

FAITH OF OUR FATHERS

[A WEEKLY INSTRUCTION FOR YOUNG AND OLD.]

GOD AND HIS ATTRIBUTES.

1. The Catholic doctrine concerning the divine nature and attributes is contained in the following points:—

There is one God, the Creator of heaven and earth. God is infinitely perfect. He possesses in Himself, according to our conception, all perfections, all good qualities, in an infinite degree. His nature is the plenitude, the ocean of all that is good and perfect in being, in life, in goodness in beauty, in wisdom, and in all good things; or rather, He is essentially being, life, truth, beauty goodness itself. A *good* thing may cease to be good, but *goodness* must always be good, because goodness is its essence, not its quality.

2. These perfections, separately considered, are called essential attributes or properties, with which we conceive the divine nature adorned, as the sun is adorned with its light. They are divided into three classes: quiescent attributes, or those which produce no action; operative, and moral.*

First Article: Quiescent Attributes.

3. The quiescent attributes are unity, simplicity, infinity, eternity, immensity, and immutability. Unity: there is only one God, who occupies the highest place of the immense scale of beings as the supreme, the uncreated cause of all things, infinitely above the world and all creatures. The character of oneness or unity is essential to the divine nature. Were it not so, God would no longer be the Supreme Being.

4. The unity of nature in the divinity is not incompatible with the plurality of persons, as we shall see in the following chapter.

5. The simplicity of the divine nature excludes all the imperfections of that which is material and compound. God is a pure spirit, whose perfections are not, like the faculties of our souls, really distinct from each other. The only distinctions in God are those which we ourselves create, in order to render Him more comprehensible to our minds.

6. The infinity of the divine nature, or its infinite perfection, consists in the union and plenitude of every perfection in God. Those which are called pure, such as knowledge, He possesses formally, and in themselves; but not so those which are mixed up with imperfections, such as reason, which requires comparison and deduction before it can understand. God does not possess these latter in themselves, but they form part of others higher and better, which eminently or virtually contains them much in the same way as a gold coin contains a silver one, and as the genius of the artist contains the work it can produce. So the infinite knowledge of God eminently comprises the perfection of reason.

7. God's eternity excludes from Him the possibility of beginning, end, or succession. Whilst creatures are perpetually passing with the ceaseless succession of time, God reigns in an eternal present, like a motionless centre in the midst of a circle moving around it. Time is a successive duration, but eternity may be called a simultaneous duration; it is the fulness of duration which God possesses without succession, as immensity is the fulness of plenitude of space, which He fills without movement or progression. Time is not a part, but, as it were, a shadow of eternity, or, according to the well-known phrase, a changeful image of a changeless eternity.

8. The immensity of God is, as it were, the diffusion of this simplicity. By it the divine nature of necessity in its fulness pervades all space. It is, as a learned philosopher has wisely said, a wonderful sphere, the centre of which is everywhere and the circumference nowhere. Of this we have an image, though a very imperfect one, in the human soul, which is so subtly spread over all our

* All these attributes are absolute, common to the Three Divine Persons; they must not be confounded with those that are termed relative attributes—as paternity, filiation, etc., which are personal to one or other of the three different Persons of the Blessed Trinity.

being that it exists entire in the whole body, and entire also in every individual member thereof.

The immensity of God produces His substantial omnipresence. God is present everywhere in His entirety, without, however, equally manifesting His presence everywhere: for this reason, we say that He is in a special manner present in His temples and in heaven, because He there displays His divine attributes in a more striking manner.

9. His immutability. God is immutable in Himself, and exempt from all change or vicissitude. It is true that in His relation with us He may seem to change, and show Himself sometimes propitious, sometimes angry; but these variations proceed from the creature, who places himself either under the influence of God's love or justice.

Second Article: Operative Attributes.

10. The operative attributes of God, or the principle of His external works in which man participates, are His knowledge, will, and power.

11. (1) Knowledge, to which God's science and wisdom belong, is His knowledge or clear and intuitive view of all things. It is called the omniscience of God.

God sees all things. Past and future as well as the present; that which takes place in open day as well as in most secret intrigues and the most hidden thoughts,—all is clear and unveiled to His sight. He sees things without veil or shadow, such as they are in themselves; nothing could be unknown to God, nor could anything deceive Him.

His knowledge of futurity does not, however, restrict the liberty of man. He sees in the future as we see in the distance. He sees in futurity those who wilfully damn themselves, as we should see from afar a wretched suicide cast himself over the brink of a precipice. God's knowing interferes no more with the liberty of the act than does our seeing.

(2) The will of God is a free, active faculty like the human will, which is its image; but the image differs from the great original because this latter is infinitely perfect.

The will of God, though in itself single and simple, is called by different names, according to the object it affects; thus there is the will of sign, and the will of good pleasure. The will of sign, which may also be called the will of rule or direction, is that which dictates precepts and counsels.

The permissive or efficacious will, which causes things, or allows them, to happen, is called the will of good pleasure.

The will of God is ever directed by His infinite wisdom. It is holy, free, and all-powerful.

(3) The power of God is infinite: it is called omnipotence; by it nothing is impossible to God, excepting that which implies error or contradiction. He created the universe by a word; and He could, in like manner, create thousands of other worlds. He preserves the existence of creatures, and could annihilate everything by one single act of his divine will. Nothing can resist Him. In a moment he could oppose the progress of all the kings' armies, confound all human wisdom, defeat all the artifices of the wicked, disconcert all the plans and all the efforts of the powers of heaven and earth. He can restore life to the dead, strengthen the weak, enrich the poor and the indigent. Everything is equally easy to Him, both in the order of nature and of grace. He exerts His power as He chooses; that is to say, with perfect liberty, but always according to the views of wisdom and infinite sanctity.

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