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Dr. Johnson & the Catholic Church

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**Dr. JOHNSON
AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.**

BY
HON. SIR CHARLES RUSSELL, BART.

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To my dear Friend
FATHER BERNARD VAUGHAN, S.J.,
with affectionate regards.

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of the Johnson Club, on the 16th
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DR. JOHNSON AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.

BY HON. SIR CHARLES RUSSELL, BART.

AS a prelude to this paper it is necessary briefly to recall Johnson's religious history. He was, of course, a Christian ardent and convinced, and, moreover, a staunch upholder of the Protestant faith. He was a High Churchman of the old school; but, however strict and earnest, he was large and generous in his comprehension. His attitude towards the Godhead was, it seems to me, one rather of fear than of love. He records that his first religious impression was given to him when a tiny child in bed with his mother. His mother told him that the good went to heaven and the bad were sent down to hell, and he was sent by her to convey this newly acquired information to Thomas, one of the servants.

This crude lesson in religion made a great mark upon Johnson's singularly retentive memory and coloured, I believe, his whole religious life. So, in his prayers and other expressions of his belief, we find not so much the love of God as a vivid appreciation of the exacting justice of the Creator and a fear of death. He had an abnormal fear of death. He said to Boswell on the 16th September, 1777: "I never had a moment in which death was not terrible to me"; and in February, 1784, he wrote to his stepdaughter, Lucy Porter, just ten months before he died: "Death, my dear, is very dreadful."

Johnson defines "Religion" in his Dictionary as "Virtue, founded upon reverence of God, and expectation of future rewards and punishments."

Precocious child that he was, at an age when most of us only begin to conceive some glimmering of religious truths, Johnson had already reached a much later phase of development. "In my tenth year," he said, "I fell into an indifference about religion." This continued until his fourteenth year, when he says that he "became a loose talker against religion"; but in his nineteenth year, on going to Pembroke College, Oxford, he happened to pick up a book which had just been published in that year, 1728, entitled *Law's Serious Call to a Holy and Devout Life*. "Hoping," he states, "to find in it something to laugh at, I found Law an overmatch for me." Henceforth religion was the predominating object of his thoughts.

It is easy to understand Law's "Call" impressing any man and leading him onwards towards a spiritual life. In character it greatly resembles many of the writings of the more ardent of the Catholic Saints, but it is never gloomy; eternal punishment or the fear of hell is seldom alluded to from the beginning to the end of the book. It teaches that a cheerful and devout life is the happiest life, and it is full of the cheerful confidence towards God which is a great characteristic of Catholic books of devotion. I am surprised, therefore, that more of this spirit does not appear in Johnson's religious life, which continued gloomy and fearful almost to the end. I say almost to the end; for, "when the shadow was finally upon him, he was able to "recognise that what was coming was divine, an angel, "though formidable and obscure, and so he passed with "serene composure beyond mankind."¹

The above is an epitome of Johnson's religious life. It is obvious that he preferred the "Miserere" to the "Te Deum." His thoughts dwelt too long upon the forty days in the desert and he forgot the feast at Cana in Galilee.

It is curious to note how continually throughout his life we find Johnson in touch with Catholics and Catholic

¹Lord Rosebery's Lichfield Address on Johnson.

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books. Wherever we find accurate records of his doings we find friendly intercourse with Catholics and their writings. His first literary effort, published in 1735, was a translation of a book written by a Jesuit Father, *The Travels of Father Lobo, S.J.* Later on, when he came to London, in 1738, he published two works: first, his poem, *London*, which immediately received its hall-mark from a Catholic, the Infallible Pope—Alexander then in undisputed possession of the poetic throne in England.¹ In the same year he wrote his *Life of Father Sarpi*, an Italian Catholic Ecclesiastic famous for his writings on the Council of Trent.

When Boswell appeared on the scene and met Johnson in Davis's shop in May of 1763, he found the Philosopher, then fifty-four years of age, with quite a long list of Catholic acquaintances. There was Thomas Hussey, the Catholic Bishop of Waterford, first President of Maynooth, and one of the few Catholic Fellows of the Royal Society. When Johnson met him he was Chaplain to the Spanish Chapel. There was Mrs. Strickland, the lady from Cumberland whom Johnson described as "a very high lady"; there was Dr. Nugent, father-in-law of Edmund Burke; Mrs. Edmund Burke, General Paoli, Joseph Baretti, whose life he helped to save by giving evidence as to his character when he was tried at the Old Bailey. Arthur Murphy, too, who introduced Johnson to the Thrales in 1764, was a Catholic, educated at St. Omer's. Then, later, we find a warm friendship established with Father Cowley, the Benedictine; with Father Wilkes of the Sorbonne, and Father Brewer. Finally, in his last illness, Johnson was cared for with marked devotion by another Catholic, Mr. Sastres, a friend of many years' standing, to whom he administered a very solemn warning on no account to change his religion unless

¹ In the next year, 1739, Alexander Pope, though I cannot find that he ever met Johnson, tried to persuade Dean Swift to obtain for him a Degree from Dublin University, which he thought would help Johnson in his career. However later it was from Dublin Johnson received first the right to call himself "Doctor."

he was absolutely convinced that he was in error. To this gentleman, it will be remembered, he left a legacy in his will.

It may fairly be surmised that he had made many other Catholic friends, for this reason: in the very centre of the district covered by Johnson's many residences there were several Catholic chapels, rare objects in those days. The one in Golden Square still exists (the entrance being in Warwick Street, Regent Street), and the other was in Sardinia Street, Lincoln's Inn (lately moved into Kingsway).

The rarity at this date of Catholic chapels in London was due to the fact that the only exception to the laws prohibiting Catholic worship was that ambassadors were allowed to have Catholic chapels in connection with their embassies, and to these chapels the English Catholics flocked. Hence, to this very day Catholics in London worship in churches still bearing the names of "The Bavarian Chapel," "the Sardinian Chapel," "the Spanish Chapel," and "the French Chapel," although the Bavarians, the Sardinians, the Spanish and the French have little to do with them.

As Boswell says, Johnson "had an eager and unceasing curiosity to know human life in all its variety," and in passing and repassing these institutions, as Johnson must have done many thousands of times, this curiosity would never have remained satisfied until he had made the acquaintance of their interiors and discussed matters with their priests, who were gentlemen of education and learning, and generally Englishmen.¹

We know that Johnson stated that all prison chaplains ought to be Catholic priests or Wesleyan ministers. "Sir," he said, "one of our regular clergy will probably not impress their mind sufficiently; they should be attended by a Methodist preacher or a popish priest." It is unlikely

¹ Johnson had no prejudice against entering Catholic churches. He attended Mass several times when he visited Paris with the Thrales in 1775. When he visited Scotland with Boswell in 1773 he firmly refused to enter a church.

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that he would make such a statement unless he had heard them preach.

Another reason for believing that Johnson heard them preach is that in those days, although the ambassadors were allowed to have chapels, they were not allowed to have sermons in their chapels, and the various congregations of the faithful had to resort to the expedient of adjourning to the upper chamber of some adjoining tavern, and there, with the aid of pots of beer and long clay pipes, to hear the sermons of their pastors. The congregation of the Sardinian Chapel used to assemble in a publichouse, which still exists, called the "Ship," situated in the Turnstile, Lincoln's Inn Fields,¹ and I like to fancy, as I go through that passage, that Johnson probably found his way to the upper chamber and partook of the beer, even if he did not smoke the clay pipe, with the Catholic congregation there assembled. He certainly must have been aware of this Catholic practice, for nobody knew the tavern life of London better than he.

Johnson was a great habitu , too, of the Temple. It is true that no Catholic was admitted to the English Bar until 1791,² and the first Catholic K.C. was made only in 1831. Nevertheless, there existed a branch of the Law (now extinct), members of which were known as "Special Pleaders"; they were gentlemen who drew the written pleadings but never appeared in Court. Catholics, shut out from the Bar, in considerable numbers became Special Pleaders. In Lincoln's Inn, too, Catholics became Conveyancers, although not members of the Bar; and it is more than likely that in this way Johnson made other Catholic friends.

¹ The celebrated preacher, Father James Archer (1740-1823), who was converted by Bishop Challoner's preaching and took Holy Orders, was originally a "pot boy" at the "Ship."

² Charles Butler, nephew of Alban Butler, was the first Catholic barrister (1791), and he was also the first Catholic K.C. (1831). The first Catholic judge was Sir William Shee, in 1863. The first Catholic Attorney-General was Sir Charles Russell, in 1887. He was also the first Catholic Lord Chief Justice of England (1894).

We know also, from his own statements to Boswell, that Johnson visited at least one Catholic convent of English nuns, because he refers to his discussion with the Lady Abbess :—

I said to the Lady Abbess of a Convent, “Madam, you are here, not for the love of virtue, but for the fear of vice.” She said she should remember this as long as she lived. I thought it hard to give her this view of her situation, when she could not help it.

Boswell adds :—

I wondered at the whole of what he now said, because both in his *Rambler* and *Idler* he treats religious austerities with much solemnity of respect.

On the occasion of his visiting Paris with the Thrales in 1775, we know that Johnson visited several Monasteries, and actually resided for a brief time in a monk's cell in a Benedictine Monastery, which he left with some emotion, for he records : “I parted very tenderly from the Prior and Father Wilkes” ; and he received from the Prior, to whom he had endeared himself, the promise that his cell would always be ready for him.

Finally, to complete a list of Johnson's Catholic (or ex-Catholic) friends, we must mention that fraudulent old rascal Psalmanaszer, who was originally a Catholic, and whom Johnson regarded almost as a saint.

I have dwelt at some length upon these various friendships and acquaintances because they account for one outstanding fact about Johnson's attitude towards the Catholic Church which differentiates Johnson from too many of her critics, ancient or modern, namely, that he took the trouble thoroughly to understand what he was talking about. He may have differed from Catholics, but he, at any rate, understood in what he differed. He honestly tried to understand the Catholic point of view, and he never attempted to misrepresent Catholic teaching. His many Catholic friends gave him the opportunity of acquiring accurate information.

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But what were Johnson's views on the Catholic Articles of Faith and Catholic practices? He appears, at different times, to have discussed all the most important points of Catholic doctrine with Boswell: the Real Presence, the Doctrine of Purgatory, Prayers for the Dead, Invocation of the Saints, Confession and Absolution. On each point he shows accurate knowledge, and he invariably admits the reasonableness of the Catholic point of view, even if he is not prepared to agree with it.

It may perhaps be worth while following the dates and order in which these matters arise in Boswell's "Life."

Sorrow and loss drove Johnson, like many others, to consider the lawfulness of prayers for the dead and the doctrine of purgatory. He was only forty-two years of age when he lost his wife in 1751, his beloved "Tettie," and for the remaining thirty-three years of his life he never ceased to pray for the repose of her soul and that she might be finally received into eternal happiness, at first prefacing his prayers with the proviso, "so far as it may be lawful in me." In course of time mention of this proviso disappears. He prayed in like manner for his father, continuing such prayers for some fifty years after his father's death.

Boswell only met Johnson in May, 1763, and by August of the same year their friendship had ripened so quickly that Johnson journeyed with Boswell down to Harwich to see Boswell start upon his famous Continental tour. On the stage coach Johnson astonished the passengers by his views on the Spanish Inquisition. Boswell records the event thus:—

In the afternoon the gentlewoman talked violently against the Roman Catholics and of the horrors of the Inquisition. To the utter astonishment of all the passengers but myself, who knew that he could talk upon any side of a question, he defended the Inquisition, and maintained that "false doctrine should be checked on its first appearance; that the civil power should unite with the Church in punishing those who dare to attack the established religion, and that such only were punished by the Inquisition."

Boswell assumed that Johnson was doing so because he could talk upon any side. I think Boswell was wrong. I believe it is clear, from Johnson's discussions on the subject of "Liberty," that the old philosopher would have been a stern persecutor of error and a firm disciple of Torquemada had he had the chance. He more than once declared, "The state has the right to regulate the religion of the people"; and I regret to say I believe he would have boiled the oil and polished up the thumbscrew and applied his test of martyrdom with regret but determination.

Boswell received his next shock in 1772, when he and Johnson determined to make the tour of the Hebrides. In the course of their preparations he asked Johnson whether there was any objection to his taking a Catholic servant with him on the projected tour, and was curtly told by Johnson: "Sir, if he has no objection, you can have none."

Soon after there was a general questioning by Boswell as to Johnson's views on Catholicity. His cross-examination of Johnson was complete and persevering:—

BOSWELL: "What, sir, do you think of Purgatory?"

JOHNSON: "I consider it is a very harmless doctrine. They are of opinion that the generality of mankind are neither so obstinately wicked as to deserve everlasting punishment, nor so good as to merit being admitted into the society of blessed spirits, and, therefore, that God is graciously pleased to allow a middle state. Sir, there is nothing unreasonable in this."

BOSWELL: "But they, sir, offer Masses for the dead."

JOHNSON: "Sir, if it be once established that there are souls in Purgatory, it is as proper to pray for them as for our brethren of mankind who are yet in this life."

Johnson might also have referred Boswell to certain passages in Scripture in which we are told it is "a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from sin."

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Boswell, with his usual perseverance, was not going to let matters rest, for he pushed on :—

“The idolatry of the Mass, sir?”

Whereupon Johnson thundered at him :—

“There is no idolatry in the Mass. They believe God to be there and they adore Him.”

“The worship of the Saints,” cried Boswell.

JOHNSON: “They do not worship the Saints; they invoke the Saints; they ask their prayers.”

Boswell had one more shot left, and he fired it, uttering the single word, “Confession!”

JOHNSON: “I do not know but that it is a good thing”; and he further pointed out that Absolution was entirely conditional on repentance and penance.

Throughout the trip there were many discussions on religious matters, and sometimes on Catholic Doctrine. On the 20th August, 1773, whilst in the post chaise on the road from Dundee, even the subject of Transubstantiation was discussed. “On that awful subject,” as Boswell calls it, he records Johnson’s opinion that the Catholics were in error in their construction of the Scriptures. But Johnson added, “Had God never spoken figuratively, we might hold that He spoke literally.”

Johnson’s attitude towards converts is interesting. He held the theory that every man was justified in adhering strictly to the religion in which he was born, or, as he put it, “the religion in which Providence had placed him.” If he did so he was “safe,” and a man was not justified in abandoning such religion unless he was overwhelmed with the conviction that he was in error. He doubted the sincerity of conversions which entailed the giving up of belief, but he believed apparently in the sincerity of conversions in which belief was increased. Boswell records his words on the matter as follows :—

A man who is converted from Protestantism to Popery may be sincere: he parts with nothing: he is only superadding to what he

already had. But a convert from Popery to Protestantism gives up so much of what he has held sacred as anything that he retains : there is so much *laceration of mind* in such a conversion, that it can hardly be sincere and lasting.

Holding these views, we find him in his *Life of Dryden* treating the poet's somewhat timely if not suspect conversion to Catholicism on the occasion of the accession of James II. with marked toleration :—

Soon after the accession of King James and the design of reconciling the nation to the Church of Rome became apparent, and the religion of the Court gave the only efficacious title to its favours, Dryden declared himself a convert to Popery. This at any other time might have passed with little censure. . . . That conversion will always be suspected that apparently concurs with interest. He that never finds his error till it hinders his progress towards wealth or honour will not be thought to love truth only for herself. Yet it may easily happen that information may come at a commodious time, and as truth and interest are not by any fatal necessity at variance, that one may by accident introduce the other. When opinions are struggling into popularity, the arguments by which they are opposed or defended become more known. . . . It is natural to suppose that a comprehensive is likewise an elevated soul, and that whoever is wise is also honest. . . . but enquiries into the heart are not for man, who must now leave Dryden to his Judge.

Boswell records that in 1784 he was present when Mrs. Kennicot informed him of the conversion of the Rev. Mr. Chamberlayne, and his forfeiting his living to join the Church of Rome, upon which Johnson fervently exclaimed, "God bless him!" On the other hand, when Hannah More informed him that his young friend Miss Jane Harry had become a Quakeress he denounced the lady :—

"Madam, she is an odious wench. She could not have had any proper conviction that it was her duty to change her religion, which is the most important of all subjects, and should be studied with all care, and with all the helps we can get. She knew no more of the Church which she left, and that which she embraced, than she did of the difference between the Copernican and Ptolemaick systems."

MRS. KNOWLES: "She had the New Testament before her."

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JOHNSON: "Madam, she could not understand the New Testament, the most difficult book in the world, for which the study of a life is required."

MRS. KNOWLES: "It is clear as to essentials."

JOHNSON: "But not as to controversial points. The heathens are easily converted, because they had nothing to give up; but we ought not, without very strong conviction indeed, to desert the religion in which we have been educated. That is the religion given you, the religion in which it may be said Providence has placed you. If you live conscientiously in that religion, you may be safe. But error is dangerous indeed if you err when you choose a religion for yourself."

MRS. KNOWLES: "Must we then go by implicit faith?"

JOHNSON: "Why, madam, the greatest part of our knowledge is implicit faith; and as to religion, have we heard all that a disciple of Confucius, all that a Mahometan, can say for himself?" He then rose into passion, and attacked the young proselyte in the severest terms of reproach, so that both ladies seemed to be much shocked.

Mrs. Knowles wrote years after a very different account¹ of this conversation (too long to quote) which gives to herself a suspiciously large share of the honours of war.

In the same spirit was Johnson's advice to Francisco Sastres, to whom he wrote as follows:—

There is no one who has shewn me more attention than you have done. It is now right you should claim some from me. . . . Let me exhort you always to think of my situation, which must one day be yours. Always remember life is short and that eternity never ends. I say nothing of your religion, for if you conscientiously keep to it I have little doubt that you may be safe. If you read the controversy, I think we have right on our side; but if you do not read it, be not persuaded from any worldly consideration to alter the religion in which you are educated. Change not but from conviction of reason.

It is somewhat difficult to reconcile with all this his welcoming Father Compton, the Catholic priest who joined the Church of England. Johnson charitably gave him shelter and money, and found him employment under the Bishop of London. Is it possible that the sturdy Johnson was disarmed by Father Compton's assurance that he owed his conversion to

¹ See the *Gentleman's Magazine* of June, 1791, where her "mild fortitude is contrasted with Johnson's "hoisterous violence of bigoted sophistry."

the Church of England to reading Johnson's Paper 110 of the *Rambler* on the subject of Repentance. I have read the paper in question, and I must say I cannot see anything in it which need disturb anybody's convictions, Catholic or Protestant,

I think there can be no doubt Dr. Johnson was at some time in his life very nearly becoming a convert himself and joining the Catholic Church.

"I would be a papist if I could; I have fear enough, but an obstinate rationality prevents me. I shall never be a papist except at the near approach of death."

Indeed his sympathy with the doctrines and teaching of the Catholic Church were such that Bennett Langton's father died under the impression that he was in fact a member of the Catholic Church.

On some questions connected with Catholic practice there is no doubt that Dr. Johnson at different times held different opinions. At one time he is strongly in favour of Monasteries, and at another he condemns them. They always appear, however, to have an attraction for him. When Baretti pressed him to visit Italy he replied that "the Monasteries would interest him more than the Palaces."

Boswell puts forward the contention that, because Johnson sometimes appeared to support the Catholic Church and at other times to oppose it, it was clear he was only "talking for victory" and not expressing his convictions; but it is to be remarked that as a rule when Johnson spoke in its favour he always backed up his assertions with cogent argument, but when he spoke against the Catholic Church his language was generally mere denunciation. Thus he said:—

"In everything they differ from us they are wrong."

"Purgatory is made a lucrative imposition."

"Giving the Sacrament in one kind is criminal."

"Invocation of the Saints is will worship and presumption."

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On other occasions Johnson expressed the view that there was no important difference between the teachings of various Christian bodies.

In matters of morality Johnson was a stern upholder of virtue. No lines in his writings call for expurgation, and in his conversation he was equally uncompromising. Boswell records a conversation at Oxford in June of 1784, when he had the resolution to ask Johnson whether he thought the roughness of his manner had been an advantage or not, and if he would not have done more good if he had been more gentle.

JOHNSON ; “ No, sir, I have done more good as I am. Obscenity and impiety have always been repressed in my company.”

To this Boswell quaintly replies:—

“ Sir, that is more than can be said of every Bishop.”

Men like Johnson are the champions of faith and of morality in their time, and whatever particular name may be assigned to Samuel Johnson's beliefs, he was a glorious exponent of religion, as defined by the Apostle St. James:—

“ Religion clean and undefiled before God and the Father is this, “ to visit the fatherless and the widows in their tribulation and to keep “ oneself unspotted from the world.”

Johnson welcomed and sheltered the blind and sick, he provided for the orphan, he lifted the fallen, he held out his strong hand even to the criminal and the imprisoned. His home was a veritable house of charity ; and after a long life of seventy-three years' hard battling with the world his huge heart remained as unsullied as a child's.

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