

WHAT IS CATHOLICISM?

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What is Catholicism? by Edmond Scherer

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EDMOND SCHERER

**WHAT IS
CATHOLICISM?**

What is Catholicism ?

BY
EDMOND SCHERER

TRANSLATED BY THE
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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THE
REV. R. F. HORTON, M.A., D.D.

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INTRODUCTION

THE startling passage of arms between Prof. Mivart and Cardinal Vaughan, the ex-communication of the man of science by the Cardinal, and the triumph of the Cardinal in consigning the body of his antagonist to an unconsecrated and Godless grave, have raised again in England a question which had for some years slumbered.

Catholicism, it is true, had never pretended to be tolerant, but Protestants in their charity had ascribed to it a virtue which it could not affect, and it had allowed the soft impeachment in the interests of a conversion on which it was set.

Suddenly the inexorable hand of fact drew aside the veil and scattered illusion. It became evident that the Roman Church was

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what she was in the days of Galileo—shorn of the power, and that the sacred deposit of human liberty could only be secured by shattering the claims of a Church which was its irreconcilable foe.

When Father Clarke came forward with the Theory of Catholicism, and claimed that the subsequent developments of dogma had been contained in the deposit which Christ handed to His Apostles, that Christ instructed Peter in the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin and in the Infallibility of the Pope, as well as in the doctrine of Transubstantiation and the system of Penance, immediately the educated world realised the fact that it was still face to face with the old Obscurantism, and that before the demands of the Church the truth of science and the truth of history, and with these the truth of morals and the truth of life, must inevitably go down.

Such a reminder and such a shock will give a singular interest to M. Scherer's letters, which, originally provoked by the promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate

Conception, are equally relevant to every fresh assertion of the Roman Authority.

M. Scherer was a master of that luminous style which seems to find its only fitting expression in French. He had many of the qualities of Pascal, and his letters stand in the legitimate succession of the *Letters to a Provincial*. If he had not Pascal's incomparable irony, he had in compensation a firmer and clearer grasp of positive truth, and the more extensive and philosophical view of religious problems which has only become possible in this century.

Never was the case of the truth-seeker stated against Roman claims with more temper, with more candour, or with more convincing logic. The conversation with which the letters are completed, between the writer and his hitherto silent correspondent, clinches the argument, and shows that there is and can be no answer :

“The Catholic believes by proxy. In this system faith is a blank cheque, which the faithful hands to the Church to fill up. It is

the faith of the charcoal-burner—'I believe what my curé believes.' 'And what does he believe?' 'Oh, he believes what the Church believes.'"

There is the whole situation in a nutshell. But why should men be ready to hand over this blank cheque to the Church? It is the human infirmity that wishes to have religion without being religious, to compound with God, and yet not to yield to God, to be rid of religious responsibility by committing it to the loudest claimant. There is "a need which most men feel of renouncing all spiritual individuality, all personal piety, in order to allow themselves to be taught, directed, and sanctified by the priest."

The future of Catholicism is therefore assured. "Catholicism is at once perishable, like everything that is of man; eternal, like everything that is of humanity." Its future is assured; it will be the religion of the nations and the persons that, regardless or despairing of truth, have renounced progress. It will attract and retain decadents.