

A LETTER TO DEAN INGE

This letter of Hilaire Belloc defending the Catholic Church against attacks by the controversial Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, London, was originally published in London's *Evening Standard*, of which newspaper Inge was a columnist. It is reproduced in *Essays of a Catholic* (London, 1931, reprinted by *Books for Libraries Press, Inc.*, New York, 1967). The letter, the author says in his Preface, has been 're-touched slightly, but not in more than a dozen lines'.

You have often attacked (and defamed) the Catholic Church in your pages. In that effort you have introduced, among others, my own less significant name. I propose to answer you.

The task is the easier because your animosity leads you to open declaration of your hatred, and, unlike too many of your kind, you are sometimes led by exasperation to be sincere.

Your indictment against the Faith (which you have called "A bloody and treacherous corporation") is in these articles: that it is foreign, that it is disciplined, and that it is false—or (as you have written) "an imposture." The first is puerile, the second misconceived, and the last momentous, and the issue. I will take them in their order.

The Faith, you say, is foreign. Certainly it has been alienated by force and fraud from the English—but since how long? You know that it made England, and in particular re-made England out of barbarism as no other province of our civilisation was restored.

You are a man cultured and acquainted with the sources. You know well enough that England only *is* because the Church made England after the chaos of the fifth and sixth centuries. You know also—as your readers do not—that all about us, axe and ladder and saw, pillar and arch, and verse and law, and reasoning, are from that Mediterranean antiquity which the Church barely saved, and having saved, nourished into Christendom.

This done, England so recovered, the Faith presided over all her being for a thousand years. It was not till three hundred years ago that the half of England doubted. It is not two hundred since the last body of Englishmen loyal to the ancient national Faith of Englishmen were crushed out. A hideous official persecution, violent beyond example, and carried out in the interest of men newly enriched by the plunder of sacred things, took three lifetimes before it succeeded.

I find a contradiction in you here. An Englishman (you say) cannot be English unless he has in him some Manichean poison of the Puritans. So Chaucer, Alfred, Bede are not English? But next I hear that this Puritanism is a product of Englishry, so those thousand years *were* English after all—but, took their thousand years to bear the Protestant fruit, which blossomed suddenly three hundred years ago. When Shakespeare wrote, England was manifestly Catholic; when Milton, no longer. Yet you would abandon Shakespeare—with regret. You define an Englishman by his religion—no true Englishman can be of Shakespeare's mood, you say, only of Milton's. An Englishman of Shakespeare's mood, or Chaucer's, or More's, was no true Englishman.

The Englishman groping for the light, shall no longer be English for you if he attains it. He shall only be English in your eyes on the condition of groping still.

Certitude and the light upon eternal things are a bar to your granting a certificate of English essence.

What is more, the answer to the most universal (and most important) of questions must, you tell us, be local: and truth must be provincial to be true. If it oversteps national boundaries it is false. Was there ever such nonsense!

I have called it puerile—and so it is: a schoolboy's folly, to which all things not familiar seem ridiculous; for how can truth have local boundaries?

Your second objection is weightier. We of the Faith are not universal, but segregated. The world notes (as you do) that we stand together, making one regiment. You mistake that unity for mere servitude, and that bond for a chain. There is none of us but can assure you that only in the Faith does the reason reach a plenitude of freedom, nor any of us that has searched into ideas but will further tell you that we of the Faith may doubtfully admit some sceptics for our equals, but certainly no sentimentalists or men of merely emotional religion.

You say that we are within walls. So we are. But they are the walls of a city. It is the secure City of God. You resent our unity. Without it how would the structure of revelation be preserved, or of that Christian society which we made, which is Europe, and the dissolution of which would be the death of all? You are offended at our central command. But are we not under siege?

In truth it is not the constitution of the Church you abhor, but the thing itself—little though you know that thing: just as men hate some strange country though they know not a word of its language. When such decry the tyranny or the licence of some polity, it is not Monarchy nor the Republic which troubles them, but the very texture of a detested nation. With you it is not the Captaincy of Peter that offends—though that is holy, necessary, and aboriginal—it is his Ship: the Ship itself: life on shipboard: the manner of the sea.

Wherein also resides your chief, and only grave, indeed your *one* grievance: that what the Catholic faith lays down, this you do not believe.

You have written "The Catholic Church is an Imposture," thereby provoking all the past of Europe, and challenging Ignatius of Antioch and Augustine of Hippo no less than the least of our fellowship today.

I forbear to pin you to a strict explanation, whether that "imposture" be the Incarnation, the Eucharist, or any other of our structural mysteries.

Your office forbids you to reply. You take money paid you to teach and maintain some, at least, of the Christian doctrines and the creeds. Therefore you cannot speak your mind openly, or tell us whether at heart you do not agree with the half-instructed millions around you who make no doubt that religion is of man: a figment.

I will content myself by concluding with this: that there wholly escapes you the character of the Catholic Church. You judge it by indications dead and valueless; you have not—for all your detestation of it—experienced its life, not known it for what it is. You are like one examining the windows of Chartres from within by candle-light, and marvelling how any man can find glory in them; but we have the sun shining through. You are like one curious to note the canvas-marks on the back of a Raeburn, and marvelling to hear its obverse called the true picture of a man. For what is the Catholic Church? It is that which replies, co-ordinates, establishes. It is that within which is right order; outside, the puerilities and the despairs. It is the

possession of perspective in the survey of the world. It is a grasp upon reality. Here alone is promise, and here alone a foundation.

Those of us who boast so stable an endowment make no claim thereby to personal peace; we are not saved thereby alone. But we are of so glorious a company that we receive support, and have communion. The Mother of God is also ours. Our dead are with us. Even in these our earthly miseries we always hear the distant something of an eternal music, and smell a native air. There is a standard set for us whereto our whole selves respond, which is that of an inherited and endless life, quite full, in our own country.

You may say, "All this is rhetoric." You would be wrong, for it is rather vision, recognition, and testimony. But take it for rhetoric. Have *you* any such? Be it but rhetoric, whence does that stream flow? Or what reserve is that which can fill even such a man as myself with fire? Can *your* opinion (or doubt, or gymnastics) do the same? I think not!

One thing in this world is different from all other. It has a personality and a force. It is recognised, and (when recognised) most violently loved or hated. It is the Catholic Church. Within that household the human spirit has roof and hearth. Outside it, is the Night.

*In hac urbe lux solennis
Ver aeternum pax perennis
Et aeterna gaudia.*