtered through as “modern” ideas to the man in the street, will long since have been thoroughly sifted and put in their true perspective, and the relationship between the knowledge of the physical world discovered through science and the spiritual truths of the Church’s teaching made clear. But, however imposing the list of sincere Catholic scientists, historians and philosophers may be, individual difficulties are bound to arise. The faith of someone whom we recognize as our superior in intellect and learning may influence, but not necessarily convince us. For

one who values freedom of thought the main problem might be expressed thus: 'I could agree with some of the teaching of the Church — where I can see a reason for it. But I can't possibly believe something just because I'm told to, especially if, to me, it seems untrue and even wrong.'

This is the very natural reaction of one who has always thought as prompted by his own personal opinions. He is prepared to accept someone else's teaching only if, to him, it seems to agree with his own preconceived ideas. In such cases the final judgement must always suffer the weakness and uncertainty of being based on the limited evidence of his own narrow experience; and few of us are willing to admit, or even consider, how narrow our personal experience is bound to be. It is especially in this matter of religion, which cannot be proved by physical demonstration, and which touches our private lives so closely, that people are inclined to resort most frequently to personal opinions. To accept something as true merely because the Church teaches it appears to demand a credulity or simple mindedness that does little honour to their powers as rational beings. This is very far from being the case.

The Authority of the Church

When a Catholic makes an Act of Faith in the teaching of the Church he does so only after rational investigation has shown that the Church has indeed the authority to teach in God's name. Because it has this authority, he knows that when the Church tells him that something is certain, he can believe without doubting, on the authority of God Himself. Whatever authority human beings may have, they are liable to error. Yet we consider it reasonable to accept without question the opinion of experts in their own field of learning; and we do not feel that we insult our own reason by doing homage in this way to their superior knowledge. The reliability of the Church, on the other hand, is guaranteed by its divine Founder's promise that it would teach mankind the truth. Once one is convinced of this, to accept its teaching becomes a supremely rational act. Nothing could be more reasonable than paying willing homage to God by submitting our reason to the authority of a Teacher guaranteed by Him who is Truth itself.

Even if we had never heard of the Church, our reason alone might lead us to suspect that God would in some way or other make known His wishes for us. We should think a housewife very unreasonable if she were to sack her maidservant for not fulfilling her duties if no instructions had been given and no implements provided for carrying out the work required. Nor should we think much of a school where the pupils were put into a classroom and there abandoned, to prepare for manhood on their own, as best they might.

Had the Creator put us into the world and then abandoned us to our fate, His gift to us of free will and the ability to reason would reflect neither purpose nor intelligence. Yet, throughout the whole physical universe, from the vast galaxies of stars down to the intricate structure of the most microscopic living creature we see reflected an intelligent purpose that we cannot conceive as having been absent when He created man.

That you are reading this pamphlet is evidence of your natural yearning for truth and your inborn desire to make the most of your life. Like all living creatures, we are naturally curious. But the animal is curious only about those things in contact with its senses — what it feels, scents, sees or hears. Man possesses a superior curiosity. He wants to know about ideas, about truths that are beyond the senses; he wants to know what is good and how to attain it. Were there no sure guide available it would mean that man alone had been created with needs that could not be satisfied, and endowed with intellectual gifts to no purpose.

Conscience alone is not enough

Experience teaches us that conscience on its own is not enough. Partly through inherited and outside evil influences, partly through our own fault, our ideas of right and wrong are often warped. Our need for guidance is obvious from the fact that even those who honestly obey the dictates of conscience act very differently from one another. We know, too, that there are many who hesitate to act according to conscience because they are uncertain whether the sacrifices and control it would impose are really worth while.

The Catholic, however, claims that he knows the purpose of life and possesses an infallible guide for his conscience in

essential matters, not because he is wiser or cleverer than other men, but because he has access to the teaching of the Church, which he knows, on God's assurance, is the only authority on earth that cannot err in such matters of faith and morals. But he does not, if he is a thinking man, accept this authority blindly. His faith is based on the conviction that the claims of his Church can be proved by reason. Even the born Catholic, brought up to accept his religion as a matter of course, is required, when he reaches the age of reason, to learn the grounds on which it is based.

Sentiment or natural inclination are not sufficient cause for deciding whether or not to accept the Church's authority. Such feelings are liable to change. Faith must be based on a more solid foundation, not subject to the vagaries of every passing mood. Thus it is only when you set out to examine these claims in the cold light of reason that you will be making that use of your intelligence which, as a rational being, you are bound to do. Not until you have done so will you be able to make an act of faith intellectually satisfactory and capable of withstanding the test of time.

Since the Church is meant for all, it is not surprising to find that its claims are supported by facts easily obtained and easily understood. The majority of us have no time for prolonged study. Few of us are competent historians, and fewer still can follow the intricacies of philosophical arguments. It is not necessary to attempt the impossible task of working out everything for oneself. A patient assures himself, before submitting to an operation, that the surgeon he chooses has proved his ability, but he does not examine in detail every step of his training and every case he has handled. In the same way, when we make a rational investigation into the grounds for an act of faith in the teaching of the Church, the essential task before us is to examine the reliability of its authority as a divinely-appointed teacher.

We should quite rightly conclude that it could not possibly possess such authority if what it taught was so lacking in the essential qualities of truth as to prove its claim unacceptable. We must start, therefore, by making sure that what the Church teaches can be shown to possess all those qualities that are essential to the nature of truth. If any of these qualities are absent, then we can be sure that we are on the wrong path. But if all the elements of truth are present then its claim to teach with an authority acceptable to reason will clearly merit the most careful consideration we can give. Fortunately it is not difficult to make certain that the teaching of the Catholic Church has all the elements of Truth itself.

The Church's Teaching fits the Facts

In the first place, if the teaching of the Church is true it must be able to answer the questions "Why am I here?" and "What must I do about it?" If it cannot do this it will be no more than a theory, having no direct bearing on our lives, and no personal appeal to us as individuals. If it be true the teaching of the Church must fit known facts. No one can be expected to accept as true something which shows every sign of being false.

Its teaching must be consistent. It must be the same at all times and in all places, and hang together as one complete whole. Truth cannot change from place to place or age to age. It must, moreover, where its own beginning in time is concerned, fit the facts of history. And to be acceptable to each one of us it must be equally acceptable to all mankind, regardless of varied circumstances, age, intelligence or race. Every normal man or woman, of whatever gifts or disposition, must be able to grasp its essential truths and profit from the way of life it proposes. Finally, but by no means least in importance, it must work in practice.

All these conditions can be found to exist. A very brief summary cannot deal at length with every point, but it can show that the teaching of the Church does possess all the qualities that Truth demands. When this is clear, it follows that it must therefore be worth our while at least to make as thorough an examination of it as circumstances permit.

Catholic teaching is, in fact, an intelligent explanation of the mystery of life. If this were not so it could not be accepted as such by a very large number of extremely intelligent and honest men and women of different race and upbringing, of wide and varied talents, in every branch of science and learning. Should anyone doubt this, he need only examine some of the works by Catholic authors on the shelves of a Catholic bookshop, or in the catalogues it supplies. It will be found that there is no branch of science or philosophy in which they do not show the most profound scholarship and ability. Yet, for all this, the genius of Catholic teaching lies in the fact that its essentials can easily be understood by men and women, and children too, who have no special intellectual training or gifts. Since it is intended for everyone, it could not be otherwise!

Scientific Truth Accepted

Catholic teaching is not opposed to known facts. Contrary to the accusations of those who have not troubled to make sure of their facts, the teaching of the Church is not opposed to science. Scientific truth — when it really is truth, — cannot be opposed to the whole Truth of which it forms a part, and from which the Church draws its own teaching. There are far too many scientists alive to-day who are devout Catholics to leave room for doubt on this point. True science does not affect the doctrines of the Church. Our degree of progress in the knowledge of the mechanism of the material universe does not alter the truths of the Church's religious teaching, which is concerned with why God created man, not with the method He used; and with the destiny of man, not the physical structure of his body or the chemistry of life.

The teaching of the Church does not change with every passing era. Catholicism is often accused of clinging too rigidly to its ancient doctrines, as if this were a fault. In the Christian world outside the Church theories rise and fall; in some bodies, as in the Church of England, many different and opposed points of view exist side by side. If the Church changed its teaching to suit the opinions of the moment, it would show itself to be no more than the mouthpiece of men. God's truth cannot alter: and of all the teaching authorities in the world, only the Catholic Church can claim for its doctrines this essential quality.

What does happen is that the Church — like any other living organism — grows and develops in a growing and developing world. Its basic doctrines are more fully explained in the course of time; their relationship with new-found hitherto unknown natural laws is stated. The logical conclusions and consequences of its fundamental truths are developed. These fundamental truths, which the Church teaches as certain, are to be found in the original "deposit" of faith given by its Founder to the Apostles, and passed on to later ages in the writings and traditions of the Church. Everything else, its theology (which is the explanation of the truth and not the truth itself), its discipline, its organization, are all based on this deposit. It does not teach new truths, but it does from time to time clarify its position when queries about its original teaching makes this advisable. Only its organization and discipline, in so far as this is of purely human origin, may alter to suit changing circumstances. Much that seems new to the outsider is simply the Church's answer to some fresh theory or discovery which had not previously called for a statement from the Church.

It is worthy of note that as far as most non-Catholic theories proposed by Protestant bodies are concerned, nearly all their "modern" ideas were already thought of and answered in the first few centuries of the Christian era. The difficulties of modern man with regard to religious truth do not differ in essentials from those of past ages.

If the teaching of the Catholic Church is true, it must be suited to the needs of people in every age and of every race. That it fulfills this condition is evident from facts easily checked by anyone interested. There are today sincere, devout and orthodox Catholics in all parts of the world, all holding equally the one same faith. Orientals, Africans, Europeans — all find in Catholicism the same intellectual, moral and spiritual satisfaction. Because of differing temperaments, the outward expression of their common faith may vary. Just as human respect is shown in varied ways — by bowing, clapping hands, or silence, so the Faith may be clothed in pomp or austerity, in flamboyant expansiveness or in quiet restraint. This is a matter for human individual taste and local tradition: but the faith thus variously expressed is the same. Ask an educated Catholic in any part of the world what he believes, and he will have the same story to tell.

Because the simple and the learned, the African, Oriental and Westerner, all find what they need in its teaching, we are forced to conclude that Catholicism cannot be the product of one special type of human mind, suited only to such minds. It is only a teaching expressing truth to the whole human race that can correspond to the natural instinctive yearnings of us all.

The Church's claim to be the divinely appointed authority founded by Christ to carry on His work and teaching fits the facts of history. We are all inclined to accept as true events of the past as presented to us by the history books we have read. Few stop to wonder on how sound a foundation, on what real evidence, the facts they present are based. We accept without question stories about personalities of past ages which are in reality often far less well based on solid evidence than the story of the beginnings of the Catholic Church. The enormous mass of literature on the subject, the vast amount of scholarship and learning and unremitting research that so many capable men in this and former centuries have

employed, all show without question that no single character has had to stand up to such searching enquiry as that made about Jesus Christ. No other documents that have come down to us from the past have been examined with such minute care as those that make up the New Testament. No historical record has had its authenticity and accuracy so exhaustively tested to discover whether it shows signs of later or less reliable authorship than claimed.

Recent archaeological discoveries and modern methods of research have greatly strengthened the case for the truth and dependability of the New Testament books — discoveries made and conclusions drawn by men, by no means always Catholics, who have employed their scholarship solely in the interests of truth.

The Faith works out in Practice

Finally, the way of life proposed by the Church does work out in practice. No one will deny that there are deeply religious and morally good men and women in every religion, and many who have no professed faith. This is because we all share the light of conscience, and natural reason can give to any religion some part of truth. There are other ways of going from London to York than by taking the train: but they will mean depending on our own resources, and we shall be more likely to go astray, take longer, arrive in less good trim, and possibly never arrive at all.

But this picture of a train, like all such comparisons, is far from perfect: it must not make you imagine that once in the Catholic Church you have nothing left to do. The Church does not guarantee to take all its members to heaven, just because they are members. But it does guarantee to show the way and provide the means. Only in the Catholic Church do we find the frequent occurrence of heroic virtue among persons of widely differing gifts and temperament. Scholars and peasants, kings and beggars, old and young — all have been numbered among its saints.

It is the common experience of people in the Church, including those who at one time lived in disbelief or evil ways, that if honestly and conscientiously put to the test it really does “work”. A realization of this — perhaps in many cases subconscious — accounts for the hesitation of those who, standing on the threshold, still hesitate, reluctant to give up some personal weakness or an easy way of life. But those who do pluck up the necessary courage find, to their surprise, that to do so is not only easier than they had imagined, but their happiness is greatly increased, whatever sacrifices they are called upon to make.

Considered impartially, with an open mind, these facts must compel the honest enquirer to admit that the teaching of the Church has all the qualities required of truth. It follows that if it is truth you seek, the teaching of the Catholic Church merits careful and thorough investigation. That so many men of good will, and Christians too, remain outside the Church is due largely to ignorance, and to the prejudice that such ignorance inspires.

For ignorance about the Church is widespread. Yet the necessary information is available to all, easy to obtain and freely given. It does not matter whether you are a member of any other Christian organization or religion, or have had no previous religious experience at all: for anyone who turns enquiringly to the Catholic Church there is no difficulty of faith to which he will be unable to find the solution. From the Church in which all are welcome, none will be turned away.

We have covered here no more than the first steps that lead towards making that Act of Faith which is the inward consent of the mind to the teaching of the Church. Before you can give that final assent, there may be much ground to cover. You will want proof that the teaching of the Catholic Church is indeed guaranteed by God; that it was founded by Christ; that Christ promised it the authority it claims; that Christ Himself was truly God made Man, Whose promises we can depend upon. Doubts about certain doctrines may puzzle you and make you hesitate; queries about the Church’s moral law and practical discipline will need explaining and justifying.

There are innumerable books on all these points, ranging from learned works in many volumes to simple pamphlets like this, so that everyone, whatever his need or interest may readily obtain the information he seeks. And there is always the Catholic priest, trained to answer problems, general or personal, to whom you or anyone may turn, without expense and without obligation, either for a complete course in Catholic teaching or for the answer to a single question.

The Church welcomes Enquiries

In any enquiry you may make, you need have no fear that you will be “caught” against your wishes. The Church welcomes enquiries, and has no desire to act in any way that would keep them away. It certainly will not press anyone who does not freely and willingly accept its teaching. Indeed, it cannot do so, since one of its doctrines is that Faith must be rational and freely given, and the convert must be fully instructed and aware of what he is doing before he can be received into its membership. But it spares no pains to make this as easy as possible, and will patiently and sympathetically help you through all your perplexities and problems in the hope that, in God’s good time, the first seed of grace may grow into a lively and well-founded faith.

And if in time, perhaps not without pause or set-back, this should happen, you will gradually become aware of a new outlook on life, a new peace and security of mind; you will find you understand what Christ meant when He said that the members of His Kingdom must become as little children, so that they may, not blindly, yet still “as through a mirror darkly”, glimpse the unity of Truth beyond man’s piece-meal science — the boundless Realm not limited by space, the Eternity unfettered from the chain of time: and, with Faith made sound by reason, freely accept God’s grace to say ‘Credo’, I believe.
