

THE CHRISTIAN CATHOLIC.

IN a retired village of —— there lived, not long ago, a good curé, amongst some two or three hundred parishioners. One Sunday, after mass, as he reflected upon the little benefit which his auditors had probably derived from it, he found himself in the midst of some dozen of his people, who were chatting before the door of the church. It occurred to him that a familiar conversation with these simple villagers, might be more useful to them than the Latin vespers. He halted, therefore, amongst them, seated himself upon a stone, and, resting his hands on the head of his walking-stick, he commenced thus in a goodnatured tone:—

“Tell me, John, are you a Christian?”

“Eh! yes, Mr. Curé,” replied John, all amazed.

“And how did you become a Christian?”

“Because—because you baptized me when I was quite little; and so I am a Christian.”

“Well, but my good fellow, do you think that that thief, whom the police arrested last month upon the highway, and who was condemned yesterday to ten

years in the galleys, for having stolen £800 from our notary—do you think that that robber was a Christian?"

"Most certainly not!"

"However, like yourself, he received baptism when he was quite little. So you see that baptism does not make a Christian.—And you, George, are you a Christian?"

"Yes."

"And why?"

"Because I—I've made my first communion?"

"Well, you have heard speak of Cartouche?"

"Yes, sometimes."

"Was *he* a Christian?"

"No, he was a brigand like Mandrin."

"Well now, my friend, Cartouche and Mandrin had both received their first communion: so you see also, that the communion does not make the Christian."

Our worthy peasants regarded each other, not well knowing what their curé was about. He continued:—

"Mr. Schoolmaster, you can better inform us, I dare say, what renders you a Christian?"

The schoolmaster, persuaded that the curé had selected him to decide the difficulty to the satisfaction of all, was, for a moment, greatly flattered to hear himself thus appealed to; so, after having coughed, and cleared his throat, he replied:—

"I am a Christian, 1st, because I go every Sunday

to mass ; 2ndly, because I go to confession every month ; 3rdly, because I observe the penances imposed ; I repeat my paternosters ; I keep the fasts—Lent, and all the rest."

"Your answer is longer than the others (the pedagogue looked well satisfied with this commencement) ; but it is worth no more (the master betrayed his vexation) ; for you must remember," continued the curé, "that all the heretics condemned by the church, all the hypocrites who trade in religion, go to mass, fast, recite their paters, observe their penances : and yet neither these heretics, nor these hypocrites, are Christians."

The auditors were more and more surprised—every one feared to be questioned : a child of ten years of age present was alone unconcerned, it was to this child the curé addressed himself.

"Tell me, my little Joseph, what must one do to be a Christian ?"

"Sir, we must love the blessed God, and be very good."

"Blessed art thou, heavenly Father!" exclaimed the pastor, raising his eyes to heaven ; "for that thou hast revealed to babes the things which thou hast hid from those who think themselves wise and prudent ! Yes, my friends, that which makes the Christian, is the feeling of his heart. He who has faith in Jesus Christ to obtain for him forgiveness of his sins, and who, thus

pardoned, loves God with all his heart, and his neighbour as himself, he is a Christian: in two words—religion consists not in the ceremonies performed by our feet, our hands, or our mouths; it is in the sentiments of faith and love of our hearts.”

The curé here ended his conversation, and withdrew. These words, which so completely astonished our good peasants, will not so much surprise the reader, when he learns that our curé, for some time past, had devoted himself to the reading of a great volume, inherited from an uncle; and that that study, in which he was seen to be engaged morning and evening, preceded and followed by prayer, had caused him more than once to forget his breviary, and had sensibly modified his religious opinions.

He thought he saw, in his church, more than one thing which was not good; yet, not being at present quite clear about it, he continued, at the same time, to read his book, and to say the mass.

But, this time, he had wounded the self-esteem of the schoolmaster, who, to revenge himself, reported the said conversation to the vicar: he spoke in his turn to the Bishop, and the following Thursday the curé received from his superior, who was also his uncle and his friend, the letter which follows:—

“My dear nephew, and brother in Jesus Christ,—It has been told me, that last Sunday you held in your

church a conversation, the consequence of which will be to bring into contempt all the holy practices of our church, and which puts the salvation of man beyond the influence of the priest. You are aware how dangerous such doctrines are. I wish to believe that your words have been ill understood, and that, without doubt, you meant to say that all these practices ought to be accompanied by the sentiments of the heart; but that ceremonies and feeling are equally necessary; that if faith and repentance be necessary on the part of the believer, the intervention of the priest is no less necessary to receive that faith, to receive that repentance, and to perform the ceremonies of baptism, confirmation, extreme unction, &c., without which there is no salvation. I hope, then, that you will give me this explanation in your reply, and, at the same time, thus explain yourself in your next exhortation at mass.

“I salute you,” &c.

The curé read and re-read this letter: he found in it something which wounded his feelings and offended his reason; however, he scarcely knew how he should reply. . . . He did not reply; he waited, and during that time it was noticed that he shut himself up more frequently in his study to pray and read his folio, as you could see from that corner of the garden towards which his window looked. At length after some weeks of study, here is the answer he sent:—

“My Lord, and dear Uncle,—I said that all the ceremonies of the Church do nothing for salvation; and to-day, after having prayed to God and read his word, I say again, they are of no avail. There are only three ways by which we can suppose salvation to be attainable;—either by ceremonies alone—and in this case the greatest villains dying in impenitence would be saved (which you would admit no more than myself); or, the religious ceremonies and the sentiments of the heart are equally indispensable. This you believe to be true, and this I am about to show to be false. If baptism, confirmation, fasts, mass, extreme unction, &c., are indispensable in order to be saved, the adulteress whom Jesus Christ pardoned, the thief to whom our Saviour made promise of paradise, St. Stephen, who died a martyr, are not saved; for, in the time of the adulteress mass was not said; the thief had no time to be baptized; St. Stephen did not receive extreme unction.

“If the ceremonies of the Church are indispensable for salvation, Christian sailors, cast by a shipwreck on a deserted isle, Christian prisoners dying in heretical countries, or savages who may have been converted by the simple reading of the Bible, and who shall stay in their country far from every priest and every sacrament; all these men, notwithstanding their sentiments, their faith, their love, would not then be saved, because they have not done that which they *could* not do.

“ If our ceremonies were absolutely necessary to salvation, it would only need that a bad priest should, from caprice or hatred, refuse the sacraments to one of his parishioners, and he would be damned. If you reply that these are only exceptions, and that, in these cases, men may be saved without our religious ceremonies, I answer, These practices are not, then, necessary; one may be saved *sometimes* without them, and if *sometimes*, why not *at all times*? If the grace of God sufficed for St. Stephen, why shall it not suffice for me? If one may be saved without the absolution of a priest, in a desert isle, why not in my village? Is God less powerful in one age than in another, in one country than another? And, my dear uncle, that which plain good sense tells us, the Word of God tells us also. Listen to these words:—“ To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices, saith the Lord; incense is an abomination unto me; cease to do evil, learn to do well, seek judgment, judge the fatherless,” &c. “ The Lord,” says king David, “ takes no pleasure in sacrifices. The sacrifices acceptable to God are, a broken spirit. The Lord regardeth the heart.” However, my lord, think not that I wish to abolish all ceremonies; there are some which I believe were established by Jesus Christ himself, and which, for that reason, are good and useful. But it is one thing to say that a ceremony and a sacrament are useful, another to assert that they are indis-

pensable. Wine is useful, but, when it fails, one can dispense with it; whilst water is indispensable, and, if it fails, we die. But if we follow to its consequences this unhappy principle admitted by our Church, of the necessity of the sacrament and of the priest for the salvation of believers, you will be alarmed at the abuses to which it gives rise.

“ Our Church has declared ceremonies necessary, and the heart of man, naturally corrupted, has seized upon this principle with eagerness, and has pushed it farther. The more outward worship appeared indispensable, the more he believed he could dispense with the worship of the heart; so that each has now learned how to reserve to himself his favourite passion, whilst imposing on his body a few extra ceremonies. For man will consent willingly to all privations, to all sacrifices, provided that you leave him at liberty to preserve the idol of his heart; one, avarice, another, pride, a third, impurity. He will give you his time, his money, his trouble; he will submit himself to fasts, to abstinences, to confessions, &c. He will regard all these as good, useful, necessary, indispensable for salvation; he will even attach to them more importance than you desire, and that just to satisfy so much the more easily his dominant passion. My lord, this is a truth of which I have seen a thousand instances in my Church; I avow that I have myself had experience of it. More than

once I have remarked, that after joining in mass in the morning, I have thought myself authorised to act more freely in the evening. More than once I have punctiliously observed Lent, in the secret hope of making up for it afterwards. At other times, tempted to sin, I gave way more easily, thinking that, on confession, I should obtain absolution. After confession, I felt more at ease. It seemed as if my conscience, lightened by the absolution of the priest, could well now afford, without much risk, to charge itself afresh with some little sin. Oh, my lord, how deceitful and desperately wicked are our hearts! One must study one-self with care to discover it; but be sure that if others have not discovered it in themselves, it is because they are willing to be deceived. Let us then tell the people the whole truth; let us say to them that ceremonies are good, as external signs, to symbolise the sentiments within us: but that, after all, they are only symbols; that baptism by water is only an image of the purification of our heart from all its vices; that the Lord's Supper is only a memorial of the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who died to redeem us from our sins. Let us tell them that their attention should be directed within them, and in studying themselves, they will recognise the truth of these words of Holy Writ:—'Men are filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity,

whisperers, backbiters, haters of God,' &c. (Rom. i. 29.) And when these unhappy sinners shall feel deeply their spiritual misery, let us disclose the treasure of salvation; let us announce to them that an expiatory sacrifice has been made for them, and that, according to the Word of God, Christ has borne our sins upon the tree, that his blood has been shed for the remission of the sins of many; tell them that God gives them a heaven which they have not merited; and if they dare not believe in such a mercy, open the Bible before them, and let them there read for themselves those sweet words too long concealed: 'You are justified freely; you are saved by grace, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.' God grant, my dear uncle, that these promises of the Bible may rejoice your own heart even as they have mine!

Accept," &c.

Three days after, his lordship sent one who should replace our curé, and invited him to pass some weeks at his dwelling. The bishop was a venerable old man—sincere and well-disposed. He had never cherished the least doubt about the authority of his holy Mother Church; also as a respectful and submissive son, he subjected his body to its most minute observances—his health had even suffered thereby. Ever seeking an internal peace which he did not find, experiencing the

want of certain hope of his salvation, he added pilgrimages to fasts, to pilgrimages hair-cloth next his skin; and all this greatly exhausted his body, without soothing his mind. He ceased not to ask himself, if he had done sufficient to gain heaven; and he trembled at the thought that he was, perhaps, even a few steps off, perhaps at the threshold, but still exposed to fall into hell! Then; fresh abstinence, fresh fears; and thus life passed away, divided between the sufferings of his body and the anguish of his soul. One may thence conclude, with what purpose he had summoned the poor curé; he hoped to bring him back to opinions more conformable to those of the Church, from which he saw him wandering rapidly. The curé accepted the invitation of his bishop, who at first said very little, but received him with kindness.

The following day, in order to be more quiet, his lordship set out, accompanied by his nephew, for a long walk in his park; and there, when no one was in sight, save two or three children, who watched their flock at a little distance, he opened at length the great subject in these words—

“ Tell me, my dear nephew, whence did you derive these new doctrines, so opposed to those of the Church? Is it not Satan who has suggested them ?

“ No, my lord ; it is the Bible.”

“ That is, then, the reason you have distributed a

hundred copies of this book in your parish, as I have been told?"

"My lord, I thought to do no harm in placing before the eyes of the faithful, the words which God has addressed to all of us."

"But do you not perceive that plain people cannot understand this book, which ought only to be read and explained by the priest?"

"No, I do not see that; and I find, on the contrary, God has judged that *all* are able to comprehend it, since he enjoins the reading of it on *all*. Thus Jesus said to the Jews: 'Search the Scriptures.' The Psalmist said; 'The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.' Moses desires the king to read the law every day of his life. He says to all the people: 'Put my word in your heart, bind it on your hands, inscribe it on your houses.' St. Luke commends the inhabitants of Berea, because they compared the preaching of St. Paul with the word of God. St. Paul, writing his Epistles to different churches, addresses himself, not only to the priests, but says: 'To you who are at Rome.' 'To all those in Achaia.' And if all the Israelites of the time of Moses, all the Jews of the time of Christ, all the inhabitants of Rome and of Achaia might read the Bible, I see not why all the Christians of our day should not also read it."

"But, do you not know," replied the bishop, "that the Bible is obscure, and cannot be understood by all?"

The curé smiled, and replied: "You shall judge." At the same time he beckoned to the children who tended the flock to approach; and when the little ones of ten or twelve years old stood in a semicircle, near the bishop, the curé said to the youngest:—

"My child, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind!' Do you understand me?"

"Oh! yes, Mr. Curé! we must love the blessed God."

"And you, my child, listen: 'There is none righteous; there is none that doeth good.' Do you understand?"

The child cast down his eyes; he had so well comprehended these words, that his conscience had caused him to apply them instantly to himself; and as he had just been striking one of his companions in a quarrel, he answered:—

"It was he who began; he gave me a kick, too."

"It was much more your fault," said the other.

"No!" said a little girl, "it was both of them."

"And you, my little girl," said the curé, "attend: 'Christ has died for our sins; there is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ; believe in the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved.' What does that mean, my child?"

"It means that God will pardon our sins if we love Jesus Christ."

"Now you," said the curé to the fourth; "'If any lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all liberally.' 'Pray without ceasing.' What do these words mean?"

"Wait! that means that we must pray to God to make us very good."

"Quite right, my children; fight no more; love Jesus Christ, who died to obtain the forgiveness of your sins; ask God to make you very good, and you will go to heaven."

The children escaped, quite delighted.

"Well," said the curé to the bishop, "it appears to me that these children have understood my words well enough."

"It is not surprising," said the latter, "they were so simple."

"Yes; but those words, so simple, were precisely those of the Bible. If these children have understood them, I suppose that their fathers and mothers will understand them likewise."

"Yes; but all the pages of the Bible are not so clear as those you have quoted."

"I grant it; but even if the simple believer had understood these four passages only of all the Bible, would it not be worth his while to read it? Moreover,

experience and good sense unite to affirm, that after the Bible has been read some time, with prayer, the most simple reader will very soon find an easy passage help him to understand another less clear; that which he has learned will help the understanding of that which remains to be learnt, and thus these obscurities will be completely cleared up. When a friend addresses us a letter of which some words are effaced, we do not on that account reject the sheet of paper; we read a second time, a third time, until that which precedes, and that which follows, helps us to understand the illegible words."

"But," answered the bishop, rather embarrassed, "in order to clear up these difficulties, is it not better to submit the Bible to the interpretation of the councils, whose decisions are directed by the Holy Spirit, according to the promise of Jesus Christ?"

"But," returned the curé, without hesitation, "why should the Holy Spirit, who can direct the decisions of councils, not also direct the thoughts of the simple believer who shall implore it with humility? For that promise was not made to councils only, but to as many as the Lord should call."

"But, then, if each one may read and interpret the Bible, you will have as many creeds as individuals; whilst in submitting the Bible to the interpretation of councils, we shall all have the same faith."

"I doubt it; for how will uniformity be attained better by reading the decrees of councils than by reading the Bible? Will it be easier to understand the Latin of the Council of Trent, than the Latin of the Vulgate?"

"No; but the priest is there, to interpret the decrees of the council to the simple believers."

"But, then, will it be easier to make the believer understand the French of his curé, who speaks in the pulpit, than the French of De Sacy, who speaks through the translation of the Bible? Latin for Latin, French for French. I like better to read the text than the commentary. The Bible is worth more than the explanations; unless we pretend that when God speaks, men know better what he intends to say than himself, and that men have a greater capacity to make themselves understood."

"Finally," said the bishop, with impatience, "what conclusion do you draw from all this?"

"I conclude, that since the Bible is the word of God, every man is bound to draw from that word the rule of his faith and conduct, without any one having the right to impose another upon him; and that, if the simple believer ought to listen to his pastor, it is only so far as his pastor speaks conformably to the Bible. Then the faith of the Christian will be an enlightened faith, and so much the more firm as it shall be more intelligent. Then the Christian shall be able to say in his conscience

that he obeys God rather than men, since he searches in the book which all Christian communions (the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church the first) are obliged to recognise as the source of all religion—as the word of God. Is it not at the source that the water of a rivulet is most limpid? Does not every foot that it proceeds through the dirt and mud of this earth contribute to pollute it? Well; in the same way, will not religion be most pure at its source, in the mouth of God, and will not every step made in passing from mouth to mouth tend to corrupt it? Let us, then, give the Bible to the people, and then they will understand that it is not certain vain ceremonies that save the sinner, but the blood of Christ alone, and the renewal of the heart by the Holy Ghost.”

The curé spoke with such warmth, that the bishop saw he should never succeed in inducing him to abandon this new course by mere persuasion. He therefore brought into play alternately, the fear of hindering his advancement in the Church, the menaces, of the condemnation of Rome, &c. But all availed nothing; the curé returned always to this response: “Show me by the Bible that I am mistaken, and then I shall be ready to submit.” And he bore, with resignation, all the petty persecution raised against him.

A few months later, the bishop fell seriously ill; he grew worse day by day. The fear, or rather the cer-

tainty of his approaching decease, increased his alarms on the uncertainty of his salvation. He endeavoured to assure himself, and wondered that he was unable to do so. In vain he reminded himself that few of the saints had submitted to austerities so severe and so numerous as his own; his conscience continually reminded him of his sin, and made him fear that he had not yet performed sufficient penances for the expiation of his faults before Him "whose eyes are too pure to regard iniquity." In this state of trouble he recalled the serenity, the peace, which the curé had seemed to enjoy during his stay with him; and the thought that that serenity of mind was, perhaps, the effect of his religious convictions, and that, after all, there might indeed be something good and true in them—that thought impressed itself on his mind. At the hour of death, one is little troubled about maintaining appearances before the world, which we should have attended to in a state of health. The Bishop summoned his nephew, and sent to say, that he desired to converse with him upon serious subjects. The curé betook himself to the dying man. On seeing him enter, "Welcome, said the bishop; take a seat, and let them leave us alone for a few minutes." When all had withdrawn, and the curé, having closed the door, re-seated himself by the bedside of his uncle, the latter said, in a sorrowful and solemn voice:—

"My dear friend, I have no time to lose, and without going out of the way, I come to the question at once. You know my mode of life, you know that I have acquitted myself scrupulously of my religious duties; and yet I must confess that on the point of appearing before God, even after having received the holy sacrament for the last time, I tremble at the thought of appearing at the tribunal of my Judge! Something more powerful than myself tells me that I am not ready to appear, and I feel that I do not enjoy, in my last hour, that Christian calmness which sees death approach without fear, which welcomes it even with joy. I have observed in you, dear brother, this precious calm; and even when harassing you for your doctrines, I was internally struck with the composure which they produced in your soul. Oh! I pray you, tell me quickly how you have obtained it."

"It is thus," replied the curé; "I was myself in the state of mind in which I find you now. In examining my life, I discovered each day new imperfections; the more I constrained myself to live holily, the more I felt sin weigh on my conscience. If I performed an action which was good in the eyes of the world, I felt that it was bad in the sight of God, because vanity and pride had always a share therein. If I forced myself to make a resolution in the sight of God, at the instant when determining to do good, I found an interested motive

arise to urge me also, and thus pollute the source. At last, I came to hate myself. My past life alarmed me; and what contributed to increase my terrors was, that I found in my Bible-readings such declarations as these: 'The wages of sin is death!' 'Cursed is every one who continueth not in all things written in the Book of the law to do them!' 'Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, is guilty of all.' One day I thought I should lose my senses, and in despair I cast myself on my knees, striking my breast and exclaiming, 'O my God! take pity on me. I am a great sinner; what must I do, what must I do to be saved?' On the instant I raised myself, opened my Bible, cast my eyes upon it, and there I found these very words which I have just uttered, 'What must I do to be saved?' Struck by the coincidence, I hastened to read the words following. It was precisely the reply to my question, thus: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.' '*Believe, and thou shalt be saved,*' said I. 'What! is it sufficient to believe?' . . . I thought I must have misunderstood; I re-read these words, and I found again and again: '*Believe* in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.' In order to throw light on the subject, I looked at other passages of my Bible, in which it was treated, and which were indicated by references. I found a great number, all having the same sense, '*Believe in the*

Lord Jesus Christ, thy sins shall be pardoned, and thou shalt receive eternal life. I confess, however, that this faith which was required, this salvation offered so freely—all this was at first in my head without entering my heart; when one day that word of the Gospel, ‘saved by grace,’ fell like light into the depth of my soul. ‘Grace! oh! I understand,’ cried I ‘I was condemned to hell as a criminal upon the scaffold, and when about to perish, my king sends me a pardon!’ ‘I understand, I owed to my master a heavy debt of sins, and my God has cancelled them! He gives me forgiveness, grace! Oh, I understand this word! How sweet it is! how powerful to chase all fear from my heart! Now, living or dying, I am saved; What love my God has had for me! and what love must I, saved by his grace this day, have towards him! How sweet to do his will! How willingly I would sacrifice myself to his service, and to the welfare of my brethren, who know not yet what this grace is—the pardon, the love of God!’ Grace! this word inflamed all my soul; and since then an ever-increasing peace spread itself through my heart. I experienced the reality of that promise of Jesus,—‘My peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth: let not your hearts be troubled, neither be afraid.’ Since that time I have had no greater happiness than in endeavouring to effect the will of my God. Doubtless, I still fall frequently

into sin ; but I never rise without trembling, and without finding, even in those falls, new strength by which to hold faster for the future. Since that time, I feel as if consumed with desire to make known that good news to my brethren ; and I am happy, indescribably happy ! when I see my words fall in a heart well prepared, and another soul escaping hell by turning to the Saviour."

"But, dear brother," interposed the bishop, moved by these words full of fire, "who guarantees you that this assurance of your salvation, which you believe you experience, is indeed a reality ratified in heaven by God himself, and that it is not merely the fruit of your imagination ?"

"I have for my guarantee the witness of the Holy Spirit, which I bear in my heart, and which made St. Paul say, that 'the Spirit of God witnessed with his spirit that he was adopted of God.' I know that the world may tell me that this is only the effect of my imagination. But what matters what the world says and thinks ? It is sufficient for me, to feel that it is otherwise. I say to all, Ask God for his Spirit, and you will receive it for your sanctification. If my counsel be put in practice, the truth is soon seen, and I bless my God. If they believe me not, and mock at me, I am not the less assured of my own salvation. I pray for the unbeliever, and I hope always for him : I know that God can convert him even at the last hour. Yes,

my dear uncle, it is not in yourself that you must seek your salvation;—your works, always imperfect, will never give you security. You need a Saviour, powerful, perfect, holy. You need Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God manifest in the flesh. It is only with such a support that you will no longer fear to fall, and with such an advocate with God, that you will be assured against condemnation.”

During the following days the two friends had several conversations. The bishop grew weaker and weaker, but, at the same time, his soul seemed to gain fresh strength: he listened much more than he spoke. He made his nephew read him different parts of the New Testament; among others, the Epistle to the Romans, and that to the Galatians. At length, one Sunday evening, as his nephew, kneeling at the foot of his bed, concluded a prayer in these words—“My God, we look not to ourselves, nor to our works, but solely to Jesus Christ for our salvation.” The bishop raised his eyes to heaven, and whilst pronouncing these words—“*Amen! Lord! Amen!*” he breathed forth his last sigh.