

CHAPTER II: THE OBVIOUS BLUNDERS

I have noted that Catholicism really is in the twentieth century what it was in the second century; it is the New Religion. Indeed its very antiquity preserves an attitude of novelty. I have always thought it striking and even stirring that in the venerable invocation of the "Tantum Ergo," which for us seems to come loaded with accumulated ages, there is still the language of innovation; of the antique document that must yield to a new rite. For us the hymn is something of an antique document itself. But the rite is always new.

But if a convert is to write of conversion he must try to retrace his steps out of that shrine back into that ultimate wilderness where he once really believed that this eternal youth was only the "Old Religion." It is a thing exceedingly difficult to do and not often done well, and I for one have little hope of doing it even tolerably well. The difficulty was expressed to me by another convert who said, "I cannot explain why I am a Catholic; because now that I am a Catholic I cannot imagine myself as anything else." Nevertheless, it is right to make the imaginative effort. It is not bigotry to be certain we are right; but it is bigotry to be unable to imagine how we might possibly have gone wrong. It is my duty to try to understand what H. G. Wells can possibly mean when he says that the medieval Church did not care for education but only for imposing dogmas; it is my duty to speculate (however darkly) on what can have made an intelligent man like Arnold Bennett stone-blind to all the plainest facts about Spain; it is my duty to find if I can the thread of connected thought in George Moore's various condemnations of Catholic Ireland; and it is equally my duty to labour till I understand the strange mental state of G. K. Chesterton when he really assumed that the Catholic Church was a sort of ruined abbey, almost as deserted as Stonehenge.

I must say first that, in my own case, it was at worst a matter of slights rather than slanders. Many converts far more important than I have had to wrestle with a hundred devils of howling falsehood; with a swarm of lies and libels. I owe it to the liberal and Universalist atmosphere of my family, of Stopford Brooke and the Unitarian preachers they followed, that I was always just sufficiently enlightened to be out of the reach of Maria Monk. Nevertheless, as this is but a private privilege for which I have to be thankful, it is necessary to say something of what I might be tempted to call the obvious slanders, but that better men than I have not always seen that the slander was obvious. I do not think that they exercise much influence on the generation that is younger than mine. The worst temptation of the most pagan youth is not so much to denounce monks for breaking their vow as to wonder at them for keeping it. But there is a state of transition that must be allowed for in which a vague Protestant prejudice would rather like to have it both ways. There is still a sort of woolly-minded philistine who would be content to consider a friar a knave for his unchastity and a fool for his chastity. In other

words, these dying calumnies are dying but not dead; and there are still enough people who may still be held back by such crude and clumsy obstacles that it is necessary to some extent to clear them away. After that we can consider what may be called the real obstacles, the real difficulties we find, which, as a fact, are generally the very opposite of the difficulties we are told about. But let us consider the evidence of all these things being black, before we go on to the inconvenient fact of their being white. The usual protest of the Protestant, that the Church of Rome is afraid of the Bible, did not, as I shall explain in a moment, have any great terrors for me at any time. This was by no merit of my own, but by the accident of my age and situation. For I grew up in a world in which the Protestants, who had just proved that Rome did not believe the Bible, were excitedly discovering that they did not believe the Bible themselves. Some of them even tried to combine the two condemnations and say that they were steps of progress. The next step in progress consisted in a man kicking his father for having locked up a book of such beauty and value, a book which the son then proceeded to tear into a thousand pieces. I early discovered that progress is worse than Protestantism so far as stupidity is concerned. But most of the free-thinkers who were friends of mine happened to think sufficiently freely to see that the Higher Criticism was much more of an attack on Protestant Bible-worship than on Roman authority. Anyhow, my family and friends were more concerned with the opening of the book of Darwin than the book of Daniel; and most of them regarded the Hebrew Scriptures as if they were Hittite sculptures. But, even then, it would seem odd to worship the sculptures as gods and then smash them as idols and still go on blaming somebody else for not having worshipped them enough. But here again it is hard for me to know how far my own experience is representative, or whether it would not be well to say more of these purely Protestant prejudices and doubts than I, from my own experience, am able to say.

The Church is a house with a hundred gates; and no two men enter at exactly the same angle. Mine was at least as much Agnostic as Anglican, though I accepted for a time the borderland of Anglicanism; but only on the assumption that it could really be Anglo-Catholicism. There is a distinction of ultimate intention there which in the vague English atmosphere is often missed. It is not a difference of degree but of definite aim. There are High Churchmen as much as Low Churchmen who are concerned first and last to save the Church of England. Some of them think it can be saved by calling it Catholic, or making it Catholic, or believing that it is Catholic; but that is what they want to save. But I did not start out with the idea of saving the English Church, but of finding the Catholic Church. If the two were one, so much the better; but I had never conceived of Catholicism as a sort of showy attribute or attraction to be tacked on to my own national body, but as the inmost soul of the true body, wherever it might be. It might be said that Anglo-Catholicism was simply my own uncompleted conversion to Catholicism. But it was from a position originally much more detached and indefinite

that I had been converted, an atmosphere if not agnostic at least pantheistic or unitarian. To this I owe the fact that I find it very difficult to take some of the Protestant propositions even seriously. What is any man who has been in the real outer world, for instance, to make of the everlasting cry that Catholic traditions are condemned by the Bible? It indicates a jumble of topsy-turvy tests and tail-foremost arguments, of which I never could at any time see the sense. The ordinary sensible sceptic or pagan is standing in the street (in the supreme character of the man in the street) and he sees a procession go by of the priests of some strange cult, carrying their object of worship under a canopy, some of them wearing high head-dresses and carrying symbolical staffs, others carrying scrolls and sacred records, others carrying sacred images and lighted candles before them, others sacred relics in caskets or cases, and so on. I can understand the spectator saying, "This is all hocus-pocus"; I can even understand him, in moments of irritation, breaking up the procession, throwing down the images, tearing up the scrolls, dancing on the priests and anything else that might express that general view. I can understand his saying, "Your croziers are bosh, your candles are bosh, your statues and scrolls and relics and all the rest of it are bosh." But in what conceivable frame of mind does he rush in to select one particular scroll of the scriptures of this one particular group (a scroll which had always belonged to them and been a part of their hocus-pocus, if it was hocus-pocus); why in the world should the man in the street say that one particular scroll was not bosh, but was the one and only truth by which all the other things were to be condemned? Why should it not be as superstitious to worship the scrolls as the statues, of that one particular procession? Why should it not be as reasonable to preserve the statues as the scrolls, by the tenets of that particular creed? To say to the priests, "Your statues and scrolls are condemned by our common sense," is sensible. To say, "Your statues are condemned by your scrolls, and we are going to worship one part of your procession and wreck the rest," is not sensible from any standpoint, least of all that of the man in the street.

Similarly, I could never take seriously the fear of the priest, as of something unnatural and unholy; a dangerous man in the home. Why should man who wanted to be wicked encumber himself with special and elaborate promises to be good? There might sometimes be a reason for a priest being a profligate. But what was the reason for a profligate being a priest? There are many more lucrative walks of life in which a person with such shining talents for vice and villainy might have made a brighter use of his gifts. Why should a man encumber himself with vows that nobody could expect him to take and he did not himself expect to keep? Would any man make himself poor in order that he might become avaricious; or take a vow of chastity frightfully difficult to keep in order to get into a little more trouble when he did not keep it? All that early and sensational picture of the sins of Rome always seemed to me silly even when I was a boy or an unbeliever; and I cannot describe how I passed out of it because I was never

in it. I remember asking some friends at Cambridge, people of the Puritan tradition, why in the world they were so afraid of Papists; why a priest in somebody's house was a peril or an Irish servant the beginning of a pestilence. I asked them why they could not simply disagree with Papists and say so, as they did with Theosophists or Anarchists. They seemed at once pleased and shocked with my daring, as if I had undertaken to convert a burglar or tame a mad dog. Perhaps their alarm was really wiser than my bravado. Anyhow, I had not then the most shadowy notion that the burglar would convert me. That, however, I am inclined to think, is the subconscious intuition in the whole business. It must either mean that they suspect that our religion has something about it so wrong that the hint of it is bad for anybody; or else that it has something so right that the presence of it would convert anybody. To do them justice, I think most of them darkly suspect the second and not the first.

A shade more plausible than the notion that Popish priests merely seek after evil was the notion that they are exceptionally ready to seek good by means of evil. In vulgar language, it is the notion that if they are not sensual they are always sly. To dissipate this is a mere matter of experience; but before I had any experience I had seen some objections to the thing even in theory. The theory attributed to the Jesuits was very often almost identical with the practice adopted by nearly everybody I knew. Everybody in society practised verbal economies, equivocations and often direct fictions, without any sense of essential falsehood. Every gentleman was expected to say he would be delighted to dine with a bore; every lady said that somebody else's baby was beautiful if she thought it as ugly as sin: for they did not think it a sin to avoid saying ugly things. This might be right or wrong; but it was absurd to pillory half a dozen Popish priests for a crime committed daily by half a million, Protestant laymen. The only difference was that the Jesuits had been worried enough about the matter to try to make rules and limitations saving as much verbal veracity as possible; whereas the happy Protestants were not worried about it at all, but told lies from morning to night as merrily and innocently as the birds sing in the trees. The fact is, of course, that the modern world is full of an utterly lawless casuistry because the Jesuits were prevented from making a lawful casuistry. But every man is a casuist or a lunatic.

It is true that this general truth was hidden from many by certain definite assertions. I can only call them, in simple language, Protestant lies about Catholic lying. The men who repeated them were not necessarily lying, because they were repeating. But the statements were of the same lucid and precise order as a statement that the Pope has three legs or that Rome is situated at the North Pole. There is no more doubt about their nature than that. One of them, for instance, is the positive statement, once heard everywhere and still heard often: "Roman Catholics are taught that anything is lawful if done for the good of the Church." This is not the fact; and there is an end of it. It refers to a definite statement of an institution whose statements are very definite; and it can be

proved to be totally false. Here as always the critics cannot see that they are trying to have it both ways. They are always complaining that our creed is cut and dried; that we are told what to believe and must believe nothing else; that it is all written down for us in bulls and confessions of faith. In so far as this is true, it brings a matter like this to the point of legal and literal truth, which can be tested; and so tested, it is a lie. But even here I was saved at a very early stage by noticing a curious fact. I noticed that those who were most ready to blame priests for relying on rigid formulas seldom took the trouble to find out what the formulas were. I happened to pick up some of the amusing pamphlets of James Britten, as I might have picked up any other pamphlets of any other propaganda; but they set me on the track of that delightful branch of literature which he called Protestant Fiction. I found some of that fiction on my own account, dipping into novels by Joseph Hocking and others. I am only concerned with them here to illustrate this particular and curious fact about exactitude. I could not understand why these romancers never took the trouble to find out a few elementary facts about the thing they denounced. The facts might easily have helped the denunciation, where the fictions discredited it. There were any number of real Catholic doctrines I should then have thought disgraceful to the Church. There are any number which I can still easily imagine being made to look disgraceful to the Church. But the enemies of the Church never found these real rocks of offence. They never looked for them. They never looked for anything. They seemed to have simply made up out of their own heads a number of phrases, such as a Scarlet Woman of deficient intellect might be supposed to launch on the world; and left it at that. Boundless freedom reigned; it was not treated as if it were a question of fact at all. A priest might say anything about the Faith; because a Protestant might say anything about the priest. These novels were padded with pronouncements like this one, for instance, which I happen to remember: "Disobeying a priest is the one sin for which there is no absolution. We term it a reserved case." Now obviously a man writing like that is simply imagining what might exist; it has never occurred to him to go and ask if it does exist. He has heard the phrase "a reserved case" and considers, in a poetic reverie, what he shall make it mean. He does not go and ask the nearest priest what it does mean. He does not look it up in an encyclopedia or any ordinary work of reference. There is no doubt about the fact that it simply means a case reserved for ecclesiastical superiors and not to be settled finally by the priest. That may be a fact to be denounced; but anyhow it is a fact. But the man much prefers to denounce his own fancy. Any manual would tell him that there is no sin "for which there is no absolution"; not disobeying the priest; not assassinating the Pope. It would be easy to find out these facts and quite easy to base a Protestant invective upon them. It puzzled me very much, even at that early stage, to imagine why people bringing controversial charges against a powerful and prominent institution should thus neglect to test their own case, and should draw in this random way on their own imagination. It did not make me any more inclined to be a Catholic; in those days the very idea of such

a thing would have seemed crazy. But it did save me from swallowing all the solid and solemn assertion about what Jesuits said and did. I did not accept quite so completely as others the well-ascertained and widely accepted fact that "Roman Catholics may do anything for the good of the Church"; because I had already learned to smile at equally accepted truths like "Disobeying a priest is the one sin for which there is no absolution." I never dreamed that the Roman religion was true; but I knew that its accusers, for some reason or other, were curiously inaccurate.

It is strange to me to go back to these things now, and to think that I ever took them even as seriously as that. But I was not very serious even then; and certainly I was not serious long. The last lingering shadow of the Jesuit, gliding behind curtains and concealing himself in cupboards, faded from my young life about the time when I first caught a distant glimpse of the late Father Bernard Vaughan. He was the only Jesuit I ever knew in those days; and as you could generally hear him half a mile away, he seemed to be ill-selected for the duties of a curtain-glider. It has always struck me as curious that this Jesuit raised a storm by refusing to be Jesuitical (in the journalese sense I mean), by refusing to substitute smooth equivocation and verbal evasion for a brute fact. Because he talked about "killing Germans" when Germans had to be killed, all our shifty and shamefaced morality was shocked at him. And none of those protesting Protestants took thought for a moment to realise that they were showing all the shuffling insincerity they attributed to the Jesuits, and the Jesuit was showing all the plain candour that they claimed for the Protestant. I could give a great many other instances besides, these I have given of the hidden Bible, the profligate priest or the treacherous Jesuit. I could go steadily through the list of all these more old-fashioned charges against Rome and show how they affected me, or rather why they did not affect me. But my only purpose here is to point out, as a preliminary, that they did not affect me at all. I had all the difficulties that a heathen would have had in becoming a Catholic in the fourth century. I had very few of the difficulties that a Protestant had, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth. And I owe this to men whose memories I shall always honour; to my father and his circle and the literary tradition of men like George Macdonald and the Universalists of the Victorian Age. If I was born on the wrong side of the Roman wall, at least I was not born on the wrong side of the No Popery quarrel; and if I did not inherit a fully civilised faith, neither did I inherit a barbarian feud. The people I was born amongst wished to be just to Catholics if they did not always understand them; and I should be very thankless if I did not record of them that (like a very much more valuable convert) I can say I was born free.

I will add one example to illustrate this point, because it leads us on to larger matters. After a long time--I might almost say after a lifetime--I have at last begun to realise what the worthy Liberal or Socialist of Balham or Battersea really means when he says he is an Internationalist and that humanity should be preferred to the narrowness of

nations. It dawned on me quite suddenly, after I had talked to such a man for many hours, that of course he had really been brought up to believe that God's Englishmen were the Chosen Race. Very likely his father or uncle actually thought they were the lost Ten Tribes. Anyhow, everything from his daily paper to his weekly sermon assumed that they were the salt of the earth, and especially that they were the salt of the sea. His people had never thought outside their British nationality. They lived in an Empire on which the sun never set, or possibly never rose. Their Church was emphatically the Church of England-- even if it was a chapel. Their religion was the Bible that went everywhere with the Union Jack. And when I realised that, I realised the whole story. That was why they were excited by the exceedingly dull theory of the Internationalist. That was why the brotherhood of nations, which to me was a truism, to them was a trumpet. That was why it seemed such a thrilling paradox to say that we must love foreigners; it had in it the divine paradox that we must love enemies. That was why the Internationalist was always planning deputations and visits to foreign capitals and heart-to-heart talks and hands across the sea. It was the marvel of discovering that foreigners had hands, let alone hearts. There was in that excitement a sort of stifled cry: "Look! Frenchmen also have two legs! See! Germans have noses in the same place as we!" Now a Catholic, especially a born Catholic, can never understand that attitude, because from the first his whole religion is rooted in the unity of the race of Adam, the one and only Chosen Race. He is loyal to his own country; indeed he is generally ardently loyal to it, such local affections being in other ways very natural to his religious life, with its shrines and relics. But just as the relic follows upon the religion, so the local loyalty follows on the universal brotherhood of all men. The Catholic says, "Of course we must love all men: but what do all men love? They love their lands, their lawful boundaries, the memories of their fathers. That is the justification of being rational, that it is normal." But the Protestant patriot really never thought of any patriotism except his own. In that sense Protestantism is patriotism. But unfortunately it is only patriotism. It starts with it and never gets beyond it. We start with mankind and go beyond it to all the varied loves and traditions of mankind. There never was a more illuminating flash than that which lit up the last moment of one of the most glorious of English Protestants; one of the most Protestant and one of the most English. For that is the meaning of that phrase of Nurse Cavell, herself the noblest martyr of our modern religion of nationality, when the very shaft of the white sun of death shone deep into her mind and she cried aloud, like one who had just discovered something, "I see now that patriotism is not enough."

There was this in common between the Catholics to whom I have come and the Liberals among whom I was born: neither of them would ever have imagined for a moment that patriotism was enough. But that insular idealism by which that great lady lived really had taught her unconsciously from childhood that patriotism was enough. Not seldom

has the English lady appeared in history as a heroine; but generally as facing and defying strangers or savages, not specially as feeling them as fellows and equals. Those last words of the English martyr in Belgium have often been quoted by mere cosmopolitans; but cosmopolitans are the last people really to understand them. They are generally trying to prove, not that patriotism is not enough, but that it is a great deal too much. The point is here that hundreds of the most heroic and high-minded people in Protestant countries have really assumed that it is enough to be a patriot. The most careless and cynical of Catholics knows better; and so did the most vague and visionary of Universalists. Of all the Protestant difficulties, which I here find it hard to imagine, this is perhaps the most common and in many ways commendable: the fact that the normal British subject begins by being so very British. By accident I did not. The tradition I heard in my youth, the simple, the too simple truths inherited from Priestly and Martineau, had in them something of that grand generalisation upon men as men which, in the first of those great figures, faced the howling Jingoism of the French Wars and defied even the legend of Trafalgar. It is to that tradition that I owe the fact, whether it be an advantage or a disadvantage, that I cannot worthily analyse the very heroic virtues of a Plymouth Brother whose only centre is Plymouth. For that rationalism, defective as it was, began long ago in the same central civilisation in which the Church herself began; if it has ended in the Church it began long ago in the Republic: in a world where all these flags and frontiers were unknown; where all these state establishments and national sects were unthinkable; a vast cosmopolitan cosmos that had never heard the name of England, or conceived the image of a kingdom separate and at war; in that vast pagan peace which was the matrix of all these mysteries, which had forgotten the free cities and had not dreamed of the small nationalities; which knew only humanity, the humanum genus, and the name of Rome.

The Catholic Church loves nations as she loves men; because they are her children. But they certainly are her children, in the sense that they are secondary to her in time and process of production. This is, as it happens, a very good example of a fallacy that often confuses discussion about the convert. The same people who call the convert a pervert, and especially a traitor to patriotism, very often use the other catchword to the effect that he is forced to believe this or that. But it is not really a question of what a man is made to believe but of what he must believe; what he cannot help believing. He cannot disbelieve in an elephant when he has seen one; and he cannot treat the Church as a child when he has discovered that she is his mother. She is not only his mother but his country's mother in being much older and more aboriginal than his country. She is such a mother not in sentimental feeling but in historical fact. He cannot think one thing when he knows the contrary thing. He cannot think that Christianity was invented by Penda of Mercia, who sent missionaries to the heathen Augustine and the rude and barbarous Gregory. He cannot think that the Church first rose in the middle of the

British Empire, and not of the Roman Empire. He cannot think that England existed, with cricket and fox-hunting and the Jacobean translation all complete, when Rome was founded or when Christ was born. It is no good talking about his being "free" to believe these things. He is exactly as free to believe them as he is to believe that a horse has feathers or that the sun is pea green. He cannot believe them when once he fully realises them; and among such things is the notion that the national claim upon a good patriot is in its nature more absolute, ancient and authoritative than the claim of the whole religious culture which first mapped out its territories and anointed its kings. That religious culture does indeed encourage him to fight to the last for his country, as for his family. But that is because the religious culture is generous and imaginative and humane and knows that men must have intimate and individual ties. But those secondary loyalties are secondary in time and logic to the law of universal morality which justifies them. And if the patriot is such a fool as to force the issue against that universal tradition from which his own patriotism descends, if he presses his claim to priority over the primitive law of the whole earth--then he will have brought it on himself if he is answered with the pulverising plainness of the Book of Job. As God said to the man, "Where were you when the foundations of the world were laid?" We might well say to the nation, "Where were you when the foundations of the Church were laid?" And the nation will not know in the least what to answer-- if it should wish to answer--but will be forced to put its hand upon its mouth, if only like one who yawns and falls asleep.

I have taken this particular case of patriotism because it concerns at least an emotion in which I profoundly believe and happen to feel strongly. I have always done my best to defend it; though I have sometimes become suspect by sympathising with other people's patriotism besides my own. But I cannot see how it can be defended except as part of a larger morality; and the Catholic morality happens to be one of the very few large moralities now ready to defend it. But the Church defends it as one of the duties of men and not as the whole duty of man; as it was in the Prussian theory of the State and too often in the British theory of the Empire. And for this the Catholic rests, exactly as the Universalist Unitarian rested, upon the actual fact of a human unity anterior to all these healthy and natural human divisions. But it is absurd to treat the Church as a novel conspiracy attacking the State, when the State was only recently a novel experiment arising within the Church. It is absurd to forget that the Church itself received the first loyalties of men who had not yet even conceived the notion of founding such a national and separate state; that the Faith really was not only the faith of our fathers, but the faith of our fathers before they had even named our fatherland.