

GASQUET FRANCIS AIDAN

BREAKING WITH THE
PAST; OR, CATHOLIC
PRINCIPLES ABANDONED
AT THE REFORMATION

Francis Gasquet

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PREFACE

THE Rt. Rev. Francis Aidan Gasquet, Abbot-General of the English Benedictines and Chairman of the Commission appointed for the revision of the Vulgate or Latin Bible, gave a course of sermons at the High Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral on the Sundays of Advent, 1913, on "Catholic Principles abandoned at the Reformation."

These sermons attracted very wide attention. The subject chosen, while seemingly a familiar one, proved most interesting to the vast congregations, drawn by the fame of the preacher as a historian of the Reformation period. His manner of treatment had much to do with the profound interest manifested by his listeners. All attempt at pulpit oratory was cast aside, and the preacher confined himself to a clear unvarnished tale of the causes that led up to the so-called Reformation. He showed himself a complete master of the question. As announced in his opening sermon, the Rt. Rev. Abbot did not seek to be controversial, but purely historical, and this purpose he followed to the end, basing all his statements on documents whose authenticity could not be called in question. He made clear what Cardinal Manning has so often repeated, that England did not give up the Catholic faith of centuries, but was simply robbed of it.

It was my pleasure to be present at all the sermons, and to be held under the spell of his simple eloquence, and to experience the appeal his strong arguments must have made. The main thesis which the learned Abbot sought to establish was that the doctrines of the Church in England had been reconstructed under Lutheran and Calvinistic influence, and the cultural beliefs held by the Church from the time of Christ had been rejected. This was especially true of the priesthood. By Act of Parliament a new form of ordination, carefully and systematically excluding every word that could be interpreted to mean that the candidate was to be a sacrificing priest, was introduced.

In these days when there is a strong movement on foot without the fold, to restore the unity of the Christian faith, we can indulge the hope that the four lectures of the distinguished Abbot will prove fruitful. They are on subjects so vital to unity; *i. e.* the Supremacy of the Pope, the Sacrifice of the Mass, the Eternal Priesthood, the Universal Church. We pray that these sermons will attract the attention of many outside the Church, and make them meditate on the bitterness of breaking from their "Father's House." May God's holy grace prove stronger than prejudice, as it has so often in the past, and may it soften the hearts which have been hardened by cruel legislation rather than by wilful disobedience.

JOHN CARDINAL FARLEY,
Archbishop of New York.

NEW YORK,
The Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, 1913

I

THE POPE'S AUTHORITY

TO-DAY we begin the work of Advent. During these weeks of preparation for the great feast of Christmas it is usual and useful to turn our thoughts to some of the great principles upon which our faith as Catholics is grounded, in order that we may realise more fully all that our Blessed Lord's coming into this world has done for mankind in general and for our individual souls in particular. It will not therefore be altogether foreign to this purpose if during these Sundays of Advent I ask your consideration of certain Catholic principles which appear to me to have been deliberately abandoned in the great religious revolution of the sixteenth century, known as the Reformation, but to which our Catholic forefathers in England and in Ireland clung with heroic constancy and for which they suffered loss of worldly goods and even laid down their lives.

And first, I should at the outset like to disclaim any desire to enter into mere matters of controversy. In these days, when so many aspirations and prayers for a return to Christian Unity are being uttered and which in the face of the common enemy find an echo in the heart of every Catholic, the bitterness engendered by the controversial spirit is, to say the least, wholly foreign to the work of Union. But as a first step to that Christian Unity we all pray for, it is surely necessary to recognise the points of departure, out of which our differences have grown. We cannot proceed far along the path towards agreement unless we understand how we first began to differ, and therefore, not in any spirit of bitterness or controversy. I desire to speak of facts as they seem to me, and to point out what was really done at the time of the Reformation in England, which still has obvious consequences in all English-speaking countries. As far as I am concerned at present those who hold that what was done in regard to religion in the sixteenth century was well done may continue to hold this belief. All I desire at this time is to ascertain *what* was done.

Now the first point of attack made on the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church was upon the spiritual jurisdiction of the Pope. We Catholics hold and believe that our Lord came down on earth and became man to redeem us, not as a mere historical fact, which was once done and completed by His death upon the Cross, but that the work of this redemption was to be applied to the individual soul, through the work of the Church He established on earth. This Church was to minister to souls through the Sacraments He instituted, the grace He had purchased for them by His Passion and Death, and it was to be the fount of all truth and teaching. We Catholics further believe and hold that our Lord established this His church upon the authority of St. Peter and his successors, as the necessary basis of unity of faith and discipline. To us this seems so certain that it is inconceivable that our Lord, who was God and had all knowledge of the working of the human heart and mind, should not have provided some such an authority as that of the Pope, as the necessary bond of unity of the Faith. Mind, I am not proving this in any way: I am but stating it as the firm and unchanging belief of Catholics.

Up to the time of King Henry VIII., and indeed till the end of the first half of his reign, this, which is our belief, was that of England and Ireland in common with all other parts of Christendom before the revolt of Luther a few years before in Germany. Of this I do not think there can be much doubt, except perhaps in the minds of professional controversialists. Let me give a few examples of English teaching on the subject. In the University of Oxford, up to the Reformation, there was no more honoured theological authority in the schools, than the celebrated Duns Scotus. This is what he taught as to papal authority: "It is of faith that the ever Holy Roman Church, which is the pillar and ground of all truth and against which the gates of hell cannot prevail, admits of no error and teaches the truth. Hence they are excommunicated as heretics who teach or hold anything different from what She teaches and practises." This is clear enough teaching: and no less clear is the declaration made

by the representatives of England and Ireland in the Council of Florence, which was held in A. D. 1417, a century and more before the breach with Rome. At that Council there were present more than a hundred British Bishops and Prelates. Peculiar circumstances called for a declaration of their loyalty to the Universal Church, and this is one clause in that declaration: "Moreover the Kingdom of England, thanks be to God! has never swerved from its obedience to the Roman Church: it has never tried to rend the seamless coat of Our Lord: it has never endeavoured to shake off its loyalty to the Roman Pontiffs."

Ten years later again, in 1426, Pope Martin V. in a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury, states as a recognised fact, that not only had the Roman Pontiffs supreme authority as a fact, but that this authority was derived as of divine institution from our Lord Himself and he tells the archbishop that he is bound to protect "the rights and privileges of the Roman Church and the Apostolic See, which Christ Himself gave by His divine Word, and not men." This is the distinct claim put forth by the Pope, and Archbishop Chicheley in his reply, made on behalf of the English Church, fully and frankly admits this claim, and makes it quite clear that the traditional teaching of the English Church in regard to the Papacy was that it was of divine institution and not that its authority was of ecclesiastical institution, and still less that England or Ireland had ever given its obedience to the Pope on grounds of national policy or expediency and not on a dogmatic basis. The matter is put clearly enough to remove all doubt in the letter addressed to the Pope by the University of Oxford at the same time as that of Archbishop Chicheley in behalf of the English Bishops. "We recognise in your beloved person (that of. Pope Martin V.) the true Head. We profess without doubt and from our hearts (that you are) the one Supreme Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ on earth and the true successor of St. Peter."

That this remained the firm and unshaken faith of the Church and people of England and Ireland right up to the final breaking away from Rome we have ample and positive proofs. Out of many I will cite one testimony. When the teachings of the reformer, Luther, began to find adherents in other lands, King Henry VIII., with the help of Bishop Fisher, himself composed a book in defence of the Sacramental teaching of the Church. This volume was taken to Rome by one of the English Bishops and presented to the Pope in full Consistory on October 2, 1521. On behalf of Henry, the envoy in the presence of all the Cardinals and Ambassadors made public declaration of the entire loyalty of the English nation to the Holy Roman Church and its Supreme Pontiff. "Of other nationalities," he says, "let others speak. But assuredly my Britain – my England, as in later times she has been called – has never yielded to Spain, never to France, never to Germany, never to Italy, never to any nearer nation, no, not even to Rome itself, in the service of God and in the Christian faith and in the obedience due to the Most Holy Roman Church; even as there is no nation which more opposes, more condemns, more loathes this monster (*i. e.* the Lutheran apostasy) and the heresies which spring from it." It was for the volume then presented and for the declaration then made that Henry received the title of "Defender of the Faith" from the Pope.

Suddenly and almost as a bolt from the blue, difficulties between the King of England and the Pope began to show themselves. Grave events often spring from slight causes, and, whatever may be said by professional controversialists, there can be no doubt that it was a mere love affair of Henry VIII., which initiated the royal policy and finally dragged England into schism and heresy. ¹ To some, people, indeed, in these days the action of the Pope in refusing to allow Henry to have his own wilful way in putting aside his wedded wife, Katherine, and to marry another woman, with whom he had had illicit relations, may appear to have been the height of unwisdom. Certainly as a result it has had the most disastrous consequences to the English Church. But this at least all must confess: that the Pope's courageous action is a manifest proof of the impossibility of ecclesiastical authority interfering without right reason with the indissoluble sanctity of a true Christian marriage.

¹ This statement was challenged in the press. It is difficult to see how it can be questioned by anyone who has read the history of this period. Those who are interested may be referred to an excellent article in *America* for Dec. 20, 1913, "What to say and how to say it."

To obtain the support of Parliament the King suggested that the nation had incurred the extreme penalties of *praemunire* by admitting the legatine powers of Cardinal Wolsey, even though this had been done with his royal knowledge and authority. His lay subjects were at once pardoned for a mere technical offence against the statute laws, but the clergy were excluded, in order to hold the penalties *in terrorem* over them. With his royal hand on the throats of his ecclesiastical subjects he demanded a recognition of his Headship over the Church in England, and finally Convocation, after a debate which extended over two and thirty sessions, gave an unwilling assent to a clause admitting the King as "the Protector and Supreme Head" of the English Church. This was the thin edge of the wedge by which the cleavage from Rome and the Pope was subsequently effected. At the time, there can be no doubt that the inward meaning of the acknowledgment was not understood. Dean Hook says that the statement was not "regarded as inconsistent with the legitimate claims of the papacy," and as Froude admits, it is certain that "the title was not intended to imply what it implied when, four years later, it was conferred by Act of Parliament, and when England virtually was severed by it from the Roman Communion."

In 1532 by an Act entitled "The Submission of the clergy" the king received their pledge not to legislate in ecclesiastical matters in Convocation without his royal leave. By this "Submission" the English Church deprived itself of all corporate action; and in the same year the aged Archbishop Warham died. "We cannot doubt," writes the late Dr. James Gairdner, the most competent judge of the events of this reign and himself not a Catholic, "We cannot doubt that the event (*i. e.* the death of the Archbishop of Canterbury) at once suggested to the King a new method of achieving his end" and divorcing Queen Katherine. He obtained from the Pope the appointment of Thomas Cranmer, a priest who in defiance of the canons had secretly married in Germany the niece of Osiander, the German Reformer, as a second wife.

Having secured this appointment from the Holy See, the King directed Cranmer to consider the divorce question, and the decree having been pronounced by the subservient archbishop, Henry made Anne Boleyn his Queen on June 1, 1533. Six months later the Convocations of Canterbury and York, under strong royal pressure formally accepted the declaration that "the Bishop of Rome has not in Scripture any greater jurisdiction in the Kingdom of England than any foreign bishop." Finally in March, 1534, the severance of England from Rome ecclesiastically was effected by the *Supreme Head* act which styled the King the only "Supreme Head in earth of the Church of England" and granted him the most ample powers of ecclesiastical Visitation. Then the final touch was given to the work by the *Act of Verbal Treasons*, by which it was declared to be high treason to "imagine" any bodily harm to either the King or Queen or "to deprive them of their dignity, title, style," etc.

The change had now been effected: England was cut off from the jurisdiction of Rome. Some men, like the Venerable Bishop Fisher, Blessed Sir Thomas More, the heroic Carthusians and others, refused to burden their consciences by taking the required oath and preferred imprisonment and death. For the most part the clergy and monastic houses gave way and did what was required of them. But there can be little doubt that the nation at large disliked the King's proceedings. In spite of the act for *Verbal Treasons*, which was wide enough to catch anyone guilty of a mere expression of opinion, "on no other subject during the entire reign have we such overt and repeated expressions of dissatisfaction with the King and his proceedings," as Dr. Gairdner with the fullest knowledge of this period declares. For, as he says, "the ecclesiastical headship was without precedent and at variance with all tradition: ".. "It was a totally new order in the Church."

My purpose does not lead me to speak of the exercise of ecclesiastical jurisdiction by the King, in virtue of this new Headship over the Church. As, by virtue of his authority, he had bidden Archbishop Cranmer to pronounce the sentence of divorce, which the Pope had refused, so in the dissolution of the religious houses, he pronounced the monks and nuns in his kingdom freed from the vows they had made to God. In the exercise of the royal supremacy in matters ecclesiastical he

appointed Thomas Crumwell, a layman, his Vicar General, and in this capacity, Crumwell presided at all meetings of Bishops and regulated all discussions upon spiritual affairs.

There were various other religious changes initiated during the remainder of this reign, like the destruction of shrines and the prohibition of devotion to the saints, but it is one of the perplexing problems of this time why there was not a more radical reconstruction of religion in England upon the lines of the Lutheran principles of the Reformation. The fact is that, though for his own purposes Henry was willing enough to get rid of the Pope, he was never a Lutheran at heart. He had defended Catholic principles against the German Reformed doctrines in his work on the Seven Sacraments. He never wholly lost his Catholic instinct, and to the last he maintained with a strong hand the ancient Catholic Sacramental teaching, and in particular in regard to the most Holy Eucharist and the doctrine of Transubstantiation. In this regard the reforming party, as long as he lived, was kept in check and had to wait for the King's death to secure further changes.

To us Catholics, by the act of cutting England from Rome, the principle of Christian Unity was rejected and sacrificed. The branch cut from the tree no longer feeds upon the sap of the parent stock, and disintegration is merely a matter of time. We who look back over the centuries, which have passed since the severance of the English Church from Union with Rome was effected, can see how the disintegration as to doctrine, has gone on ever since. Few can deny that it is still proceeding at a rate, which is rightly alarming those who still cling even to the shreds of the religious formularies evolved in the Reformation settlement. Hundreds of religious bodies, all claiming to be Christian and all differing on vital and essential matters of belief, can be seen round about us to-day. The process of division is still going on and it must continue where there is no authority to speak with a divine commission. We Catholics, as we review this chaos, may well thank God that our English and Irish forefathers have fought and suffered to maintain for us the Christian principle of a Supreme authority in religion.

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