



**Dispositions
for Faith**

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Cardinal Newman*

Booklet

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Dispositions for Faith

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INTRODUCTION

Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his path. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways plain. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

The holy baptist was sent before our Lord to prepare his way; that is, to be his instrument in rousing, warning, humbling, and inflaming the hearts of people so that, when he came, they might believe in him. He himself is the author and finisher of that faith, of which he is also the object; but ordinarily he does not implant it in us suddenly, but he first creates certain dispositions. And these he carries on to faith as their reward. When then he was about to appear on Earth among his chosen people and to claim for himself their faith, he made use of St. John first to create in them these necessary dispositions; and therefore it is that, at this season when we are about to celebrate his birth, we commemorate again and again the great saint who was his forerunner, as in today's gospel, lest we forget that, without due preparation of heart, we cannot hope to obtain and keep the all-important gift of faith.

THE SIN OF UNBELIEF

It is observable too that on this same day, the fifth day before Christmas, we are accustomed to celebrate the feast of St. Thomas, who for a while incurred the sin of unbelief; as if our tender Mother Holy Church, as an additional safeguard, would make an example of the great apostle for our sakes and held him, who now reigns with Christ in heaven, up to us in the image of his earthly weakness in order to force us to consider that certain dispositions of mind are necessary for faith, and how the lack of these dispositions shows itself, and why that is blameworthy.

I think, then, that I shall be taking a subject suitable both to the season and the day if I attempt to set before you, my brethren, as far as time permits, how it is, humanly speaking, that a man comes to believe the revealed word of God, and why one man believes and another does not. And, in describing the state of mind and thought which leads to faith, of course I shall not be forgetting that faith, as I have already said, is a supernatural work and the fruit of divine grace. I shall only be calling your attention to what must be your own part in the process.

As to the account given us in Scripture of St. Thomas' incredulity, its prominent points are these: first, that when told by his brethren that our Lord was risen he said, "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my fingers into the place of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." Now, here the question is, What was wrong in this? For the other apostles had seen and touched our Lord, and appear not to have believed till they did. Secondly, that our Lord said to him on a subsequent occasion, after allowing the evidence he desired, "Because you have seen me, Thomas, you have believed; blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed." Now, why is it blessed to believe in him without seeing, rather than to have sight of him which the apostles had when they believed?

The subject is a very large one: .I shall attempt to follow out only one of various trains of thought to which it gives rise.

CHRIST PRAISES BELIEF

Now, first, I think it will be granted by anyone who knows Scripture well that the teaching laid down by our Lord on the occasion in question had been expressed by him on other occasions and in other ways. For instance, he said, "Unless you see signs and wonders, you believe not." Elsewhere we read, "He wrought not many miracles then because of their unbelief." In these passages he implies that hardness of belief is blameworthy. Elsewhere he praises easiness of belief. For instance, "O woman, great is thy faith." "Amen, I say to you, I have not found so great faith in Israel." "Be of good heart, daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole." "Thy faith hath made thee safe, go in peace." "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." I might quote many other passages to the same effect, from the gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, and St. Paul's epistles.

Now these passages cannot mean that faith is against reason, or that reason does not ordinarily precede faith, for this would be a teaching quite contrary to revelation. But I think I shall not be wrong in understanding them thus—that with good dispositions faith is easy, and that without good dispositions faith is not easy; and that those who were blamed for their unbelief were such as were wanting in this respect and would have believed, or believed sooner, if they had possessed the necessary dispositions for believing or a greater share of them. This is the point I am going to insist on: I am led to it by the Baptist's special office of "preparing the way of the Lord"; for by that preparation is meant the creating in the hearts of his hearers the dispositions necessary for faith. And I consider that the same truth is implied in the glorious hymn of the angels on Christmas night. For whom was the Prince of Peace to come to? They sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace to men of good will." By "good will" is meant "good disposition"; the peace of the gospel, the full gifts of the knowledge and of the power and of the consolation of Christian redemption, were to be the reward of men of good dispositions. They were the men to whom the infant Savior came; they were those in whom his grace would find its fruit and recompense; they were those who by congruous merit would be led on as the evangelist says, to "believe in his name," and "to be born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

Now, in order to show what this good will, or good disposition, is, and how it bears upon faith, I observe as follows: What is the main guide of the soul, given to the whole race of Adam, outside the true fold of Christ as well as within it, given from the first dawn of reason, given to it in spite of that grievous penalty of ignorance which is one of the chief miseries of our fallen state? It is the light of conscience, "the true light," as the same evangelist says in the same passage, "which enlightens every man that comes into this world." Whether a man be born in pagan darkness, or in some corruption of revealed religion—whether he has heard the name of the Savior of the world or not—whether he be the slave of some superstition—or is in possession of some portions of Scripture and treats the inspired word as a sort of philosophical book which he interprets for himself and comes to certain conclusions about—in any case he has within his breast a certain commanding dictate, not a mere sentiment, not a mere opinion or impression or view of things, but a law, an authoritative voice, bidding him to do certain things and avoid others. I do not say that its particular injunctions are always clear, or that they are always consistent with each other; but what I am insisting on here is this, that it commands—that it praises, it blames, it promises, it threatens, it implies a future, and it witnesses to the unseen. It is more than a man's own self. The man himself has no power over it, or only with extreme difficulty. He did not make it; he cannot destroy it. He may silence it in particular cases or directions; he may distort its enunciations. But he cannot, or it is quite the exception if he can, he cannot emancipate himself from it. He can disobey it; he may refuse to use it. But it remains.

This is conscience; and, from the nature of the case, its very existence carries our minds on to a being exterior to ourselves. For otherwise where did it come from? And to a being superior to ourselves, else where does its strange, troublesome peremptoriness come from? I say, without going on to question what it says and whether its particular dictates are always as clear and consistent as they might be, that its very existence throws us out of ourselves and beyond ourselves, to go and seek in the height and depth for him whose voice it is. As the sunshine implies that the sun is in the heavens though we may not see it, as a knocking at our doors at night implies the presence of one outside in the dark who asks for admittance, so this work within us not only instructs us up to a certain point, but necessarily raises our minds to the idea of a teacher, an unseen teacher: and in proportion as we listen to that word and use it, not only do we learn more from it, not only do its dictates become clearer and its lessons broader and its principles more

consistent, but its very tone is louder and more authoritative and constraining. And thus it is that more is given to those who use what they have; for, beginning with obedience, they go on to the intimate perception of one God. His voice within them witnesses to him, and they believe his own witness about himself. They believe in his existence, not because others say it, not on the word of man merely, but with a personal apprehension of its truth. This then is the first step in those good dispositions which lead to faith in the gospel.

POINTS TO DIVINE LAW

And my second remark is this: that, in spite of all that this voice does for them, it does not do enough, as they most keenly and sorrowfully feel. They find it difficult to separate what it really says, taken by itself, from what their own passion or pride, self-love or self-will, mingles with it. Many are the times when they cannot tell how much that true inward guide commands, and how much comes from a mere earthly source. So the gift of conscience raises a desire for what it does not itself fully supply. It inspires in them the idea of authoritative guidance, of divine law; and it inspires the desire of possessing it in its fullness, not in mere fragmentary portions or indirect suggestions. It creates in them a thirst, an impatience, for the knowledge of that unseen Lord and Governor and Judge who as yet speaks to them only secretly, who whispers in their hearts, who tells them something, but not nearly so much as they wish and as they need. Thus you see, my brethren, a religious man, who has not the blessing of the infallible teaching of revelation, is led to look for it, for the very reason that he is religious. He has something, but not all; and if he did not desire more, it would be a proof that he had not used, that he not profited by, what he had. Hence he will be on the look-out. Such is the definition, I may say, of every religious man, who has not the knowledge of Christ: he is on the look-out. As the Jewish believers were on the look-out for a Messiah who they knew was to come, so at all times, and under all dispensations, and in all sects, there are those who know there is a truth, who know they do not possess it except in a very low measure, who desire to know more, who know that he alone who has taught them what they know can teach them more, who hope that he will teach them more, and who therefore are on the look-out for his teaching.

CONSCIENCE IS SEVERE

There is another reason why they will be thus waiting and watching for some further knowledge of God's will than they possess at present. It is because the more a person tries to obey his conscience, the more he gets alarmed at himself for obeying it so imperfectly. His sense of duty becomes more keen and his perception of transgression more delicate, and he understands more and more how many things he has to be forgiven for. But next while he thus grows in self-knowledge, he also understands more and more clearly that the voice of conscience has nothing gentle, nothing of mercy, in its tone. It is severe and even stern. It does not speak of forgiveness but of punishment. It suggests to him a future judgment; it does not tell him how he can avoid it. Moreover it does not tell him how he is to get better. He feels himself very sinful at the best; he feels himself in bondage to a tyranny which he loves too well even while he hates it. And thus he is in anguish, and cries in the Apostle's words, "Unhappy man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of this death?"

For all these reasons then—because he feels his ignorance, because he feels his bondage, because he feels his guilt and danger—a religious man who does not have the blessing of revelation will be on the look-out for revelation. And this is the second disposition leading to faith in Christ: the first was belief in God, as our Teacher, Governor, and Judge; and the second is the earnest desire that he would reveal himself, and an eager looking-out for his doing so.

This is the state of mind of the elect few: now, on the other hand, let us consider the state of mind of the multitude, who think little or nothing of religion, who disobey their conscience, who think as little of its dictates as they can, who would get rid of it if they could. What will they know of the convictions, the apprehensions, and the hopes and wishes of which I have been speaking? Will they have any anxiety, any painful longing to be brought out of their present darkness? Will they, being as I am supposing strangers to revealed truth, will they be on the look-out for revelation? What is revelation to them? What do they care how sins are to be forgiven when they do not feel the burden of sin? What desire do they have for strength greater than their own to overcome their passions or their pride, seeing that they

make much of their pride as their true dignity, and freely indulge their passions as their sole joy? They are contented with themselves; they think themselves as happily conditioned as they can be under the circumstances; they only wish to be let alone; they feel no need of priest or prophet; they live in their own way and in their own home, pursuing their own tastes, never looking out of doors; perhaps with natural virtues, perhaps not, but with no distinct or consistent religious sense. Thus they live, and thus they die. Such is the character of the many, all over the Earth; they never rise above the world; and, it is plain, they have nothing of those dispositions at all which lead to faith.

OPEN OR CLOSED TO BELIEF?

Now take a man from each of these two classes, and suppose the news actually reaches them both that a message has been received from the unseen world: how will they respectively act? It is plain: on him who has been looking out, or hoping, or at least longing, for such a mercy, its operation will be wonderful. It will affect him profoundly; it will thrill through him so much so that, provided only the message on examination be of a nature to answer his needs, he will be under a strong temptation to believe it, if he can, on very little evidence or on none at all. At any rate he will set about inquiring what its evidence is, and will do his best to find out, whether it be more or less. On the other hand, the man who is without the religious dispositions I have been describing simply will not be moved at all. He will take no interest in it. He will sit at home, and it will not even occur to him that he ought to rise and look about him. He will be as little stirred, as if he heard that a great man had arisen in the antipodes, or that there was a revolution in Japan. Here then we have come to the critical difference between the two descriptions of men. The one is active and the other passive when Christ is preached as the Savior of the world. The one goes to meet the Truth; the other thinks that the Truth ought to come to him. The one tries to prove that God has spoken; the other waits till God's message is proved to him. He feels no personal interest in it; he thinks it not his own concern but (if I may say so) God Almighty's concern. He does not care to make the most of his knowledge; he does not put things together. He does not add up his facts and cumulate his arguments; he leaves all this to be done for him by him who speaks to him. And if he is to have any trouble in the matter, then he is willing to dismiss it altogether. And then, supposing proof actually is offered him, he feels no sort of gratitude or delicacy toward him who offers it; he says without compunction, "I do not see this," and "That does not follow." For he is a critic and a judge, not an inquirer; and he negotiates and bargains, when he ought to be praying for light. And thus he learns nothing rightly, and goes to reject a divine message, because he will not throw himself on and into the evidence; while his neighbor, who has concern for his own salvation, finds it and believes.

Returning then to what I said when I began, we see now how it was that our Lord praised easiness of belief, and condemned hardness of belief. To be

easy in believing is nothing more or less than to have been ready to inquire; to be hard of belief is nothing else but to have been reluctant to inquire. Those whose faith he praised had no stronger evidence than those whose unbelief he condemned; but they had used their eyes, used their reason, exerted their minds, and persevered in inquiry till they found. But the others, whose unbelief he condemned, had heard indeed but let the divine seed lie by the roadside, or in the rocky soil, or among the thorns which choked it. And here I am led to say what seems to me, as far as it is reverent to conjecture it, to be the fault of the holy apostle St. Thomas. He said that he would not believe that our Lord had risen unless he actually saw him. Is there not more than one way of arriving at faith in Christ? Are there not a hundred proofs, distinct from each other and all good ones? Was there no way of being sure he came from God except seeing the great miracle of the resurrection? Surely there were many others; and St. Thomas was wrong in prescribing the only mode in which he would consent to believe in him. This was the case of his countrymen too, for in this point he only did what they had done. The Jews had long been the people of God, and they had the writings of the prophets. The fulfillment of the prophecies in the person of our Lord was the most obvious and natural evidence to the Jews that he was the Messiah; but they would not accept this evidence, and determined to have something else. They determined to be convinced in one particular way, namely, by miracles; and when, out of the superabundant mercy of God, miracles were worked before their eyes, then they insisted on the particular kind of miracle which would convince them and would not believe unless it was a miracle of their choice. And so it was that our Lord said, as I have already quoted his words: "Unless you see signs and wonders, you believe not." And so too he said, on other occasions: "O foolish and slow of heart to believe all things which the prophets have spoken." And: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe if one rise again from the dead." And: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, and a sign shall not be given it, but the sign of Jonah the prophet." And hence the Jews of Thessalonica are censured, and the Bereans on the contrary praised, "who received the word with all eagerness, daily searching the Scriptures whether these things were so." It is added, "And many of them believed." And therefore, in the instance of St. Thomas, I say that, when he was too slow to believe, his fault lay in thinking he had a right to be fastidious, to pick and choose what arguments he would be convinced by, instead of asking himself whether he did not have enough to convince him already; just as if it were a great matter to his Lord that he should believe and no matter at all to himself. And therefore it was

that, while Christ graciously granted him the kind of proof he desired, he said to him for our sakes: "Because you have seen me, Thomas, you have believed; blessed are they that have not seen and have believed."

And so it is now: many are the people who have an attraction toward the Catholic Church and resist it on the plea that they do not have sufficient proof of her claims. Now they cannot have proof all at once, they cannot be converted all at once, I grant. But they can inquire; they can determine to resolve the doubt before they put it aside, though it cost labor and time to do so. The intimate feeling of their hearts should be: "What must I do that I may be saved?" Their best consolation is the promise: "Ask, and it shall be given to you. Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and it shall be opened to you." If, instead of this, they quarrel with this or that particular proof, never think of inquiring for themselves and ascertaining where the truth lies, content themselves with admiring the Church and so end the matter, what is this but the conduct of people who have no sensitive conscience, who love their own ease, or the comforts of life, or their worldly reputations, or the society of their relatives, or their worldly interests, and considers that religious truth is not worth the sacrifice of these temporal advantages?

THE DISPOSITIONS OF CATHOLICS

Do not suppose, my brethren, that what I have been saying about inquirers does not apply to you. Catholics, indeed, do not have to seek; the anxious questions which natural conscience asks are in your case answered to the full. You know who saves you, and how. But recollect that that same sensitiveness and delicacy of conscience which is the due disposition for faith is also its safeguard and its nutriment when it is at length possessed. It feeds the flame of faith, and makes it burn brightly. St. Paul speaks of those who, having "rejected a good conscience," had "made shipwreck of their faith." Such particularly will be the case in a situation like this. Catholics go into the world; they mix with men of all religions; they hear all manner of sophistical objections made to the Church, her doctrine, and her rules. As a practical matter, what is to keep them steady in the faith but their intimate perception of their need of it? What is to bring them to the sacrament of penance but their sorrow and detestation of sin? What is to bring them to Communion but a thirst for the living and true God? What is to be their protection against the aberrations of the intellect but the deep convictions and aspirations of the heart?

“ARGUMENTS” FOR RELIGION

My dear brethren, this is a day when much stress is laid on the arguments for believing religion, natural and revealed; and books are written to prove what we ought to believe, and why. These books are called natural theology and evidences of Christianity; and it is often said by our enemies that Catholics do not know why they believe.

Now I have no intention whatever of denying the beauty and the cogency of the arguments which these books contain; but I question seriously whether in fact they make or keep people Christians. I have no such doubt about the argument which I have been recommending here to you. Be sure, my brethren, that the best argument, better than all the books in the world, better than all that astronomy, and geology, and physiology, and all other sciences, can supply—an argument intelligible to those who cannot read as well as to those who can—an argument which is "within us"—an argument intellectually conclusive and practically persuasive, whether for proving the being of a God or for laying the ground for Christianity—is that which arises out of a careful attention to the teachings of our hearts, and a comparison between the claims of conscience and the announcements of the gospel.



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