

This Is a Hard Saying

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Abscondes eos in abscondito faciei tuae
Ps.xxx

1

A very influential contemporary author with a large readership wrote recently that he did not understand how some of the most intelligent people he knew could still believe in follies as distressful as those which are taught by the Catholic church. We will not be so simplistic as to reject this invective without distinctions. *Has not the good Lord told us that it has pleased him to save believers by the folly of preaching? that the doctrine of the cross is folly for those who perish? that what the world deems madness is what God has chosen to confound the wise? that the natural man does not receive the things of the spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he cannot know them?*¹

Certain philosophers have thought that the relationship of properly divine truth to natural truth could be compared to a series converging towards its limit. But this comparison tends to confuse the incomparable otherness of these two truths. Properly divine truth exceeds natural truth to such an extent that no natural truth permits us to have an inkling of that divine truth. It is written in effect *that the things which God has prepared for those who love Him are not revealed to the heart of man.*²

Others have held that divine truths are beyond us to such an extent that natural reason can teach things contrary to faith. Against *this* extreme we say with St. Thomas that if it is absolutely impossible for natural reason to come to a knowledge of truths that are of purely divine faith, it is equally impossible for this same reason to say that they are in truth impossible. If natural reason can know determinately that there are truths which it cannot conceive, it could not say determinately what these truths are. If for example, reason cannot say that the Trinity is impossible, it cannot say with any more determination that it is possible. We cannot say something is possible because we do not see its impossibility. And such is the limiting point of philosophical knowledge.

¹*I Cor. 1 and 2*

²*I Cor. 2,9*

We should not seek therefore, to weaken the strength of the Apostle's text; an erroneous understanding of the doctrine of analogy could destroy the profound significance of its meaning. If natural theology knows God *sub ratio entis*, in no way does it attain God as a part of the subject of metaphysics—it knows Him only as a principle completely extrinsic of that subject. It cannot know this principle as to what it is properly, that is, as to what constitutes it in its very otherness. It can know it only in a purely negative way. If God were contained within the limits of this being which makes up the subject of metaphysics, faith would serve only to reenforce in a certain way the *ratio entis* in converting it into the *ratio deitatis*. Or again, this latest conception of God would have us know determinately only what our first knowledge of Him lets us know obscurely. The knowledge of God according to his deity would then be at least in a straight line with philosophical wisdom, it would be as a limit of a converging series.

That is why the wisdom of this world becomes pure folly when it wishes to judge that wisdom which is properly divine. On the other hand, judged by the wisdom of the world, divine wisdom itself becomes foolishness, according to the daring expression of the Apostle. Philosophical wisdom, when it applies itself to things which are of purely divine faith can but encourage error. And it is in this sense that the words of Dionysius the Areopagite: *all human knowledge is error in comparison to divine knowledge*, are perfectly formal and not a simple hyperbole. Philosophy cannot be an aid to theology except under the title of *ancilla*. Philosophical truth can only influence the theological conclusion in virtue of its superelevation by the sapiential judgment of theology. It is not, therefore, in virtue of a power which would be proper to it that philosophy can be useful in theology. “That sacred science, says St. Thomas, employs other sciences . . . the motive is not because of its imperfection or its insufficiency, but because of the weakness of our intellect which, starting with things which are known by natural reason, and from which the other sciences proceed, can be more easily led, as by the hand, toward things which are above reason, the goal of this sacred science.”³

The truths to which we must adhere by faith are so much beyond the capacity of man as such, they are of another order so profound and so obscure that we cannot judge the degree of our faith according to the inclinations or repugnancies we find within ourselves in giving our firm adhesion. “One of the most remarkable favors, says St. John of the Cross, that the Savior gives to a soul during this life—even though it is not lasting but momentary—is to grant it a knowledge so clear and an impression so revealing of his divinity, that the soul understands and sees very distinctly the impossibility of having that knowledge and impression here below. When a soul rests upon the knowledge proper to it, or upon its tastes and sentiments to go to God, when it does not see that such means are without value and disproportioned to such an end, it easily leads itself astray, or stops itself on the way, by failing to attach itself blindly to faith alone, which is its true guide.”

There is no mystery of our faith where the otherness of the properly di-

³Ia, Q.1, a.5, ad 2

vine ways is more radiantly manifest than in that of the Holy Eucharist. It is concerning this doctrine that the Gospel relates: *Many of his disciples, having heard him, said "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it." Jesus, knowing himself that his disciples murmured about this, said to them "This scandalizes you?" From that moment, many of his disciples fell away and they went no more with him.*⁴ Let us pause a few moments to consider the care God has taken to make us adhere by faith alone to the great mystery of his Eucharist.

2

David Hume, in his *ENQUIRY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING*, attacks first of all the notion of causality. It is in denying the possibility of demonstrating the existence of a cause through its effect that he denies the possibility of knowing God by natural reason. He removes from natural wisdom precisely that which it can partake of the divine; he therefore denies natural wisdom. As Aristotle had said: "Wisdom (we understand here the wisdom man can acquire by reason alone) is a science which would be the most worthy for God to possess, and which would consider divine things. Now wisdom alone is possessed of this double character: God is quite truly a cause of all things and a principle, and such a science God alone, or at least principally God, can possess."

The second part of his *ENQUIRY* (Section x) is directed against the Catholic faith. He attacks miracles as motives of credibility. This attack is, at first glance, conducted most curiously. It opens with a disdainful charge against the doctrine of the Real Presence: "a doctrine so little worthy of serious refutation." Should this manner of procedure be attributed to stupidity or cunning? He cites the Eucharist as an example of the miracles to which the Apostles testified: "who were eye-witnesses to those miracles of our Savior"—and through which Christ proved his divine mission—"by which he proved his divine mission." But, pursuing the point, he says that the doctrine of the real presence contradicts sense. "It contradicts sense, though both the scripture and tradition, on which it is supposed to be built, carry not such evidence with them as sense; when they are considered merely as external evidences, and are not brought home to every one's breast, by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit."

Manifestly, he here makes a twofold confusion. He supposes that we assimilate the certitude of the miracle as an extrinsic motive of credibility to the certitude of faith. But, more insidiously, he destroys the certitude of the extrinsic motive, he renders it even absurd, in citing, either through ignorance or intention, the miracle of transubstantiation as the exemplar of miracles through which the truth of the Christian religion is proved. He wishes to ignore the fact that transubstantiation is precisely an absolutely invisible miracle, that this miracle is in no way a sign of the truth of revelation and a motive of credibility. We adhere to it, in fact, by divine faith alone. This miracle is, in effect the one the Apostles neither saw, nor touched, nor tasted. They simply heard the

⁴Joohn 5,35-66

words of Christ as we would have heard them. They reported them to us. And we believe in this miracle as did they—because Christ said it.

Notice the cunning—conscious or unconscious—of Hume’s method. Not only does he destroy the species of miracles which are extrinsic motives of credibility in citing the example of a miracle which does not belong to that species, but he destroys, at the same time, the sacrament which is the most hidden, the most profound, and the greatest in the whole of the Christian life. He attacks the faith under its purest form, that by which we adhere not only to that which is wholly invisible as is the most Holy Trinity, but also, and firmly, to that which contradicts the principle and origin of all our knowledge: the senses. He chooses the case where the divine truth is most manifestly beyond the intellectual knowledge which is based upon the senses. In the holy Eucharist, in effect, while the senses do not deceive themselves about their proper objects—they really are the accidents of bread and wine—it is nevertheless because of the senses that the intelligence, without faith, would fool itself as to the substance which is hidden under these accidents.

Visus, tactus, gustus in te fallitur,
Sed auditu solo tuto creditur.
Et si sensus deficit,
Ad firmandum cor sincerum
Sola fides sufficit.

It is in the faith in this sacrament that God demands of us the most complete abnegation of that which is the most profoundly human—I mean the loss of our proper judgment upon the substance of the object most proportioned to our intelligence.

But there is more. God chooses to hide the body and blood of the divine Savior, not under the appearance of a nutritive substance produced by the operations of nature alone: He chose the appearances of substances produced by the application of human art: bread and wine.

The perfect hiddenness of this *sacrum secretum* suits the perfection of the faith, says St. Thomas. Since God wishes us to participate in this divinity that no creature can know through its proper powers—no one has ever seen God⁵—is it not befitting that he demands of us a total faith in this Sacrament of the Way, the Truth, and the Life; a universal faith where reason removes itself from its dependance upon the senses, the source of its knowledge? Because our faith bears not only upon the divinity of Christ, but also upon his humanity by which he became like us so that we could become like unto him, is it not fitting to the very perfection of this same faith that in the Sacrament which contains substantially the very principle of all sanctification and which, in this perfect obscurity, announces in a manner so appropriate our union with him in the light of the future life, Christ shows his body and blood in an invisible manner?

In cruce latebat sola deitas,
At hic latet simul et humanitas.

⁵John I,18

On the cross, where the redemptive passion was accomplished, only the divinity was hidden. The senses could perceive the humanity of Jesus—a crushed humanity it is true, but at least visible. Whereas, in the Sacrament, the humanity itself is hidden under the appearance of a foreign sensible substance. *Sacramentum regis abscondere bonum est.*⁶ It is good, says Scripture, to hide the sacrament of the King, of the King who manifested himself to us in the total abnegation of the Passion. It is good that the semetipsum exinanivit—He emptied himself⁷—be shared by the senses in the sacrifice we offer in his memory. It is good, it is wise, that the Light of the perfect Passover be fully manifested to us in his present obscurity, in his dense darkness. *Et nox illuminatio mea.*⁸ *Nox nocti indicat scientiam.*⁹

It is, then, by a mercy truly unparalleled that God has deigned to meet us in perfect night and that, in order to elevate us to his own heights, he has satisfied for all our insufficiencies, he has asked in our act of faith an abnegation analogous to that of his Son. *This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?*¹⁰ But is not the harshness of this saying for human ears the reason for us to adhere to it with a faith all the more firm? Is it not an admirable manifestation of the otherness of the divine truth having henceforward become “ours”? Instead, therefore, of being scandalized with his murmuring disciples, or intimidated by those who hold divine truth as scandalous, we have, on the contrary, every reason to cry out with St. Peter: *Master, you have the words of eternal life!* The more the words you ask me to believe are different from my own, the more you—Word of Life—draw me towards you as you are in yourself. *That he would kiss me with the kiss of his mouth!*¹¹ That he would tell me these unparalleled words, these words to which I listen without understanding. Master, you are the word of life. You are the Word which no human word can express. The human word renders vain the cross of Christ.¹² Tell me the words you have formed.

“*And you, do you not also want to leave?*” Simon Peter answered him: “*Master, to whom shall we go?*”¹³ Is it not a mercy admirable above all that abandoned by all we can no further go except to him, in the surrender of this mystery of Faith where hides in a perfectly adapted silence the one whose name is Word?

⁶Tobias 12,7

⁷Philippians 2,7

⁸Psalms 138,11

⁹Psalms 18,3

¹⁰John 6,6

¹¹Canticle 1,2

¹²I Cor. 1,17

¹³John 6,6