

PRESENT DAY QUESTIONS—No. 3

SHOULD I JOIN THE CHURCH OF ROME?

By THE REV. F. H. KINCH, M.A.



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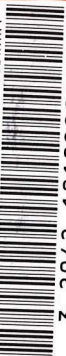
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SHOULD I JOIN THE

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THERE are many people who hold the opinion that one should never change one's Religion,—that we should always remain "what we were brought up to." The one who "turns" is looked upon by them as a mere renegade, not fit for decent society. I have never been able to take that view, in fact it seems to me to be a terrible idea. If it had always been the rule how could Christianity have spread? This dear land of ours would still be sunk in heathen darkness. The idea that "turning" is in itself a bad thing implies three other thoughts: (1) that, whatever we may do in other matters, we should never use our reasoning powers to guide us in religious affairs; (2) that Truth, in itself, is of no value, especially if it is concerned with spiritual things; and (3) that, if we do know of a higher form of Religion than that in which we were brought up, we should reject it. The absurdity of all this is self-evident. So I hold that it is our duty to God and ourselves, (and, indeed, to our neighbour too), to think out our religious position, and to follow the clearest light we can have. We must deal quite honestly, looking at both sides of the question.

I was once faced with the claims of the Church of Rome on my own and other lives. Certain striking facts at once stood out:—

(I.) *The Church of Rome is the largest of the Christian communions in the World.* But I at once felt that the value of the argument from numbers is wiped out if people are told from childhood "You must accept our teaching. To doubt it is a sin." Believing "under duress" is on a level with the conversion of whole countries to Mohammedanism when the choice has been "Death or Mohammed." We can find no argument on it. Of course, numbers can never be a proof of truth,

though they make an immense appeal to some types of mind. Christianity had the message of Truth for the World, even when its numbers were tiny. Then, however, another question arose. What about those many educated men and women who had voluntarily joined the Church of Rome? This was quite a different matter. So I procured a number of short accounts of such conversions which I read without being at all favourably impressed. It was evident that whilst some of these men had little or no grasp of Roman teaching, and not much knowledge of the teaching of their own Church before going over, others were attracted by the gorgeous ritual, or the universality, or the claim to authority of the Roman Church. For me the search must go deeper,—I wanted proof of the truth of such claims. There were others who traced their decision to texts of Holy Scripture. “Hear the Church”—(St. Matt. xviii. 17) was a favourite. But on referring to this chapter I found there no reference to the teaching of the Church, or to the Church as a teaching body. Our Lord was plainly speaking of a congregation judging or arbitrating in a dispute between two of its members. The study of these biographies, indeed, provided no convincing argument in favour of Rome. Yet the attraction of large numbers remained, but I saw that running with the crowd might be simply cowardice and treachery to the Truth. To stand firm with the few for the Truth is infinitely finer.

(II.) Another thing that struck me was *the great and open spirit of devoutness* amongst Roman Catholics. This is a great fact to be seen and observed by all. The way the people flocked to Mass, to special devotions, to Missions, and so forth, was inspiring, especially when contrasted with the carelessness of so many Protestants. Yet as I considered the matter, other thoughts came to my mind, such as these: (a) a similar great and open spirit of devoutness is to be found amongst Hindus and Mohammedans. It is, therefore, no proof of the rightness of a Religion. (b) I began to doubt whether there would be such large attendances at Mass, etc., if all compulsion were withdrawn. I knew that, in the Army, compulsory Church Parade had very little spiritual value. Certainly in the Church one volunteer is better than ten conscripts. One of our clergy

once said to that famous wit, Father Healy, “I wish we could get our people out to Church the way you get yours.” “Oh,” said Father Healy, “what you want is to rent an acre of Purgatory from us.” Perhaps we were as well without it. (c) I found that Roman Catholic devotion sometimes did not ring true. An instructive incident happened in St. Eugene’s R.C. Cathedral, Derry. I went with a friend to see the stained glass windows, and arrived just as the school children were coming out for lunch. Several of them hurried before us into the Cathedral, dropped on their knees, and began to recite their prayers (as I thought). “Now,” I said, “I like to see that.” “Yes,” said my companion, “but do you hear what they are saying?” I listened, and heard—“Protestant minister, gwan out a’ that” being repeated many times. I passed on, reminded that things are not always what they seem. (d) I got a number of Roman Catholic magazines and papers, and found in them evidence that the spirit of prayer was very much alive in the Church of Rome. But what amazed me was that most of the prayers were addressed to St. Anthony of Padua, the Little Flower, and other foreign folk who seemed to be “boosted” by the Church, while God and the Saviour were comparatively overlooked. So the second attraction faded out.

(III.) There remained *the magnificent unity of the Church of Rome*. A city at unity in itself is always attractive,—at first sight. But if that unity is only attained by the bludgeon it is much less beautiful. A political meeting may arrive at apparent unanimity by throwing out troublesome opponents, and terrorising the more timid. On close examination Roman unity bears a striking resemblance to the political unity of a country under a stern Dictator. So its evidential value is *nil*. The divisions of Protestantism, though deplorable, are a lesser evil. When a jury disagrees it causes much trouble, but it serves the cause of justice much better than if juries always agreed under compulsion. No one can have confidence in a compulsory method. In the Church of Ireland, and much more in the Church of England, there is wide variety of opinion. One could often wish there were much less. But there is a unity underlying the diversity, and, after all, differences of opinion are a necessity of live thought.

But it was quite impossible to stop there. The question was not "Am I attracted by the Church of Rome?" but, "Is that Church right?" "Are its claims justified?" "Are its doctrines true?" "Is its practice Christ-like?" And first of all, *Did our Lord make St. Peter Head of the Church, Prince of the Apostles, and so forth?* The texts usually relied on to prove this have been variously interpreted from early times, so it seemed reasonable to hark back to Apostolic days, and to ask, *How were our Lord's words understood by St. Peter himself and the other Apostles?* Let us study all we can know about them and their teaching. The amazing result is that we do not find even the slightest indication in the story, or the speeches, or the writings of the man himself, that he had been made Head of the Church or Prince of the Apostles. As for St. Paul, St. John and the other Apostles, they are as blissfully unconscious of his over-rule as any modern Protestant is of the Pope's. Never by one word or act do we find any of them acknowledging his government of the Church. Indeed, St. James presides, as of right, (being the local Bishop) over the first Church Council, although St. Peter was present, and St. Paul claims "that the Gospel of the Uncircumcision"—(Galatians, Chap. 2, verse 7) was committed to him "as the Gospel of the Circumcision was unto Peter." This certainly implies that St. Paul had the wider commission of the two, and was in no sense subject to St. Peter. The New Testament contains all the Apostolic documents known to the Church, and it shows no knowledge of the primacy of St. Peter, either on his own part, or on the part of any other Apostle or member of the Church.

In face of these facts I thought of *Roman doctrine and its bearing on Christian truth*. It is an extraordinary fact that the Church of Rome seems to be afraid of the Bible. That Church and ours alike accept the Bible, but, whereas we do all we can to get our people to study it, the Roman Church definitely discourages them. Fourteen Epistles bear the name of St. Paul, one of St. James, one of St. Jude, three of St. John, and two of St. Peter himself. We have four Gospels, a short history of the growth of the Church (the Acts) and the Revelation of St. John. All these have Apostolic authority; yet the Church which claims to be Apostolic above all others is chary of giving

them to the people. And we Protestants appeal to them freely and fully. The conclusion is plain. We are all inclined to appeal to evidence which tells in our favour, and to be shy of all that may tell against us.

Then I turned to Roman books of devotion, amongst which are many works of the highest devotional quality, but, also some which grated harshly on my sense of reverence to our blessed Lord, and which seemed to subvert the Truth. Here, for instance, is an extract from the GLORIES OF MARY by a "Saint" of the Roman Church, Alphonsus de Liguori:—"In the Franciscan chronicles it is related that Brother Leo once saw a red ladder, on the summit of which was Jesus Christ; and a white one, on the top of which was His most holy Mother, and he saw some who tried to ascend the red ladder, and they mounted a few steps and fell,—they tried again, and again fell. They were then advised to go and try the white ladder, and by that one they easily ascended, for our blessed Lady stretched out her hand and helped them, and so they got safely to Heaven." Now the moral of this tale is plain,—Jesus Christ may fail you, so trust rather to our blessed Lady who will surely help you. But compare with this St. Peter's words "Neither is there salvation in any other (than Jesus Christ), for there is none other Name under Heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved."—(Acts iv. 12), Or St. Paul "For other foundation can no man lay, than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."—(1 Cor. iii. 11), No wonder the Roman Catholic laity are not trusted with the Bible. The words of the Lord Himself are, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me"—(St. John xiv. 6). This statement and those of the holy Apostles just quoted have no agreement with the GLORIES OF MARY, or with the words quoted by the translator, "she is the sinner's ladder, all his confidence, and the whole ground of his hope." So this is Roman doctrine, and its bearing on the Christian Faith is easily seen.

Attention was now turned to *the attitude of the Roman Church towards the principle of compulsion in religious matters*. Now, in this matter Protestants are by no means blameless. But compulsion and intolerance are contrary to Protestant teaching. The Church of Rome, on the other hand, openly acclaims them.

Which is right, Protestantism or Romanism? That is the question. It seems to me that in making Man a creature of free-will, our Divine Creator deliberately laid aside the principle of compulsion. He could have compelled Man to remain sinless, but Man would no longer have had free-will. He would no longer have been a moral being. God's methods are those of persuasion and reason,—not compulsion. A man was telling of some shocking conduct he had witnessed. He said, "I wished I could be God for five minutes." What he meant was, that he wished he could have had God's Power, so that he could have inflicted terrible punishment on the wrong-doer. But that attitude is very human, not at all God-like. Jesus Christ has in His life "shown us the Father." But He shewed us forbearance, not punishment; gentleness, not compulsion; love, not hatred.

One of the principles of Protestantism is religious liberty,—that includes liberty of faith and worship for everybody. Such freedom is a jewel worth preserving. In Religion, as in all other matters, freedom to think for one's self and to reason out questions, is the only way of advancing to the Truth. Had there been a counterpart of the Church of Rome in scientific circles the great sciences would to-day be sunk in mediaevalism, and as religious Truth is most valuable of all, religious freedom is most worth preserving. For the time being it has led to various errors, to schisms, to many evils, but "Great is Truth and it will prevail." The evils of Freedom, are, as a matter of fact, no greater than the evils of suppression. We have only to look at Mexico to see proof of this fact. The Church of Rome has had complete power in that country for centuries, and now has not a good word to say of the Mexicans! Spain has always been one of the Church of Rome's strongholds, but Spaniards are now burning down Roman Churches and Convents. The strange truth is that the property of the Church of Rome is safer in Protestant Belfast, than in Roman Catholic Barcelona. So little does compulsion make true Christians. Roman Catholics under compulsion (or shall we say "strong pressure"), flock to worship; Protestants in their liberty are deplorably slack. Yet I have heard that the present Pope has often expressed admiration of the English Sunday.

There was still one point I had to consider, namely, *Rome's Relation to Irish Independence in Church and State*. This had a great attraction for me as a patriotic Irishman. The Roman claim is twofold,—first, that it was Pope Celestine who sent St. Patrick over to this country, and that the Church of Ireland acknowledged the Papal supremacy without any breach until the Reformation; secondly, that, as Cardinal Vanutelli once said in Armagh, "the Pope has always had a special love for Ireland." Now it is a strange thing that we have the story of St. Patrick's life written by himself, and, although he tells us about his call as a missionary to Ireland, he makes no mention of any Papal commission; nor do the earliest Irish historians. Still stranger, a Papal historian of the time makes no mention of St. Patrick, though he does tell about the Papal mission of Palladius which was a failure. When, in the year 597 A.D., Pope Gregory the Great sent over Augustine and forty companions to Kent, he intended Augustine to rule over the whole Church in Britain, but, the old British Church, which was closely related to the Church of Ireland, quite definitely refused to acknowledge any such over-rule. The harsh criticisms of the early Irish Church by Roman historians shew also that the Irish Church was not regarded by them as part of their own communion. The Pope's "special love for Ireland" was not in evidence in those days.

The Bull of Pope Adrian IV., urging King Henry II. of England, to conquer Ireland *and extend the borders of the Church*, was later ratified by another Bull from Pope Alexander III. to the same effect. In this case the Pope's "special love for Ireland" was not quite disinterested. For over three and a half centuries, from the coming of Henry II. till the quarrel between Henry VIII. and the Pope, Ireland was at the mercy of the King and the Pope, who were often in league to despoil our country and Church. Both of them had a "special love" for Irish money. When Henry VIII. definitely fell out with the Pope, a change came in Vatican policy which thereafter was anti-English rather than pro-Irish. What then of Ireland's old Church? Faced by the question, "Pope or King?" there was naturally diversity of opinion, but on the whole *the Bishops, Clergy and Chiefs submitted to the Royal authority and carried*

on their duties. No new Church was formed, no Act of Parliament transferred property from one religious body to another, and there was no great change of personnel amongst the Bishops, Clergy, and People frequenting the Parish Churches and Cathedrals (see Rev. T. C. Hammond's pamphlet "DID PROTESTANTS ROB CHURCHES"). In the course of time the fatuous policy of England drove out the Irish people. The English were given the priceless boon of the Holy Scriptures and Public Worship in their own language. Not so the "mere Irish." The Act of Uniformity of A.D. 1560 ordered that the English Liturgy must be used in Ireland, but allowed that where the clergy did not know English, they might conduct Public Worship in Latin. The Irish Bible and Irish services were forbidden, with the result that the majority of the people fell away from the Church.

The present Roman Mission dates from A.D. 1614. It is an Italian-run Mission, both un-Irish and un-Apostolic in its character. Our old Church of Ireland is to-day, thank God, after centuries of chequered history, *a purely Irish branch of the Catholic Church*. Clergy and laity have their places in the councils of the Church which settle our affairs as free from foreign dictation as were our forefathers in the days of Patrick, Brigid and Columba. We have our Prayer Book and Bible in the Irish language, and in the National Cathedral of St. Patrick, the celebration of the Holy Communion or the evening devotions of the Church may be heard in Irish. Our people are absolutely loyal to the Irish Governments under which they live, North or South, in accordance with Apostolic precept. We are passing through difficult times, but with a growing consciousness of our God-given Mission to our beloved land, I believe that great days are in store for our Church, Apostolic as she is in her ministry, Catholic in her faith, Reformed as regards mediaeval error, and Irish throughout. She has a right to call for the whole-hearted and loyal support of her people in these days of difficulty, and to look forward to a united Ireland within the ancient Fold. God grant it!