

What the Catholic Church is and what she teaches

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Introduction.

To give clear ideas of Catholic doctrine rather than proofs – that is the aim of this little work, for unless the doctrine itself is presented in a reasonable light, the most convincing proofs will be thrown away. Again, clear ideas can often be expressed in a few words, whereas the real strength of a proof may be lost by compression. But in fact, the real difficulties felt against the Church are not generally due to want of proof so much as to want of correct information about what the Church is and what she teaches.

1. THE BIBLE OR THE CHURCH?

How Protestants regard the Bible.

Protestants generally take it as a principle that the Bible is the sole and adequate Rule of Faith. This is only natural, since if all authority is rejected, there is no other rule to be found. Yet the results of this view are calculated to raise serious doubts of its correctness. In the New Testament even the most essential points of doctrine are touched on so incidentally, and require such careful study and balancing of different texts, that it is an extremely delicate matter to arrive at a definite conclusion. Most Protestants believe that the Divinity of Christ is clearly taught in the Bible, yet the Socinians have argued with apparent sincerity that the New Testament presents Christ merely as an inspired man. Protestants also forget how much of their firm conviction is due to early education, and to a traditional interpretation of the Bible, rather than to any critical investigation of their own. And if this be true of fundamental doctrines, it is much more true of those teachings which are implied rather than expressed in the sacred text, and upon which the sects cannot come to any agreement.

In such a state of uncertainty, the only resource left to the inquirer is to suppose that Christ meant us to believe only what is clearly taught in the Bible, and left us free to form our own opinions about the rest. But on all these disputed points Christ must have taught either one thing or the other, and whatever he taught he must have intended us to believe. Hence it seems strange that he should have left us without the means of ascertaining which of the two doctrines we ought to believe – especially where the difference is important.

Again, the New Testament does not bear the marks of having been drawn up to serve as a code of Christian belief. Neither does it anywhere direct us to take Scripture as our sole Rule of Faith, or free us from the obligation of believing more than is clearly taught in its pages. Hence to assume that the Bible is the sole and adequate rule of Christian Faith may perhaps be the only alternative left after rejecting the authority of the Catholic Church. But neither Scripture nor history affords any warrant for such an assumption.

How Catholics regard the Bible.

Catholics on the other hand cherish the highest esteem and veneration for the Bible as the inspired Word of God, and regard it as a treasure of unique value. First, because of the vivid picture of Christ's life and character which it presents; secondly, because of the rich spiritual suggestiveness of its writings; thirdly, as a precious storehouse of doctrinal and moral instruction; fourthly, as a historic witness to the claims of the Catholic Church.

But they consider that the Bible was never intended to be the sole and adequate Rule of Faith, partly because it is not a sufficiently exhaustive account of all Christ's teaching, partly because its expressions of doctrine are not always clear and need authoritative interpretation. At the same time they hold that the New Testament itself points to another means provided by Christ for the preservation of his full teaching for all time. That means, they hold, is the authority of the Catholic Church.

The facts adduced in proof of this will be frankly admitted by Protestants themselves, even if they hesitate to agree with the conclusions drawn from them.

Christ founded an Apostolic Teaching Body.

We find that Jesus Christ, without saying a single recorded word about a written creed or code, appointed twelve Apostles to carry on the work he had begun. Invoking the power which had been given him in heaven and on earth, he bade them go and teach all nations, baptising those who should believe, and teaching them to observe whatsoever he had commanded. The Apostles were sent, not as mere messengers, but as ambassadors bearing Christ's authority and power, and teaching and ministering in his name and person, so that in hearing them men were hearing him, and in despising them they were despising him. (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16: 15; Luke 10: 16) Besides the office of teaching and baptising, they were entrusted with the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and received a special power by the Holy spirit to remit and retain sins. (1 Cor. 11: 24-25; John 20: 23) In order that they might infallibly carry out this commission, Christ promised them the Spirit of Truth, which should lead them into all truth and bring to their minds whatever he had said to them. (John 14: 17-26; 16: 13) Finally, he promised to be with them in person, not for a few years or a generation, but even to the end of the world – thereby implying that the apostolic order should last beyond the lives of its present members, even to the end of time. (Matt. 28: 20)

In thus constituting the apostolic body, Christ was in reality constituting his Church. The Church was no mere collection of individual believers, but a definite organisation, which was to be the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Tim. 3: 15) It was to be founded on a rock, and the gates of hell should not prevail against it. (Matt. 16: 18) The Church, taken as a whole, comprised the teaching body and a body of lay believers. But its essential constitution lay in the existence of that teaching body, authorised and guaranteed by Christ. Such was the original constitution of the Church, and as the Church was to last for all ages, it is natural to suppose that it should always continue to exist according to its original constitution – that is to say, as an apostolic teaching body. The burden of proof lies on those who deny so obvious an inference. There are no signs that this organisation, was a temporary expedient, to die out after a few years and leave a totally different system in its place.

How the Apostles regarded the New Testament.

When we follow the career of the Apostles as they carry out their work, we find these conclusions confirmed. There occurs no mention of any scheme for producing a written code to dispense with

the authority of apostolic preaching. The Apostles show no signs of regarding it as a duty to leave behind them a full written legacy of their teaching. They often write to meet incidental occasions and needs. The Evangelists seem to think it an important matter to leave us, in outline, their recollections of Christ's life and character, but they make no pretence of giving us a complete scheme of his teaching. St John himself declares the impossibility of writing anything like an exhaustive account of all that Christ did. (John 21: 25) There appears nowhere in the New Testament a consciousness that its writers were thereby supplying Christendom with the sole and adequate Rule of Faith, which should supersede the need of appeal to their oral teachings.

About twenty years probably elapsed after the Crucifixion before the first New Testament writings were written (presumably the Epistles to the Thessalonians), and it was at least another ten years before the bulk of the New Testament (the first three Gospels, the Acts, and the chief Epistles) can have come into general use. Many more years passed before St John wrote his Gospel, one of the most important works of all. We do not gather that there was any great haste to write. The books of the New Testament are most precious in every way, and it has been the will of God that in actual fact they should serve to safeguard his revelation. Nevertheless the Church was perfectly capable of carrying on her essential work without their help, and could do so still if this were the divine plan.

On the other hand, we find many allusions to Christian doctrine being derived from oral teaching. The Thessalonians are told; "Stand fast; and hold the traditions which you have learned, whether by word or by our epistle". (2 Thess. 2: 14) St Paul writes to Timothy; "Hold the form of sound words which thou hast heard of me; in faith and in the love which is in Christ Jesus. Keep the good thing committed to thy trust by the Holy spirit who dwelleth in us". (2 Tim. 1: 13-14) And again; "The things which thou hast heard of me by many witnesses, the same commend to faithful men who shall be fit to teach others also." (2 Tim. 2: 2) These, and many other passages which might be taken from St Paul's Epistles and other New Testament works, certainly stand in favour of the Catholic idea of apostolic authority transmitted to a line of successors, and against the Protestant idea of substituting the Bible as the sole and adequate Rule of Faith.

The Apostolic System in the Early Church.

The Catholic view receives further confirmation from the early history of the Church. The various parts which now make up the New Testament were carefully treasured and read in the local churches where they had been received, and it was only by degrees that copies were spread to other places, and the whole series came to be circulated throughout Christendom. Though held in the highest authority we find no signs of the Scriptures being substituted for traditional teaching as a sole Rule of Faith. The bishops were regarded as the authoritative successors of the Apostles, responsible for the preservation of Christian doctrine, and the people looked to them for the true interpretation of Scripture. Belief did not follow interpretation of Scripture, but interpretation of Scripture followed belief. When heretics cited Scripture in support of novel views, the bishops denied them the right to do so, reserving the interpretation of Scripture to the Church. On the other hand, the Church quoted Scripture against the heretics, not as the sole basis of its teaching, but as an inspired witness to its correctness.

Moreover, it is remarkable to see how clear the Church was in its traditional teaching even before the evidence of Scripture had been fully discussed – for instance in such questions as the nature and person of Christ. What certain heretics regarded as disputable on scriptural grounds, the Church regarded as indisputable on grounds of tradition. In short, the general impression given by the

history of the third and fourth centuries shows us the idea of an apostolic teaching body still in operation, authorised and guaranteed by Jesus Christ to provide the rule of faith, while Scripture is still regarded as a witness to the correctness of the Church's teaching, but not as the sole and adequate rule of faith to be put in its place.

The Contents of the New Testament.

During the first four centuries of the Church it remained an unsettled question what belonged to the sacred Scripture and what did not. There were spurious Gospels current besides the four we now acknowledge, and there were other Christian works, like the Epistles of Clement and Barnabas, and the Pastor of Hermas. Of these, one or two were regarded by some of the Fathers as parts of Scripture and were publicly read in local churches. On the other hand, the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Apocalypse, James, Jude, 2nd Peter, and 3rd John, were called in question in parts of the Church.

Among many tentative lists, which have survived from the first four centuries, we find at least twelve that contain the exact canon, which we now possess. The confirmation of this canon by the Popes Damasus (382), Innocent I (405), and Gelasius (495), practically settled the question throughout the Middle Ages.

In the Protestant revolt of 1520, confusion arose again outside the Church. Luther, for instance, called the Epistle of St James an epistle of straw, because it asserted that "faith without works is dead." But the Council of Trent (1563) confirmed the belief of the ages, and made it an article of the faith that all the books of the traditional canon were the inspired Word of God. After this, Protestants adopted the Catholic canon of the New Testament (which you will find in the Authorised and Revised versions) – thereby tacitly showing that they were indebted to the tradition of the "Church of Rome" for the preservation and certification of their "one and only Rule of Faith."

Protestants have tried to prove the divine inspiration of the Bible from the sublimity of its subject matter and style – but this, however plausible, does not amount to a demonstration. Inspiration, being a secret gift, can only be known from revelation and such a revelation must have been handed down from the Apostles – in fact from St John, who alone saw the New Testament completed by the addition of his own Gospel.

This fact is only one out of many, showing the important part played by tradition in the formulation of the Christian Creed and code – even in doctrines which are accepted by Protestants as well as by Catholics. The Apostles and Nicene Creeds themselves rest largely on this basis.

The Middle Ages.

Right through the Middle Ages and down to the sixteenth century we find the same system at work. Indeed, no other idea than this existed in Christendom. The Bishops were looked upon as the successors of the Apostles, and their unanimous teaching was considered absolutely trustworthy, since it was the teaching of Christ's Church, it was Christ's teaching. The Church as a whole could not possibly fall into error – this was guaranteed by the promises of Christ. Those who claimed scriptural support for their new doctrines, and contradicted the doctrine of the Church, were regarded as heretics. They were rebels against Christ, for they were rebelling against his authority delegated to his Church.

The Protestant Challenge.

But in the sixteenth century this stable state of things received a rude shock. The radical principle of the Protestant Reformers was the rejection of the living authority of the Catholic Church, and in its place they put the Bible and the Bible only. It was a bold experiment, and it proved an immediate failure, for

So long as words a different sense will bear, They cannot be their own interpreter.
and they are at the mercy of all who read.

In a few years what had been a united western Christendom was broken up into rival sects, each one making up its own creed, each claiming it to be the true gospel, and each denouncing the rest as impure. The fatal effects of this disunion have long been obvious. In recent years, it is true, earnest men have tried hard to bring various parties together, but with little or no effect. They have indeed brought about more sympathetic relations, but nothing more.

The reason for the failure is not hard to see. For, to put the matter shortly, a reunited Christendom will only be possible when the sects can find one unifying authority which all will believe in and obey as the authority of Christ. And there is on earth no man or group of men who would claim such an authority – except the Bishops of the Catholic Church under their head, the Bishop of Rome. These indeed are believed by 400 millions of Christians to be the successors of the Apostles under Peter their head – to be in fact the authoritative voice of the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church founded by Christ himself.

2. WHAT THE CHURCH IS.

Church versus Churches.

There is a difference between the word Church used as a proper noun applicable only to one thing, and the same word used as a common noun applicable to many.

If we want a definition for any one of the Protestant churches, we must describe it as; An institution holding some creed which claims to be founded on Scripture, with officials to give instructions on that creed and to conduct its public services. Any one is free to join that church if it suits him, and equally free to leave it for another more to his liking. The reason for this freedom is that these churches are human creations of recent origin, the oldest being founded by Luther in Germany (1520), Calvin in Switzerland (1535), Knox in Scotland (1555), and Queen Elizabeth I in England (1559).

So far for the common noun churches. The one proper noun Church is quite a different thing. It was 1500 years old before those other churches were born. It was founded by Christ the Redeemer, and is still living today. Every man in the world is invited by Christ himself to join it as the God-given means of salvation, and must join it if he realises this.

We have already spoken of this Church as a divinely guaranteed teaching body, and must now describe the organisation by which the teaching is done, and the guarantees on which it rests.

The Constitution of the Church.

The visible (ie. recognisable) corporate body of the Church is concisely described as; The union of all the faithful under one head. That supreme head is Christ himself, but the visible head on earth is the Vicar of Christ (familiarily called the Pope, which means Father) to whom Christ delegated his authority.

The Church is made up of Clergy and Laity. But the essential, constitutional authority is vested in the body of Bishops, who are the rulers of dioceses, with priests under them to serve the laity in parishes. As successors of the Apostles, the Catholic Bishops constitute the collective teaching body whose teaching must be absolutely true, for that is what Christ guaranteed.

When the Church of England was created in 1559, it kept indeed the outward form of the Catholic organisation it supplanted, but it changed its function and its meaning. By abolishing the Catholic rule of faith, and by cutting itself off from the one body founded by Christ, its "bishops" ceased to be a body of divinely guaranteed teachers and, by abolishing the Mass, its "priests" ceased to be sacrificing priests, and so ceased to serve the laity as Christ intended them to be served.

The Need of a Head.

But if a teaching body is to be reliable, there must be no differences of opinion. The whole body must teach as one man. And as the individual bishops were not divinely inspired, they were capable of human error, even in matters of faith hence, disputes and divisions were inevitable. Such differences could not be settled by the mere vote of a majority, for the minority might be right and the majority wrong. In a cricket match, settlement by an umpire silences all disputes, but it does not follow that the umpire's verdict is a true one. For the purposes of the Church the umpire has to be infallibly right.

This explains why Christ founded his Church on one man and not on many. St Cyprian, writing in A.D. 250, explains the matter thus; "While all the Apostles were endowed with equal honour and power, nevertheless, out of the twelve, one was chosen to be the head, so that the unity of the Church should be maintained and occasions of schism should be removed".

This head, chosen by Christ himself, was St Peter, on whom his Church was built. He was therefore ordered to confirm (ie. strengthen) his brethren (Luke 22: 32) whenever they needed confirming. And as St Peter fixed his see at Rome, and became the first bishop of that city, the headship of the Church was permanently attached to the See of Rome, and descended to St Peter's successors in that see. This is why the Vatican Council of 1870, when defining the constitution of the Church, gives it the title; The Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church – because Roman faith and Catholic faith are interchangeable terms.

The Pope and the Teaching Body.

The Pope therefore is not merely bishop of the local Church of Rome, he has the twofold prerogative of supreme ruler of the whole Church, and its supreme teacher. These prerogatives were bestowed on St Peter by Christ himself (Matt. 16: 18-19; Luke 22: 31, 32; John 21: 15-17), and they have been inherited by his successors in the bishopric of Rome.

As supreme ruler the Pope has power to make laws binding on the whole Church. As supreme teacher he has power to settle disputed points of faith and morals. It is with the second of these that we are now chiefly concerned.

Under normal circumstances, when the teaching of the bishops is unanimous and the faith of the people is undisturbed, no further safeguard than these is needed. But a heresy may arise, or the unanimity of the bishops may be disturbed. The traditional doctrine may be imperfectly transmitted in some part of the Church, with consequent disputes and uncertainty. When these things happen, an authoritative decision may be needed to close the question in a way which admits of no evasion. It is then that the decision of the supreme teacher is called for.

Catholics believe that in these decisions, and in these alone, the Pope is infallible. For such decisions bind the whole Church and commit it irrevocably to teaching and to believing as part of Christ's revelation the doctrine proclaimed by them. Hence, unless the Pope were completely reliable in such decisions, the faith of the Church might be corrupted by error, and so the gates of hell would have prevailed against it, contrary to Christ's explicit promise valid for all time.

What Papal infallibility means.

First of all we must get rid of the idea, common amongst non-Catholics, that if the Pope is infallible at all, he must be infallible in everything that he says or does. In ordinary language, infallible means incapable of error. But the Pope's infallibility does not come from a constitutional accuracy of mind working from within; it comes from a protective force working from outside. And this protective force works only when the correctness of a doctrinal definition is at stake. It applies, moreover, only to the definition itself – the exact statement published – and not to any part of the process by which the definition is prepared, for this proceeds along ordinary human lines.

For instance, the Pope does not carry in his mind the whole of Christ's teaching as a miraculous treasure on which to draw at will. He has learnt the faith as we learn it, from his Catechism and from his theology. If he wishes to know the two sides of a dispute he must study it as we must. Even when preparing to make a definition in his office of supreme teacher, he cannot count on a new revelation or inspiration of a personal kind. But when he comes finally to the act of definition – when, acting in his highest official capacity of teacher of the Universal Church, he defines a point of faith or morals with the intention of binding the whole Church – then we believe that the decision is infallibly right.

Our faith on this point rests entirely on Christ's promise to be always with his Church standing by, as it were, ready to help in case of need. So that if the Pope were in danger of proclaiming some false doctrine, the Holy Spirit would influence him in such a way as to save the situation. In short, the infallibility of the Pope is simply a virtual continuation of the infallibility of Christ. In the definition of the Vatican Council it is not called inspiration, nor yet revelation, for it is neither of these but, more vaguely, it is spoken of as divine assistance, since we do not know what form the help may take on any particular occasion.

A Summary – Five Facts.

In the foregoing pages the question; What is the Catholic Church? has been answered, and in the course of the answer five important facts have come to light;

First fact. The Protestant churches came into existence some 400 years ago by separating themselves from a much older Church, and by adopting the Bible as their only Rule of Faith.

Second fact. They have never been able to form one corporate body such as the Church of Christ ought to be, since they cannot find one creed and code of worship to which they can all subscribe – though even if they could, this would not ensure that they were the Church of Christ, since they repudiate any Christ-founded authority.

Third fact. The older Church from which they broke away is the Roman Catholic Church (which can be traced back right to the time of the Apostles) with its bishops appointed by the Apostles to carry on their work – which they have been doing ever since.

Fourth fact. Their powers of ruling and teaching are those conferred by Christ on the Apostles, and passed on by them to their successors, and the validity of their acts rests entirely on the promises of Christ – promises which are to hold good until the end of the world.

Fifth fact. The identity of the Church of Christ in the time of the Apostles with the Roman Catholic Church of today cannot honestly be denied, it is written plainly across the pages of history.

All that remains to be done is to produce the divine credentials on which the power and authority of the Church rest.

Christ's four Promises.

First Promise – to St Peter; "Thou art Peter (petros), and upon this rock (petra) I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven." (Matt. 16: 18-19)

Comment. Here we see the primary headship of St Peter, which the Popes, his successors, have been exercising ever since. The forces of heresy and schism have never succeeded in bringing the Church to ruin, for they have been bound, cast out, locked out, by the power of the keys.

This headship of St Peter is made clear elsewhere; "Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not; and thou, being once converted, confirm thy brethren." (Luke 22: 31-32) Observe the you, which refers to all the Apostles, and thee, which refers to Peter as the strengthener of the rest.

Second Promise – to all the Apostles; "All power is given to me in heaven and on earth. Going, therefore, teach ye all nations; baptising them... Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. And, behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world." (Matt. 28: 18-20)

Comment. The Apostles could only live for less than a generation, and could not possibly teach all nations. Christ's commission and promise obviously apply to their successors as well, and both are as fully in force today as they were in the past. They must be.

Third Promise – to all the Apostles; "Receive ye the Holy spirit; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." (John 20: 22, 23)

Comment. Here the Apostles are given the power to forgive the individual sinner – and to refuse to forgive if his dispositions are unworthy. And again the promise is nearly meaningless if it is limited to the Apostles themselves, hence this promise too was for all time.

No Protestant Church has the boldness to claim this power. It is true that the Church of England in its Service for the Sick copies the Catholic usage, saying; "I absolve thee from all thy sins"; but immediately it goes on to pray God to show mercy to the penitent who still "most earnestly desires pardon and forgiveness". This reduces the absolution form to a mere gesture of hope.

Fourth Promise – to all the Apostles; "The Father shall give you another Paraclete, that he may abide with you for ever." (John 14: 16) Also; "He will teach you all things and bring all things to your mind, whatsoever I have said to you." (John 14: 26) Again; "He shall give testimony of me. and you shall give testimony, because you are with me from the beginning." (John 15: 26, 27) And

finally; "He will teach you all truth... and the things that are to come, he shall show you." (John 16: 13)

Comment. If the Apostles with all the advantages of eyewitnesses needed such helps as these, how much more would future generations of bishops, who would depend entirely on what was handed down to them, need divine assistance to preserve the message of salvation intact and pure? That the Holy Spirit did not make each individual bishop an inspired oracle is plain from history. But he would at least offer them enough grace to submit in their faith to the authority of their head, the Pope, if they had the good will to do so.

The Evidence of History.

This accumulation of powers and promises is the Magna Charta of the Church of Christ as a divinely guaranteed teaching and ruling body, and it will be of interest to see how this charter worked out in practice as time went on.

As soon as the Apostolic College died out and their successors came into full command of the Church, all the forces of the enemy (symbolised by the Gates of Hell) were let loose against them.

The Gnostic heresies of the second and third centuries, subversive of all sound notions about God, his nature and his relations to mankind, were exposed and refuted by one simple means: A reference to the Church of Rome "in which the primacy of the Apostolic see had always been in force, and the faith had been kept pure".

In the fourth and fifth centuries came the heresies of Arius, Nestorius and Eutyches. These declared that God the Son was no more than a creature; that Jesus Christ was no more than an inspired man. That in Christ the nature of God and the nature of man were fused into something that was neither God nor man; that the Holy spirit was not truly God. Between them they reduced the whole system of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Redemption to chaos.

These too were condemned by reference to the teaching authority of the one Church, and the decisions of the general councils of bishops were reduced to writing. So it came about that the Nicene Creed was added to the older Apostles Creed; so too, other definitions and professions of faith accumulated, and thus the precise doctrines of Christianity were fixed in fundamentals.

The last two great acts of the teaching Church were the Council of Trent (1563), and the Vatican Council (1870). The former condemned the errors of the Protestant reformers; the latter dealt with many modern errors and defined the infallibility of the Pope.

These consolidations of Christian truth by the help of the ever-present Christ were not achieved without losses. Every doctrinal decision of the Church draws a line between the sheep and the goats – between those who submit to the verdict of the Church and remain in it, and those who refuse to submit and break away from it. During the period of the great councils (A.D. 325, 431, 451, etc.) the Arian, Nestorian and Eutychian bishops who remained obdurate were excommunicated. They left the body of the Church, but preserved a separate existence cut off from the vine.

In this way four of the great Patriarchates – Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and later Constantinople – seceded from the Church, just because they would not submit to the head whom Christ had made "in order that occasions of schism might be removed". And an impartial reading of history shows that it was politics rather than religion that caused their defection. So it came about that after the eleventh century there were very many professing Christians who were in fact cut off

from the body of the Church of Christ. That body consisted of the great Patriarchate of Rome – the centre of western Christendom – together with portions of the eastern churches, called uniatists because they had returned to communion with Rome, though preserving their ancient eastern rites and ceremonies.

Five hundred years later the Church suffered another diminution from the ravages of the Protestant 'reformers', and found itself confronted with rebel Christian bodies separated from itself. But the identity of the One Church built on the rock of St Peter remained throughout, so that anyone who joins the Roman Catholic Church of today knows that he is joining the original Church founded by Christ himself, against which no destructive forces can ever prevail.

3. WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES.

It is almost a tradition in this country – a tradition inherited from the days when the Catholic Church was proscribed – to look upon Catholics as an ignorant, priest-ridden, superstitious lot, and to see their Church as a corrupt church, vitiated by several false and some detestable errors. No inquirer, however favourably impressed he may be so far, can be expected to make an unprejudiced judgment if such ideas persist and are not examined. But the more enlightened non-Catholic will at least want to know whether Catholic doctrines are as bad as they are supposed to be, and whether a correct statement of them would make them more acceptable.

The Thirty-nine Articles.

To give this statement an easily recognisable scheme, we shall indicate the main stand taken by the Church of England against Catholic doctrine. The salient points of opposition, taken from its Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, are the following.

Certain doctrines about election, justification, and final destiny. Some of these are denied, others qualified by the teaching of the Catholic Church. The only sacraments upheld by the Church of England are Baptism and the Lord's Supper (or Holy Communion). The other five Catholic sacraments are not considered to be true sacraments. "Transubstantiation (or change of the substance of bread and wine)" is condemned as "repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, and the occasion of many superstitions." The Sacrifices of Masses, in which the priest offers Christ for the living and the dead, for remission of pain and guilt, are "blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits". "The Romish doctrines of Purgatory, pardons, worship or adoration of images and relics, as well as the invocation of Saints" are condemned as being "fond things, vainly invented and repugnant to the word of God".

Under these five headings the true doctrines of the Catholic Church can be conveniently explained.

A. THE PLAN OF SALVATION

God, Creation, Incarnation, Redemption, Salvation. In these five words the whole doctrinal system of the Catholic Church is comprised. God implies the Trinity; Creation leads to the Fall of man; the Incarnation prepares the way for Redemption, from which come Salvation and the final destiny of man.

By the Fall of man is meant the sin of Adam, the head of the human race – a sin which involved all mankind in its hereditary effects. Redemption means the recovery from the evil effects of the Fall, and the restoration to mankind of the supernatural state of grace and sonship of God which had been

lost thereby. In the early discussions on the subject this restored state was technically called justification, though many non-Catholic theologians prefer the term righteousness.

Justification by Baptism.

This justification is a free gift, conferred by God himself through the sacrament of Baptism. It is given to infants who are thereby made Christians without knowing what has been done to them. But adults who are baptised must already believe in God, be sorry for their sins, and desire to be baptised. These things do not contribute to Baptism, but are the necessary conditions under which alone Baptism will be efficacious.

The effect of Baptism is to put a man into what is called the state of grace. This is a real change which is produced in his soul. Because of it he possesses a new and real life – supernatural life; he is made an adopted son of God; he becomes a co-heir with Christ to the Kingdom of Heaven.

This restoration to grace was only made possible by the Passion and Death of Christ, who thereby paid the debt due on account of sin, "destroying the bond that was written against us of old".

Final Perseverance.

This state of grace can, however, be lost at any time by serious sin; but through the mercy of God it can be recovered by repentance and forgiveness. For Christ has provided for this in the Sacrament of Penance, to be explained later. This recovery of justification is always possible while life lasts. But everything depends on the state in which a man dies; if at that moment he is in grace, his destiny to heaven is assured; if in a state of grievous sin, unrepented of and so unforgiven, he has lost his chance of salvation.

It follows that during this life nobody is absolutely certain of his ultimate salvation. For while he retains his free will, he retains his power of deliberately sinning grievously, and thus losing his title to heaven. Hence it is possible for a soul once justified to end by falling into hell. Theoretically, an evil life may end with a good death, and a good life with an evil death, for man's final destiny is determined by the good or evil state in which he dies. But obviously it is not only risky, it is criminal to count on a deathbed repentance, and every Catholic is urged to make his last end as secure as possible by a well spent life, for this is the highest assurance we have of final perseverance. Hence we must all work out our salvation in fear and trembling; not fear lest God should fail us, but fear lest through our negligence we should abandon Christ and fall away by sin.

Justification 'by Faith'.

The Catholic doctrine is simple and reasonable; it was for the 'reformers' of the sixteenth century to throw it into confusion.

According to Luther, justification, though it was freely bestowed by God, produced no real change in a man; the only change was in God's way of looking at him and treating him. He was, in fact, treated as if he were just; and that because of the merits of Christ. His sins were not taken away, they were merely "covered by the Blood of Christ". And this justification was only brought about by a sort of "clinging to Christ" – by faith in his saving power.

Luther went further, and held that man was justified by this faith alone; that good works had nothing to do with it – nor bad works either. If after justification a man sinned grievously, that did not destroy justification, and would not send him to hell. "Once justified, always justified" was Luther's motto.

One of the worst Lutheran errors was that man's nature had been so corrupted by the Fall that free will was either spoiled altogether, or else was incapable of any good work at all. Such a morbid theory needs no refutation. For though all good works profitable for salvation must come from the initiating force of grace, it always lies in the power of free will to accept or refuse grace – otherwise man would be a mere automaton.

In passing it may be said that it is difficult to know whether Luther believed all his own teachings, for he was neither a clear nor a consistent thinker; he contradicted himself more than once.

The Fatalism of Calvin.

We can dismiss very quickly that utterly repugnant doctrine propounded and taught by Calvin; that man has no control of his own destiny, and that God, by an absolute decree, has labelled some souls for salvation and the rest for damnation. The Bible itself makes it clear that God wills all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. He wills also that no man shall perish. Hence Christ was given as a redemption for all. (1 Tim. 2: 4; Rom. 8: 32; 2 Pet. 3: 9) Consequently God will never allow any man to fall into hell for want of grace, but only through his own fault in refusing to make use of it. The lowest degree of grace ever offered to a man is amply sufficient for his salvation, and this grace is offered to all.

B. THE SACRAMENTS.

Such things as food, air, medicines are necessary if man's natural life is to be maintained; and similarly, supernatural helps are needed to preserve, strengthen and increase the life of grace which justification initiates. The most important of these are the seven Sacraments of the Church which Christ instituted for this purpose. Five of them are for certain special and important occasions of life, two are for general and regular use.

The five 'special' sacraments are;

Baptism. This sacrament confers grace, and makes a man a son of God and a member of the Church Christ founded. It has already been spoken of above. Confirmation. This is the apostolic practice of laying on of hands, whereby the Christian is commissioned as a soldier of Christ, and receives the grace to stand firm in the manly service of God. Normally it is conferred when a child attains the use of reason. Matrimony. Christ raised the natural contract of matrimony to the level of a sacrament, and attached to it the graces needed by husband and wife for mutual fidelity and helpfulness, and also for the upbringing of their children. Orders. When bishops and priests are ordained, they receive the sacrament of Order, whereby they are given the power to offer the Christian sacrifice, administer the sacraments, and govern the Church. Extreme Unction, This is the anointing of the sick which St James prescribed (Jam. 5: 14); its chief purpose is to strengthen the sick man so that he may remain faithful to God in his last hour.

The two sacraments for regular use are; The Eucharist. This important sacrament is explained in detail in sections C and D below. Penance. This sacrament is familiarly known to Catholics as Confession, and some non-Catholics call it Auricular Confession. It is of such importance in Catholic life, and is so often misunderstood by non-Catholics, that it must be discussed more fully.

In pronouncing the words; "Receive ye the Holy spirit; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John 20: 22-23), Christ gave his Apostles that power which has been exercised in the Sacrament of Penance since the first days of the Church. This sacrament is the outward and visible means whereby those who after Baptism have

lost God's grace by grave sin, may, through repentance, confession and absolution, be pardoned and reconciled to God. The words of the promise; "Whose sins you shall forgive" show that when the priest gives the absolution he does really give the pardon, by the power committed to him by Christ. The sacrament restores grace that was lost, just as Baptism initiates that grace.

But sincere sorrow and sincere confession, together with a firm purpose of avoiding sin for the future, are conditions without which the sacrament is completely inoperative. Confession, therefore, is not a magical means for getting rid of sin; it does not dispense with repentance, rather it demands repentance, without which it is valueless. If it should happen that a man goes to confession without being truly sorry for his sins, or without purposing amendment, the priest indeed may be deceived, but God is not mocked; or rather, God is mocked by a sacrilegious abuse of the sacrament, and thereby a new sin is added to those of which the man is already guilty.

Confession not a Barrier.

It is sometimes objected that confession puts a barrier between the soul and God, and St Paul is quoted in support of the objection; "There is one mediator of God and men, the man Jesus Christ". (1 Tim. 2: 5) Since Christ alone is our mediator (say the objectors), the priest in the confessional is usurping the place of Christ in attempting to mediate between the sinner and God.

Let us be quite clear about what St Paul was saying. He was telling Timothy that Christ, and Christ only, wrought our redemption and justification; in so doing he acted as our ambassador with God. In that sense he is indeed our only mediator, for no one else was qualified for the task.

Let us be clear also about what the priest in the confessional is doing. He is not praying God to forgive the sinner; Christ did not say; "Whose sins you beg me to forgive, I will forgive them"; he said; "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven". The priest's first function is therefore that of a judge, not a mediator. His position is analogous to that of a judge in a court of law. The judge, using the power given him by the Crown, acquits or condemns defendants brought before him. In the same way the priest, using the commission of Christ, dispenses God's justice and mercy.

Confession a Help.

But the priest in the confessional is not only a judge; he is there to help the penitent, should help be needed. His training enables him to solve doubts and answer difficulties; he can offer advice on how to avoid sin, and give encouragement to those who are weak. To sum up; his function is to reconcile the sinner to God, and show him how to live in God's friendship.

It may be added that priests are bound by the most solemn oath (and the most severe penalties) NEVER to reveal anything they have heard under the "seal of confession", even if asked by a judge or magistrate in a court of law. And priests have gone to their death for refusing to do so.

Confession not a Danger to Morals.

As for the alleged moral unhealthiness of priest and penitent dealing in matters of a delicate nature, this objection comes only from those who know nothing of the confessional in practice. If the matter is plain and straightforward, no question or discussion is needed. If the penitent needs advice or help, it can be given in the same professional way as a doctor would give it. But confessors are trained to great prudence in this matter, and are taught that "it is better to fall short by reserve a thousand times than to go beyond the mark by a single superfluous question." They are cautious never to say a word which will convey fresh knowledge of sin to innocent minds; and a bishop who

came across a case of imprudence in this matter would take active measures to prevent it occurring again.

C. THE SACRAMENT OF THE EUCHARIST.

The Holy Eucharist (or the Lord's Supper, as non-Catholics often call it) is the sacrament which supplies our souls with the nourishment of food. In this sacrament Christ gives us himself as our food, under the appearances of bread and wine, and so it is often called the Blessed Sacrament.

What the New Testament says.

The doctrine underlying this sacrament was hotly debated by the sixteenth century Protestants, and even today there are widely differing views about it amongst non-Catholics. Let us first see what the New Testament has to say.

The Promises. "I am the bread of life... and the bread that I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world... except you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you... He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath everlasting life, and I will raise him up in the last day... he that eateth this bread shall live for ever." (John 6: 48-59)

If this was no more than an exhortation to faith in his teaching (as some hold), why did Christ use such a repulsive metaphor, redolent of cannibalism – a metaphor which actually drove many of his disciples away? And if it was only a metaphor, why did he not explain, and thus prevent their defection? The answer is found in another passage which tells what happened a year or so later, at the Last Supper, the day before he was put to death.

The Fulfilment. "Whilst they were at supper, Jesus took bread and blessed and broke and gave to his disciples and said; Take ye, and eat, **THIS IS MY BODY**. And, taking the chalice he gave thanks and gave to them, saying; Drink ye all of this, **FOR THIS IS MY BLOOD** of the new testament, which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins." (Matt. 26: 26-28)

And Christ told his apostles to repeat what he had done "Do this in commemoration of me".

The Real Presence.

In the Acts of the Apostles we can read that they did exactly what Christ told them, and St Paul, writing of this, tells the Corinthians "...whosoever shall eat this bread or drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily shall be guilty of **THE BODY AND OF THE BLOOD OF THE LORD**." (1 Cor. 11: 27) Why such portentous consequences if what they were receiving was no more than bread and wine?

But from the very first, Christians believed that it was much more than bread and wine. Christ's words were so strong that they could not be ignored or argued away; and the Church taught that when Christ said "This is my Body", "This is my Blood", what were previously bread and wine became really and truly the Body and Blood of Christ. So it was that Christ fulfilled his promise.

It followed that when, in obedience to his command to repeat the sacred rite, those who were ordained to the priesthood used Christ's consecrating words over bread and wine, they too effected the same marvellous change. To the senses it appeared that no change had taken place; but all Christians knew that what they received in this sacrament was not bread and wine; it was Christ himself really present under the outward appearances of bread and wine. They knew this from what Christ had said, and from what Christ's Church taught, and neither could err.

Transubstantiation.

But very naturally, Catholics began to ask themselves the obvious question; what happens to the bread and the wine when the words of consecration are pronounced? And the Church answered that the substance of the bread and wine simply ceased to exist, being replaced by the substance of Christ himself, though the appearances (or qualities) of bread and wine remained to serve as a sort of envelope for the Body of the Lord. Hence we have that very formidable word; transubstantiation.

Non-Catholics, almost to a man, protest against this doctrine. But after all, why protest? Christ could work that miracle as well as any other; and why should he not, seeing the sublime effects he attached to it? That God the Son should take flesh and become man at the Incarnation is a far greater miracle. And is it not a comfort to know that when our Lord uttered his startling proclamation about the food of the soul, he really meant what he said?

The Tabernacle on the Altar.

Out of this belief in the reality of the Blessed Sacrament arose a devotional practice which has played an important part in Catholic life ever since. It probably began as soon as the Blessed Sacrament was reserved in the churches for the sick, and taken to the homes of those who could not come to church. The idea would gradually grow that since Christ was really and physically there, he could be and ought to be adored there, just as he would be if he came back to the earth in human form.

Hence in course of time arose that central feature of every Catholic church, the Tabernacle, tent, or little house on the altar in which Christ dwells as our Sovereign Guest and intimate companion – so that entering a church to visit the Saviour is as real a contact with him as would be entering Buckingham Palace to visit the Sovereign – more real in fact.

Out of this came the evening service known as Benediction, in which the people are blessed with the Blessed Sacrament – Christ himself. Out of it came the fact that Catholic churches are kept open the greater part of the day, so that those who pass may step in to pay a short visit to our Lord. Thus it is that a Catholic church is seldom empty. It is always a home with one permanent resident, and he is the Sovereign Lord of all. This should not be surprising; after all, God in the Old Testament was with his people in the cloud and the pillar of fire; is it not to be expected that he would be present in an even better way in the New Testament?

Protestant Theories.

To the Protestants, all this appeared as sheer idolatry, which they scurrilously called "adoring a bread and God". But it is plain that Catholic adoration is directed not to the bread (which is not there), but to the living person of Christ, who is God, veiled under the 'elements'. Nevertheless, the language of the New Testament was so strong that the 'reformers' could not ignore it.

The drastic Calvin simply allowed no real presence of Christ at all; Holy Communion was simply a 'commemorative meal' and no more. Others allowed some sort of 'spiritual presence', but at the moment of communion only; in no sense was it a real presence. Luther went further, and held that Christ 'permeated' the bread and wine and was received with them by the communicant – a compromise which was called consubstantiation. Not one of them allowed that Christ was really and physically present in the consecrated elements as the Church had always taught. And in response to the new teachings, the Church reiterated her ancient teaching, not ceding an inch to 'reforming' theories.

Communion under one Kind.

According to the present discipline of the Church in the West, Communion is received in two kinds by the celebrant but distributed in one kind only to the faithful. Protestants regard the refusal of the cup to the laity as something contrary to Christ's institution, and as mutilating the sacrament. Yet the practice of the early Church shows clearly that reception under one kind was sufficient. It was usual to communicate infants after baptism under the species of wine only. It was also common, in time of persecution, for the faithful to take the species of bread to their homes and administer Communion to themselves and their families under one kind alone. The same was done for the sick. History affords us a striking example showing how the law of the Church could be varied according to circumstances. Those who were infected with the Manichean heresy used to abstain from receiving the cup, thinking that wine was evil. In order to expose these secret heretics, the Church left it no longer optional to communicate under only one kind, and required all to partake of the cup, also. Later on, the risk of accidents to the chalice, and other considerations, caused the use of one kind only to prevail.

No Catholic believes that he is thereby deprived of any of the benefits of the sacrament, since under either kind he truly receives the living Christ, whole and entire, and this is the very idea of the sacrament. The purpose of the two species is found in the mystical representation of Christ's death which is signified thereby; both are therefore necessary in the celebration of the Eucharist, as a commemoration of Christ's passion and death; this is the Sacrifice of the Mass.

D. THE SACRIFICE OF THE MASS.

Besides being a sacrament, the Holy Eucharist is also a sacrifice; in ordinary language we call it the Sacrifice of the Mass. This sacrifice is the central act of Christian worship, offered daily in all places by the priests of the Church. And yet in the 31st Article of the Church of England we are told that "The Sacrifices of Masses, in which it is commonly said that the priest did offer Christ for the quick and dead to have remission of pain or guilt, were blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits."

It will be seen, therefore, that after the denial of the teaching authority of the Church, this denial of the Sacrifice of the Mass is the second great gulf that separates Protestants and the Catholic Church. Hence the notion of sacrifice in general, and of the Mass in particular, must be carefully explained.

Sacrifice in general.

In the simplest and most human language, sacrifice means making a present to God in the hope that he may make us a present in return. The thing offered is something that we possess and value; and we part with it to God, acknowledging that everything really belongs to him as Lord and Master of the world. We cannot actually convey the gift to God in heaven, but we can do it symbolically, by arranging that it is really taken away and cannot be brought back to ordinary use. Cain offered fruits, but how he disposed of them we do not know. Abel offered a lamb, and, so to speak, sent it up to heaven by fire.

In the organisation of ritual sacrifices under the Jewish law, the offerings were like those of Cain and Abel. Oil or wine was poured away; animals were wholly or partially burnt. In this last type of sacrifice, certain parts of the animal were eaten by the priests or worshippers in a sacramental way, as a banquet in which the consecrated object became the means of spiritual communion between God and man. In this we have the prototype of the Eucharistic sacrifice, in which the Divine Victim

is sacrificed, and the sacrifice is completed by the reception in Holy Communion of the body and blood of the Victim under the appearances of bread and wine.

The Sacrifice of the Redemption.

The sacrifices of the Old Law were only provisional, and did not realise God's designs for the salvation of mankind. St Paul expressly says that it was impossible for the blood of oxen and goats to take away sin. Hence the Son of God came into the world and said; "Sacrifice and oblation thou wouldst not; but a body thou hast fitted to me... Then said I; Behold, I come. In the head of the book it is written of me that I should do thy will, O God." (Heb. 10: 4-7) And so "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1: 14), in order that he might offer the sacrifice of Redemption by dying on the cross.

In offering his life for the sins of mankind, Christ was dooming himself to death as a foregone conclusion, long before the death itself occurred. By this irrevocable offering it seems as if the redemptive sacrifice was formally and essentially accomplished, for the Apocalypse (13: 8) speaks of "the Lamb which was slain from the beginning of the world."

The Last Supper.

This mysterious language prepares us for further mysteries. It was at the supper table that Christ formally manifested his acceptance of the death to come, and in a symbolical manner exhibited it beforehand. By the twofold consecration he took the position of a victim slain by the separation of the blood from the body. He then went on to face the physical reality by going to his arrest in the Garden, which led to his death on the cross some hours later.

This throws a threefold light on the meaning of the Last Supper. For it not only inaugurated the sacrifice of redemption, but also instituted the Sacrifice of the Mass; and the Apostles (under orders to "do this in commemoration of me") became the first sacrificing priests.

The institution of the Sacrifice of the Mass and of a priesthood to offer it was also a fulfilment of the prophecy of Malachy; "From the rising of the sun to the going down, my name is great among the Gentiles; and in every place there is sacrifice and there is offered to my name a clean oblation." (Mal. 1: 11) – which the Church recognises as the worldwide offering of the Sacrifice of the Mass.

The Protestant Standpoint.

By rejecting the Mass as being a blasphemous fable and a dangerous deceit, the 'reformers' eliminated the conception of sacrifice altogether, and reduced subsequent repetitions of the Last Supper to a pious reminiscence of the past. In their Communion Service they retained the idea of the Eucharist as a sacrament; but they missed the idea of Holy Communion as a sharing in the sacrifice by a spiritual banquet in which the offerers of the sacrifice took part.

They rested their rejection of the Catholic doctrine on two arguments. First, that repeated sacrifices were a feature of the Old Law, and were abolished by the one eternal sacrifice of Christ, incapable of repetition; secondly, they held that to attempt to repeat the sacrifice implied some defect or incompleteness in the original, which was complete and perfect as it stood.

The answer to the first of these objections is simple. The Mass is not the offering of another sacrifice; it is another offering of the same sacrifice. In the Mass the priest is carrying out the order to do again what Christ himself did at the Last Supper. Then, Christ offered the Sacrifice of Redemption before his death; the priest is deputed to re-offer the Sacrifice of Redemption after his

death. Both offerings are commemorative and representative; but the sacrifice is the same – the immolation of the Divine Victim on the Cross.

Perhaps another thought will help to make this clearer. Christ's offering of himself, which began when he came into the world, continues forever in heaven. Hence, when at the consecration of the Mass he comes down to the earthly altar, he is still offering himself, an eternal victim, all the time. His command to the priest amounts to this; "While I offer myself as the principal sacrificer, you also offer me as the co-sacrificer."

The second objection, that the Mass argues imperfection in Calvary is quite fallacious, and is best answered by a simple analogy. The play *Macbeth* was a complete play when it was first put on the stage. Subsequent performances of it are not given because it is imperfect and needs completion, but simply because the actors appreciate its perfection and wish to spread its cultural influence.

OTHER DOCTRINES AND PRACTICES.

We now pass on to Article 22 of the Church of England, which runs; "The Romish doctrine of Purgatory, pardons, worshipping and adoring images and relics, and invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented and repugnant to the Word of God".

We deal with these only in so far as they may be obstacles to enquiries about the Catholic faith.

Purgatory and Temporal Punishment.

The most common notion among non-Catholics is that when a man dies he goes straight to heaven or to hell. The Church, believing, as the Bible says, that "nothing defiled shall enter heaven", realises that a person may die in the state of grace, and yet be defiled. For there may be minor sins not yet repented of; and there may be wholesome penalties due to sin in general, even though the guilt of sin has been taken away. A certain purgative or "rehabilitating" process is therefore required to make them fit for heaven. And the word Purgatory means purging or purifying.

The existence of Purgatory as a place or state is a doctrine of the Catholic Church; but we are told nothing of the amount, kind or duration of the purifying processes. We do know, however, that our prayers and good works can help those in Purgatory, and that Masses and indulgences can be offered for them.

Indulgences or 'Pardons'

These are remissions of the temporal punishment (called so because it lasts for a time only) due to sin after the guilt of it has been forgiven. They are granted by the Church – and have been from the earliest times – on account of prayers, good works, or services to religion. To gain an indulgence it is necessary not only to fulfil the conditions, but also to be in a state of grace.

It is a gross blunder to imagine that indulgences are pardons in advance for future sins, or permissions to commit sin. But it is true that at the time of the Reformation there were certain abuses of indulgences, even among Catholics. It was in fact a quarrel about indulgences that was the occasion of Luther's revolt against the Church. The Council of Trent (1563) took notice of these abuses, and suppressed them; at the same time it issued an official account of the true doctrine of indulgences.

It may be asked; Whence comes the Church's right to grant these indulgences? The right has a twofold source. First in the power given by Christ – "whatsoever you shall loose upon earth shall be

loosed in heaven". Secondly from the superabundant merits of Christ and the Saints, merits which the Church makes available to those who need them.

Reverence for the Saints.

Certain other doctrines now to be considered are of a different kind, for they concern our fellow creatures in the household of God.

Catholics are sometimes accused of worshipping the Saints, and the main trouble here is with the word worship. If this word is ever used of a creature, it is used in the wide sense in which our forefathers spoke of the "worshipful company of fishmongers", or the sense in which we speak of "his worship, the mayor". It is better not to use the word at all of creatures (and Catholics do not do so), but to use instead the more ordinary words reverence and honour.

No one can object to Catholics reverencing Mary or honouring the Saints; indeed, non-Catholics do exactly the same. But there may be some who object to this reverence being part of religion. The answer to this is quite clear. Religion is concerned with many objects besides God. It involves the love of others for God's sake, and this love is one of the two great commandments of religion preached by Christ. St Paul teaches that to honour the king is part of religion too. And so, to honour those whom God has delighted to honour is to show reverence to God himself in his noblest works. We may remember too that our Lady, inspired by God, declared that all generations would call her blessed.

Praying to the Saints.

But surely to pray to the Saints and to our Lady is going a step further, and a step too far; for ought not prayer to be directed to God alone?

Again the answer is simple and homely. Prayer only means asking for what we want. Hence provided those in heaven are interested in us and can hear us when we speak to them – and the Church teaches that this is true – there is no more objection to our asking them to help us by their prayers than there was to St Paul asking the Ephesians and other Christians to pray for him. (Eph. 6: 19; Rom. 15: 30, etc.) If St Paul's request for the prayers of his fellow Christians on earth did not encroach on Christ's sole mediatorship, neither do our requests for the prayers of the blessed in heaven.

Nor can it be held that we pray too much to the Saints, and too little to God. The whole of Mass and Communion, all the Sacraments, Vespers, Compline, Benediction, the Stations of the Cross; these, one and all, are acts of the direct worship of God; prayers to the Saints are, as it were, incidental, and they hold the subsidiary place to which they are entitled.

Our Lady, Virgin Mother of God.

The main idea being clear, we can deal in more detail with the Church's doctrine about our Lady. It may be summed up under three heads; first, Mary is the mother of the God-man Jesus Christ, and is the greatest of all the Saints; secondly, before and after the birth of her divine Son she remained ever a virgin; thirdly, she takes an interest in all Christians, redeemed like herself in the blood of her Son, and indeed is their Mother, so that it is legitimate and fitting to honour her and ask for her prayers.

On the other hand, the Church repudiates the idea that she is anything more than a creature, or that her intercession for us stands on the same level as that of her divine Son, for it is by no means the same thing.

To many non-Catholics it seems absurd, if not blasphemous, to call any creature the Mother of God. At first sight the title may seem paradoxical, yet the paradox is easily resolved. In both the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed it is stated clearly that Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God and himself truly God, came down to this earth and was born, a man, of the virgin Mary. Hence he was not a man with God dwelling somehow inside him as an inspirer; but he is God appropriating a human nature to his divine personality.

Jesus Christ is therefore truly God, so that God walked this earth, God taught, God suffered and died; for he was made in all things like to us, sin alone excepted. But Mary was the mother who bore him; hence Mary and Jesus were mother and son, and since Jesus is God, Mary was the mother of Jesus who is God. It is as simple as that! True, she could not have been his mother had he not become man; nor was she his mother before he became man; but she was his mother when he became man, and in becoming man he did not cease to be God.

The Church's doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ is often a stumbling block. Yet that Christ was "born of the virgin Mary" has been Christian teaching from the earliest ages. Granted such a birth is a miracle; but God has worked many greater miracles than that.

The third of the three points mentioned has already been discussed.

The Immaculate Conception.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception simply means that our Lady, in view of her exalted office, was endowed with God's grace from the first moment of her existence, instead of being conceived and born without grace – or in a state of original sin as it is called. Every Christian receives this purification from original sin by baptism; in our Lady the effect of baptism was anticipated. We cannot infer from this that she did not owe her redemption to Christ's death, but only that the grace of redemption was conferred beforehand in view of Christ's future merits. The saints of the Old Testament received their justification too before Christ's death.

The Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven.

Catholics believe also that, at the end of her life on earth, this immaculate Virgin Mother of God was taken by her Son body and soul into heaven, and dwells there now with him in glory. This has always been a tradition of the Church. Because God was to become her Son, he made her "full of grace". The Assumption is implied there. He preserved her soul from the general law of original sin; and as a corollary of that he exempted her body from the general law of corruption in the grave. He will in the end, he declares, raise from the dead all mankind, faithful and rebels too. Taking his Mother at once to heaven he did for her at once what he has told us he will do for all of us eventually, provided death finds us faithful to him.

Before 1950, when the dogma was defined, the certainty of Catholics about our Lady's Assumption arose from their good sense and their awareness that God and his Mother are real, and eternal life in heaven is real too. We now have for it the additional security of truth divinely guaranteed.

Statues, Pictures, Relics.

At one time it was customary to accuse Catholics of adoring and worshipping statues, relics and the like; this calumny has nowadays been largely forgotten, but there are still many non-Catholics who do not understand the position these things occupy in Catholic practice. The Church certainly allows their use, but only as means to help the memory and the imagination. She is perfectly clear in her assertion that we do not pray to images, for they can neither see, nor hear, nor help us.

It is indeed true that we pray before the Crucifix, or a statue or picture, but in so doing we are not praying to these things, merely using them to aid our prayer which is always directed to heaven. Perhaps the practice is best explained by an analogy. We keep photographs and keepsakes of relatives and friends who are dead in order to keep us reminded of them. It is precisely for the same purpose that Catholics make use of statues, pictures and relics. If the one is good and reasonable, surely the other is too.

Fasting and Abstinence.

Everybody knows that Catholics have to abstain from eating meat on most Fridays of the year, and that they are bound to fast on certain days too. The practices may seem foolish or pointless, yet there is good reason for them.

No one can deny that fasting was practised throughout the Old Testament, and that the practice was carried on both by Christ and his Apostles. Its purpose was quite plain. All men have sinned, and all should make some atonement of their own for those sins; fasting is one way of doing this. It also serves to remind us that we do not live for pleasure only, and that self-mortification in moderation is an excellent thing if done for God's sake.

The Church retains this immemorial custom, which seems strange only to those who have, forgetting the Scriptures, abandoned it. But circumstances have made it necessary to introduce many exemptions and dispensations, at least in our climate, and the rigour of ancient usage has been modified to suit our capabilities. And those who are unable to observe even the modified rules of fasting are recommended to practise self-denial in other ways.

Church Ceremonies.

The official services of the Church are solemn and dignified, and as far as possible magnificent in their appointments. Music, lights, incense, vessels of gold and silver, and beautifully embroidered vestments all contribute to this end. So it was from the first, but when the Protestant sects arose in the sixteenth century they abolished these artistic adornments as if there were something wrong with them.

Such things are, however, a healthy human instinct. In coronation processions, victory parades, in such ceremonies as trooping the colour, or the opening of Parliament the same instinct for pageantry and ceremonial is apparent. And so it is right that in our worship of God we should use these external embellishments so as to give God of our very best in all ways. He is, after all, the King of kings. But it is obvious that these things by themselves are insufficient to honour God; they must always be the external expression of our interior love and reverence for God our Father. And if there are some who still object, they should remember that it was Judas who was upset when Mary Magdalen anointed our Lord's feet with precious ointment; and Christ reproved him for his attitude.

The Use of Latin

What has been said about the Church's ceremonies leads on to an allied topic. The use of Latin in the services of the Church. It is sometimes thought that Catholics are bound to say their prayers in Latin, a language they do not understand. If that were true, it would indeed be absurd. Latin is used for the official rites of the Church – Mass, Vespers, Compline, Benediction, the sacramental rites – all of which are performed by the clergy. But a lay Catholic can go through all his personal acts of religion without uttering a word of Latin. He is amply supplied with Bible's, Catechisms, prayer books, psalms, and hymns, and devotional reading books in his own tongue – as well as translations of all the offices recited by the clergy. Obviously, too, all sermons, instructions, confessions, as well as popular devotions, are conducted in the language of the people.

In the early Church, which began in the East, the liturgical services were in Greek; the same was true in the West for a short time, till Latin, the native language of Rome, took its place. Rome was the centre from which the faith was spread in Western Europe (eg. Spain, France, Germany, Britain). The missionaries all used Latin; but they learnt the local languages in order to teach the Christian doctrines and prayers to the people. To translate the official liturgies into these languages was impossible. The dialects were too numerous, and far too rude and undeveloped. Nor were translations necessary for the educated few learnt Latin, and the illiterate many could not read a translation if they had one. Everybody became so used to the prevailing practice that they did not, even afterwards, feel the need of a change. The Protestants of the sixteenth century who broke away from the Church had to start new services of their own, and in doing so they naturally adopted their own local tongues – German, Scandinavian, English, etc.

But Catholics have gone on with Latin as before, and there can be no question about its convenience. Except where the Eastern rites prevail, a Catholic priest can go into any Catholic church and say Mass just as if he were at home. The lay Catholic too can find the services in the Catholic churches of North, South, East or West exactly as they are in his native land. Converts to the faith naturally find the Catholic usage a little strange at first, but they soon grow accustomed to it and appreciate its significance. For this universal language of worship shows clearly the unity and the universality of the one corporate body which is the Catholic Church of Christ.

Reading the Bible.

It is sometimes alleged that the Catholic Church fears the Bible and discourages its use, but this charge is entirely untrue. The Church has never discouraged the use of the Bible, only its abuse. For it is true to say that no book has ever been so badly used as the Bible. There is no heresy which has not quoted Scripture in its own support against the teaching of the Church. When it became the fashion to use Scripture in this way to support private views, the Bible was in great danger of becoming a source of confusion instead of a help to faith and devotion.

Simple Protestants think that the Bible is easy to understand because they can find some meaning or other in every verse of it. But it is quite a different matter to find the true, original meaning. The most extraordinary ideas can be drawn from an English translation, which reference to the original Hebrew or Greek would show not to be in the text at all.

It is no wonder, then, that the Church considers the Bible anything but an easy book which he who runs may read. The infinite capacity for the human mind to go wrong is reason enough for caution; the fact that the Bible is a precious book containing the inspired utterance of God in all its pages is reason for greater caution still. In spite of this, Catholics have always been free to read the Bible; indeed, they have always been encouraged to do so. But the Church, who is the custodian of the

Bible, has always demanded two things of them. The first is that they should use either the original text or an authorised translation; the reason for that is plain. The second is that they must always remember that the Church is the only authority which has Christ's commission to say with certainty what is the meaning of a disputed passage in the Bible. Hence those who enter the Catholic Church need have no fear that thenceforward the Bible will be closed to them.

What to do next.

The reader who has got so far may perhaps be in a state of doubt. Without being certain, he may be inclined to think that perhaps the Roman Catholic Church is the true Church of Christ which everybody ought to join. He may wonder what he ought to do next. For such as these, the following advice has been found useful;

(1) Pray. Pray quite simply to God that he would guide your steps and show you the truth; and pray for the strength to follow that truth.

(2) Get from the Catholic Truth Society or from some Catholic bookstall or shop, A Catechism of Christian Doctrine. Read each question and answer in turn. If you believe already, mark a tick in the margin. If doubtful, mark a query. If you simply do not believe it, mark a zero.

(3) Then find a Catholic priest, in the nearest Catholic church or priests' house. Show him the marked book, and tell him what you have done. He will be delighted, but there is no need to fear that he will press you. Once in touch with him, the rest will follow. If at length your impression grows into a conviction that it is clearly the right thing to become a Catholic, and you make up your mind to do so, a simple ceremony of reception into the Church will follow, and your journey will be at an end. If not, the incident is closed for the time being – but go on praying.