

PARADOXES OF CATHOLICISM

BY ROBERT HUGH BENSON

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Italics have been used for all quotations, whether verbal or substantial, from Holy Scripture and other literature_.

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PARADOXES OF CATHOLICISM

INTRODUCTORY

(i) JESUS CHRIST, GOD AND MAN

I and My Father are one.—JOHN X. 30.

My Father is greater than I.—JOHN XIV. 20.

The mysteries of the Church, a materialistic scientist once announced to an astonished world, are child's play compared with the mysteries of nature.[1] He was completely wrong, of course, yet there was every excuse for his mistake. For, as he himself tells us in effect, he found everywhere in that created nature which he knew so well, anomaly piled on anomaly and paradox on paradox, and he knew no more of theology than its simpler and more explicit statements.

[Footnote 1: Professor Huxley.]

We can be certain therefore—we who understand that the mysteries of nature are, after all, within the limited circle of created life, while the mysteries of grace run up into the supreme Mystery of the eternal and uncreated Life of God—we can be certain that, if nature is mysterious and paradoxical, grace will be incalculably more mysterious. For every paradox in the world of matter, in whose environment our bodies are confined, we shall find a hundred in that atmosphere of spirit in which our spirits breathe and move—those spirits of ours which, themselves, paradoxically enough, are forced to energize under material limitations.

We need look no further, then, to find these mysteries than to that tiny mirror of the Supernatural which we call our self, to that little thread of experience which we name the "spiritual life." How is it, for example, that while in one mood our religion is the lamp of our shadowy existence, in another it is the single dark spot upon a world of pleasure—in one mood the single thing that makes life worth living at all, and in another the one obstacle to our contentment? What are those sorrowful and joyful mysteries of human life, mutually contradictory yet together resultant (as in the Rosary itself) in others that are glorious? Turn to that master passion that underlies these mysteries—the passion that is called love—and see if there be anything more inexplicable than such an explanation. What is this passion, then, that turns joy to sorrow and sorrow to joy—this motive that drives a man to lose his life that he may save it, that turns bitter to sweet and makes the cross but a light yoke after all, that causes him to find his centre outside his own circle, and to please himself best by depriving himself of pleasure? What is that power that so often fills us with delights before we have begun to labour, and rewards our labour with the darkness of dereliction?

I. If our interior life, then, is full of paradox and apparent contradiction—and there is no soul that has made any progress that does not find it so—we should naturally expect that the Divine Life of Jesus Christ on earth, which is the central Objective Light of the World reflected in ourselves, should be full of yet more amazing anomalies. Let us examine the records of that Life and see if it be not so. And let us for that purpose begin by imagining such an examination to be made by an inquirer who has never received the Christian tradition.

(i) He begins to read, of course, with the assumption that this Life is as others and this Man as other men; and as he reads he finds a hundred corroborations of the theory. Here is one, born of a woman, hungry and thirsty by the wayside, increasing in wisdom; one who works in a carpenter's shop; rejoices and sorrows; one who has friends and enemies; who is forsaken by the one and insulted by the other—who passes, in fact, through all those experiences of human life to which mankind is subject—one who dies like other men and is laid in a grave.

Even the very marvels of that Life he seeks to explain by the marvellous humanity of its hero. He can imagine, as one such inquirer has said, how the magic of His presence was so great—the magic of His simple yet perfect humanity—that the blind opened their eyes to see the beauty of His face and the deaf their ears to hear Him.

Yet, as he reads further, he begins to meet his problems. If this Man were man only, however perfect and sublime, how is it that His sanctity appears to run by other lines than those of other saints? Other perfect men as they approached perfection were most conscious of imperfection; other saints as they were nearer God lamented their distance from Him; other teachers of the spiritual life pointed always away from themselves and their shortcomings to that Eternal Law to which they too aspired. Yet with this Man all seems reversed. He, as He stood before the world, called on men to imitate Him; not, as other leaders have done, to avoid His sins: this Man, so far from pointing forward and up, pointed to Himself as the Way to the Father; so far from adoring a Truth to which He strove, named Himself its very incarnation; so far from describing a Life to which He too one day hoped to rise, bade His hearers look on Himself Who was their Life; so far from deploring to His friends the sins under which He laboured, challenged His enemies to find within Him any sin at all. There is an extraordinary Self-consciousness in Him that has in it nothing of "self" as usually understood.

Then it may be, at last, that our inquirer approaches the Gospel with a new assumption. He has been wrong, he thinks, in his interpretation that such a Life as this was human at all. "*Never man spake like this man.*" He echoes from the Gospel, "*What manner of man is this that even the winds and the sea obey Him?* How, after all," he asks himself, "could a man be born without a human father, how rise again from the dead upon the third day?" Or, "How even could such marvels be related at all of one who was no more than other men?"

So once more he begins. Here, he tells himself, is the old fairy story come true; here is a God come down to dwell among men; here is the solution of all his problems. And once more he finds himself bewildered. For how can God be weary by the wayside, labour in a shop, and die upon a cross? How can the Eternal Word be silent for

thirty years? How can the Infinite lie in a manger? How can the Source of Life be subject to death?

He turns in despair, flinging himself from theory to theory — turns to the words of Christ Himself, and the perplexity deepens with every utterance. If Christ be man, how can He say, *My Father and I are one*? If Christ be God, how can He proclaim that *His Father is greater than He*? If Christ be Man, how can He say, *Before Abraham was, I am*? If Christ be God, how can He name Himself *the Son of Man*.

(ii) Turn to the spiritual teaching of Jesus Christ, and once more problem follows problem, and paradox, paradox.

Here is He Who came to soothe men's sorrows and to give rest to the weary, He Who offers a sweet yoke and a light burden, telling them that no man can be His disciple who will not take up the heaviest of all burdens and follow Him uphill. Here is one, the Physician of souls and bodies, Who *went about doing good*, Who set the example of activity in God's service, pronouncing the silent passivity of Mary as the better part that shall not be taken away from her. Here at one moment He turns with the light of battle in His eyes, bidding His friends who have not swords to *sell their cloaks and buy them*; and at another bids those swords to be sheathed, since *His Kingdom is not of this world*. Here is the Peacemaker, at one time pronouncing His benediction on those who make peace, and at another crying that He *came to bring not peace but a sword*. Here is He Who names as *blessed those that mourn* bidding His disciples to *rejoice and be exceeding glad*. Was there ever such a Paradox, such perplexity, and such problems? In His Person and His teaching alike there seems no rest and no solution — *What think ye of Christ? Whose Son is He?*

II. (i) The Catholic teaching alone, of course, offers a key to these questions; yet it is a key that is itself, like all keys, as complicated as the wards which it alone can unlock. Heretic after heretic has sought for simplification, and heretic after heretic has therefore come to confusion. Christ is God, cried the Docetic; therefore cut out from the Gospels all that speaks of the reality of His Manhood! God cannot bleed and suffer and die; God cannot weary; God cannot feel the sorrows of man. Christ is Man, cries the modern critic; therefore tear out from the Gospels His Virgin Birth and His Resurrection! For

none but a Catholic can receive the Gospels as they were written; none but a man who believes that Christ is both God and Man, who is content to believe that and to bow before the Paradox of paradoxes that we call the Incarnation, to accept the blinding mystery that Infinite and Finite Natures were united in one Person, that the Eternal expresses Himself in Time, and that the Uncreated Creator united to Himself Creation—none but a Catholic, in a word, can meet, without exception, the mysterious phenomena of Christ's Life.

(ii) Turn now again to the mysteries of our own limited life and, as in a far-off phantom parallel, we begin to understand.

For we too, in our measure, have a double nature. *As God and Man make one Christ, so soul and body make one man:* and, as the two natures of Christ—as His Perfect Godhead united to His Perfect Manhood—lie at the heart of the problems which His Life presents, so too our affinities with the clay from which our bodies came, and with the Father of Spirits Who inbreathed into us living souls, explain the contradictions of our own experience.

If we were but irrational beasts, we could be as happy as the beasts; if we were but discarnate spirits that look on God, the joy of the angels would be ours. Yet if we assume either of these two truths as if it were the only truth, we come certainly to confusion. If we live as the beasts, we cannot sink to their contentment, for our immortal part will not let us be; if we neglect or dispute the rightful claims of the body, that very outraged body drags our immortal spirit down. The acceptance of the two natures of Christ alone solves the problems of the Gospel; the acceptance of the two parts of our own nature alone enables us to live as God intends. Our spiritual and physical moods, then, rise and fall as the one side or the other gains the upper hand: now our religion is a burden to the flesh, now it is the exercise in which our soul delights; now it is the one thing that makes life worth living, now the one thing that checks our enjoyment of life. These moods alternate, inevitably and irresistibly, according as we allow the balance of our parts to be disturbed and set swaying. And so, ultimately, there is reserved for us the joy neither of beasts nor of angels, but the joy of humanity. We are higher than the one, we are lower than the other, that we may be

crowned by Him Who in that same Humanity sits on the Throne of God.

So much, then, for our introduction. We have seen how the Paradox of the Incarnation alone is adequate to the phenomena recorded in the Gospel—how that supreme paradox is the key to all the rest. We will proceed to see how it is also the key to other paradoxes of religion, to the difficulties which the history of Catholicism presents. For the Catholic Church is the extension of Christ's Life on earth; the Catholic Church, therefore, that strange mingling of mystery and common-sense, that union of earth and heaven, of clay and fire, can alone be understood by him who accepts her as both Divine and Human, since she is nothing else but the mystical presentment, in human terms, of Him Who, though the Infinite God and the Eternal Creator, was *found in the form of a servant*, of Him Who, *dwelling always in the Bosom of the Father*, for our sakes came down from heaven.

(ii) THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, DIVINE AND HUMAN

Blessed art thou Simon Bar-jona; because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but My Father Who is in heaven.... Go behind me, satan, for thou savourest not the things that are of God, but the things that are of men.—MATT. XVI. 17, 23.

We have seen how the only reconciliation of the paradoxes of the Gospel lies in the Catholic doctrine of the Incarnation. It is only to him who believes that Jesus Christ is perfect God and perfect Man that the Gospel record is coherent and intelligible. The heretics—men who for the most part either rejected or added to the inspired record—were those who, on the one side, accepted Christ's Divinity and rejected the proofs of His Humanity, or accepted His Humanity and rejected the proofs of His Divinity. In the early ages, for the most part, these accepted His Divinity and, rejecting His Humanity, invented childish miracles which they thought appropriate to a God

dwelling on earth in a phantom manhood; at the present day, rejecting His Divinity, they reject also those miracles for which His Divinity alone is an adequate explanation.

Now the Catholic Church is an extension of the Incarnation. She too (though, as we shall see, the parallel is not perfect) has her Divine and Human Nature, which alone can account for the paradoxes of her history; and these paradoxes are either predicted by Christ—asserted, that is, as part of His spiritual teaching—or actually manifested in His own life. (We may take them as symbolised, so to speak, in those words of our Lord to St. Peter in which He first commends him as a man inspired by God and then, almost simultaneously, rebukes him as one who can rise no further than an earthly ideal at the best.)

I. (i) Just as we have already imagined a well-disposed inquirer approaching for the first time the problems of the Gospel, so let us now again imagine such a man, in whom the dawn of faith has begun, encountering the record of Catholicism.

At first all seems to him Divine. He sees, for example, how singularly unique she is, how unlike to all other human societies. Other societies depend for their very existence upon a congenial human environment; she flourishes in the most uncongenial. Other societies have their day and pass down to dissolution and corruption; she alone knows no corruption. Other dynasties rise and fall; the dynasty of Peter the Fisherman remains unmoved. Other causes wax and wane with the worldly influence which they can command; she is usually most effective when her earthly interest is at the lowest ebb.

Or again, he falls in love with her Divine beauty and perceives even in her meanest acts a grace which he cannot understand. He notices with wonder how she takes human mortal things—a perishing pagan language, a debased architecture, an infant science or philosophy—and infuses into them her own immortality. She takes the superstitions of a country-side and, retaining their "accidents," transubstantiates them into truth; the customs or rites of a pagan society, and makes them the symbols of a living worship. And into all she infuses a spirit that is all her own—a spirit of delicate grace and beauty of which she alone has the secret.

It is her Divinity, then, that he sees, and rightly. But, wrongly, he draws certain one-sided conclusions. If she is so perfect, he argues (at least subconsciously), she can be nothing else than perfect; if she is so Divine she can be in no sense human. Her pontiffs must all be saints, her priests shining lights, her people stars in her firmament. If she is Divine, her policy must be unerring, her acts all gracious, her lightest movements inspired. There must be no brutality anywhere, no self-seeking, no ambition, no instability. How should there be, since she is Divine?

Such are his first instincts. And then, little by little, his disillusionment begins.

For, as he studies her record more deeply, he begins to encounter evidences of her Humanity. He reads history, and he discovers here and there a pontiff who but little in his moral character resembles Him Whose Vicar he is. He meets an apostate priest; he hears of some savagery committed in Christ's name; he talks with a convert who has returned complacently to the City of Confusion; there is gleefully related to him the history of a family who has kept the faith all through the period of persecution and lost it in the era of toleration. And he is shaken and dismayed. "How can these be in a Society that is Divine? I had *trusted* that it had been_ She *who should have redeemed Israel; and now* –!"

(ii) Another man approaches the record of Catholicism from the opposite direction. To him she is a human society and nothing more; and he finds, indeed, a thousand corroborations of his theory. He views her amazing success in the first ages of Christianity – the rapid propagation of her tenets and the growth of her influence – and sees behind these things nothing more than the fortunate circumstance of the existence of the Roman Empire. Or he notices the sudden and rapid rise of the power of the Roman pontiff and explains this by the happy chance that moved the centre of empire to the east and left in Rome an old prestige and an empty throne. He sees how the Church has profited by the divisions in Europe; how she has inherited the old Latin genius for law and order; and he finds in these things an explanation of her unity and of her claim to rule princes and kings. She is to him just human, and no more. There is not, at first sight, a phenomenon of her life for which he

cannot find a human explanation. She is interesting, as a result of innumerable complicated forces; she is venerable, as the oldest coherent society in Europe; she has the advantage of Italian diplomacy; she has been shrewd, unwearied, and persevering. But she is no more.

And then, as he goes deeper, he begins to encounter phenomena which do not fall so easily under his compact little theories. If she is merely human, why do not the laws of all other human societies appear to affect her too? Why is it that she alone shows no incline towards dissolution and decay? Why has not she too split up into the component parts of which she is welded? How is it that she has preserved a unity of which all earthly unities are but shadows? Or he meets with the phenomena of her sanctity and begins to perceive that the difference between the character she produces in her saints and the character of the noblest of those who do not submit to her is one of kind and not merely of degree. If she is merely mediaeval, how is it that she commands such allegiance as that which is paid to her in modern America? If she is merely European, how is it that she alone can deal with the Oriental on his own terms? If she is merely the result of temporal circumstances, how is it that her spiritual influence shows no sign of waning when the forces that helped to build her are dispersed?

His theory too, then, becomes less confident. If she is Human, why is she so evidently Divine? If she is Divine, whence comes her obvious Humanity? So years ago men asked, If Christ be God, how could He be weary by the wayside and die upon the Cross? So men ask now, If Christ be Man, how could He cast out devils and rise from the dead?

II. We come back, then, to the Catholic answer. Treat the Catholic Church as Divine only and you will stumble over her scandals, her failures, and her shortcomings. Treat her as Human only and you will be silenced by her miracles, her sanctity, and her eternal resurrections.

(i) Of course the Catholic Church is Human. She consists of fallible men, and her Humanity is not even safeguarded as was that of Christ against the incursions of sin. Always, therefore, there have been scandals, and always will be. Popes may betray their trust, in

all human matters; priests their flocks; laymen their faith. No man is secure. And, again, since she is human it is perfectly true that she has profited by human circumstances for the increase of her power. Undoubtedly it was the existence of the Roman Empire, with its roads, its rapid means of transit, and its organization, that made possible the swift propagation of the Gospel in the first centuries. Undoubtedly it was the empty throne of Caesar and the prestige of Rome that developed the world's acceptance of the authority of Peter's Chair. Undoubtedly it was the divisions of Europe that cemented the Church's unity and led men to look to a Supreme Authority that might compose their differences. There is scarcely an opening in human affairs into which she has not plunged; hardly an opportunity she has missed. Human affairs, human sins and weaknesses as well as human virtues, have all contributed to her power. So grows a tree, even in uncongenial soil. The rocks that impede the roots later become their support; the rich soil, waiting for an occupant, has been drawn up into the life of the leaves; the very winds that imperilled the young sapling have developed too its power of resistance. Yet these things do not make the tree.

(ii) For her Humanity, though it is the body in which her Divinity dwells, does not create that Divinity. Certainly human circumstances have developed her, yet what but Divine Providence ordered and developed those human circumstances? What but that same power, which indwells in the Church, dwelt without her too and caused her to take root at that time and in that place which most favored her growth? Certainly she is Human. It may well be that her rulers have contradicted one another in human matters—in science, in policy, and in discipline; but how is it, then, that they have not contradicted one another in matters that are Divine? Granted that one Pope has reversed the policy of his predecessor, then what has saved him from reversing his theology also? Certainly there have been appalling scandals, outrageous sinners, blaspheming apostates—but what of her saints?

And, above all, she gives proof of her Divinity by that very sign to which Christ Himself pointed as a proof of His own. Granted that she *dies daily*—that her cause fails in this century and in that country; that her science is discredited in this generation and her active morality in that and her ideals in a third—how comes it that she

also rises daily from the dead; that her old symbols rise again from their ruins; that her virtues are acclaimed by the children of the men who renounced her; that her bells and her music sound again where once her churches and houses were laid waste?

Here, then, is the Catholic answer and it is this alone that makes sense of history, as it is Catholic doctrine which alone makes sense of the Gospel record. The answer is identical in both cases alike, and it is this—that the only explanation of the phenomena of the Gospels and of Church history is that the Life which produces them is both Human and Divine.

