

## ORTHODOXY, REALITY AND HOLINESS

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Orthodoxy, when fully embraced and when it penetrates one's whole life, aligns us with God and creation in the way He designed us to be. By "orthodoxy," I mean a system of beliefs that are in conformity with Divine Revelation as taught by the Scriptures and the official teachings of the Catholic Church. Divine Revelation, by its nature, is a gift from God by which we come to know the actual structure of reality in a limited, though true and understandable way. It has the nature of a solid, inflexible "thing," one that thwarts all our efforts to twist or ignore, standing like a wall of brass against the ceaseless attacks of a world in open rebellion against God.

It is possible, and even common, that orthodoxy can be the weapon of pride, serving our egos while leaving our hearts untransformed by the holiness, power, mercy and tenderness of God and His word. It is only necessary to look at the example of the Pharisees to see what the consequences can be of religiosity that either doesn't affect the heart or affects it in the wrong way. Of course, it is even more profitable to look at ourselves to see the log in our own eyes so that we will not follow that path a moment longer than we have up to this point!

For me, in my relationship with the teachings of the Catholic Church, once I accepted the divine origin of the Church's authority, the struggle has usually gone like this. I see that something **MUST** be true, because the Bible or the Church teaches it to be true, but the story does not end there. A massive internal struggle ensues, in which my habits of thinking and feeling are confronted with something that shows them that they have been mistaken. I understand the reasons people usually give in support of that belief, but I find them to be insufficient to fully win over my mind and heart. The struggle between my will, which remains faithful to what I have come to accept as God's revealed word and my emotions and intellect continues until, through persistence, prayer, study and obedience to the challenging teaching, my mind and heart are gradually won over.

This interior battle is actually one aspect of the renewal of the mind. St. Paul, in Romans 12:2, states the following: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (NAB). The world around us presents a point of view on most issues that differs in some respect with the teaching of the Catholic Church. Sometimes, this difference is radical or even hostile. Unless you and I were raised in an unusual isolation from the world around us, we have all been submerged into the value system of the world. Some of these values that have sunk

into our minds through osmosis or by the direct effort of teachers and journalists are the following:

1. All morality is relative.
2. Human life has no innate value outside the value we place upon it.
3. The truth about God (if His existence is accepted at all) is unknowable.
4. Any sexual act between consenting adults is good and healthy.
5. It is arrogant and dangerous to believe that you have found the objective truth about God or morality.

These values are extremely powerful, and are difficult to deal with decisively even in our own minds. There is a powerful emotional force that accompanies these beliefs that gets much of its power from *the whole world's* monolithic acceptance of them. They are based on faulty premises, but once a person accepts those unstated premises, the above conclusions follow almost from necessity.

Coming to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and the teachings of the Church as His divinely revealed teachings does not do away with the emotional power attached to the value system of the world. The process of mind renewal begins with an act of the will, choosing to accept the Word of God as true, *even if the whole world disagrees with it*. This is truly only the beginning. The intellect and emotions are very honest, and one cannot browbeat them into submission. Rather, they must be persuaded, and such persuasion may take many years to accomplish. A person may think that such persuasion has been finally accomplished when a new statement of the question or even of another question sends the intellect and emotions into a fresh new tailspin!

At the beginning of our conversion (or reversion) to the Catholic faith, we make the fundamental choice to accept God's way rather than our own. We see that, as Creator, if God says it, it must be right and true. We come to accept "the package;" so to speak, of the Catholic Church and the Bible. For someone like me, this acceptance is complete on the level of the will (or very strong indeed), but paltry on the levels of the intellect and emotions. *Do not underestimate the emotional aspect of belief*, whether it concern belief in God, evolution or atheism! I estimate that 80% or more of our difficulties any teaching of the Church is rooted in emotional factors. We experience fear, repugnance, anger, the desire to avoid looking foolish, pride and much else when facing a doctrine or teaching that is unpopular, and these emotions may be attached to some minute detail. Such emotions, if strong enough, powerfully urge us to reject the teaching or doctrine.

Do not fall into the error of thinking that this is simply a modern phenomenon, a by-product of scientific advancement or of the advent of systems of thought that reject the validity of faith (the "Enlightenment"). St. Paul's admonition to the Romans that they "be

transformed by the renewal of their mind[s]” would be meaningless if the “pattern of this world” was not at odds with their faith, and if that “pattern” of thought and action were not powerfully alluring. Any study of the controversies in the early Church will reveal numerous popular trends that threatened to tear the Church to pieces, such as the various forms of Gnosticism that Paul and John confronted in their epistles. There have always been new, trendy, highly nuanced systems of thought confronting the Church, and highly intelligent and well-meaning people have embraced them. Nobody has ever wanted to appear to be unenlightened, simple-minded or foolish, and embracing the Catholic faith automatically puts a person in those categories in the minds of those on the outside of the Church. This was as true 2000 years ago as it is today.

A key assumption of St. Paul in his teaching on the renewal of the mind (and, really, in all the teachings of the New Testament) is that it is possible to know the truth without confusion or error. Early Christians were convinced that the teachings of the Apostles were not merely attractive or meaningful, but *true*. They were confident that the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Old Testament as seen through the prism of the Gospel presented a *true vision of reality*, and not merely a more meaningful one.

When faced with intellectual questions and emotional resistance to Divine Revelation, the path of fidelity to Revelation is the path of conversion to God. Deeper surrenders to the Lord become more and more necessary in this process, along with the duties of intellectual honesty and rigor. We need to think, and to think clearly, but to hold doggedly—even violently at times, to “the pattern of teaching to which we were entrusted” (Romans 6:17). The moral battle against sin is no more difficult than the battle of intellectual conversion. In some ways, the intellectual battle is more challenging, because it requires that we give up the absolute right to decide what is right, wrong, true or false for ourselves. This renunciation crucifies our pride at a profound level.

This is why doctrinal faith adhering to a teaching of the Church or the Scriptures is a virtue, and one which affects our eternal destiny: it is a fundamental aspect of conversion! Our lives need to line up with God’s created order, with His revealed plan, in order for us to relate to God, ourselves, other human beings and creation itself aright. We need faith in order to prevail in this battle, including trustful surrender to God who reveals, confidence in His power to reveal moral and doctrinal truth and to preserve that truth from generation to generation until the return of Jesus at the end of time.

This struggle, when endured with fidelity to Revelation and deep devotion to and love for the Lord who gave it to us, with a life steeped in prayer and obedient to the commandments, leads us inexorably into a deeper and more profound relationship with the Lord. It requires and strengthens humility, that immensely important virtue, because our posture is always that of student, disciple, learner, rather than critic, teacher and

master. Then we are able, with St. Paul, to say that “what I myself received, I handed on to you,” (1 Cor. 10:3) or, with Chesterton, “I will not call it my philosophy; for I did not make it. God and humanity made it; and it made me” (Orthodoxy, p. 1).

It is difficult to overstate the importance of obeying God, which requires knowing His will, accepting His will and the decision to conform our lives to His will. Jesus said in John 8:31-32, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (NAB). This seems to crystallize the process I am describing into a few sentences. Essentially, knowing the truth in an experiential, powerful, life-changing way requires perseverance and obedience to God’s word.

Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus unfolds this teaching more fully:

“Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me. And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him . . . Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him. Whoever does not love me will not keep my words; yet the word you hear is not mine but that of the Father who sent me” (Jn. 14:21, 23 NAB).

God wants us to know Him, not merely as a “proposition” on an intellectual level, but in an intimate, personal way, in the biblical sense of what it means “to know.” Adam “knew” Eve and she conceived a child! This knowledge of God is a work of the Holy Spirit. Even a very cursory reading of the New Testament shows us that the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of early Christians was a powerful reality that was part of their normal experience. The lives of the Saints throughout the centuries bears witness to the fact that the Holy Spirit’s work did not end 2000 years ago, but has always been present in the life of the Church. However, it is quite possible to have mystical experiences and yet not attain to a true knowledge of God, since the knowledge of God consists in the perfection of love in our lives. This love is not merely a shapeless benevolent attitude, but a generosity shaped by God’s word, as stated by John: “Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and in truth” (1Jn. 3:18 NAB). Love must be expressed in deeds, and those deeds need to be in accord with the truth; that is, in conformity with God’s word and the true nature of ourselves and of the world around us.

Jesus tells us that it is in the daily battle of seeking to obey His commandments that our hearts are more and more prepared for a deeper encounter with Him. This is a fundamental spiritual principle that no shortcut can circumvent. The human heart is, as a result of the Fall, fundamentally alienated from God apart from the grace of Christ made available through His cross and resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our

cooperation with God's grace on the level spoken of in the New Testament is only possible if we, on a daily basis, dedicate ourselves to the work of obedience to His word. It is this struggle that St. Paul so powerfully described in Romans 7, stating:

"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good" (Romans 7:14-16, NIV).

It is in the midst of this struggle to obey God *when our inner inclination is to do the opposite* that we discover the power of the God's grace that flows from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. St. Paul describes the dilemma and its solution this way:

"Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:21b-25, NIV).

This struggle as described by St. Paul reveals at least five key assumptions:

1. That God's law is good.
2. That sin is by definition disobedience to God's law.
3. That we can know God's law with clarity and certitude.
4. That God's law challenges us at the deepest level, and is impossible to fully obey it on our own power.
5. That the power to grow in freedom from sin and in obedience to God's law is available through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Thus, it becomes clear that the road to holiness, to the freedom Jesus Christ died to give us begins with coming to know God's will through divine revelation, and proceeds through the arduous work of discipleship: trying, failing, getting back up, praying for grace, failing again and again, getting back up, receiving the sacraments, avoiding the near occasion of sin and in all this remaining committed to God's commands even unto death. To compromise, that is, to seek to change God's law because His commands seem to be too difficult, too costly, unfair or even outdated, is to cut off this process of sanctification before it even gets started.

Let us firmly fix our eyes on Jesus and commit our lives wholeheartedly to Him. Let us confess our powerlessness, our readiness (all too often) to take the path of least resistance and our desperate need for His saving, sanctifying grace. Let us make His word the standard by which we live and the lens through which we perceive our lives and the world around us, and let us pray with the psalmist:

“Teach me, LORD, the way of your decrees,  
that I may follow it to the end.

Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law  
and obey it with all my heart.

Direct me in the path of your commands,  
for there I find delight” (Ps. 119:33-35, NIV).