

The Church as an Ethical Society.

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SOMEWHERE in the early years of the second century, Plinius Secundus, Governor of Bithynia, wrote to the Emperor Trajan to request direction for dealing with the sect of Christians. Except that they refused to make the usual sacrifices he found in them nothing criminal. On a fixed day, he says (no doubt the first of the week), they rose before dawn and sang a hymn *Christo quasi Deo*, to Christ as God, and bound themselves *sacramento* (which Pliny probably understood as 'by oath') to avoid evil, to practise no theft or robbery or adultery, breach of faith or embezzlement under trust; after which they separated, and later in the day met for an ordinary and harmless meal—which, it is thought, may have been the *Agape*.

This account presents to us the Church in its immediately post-apostolic phase as a Society, in the first place *Credal*, singing to Christ as God; then as *Sacramental*, bound together by rite; but mainly, in its impression on an outsider like Pliny, as an *Ethical* Society. And the ethic which, as illustrated by Christians, interested him was negative; he does not observe whether Christians loved one another or were charitable or were propagandist—he does observe that certain things they will not do; he finds in them, he says, a pertinacious and inflexible obstinacy, and he observes that in this they support one another by the acknowledgment of a standard of conduct, 'binding themselves by a sacrament.' As it happened, Pliny had hit upon precisely those characteristics of the Church which are brought into prominence by some present discussions, and especially by the charge that the Church fails to control the public morality in matters social and economic.

Fundamentally the Church is *credal*. At the root of the whole trouble in Bithynia, Pliny found 'a perverse and preposterous superstition,' of which the hymn to Christ as God was an example. The Church is based on the belief which is its reason for existing—its belief is its selective instrument by which it gathers out of the world that elect which is known by its response to the Christian idea; the Church is shaped by belief, impelled by belief, constrained by belief; creed is its dynamic, 'faith working by love.' The sacra-

ments embody belief and define belief—whatever else they may be, no one questions that the sacraments are symbols, and symbols of truth as the Church holds truth. And finally its ethic is constituted by belief—its belief in Christ as God manifest, from Whom it is possible to argue to every principle of character or conduct. This foundational relation to creed becomes more important, or one should perhaps say more evident, in view of the present challenge to the validity of the Christian ethic. We can no longer assume, as used to be assumed, that, however it may be with doctrine, Christian morality is final and assured. We can no longer think that the dogma, having yielded the code, has served its office and may pass, while the code abides. We can no longer, as formerly, argue from the excellence of the Christian system of action to the truth of its basis in Christian statements; for the excellence of the system of action is itself brought frankly into question—we must in these days render a reason why men should love one another—we must justify the Christian graces as being really graces and not infirmities; and, because first principles are seldom demonstrable by argument, we are sent back to seek our reason in the assertions of the Creed. If these are true, we have reason enough. To the Church, in fact, belief is first and last and central.

But the Church is further a *Sacramental* Society; it is not, that is to say, of man or by the will of man; it is not 'forth from this world,' but is constituted in Christ Jesus and is supported by supernatural resources. There is in it life—it is vitally, not mechanically associated—the grace of God is there, in the communion of the Holy Ghost; and by virtue of this all divine demands can be met by it, and the impossible is 'possible, because God wills it.'¹ This conception of the Church may be taken for commonplace, as ground on which all of us alike stand; it is not necessary for the purpose of this paper to consider the specific content of sacraments or their function in practice; it is enough to see that their existence indicates the Church in the aspects of coherence and vitality.

As the outcome of these fundamental character-

¹ *Ad Diognetum*, 10.

istics, the Church is ultimately an *Ethical* society. Its belief implies 'a way'—a certain conduct, both for itself as a 'substantive corporation' and for its individual members; and its fidelity to the way is the measure of its testimony to the belief. Apart from that sense of the absolute value of truth, which it has in common with honest humanity, the supreme importance which the Church attaches to right belief is proportioned to its conviction that belief always stands behind conduct, and that action invariably proceeds upon and implies what Mr. Figgis calls a theory of the universe. To adopt a theory is to prepare to act; and this is not less true in the case of the Christian, because for him the theory is stated as the assertion of certain historical facts, such as, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. The Church, therefore, gives a reason for whatever it enjoins; and the reason is not utilitarian—it is always a reason of faith. Thus in almost every Apostolic document doctrine is first set forth and then practice, the practice being linked to the doctrine as its inference. We are, for example, to love one another—it is because Christ loved us and gave Himself for us; we are not to lie to one another—it is because we are members one of another; and so on. Christianity has no interest in doctrine considered merely as knowledge unrelated to action. Its creed is practical, almost to the point of pragmatism. That is to say, that the Church is so convinced of the nexus between faith and character, between belief and action, that for it truth of faith may be judged by the moral influence of faith, and doctrine which has no ethical inference, however as information it may be accurate, is no part of the Faith which the Church teaches.

Hence the Church discerns certain necessities. It discerns a necessity to hold, if it may, the truth as it is in Jesus completely and exactly, since any deflexion from that truth will quite certainly be reflected in deflexion of morals, will distort its code, and will enfeeble its grasp upon the soul and upon society. If, for example, the Church loses consciousness of that great mystery which St. Paul speaks concerning Christ and itself, the result will presently be seen in the statistics of divorce and in the confusion of the mind of the flock as to the nature of marriage.

It discerns also a necessity to hold an absolute moral standard and to insist on compliance with

that—not on the part of the world, as to which the Church cannot insist—but on the part of its own membership, on whose conformity it obviously can insist, since Christ has given it the Keys and it lies with itself to say who its members are. The Church is under this necessity, because conduct reacts on faith and also reacts on power. False action implies, and therefore induces, false belief: if, for example, you propose to conquer the world, you must proceed on the assertion that might creates right, and you must deny that the State is a moral entity; or if you propose to act corruptly in business, you must assume that more than one moral standard is admissible. Conduct reacts also on power; sanctity is power: only saints under any religion work miracles; and sanctity presupposes at least rectitude. All things are possible to faith: but faith is possible only to obedience. The Church is therefore necessarily ethical.

It is further under a third necessity, which arises out of its mission to the world. With its faith it has to impose also its code, 'teaching to observe whatsoever Jesus has commanded'; and it can do so only so far as its example illustrates. Since it proclaims a theory and scheme of human life, it must also demonstrate the feasibility of the scheme as realized by it in practice. Obviously the Church cannot hope to persuade the world to more than itself attempts, nor can it require of the world more than it exacts from its own constituency. An ethical witness is essential to its efficiency; and this testimony would appear to take two forms. There is on the one hand the testimony which the Church as a corporate body bears in the ordering of its own methods. For, after all, to the world the Church presents itself as a society of human beings using the common conditions, and she has to show that these conditions, which are those of the world as well, can be handled in a heavenly manner. She has in fact to exemplify the working of the Kingdom of Heaven. For the Church, therefore, in her own actings no method is even lawful except the ideal method, and no action except the absolutely right action; if she falls in any detail below that standard, it is hard to see how she can be justified by the plea of circumstance or of pressure or of expedience or of resulting success. She at least should not be conformed to the world: for her at least it should not be possible to say 'I must,' either because she fears the people, or would conciliate, or would be accommodated to

the times. Should she for any reason so decline from the highest, something is thereby lost to her, with which she cannot well dispense. One can pardon a man who falls, but not so easily a Church which compromises. If the Church is not equal to heroic measures, is not in her ways habitually quixotic, she is in so far less than herself. Corporately the Church is an Ethical society, and must be so judged.

This testimony of corporate fidelity to the absolute standard is intrinsically important; from the world's point of view it is, however, perhaps not the most important. The world, one must fear, is not scandalized if it discovers in the Church's practice a certain decent worldliness—it does not take our claim to a heavenly citizenship seriously enough to be shocked by that; rather it expects that of the Church as of other human institutions, and probably respects it the more for showing a proper business aptitude and an intelligent adaptation to its environment; nor does it object to be flattered by a deference which is felt to be its due; on the contrary, the world is furiously angry if it is not conciliated, and threatens the Church with many woes if it should attempt to be independent of public opinion. What does profoundly interest and affect the world is the ethical testimony of individual conduct. Whether the Church corporate does or does not follow Christian methods makes small difference to the average citizen; but whether his employer or his employé, his merchant or his customer, or his contractor, or his public servant follows these methods—whether he himself being, as he probably may be, a baptized man and a communicant, is to be held bound to them without relief or excuse—that is another matter, and one which is going to touch him closely.

Is the Church, then, an Ethical society to such effect as, for example, a Temperance society is to be composed of persons who are temperate, or in the sense that a member of the society for the protection of Aborigines is not expected himself to engage in slave trade? The Church is, without question, a credal society—it sings its hymns, *secum invicem*, to Christ as God; and what it believes, every member of it *ex hypothesi* believes—he cannot deny the Faith and at the same time adhere to the Church. But the Church is also an Ethical society: are its members *in the same sense* bound to its code? is it equally impracticable for them in their membership to excuse themselves

from compliance with the Christian law of conduct? The answer given by most might probably be that, if we are consistent, the code is as imperative as the creed; but, in saying so, there might be in mind that admission of possible inconsistency, which, as to belief, would hardly be admitted. As for belief, we would say, a member of the Church must of course believe: must he then *equally*, as being of the Society, *do* the things that Christ has said? We may say 'yes' to both questions; but our 'yes' may not have in both cases the same emphasis. It is no doubt in great part a question of emphasis. The Church does realize itself as cohering by an Ethical as by a Credal agreement, and that it exists to testify to a morality as explicitly as to a Gospel: does it, however, realize these two facts with equal clearness? One may think it a peculiar necessity of our time that the Church should so realize itself, as not only a fellowship of persons testifying to a certain faith, but as also and as definitely a fellowship of persons who practise a certain method of life.

As for this way of life, it may probably, for the purpose of this inquiry, be taken to be something simple and elementary. These Bithynian Christians, who sang their hymn to Christ as God, bound themselves by sacrament to nothing novel. They bound themselves to avoid evil and to practise no theft, robbery, or adultery, nor to break faith or appropriate trust funds. The code implied is the code of all the world: they, however (and here was the peculiarity), bound themselves to observe it.

Roughly speaking, Christ's law seems to be laid on us in two great standards—that of the natural moral sense, which is expressed in the negatives of the Decalogue and made positively applicable in the Golden Rule—and next, that of the New Commandment, that our love for one another be after the manner of Christ's love for us. The Church is, of course, kept by both laws, each of them being obligatory on its members; but of the two, it is on the plane of the earlier and universal law that the Church's impact on the world takes place. Fidelity to the New Commandment lies, not between the Christian and the world, but between the soul and its Saviour. The Ten Commandments, on the other hand, lie between us and the world at every step. They are, one may say, common to humanity. Is there, then, anything distinctively Christian in our relation to

this natural ethic—this universally accepted 'Thou shalt not'? There is this, 'they bound themselves by a sacrament not to do evil,' not to depart from these elementary moralities. The distinctively Christian factor is not the code, but submission to the necessity of being faithful to the code. The Christian feature is the renunciation of compromise. It is the resolve not to concede. The Church then would in this aspect be, not a society of people who like others accept the common rule of right and wrong, but a society of people who hold an unswerving attitude of adherence to the rule, so that where it is said 'Thou shalt not,' they will not; a society of those who, following Christ, repudiate the double standard—for whom morality is unified in Christ. Such resolution may seem to be a simple matter; it is, however, possibly what Christ called *taking up the Cross*, and the practising of it to its conceivably awkward consequences, Christ might call *bearing the Cross*.

In these considerations we have been concerned only with the fact that the Church is an ethical society, and have not touched the perplexing questions of its regulative life which are involved. It was long before the Church despaired of handling these. In the earlier period her consciousness of herself as an ethical fellowship was, it may be thought, quite as strong as her consciousness of herself as a credal fellowship. Her elaborate system of discipline remains on record to testify. Popular imagination conceives of the Church as in those primitive centuries rent on questions of doctrine; as matter of fact the first schisms turned rather on questions of the treatment of moral offenders. Through the Medieval period the disciplinary consciousness of the Church is unquestionable; the terrors of excommunication were real, and they were freely applied. Whether the Church always wielded that Spiritual sword wisely one may doubt; but certainly she did not bear it in vain. From the Reformation onward those Communion, which are properly termed the Reformed (of which the Scottish is one), insisted on an active discipline as one of the features without which there was not 'the face of a true Kirk.'

In the Anglican Communion its Communion service (at least to the latest revision) laments the collapse of discipline and declares its revival much to be desired. Some of us are old enough to remember in Scotland the very awful rite of 'fencing the Table,' in which the Minister of the Sacrament recounted, current or probable sins and debarred from communion their practitioners.

Conceivably this venerable practice, which in Scotland is hardly even now obsolete, might hint the direction in which the Church's sense of itself as an ethical fellowship could be stimulated. It would be a difficult thing perhaps in these days for the Church to determine who does right and who does wrong—though Mr. Ruskin, in his *Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds*, makes light enough of such difficulty. The Income Tax authorities are better equipped to know than the Church can be, and yet seem to have their own perplexities; and the Act as to undisclosed commissions has not so far led to any noticeable crop of prosecutions. It is, however, always possible for the Church to form and even to express a judgment on actions and practices; and it is always possible to require the attention at least of conscience to such findings. As a society the Church may have a mind on current and emergent questions of right and wrong—there is nothing fantastic in the supposition—and may speak her mind, very much to the general advantage. For thus she may create a standard; and it is the moral standard of common thought in these matters which socially counts for everything. So doing, the Church would give some support to the individual in his poor effort to run straight. Every man is solitary as he encounters the problems of his own conduct. At such a moment our Lord spoke of being 'left alone'; there are those who are left alone, to whom the moral backing of an ethical brotherhood, behind their resolve at any cost to do right and refuse wrong would be worth a good deal. For if a man in our world will follow the naked right, he is like enough to go to the wall; and no one knows it except himself and God—and except God no one cares.