STAGBOOKS

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F. J. Sheed

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CONTENTS

I WHY STUDY THEOLOGY? . . . 9

II SPIRIT 14
Spirit Knows, Loves, is Powerful
Spirit Produces What Matter Cannot
Spirit is Not in Space
Spirit is Always Itself

III THE INFINITE SPIRIT 22
God is Infinite Spirit
God is Omnipresent and Eternal
God's Knowledge, Love, Power

IV THE BLESSED TRINITY 29
Three Persons
The Doctrine Outlined
Mystery, Not Contradiction

V THE THREE PERSONS 36
Father and Son
Holy Spirit
Equality in Majesty
Appropriation

VI THE HUMAN MIND AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY 46
Mystery
Making the Doctrine Our Own
God is Love

VII CREATION 53
All Things of Nothing
Without God All is Meaningless
Matter, Angels, Men
How God Created

VIII THE NATURE OF MAN 63
Soul and Body
God's Law and Freedom

IX THE SUPERNATURAL LIFE 70
A Goal Above Our Nature
Sanctifying Grace
Faith, Hope, Charity
Supernatural Habits

X THE FALL 80
Fall of Angels
Fall of Adam
Results of Adam's Fall
How to Restore a Fallen Race?

XI THE REDEEMER 90
God Became Man
Our Lord as We Meet Him
Christ: God and Man
The Manhood

XII REDEMPTION 105
Suffering and Death
Passion, Resurrection and Ascension
Truth, Life, Union

XIII THE VISIBLE CHURCH 113
The Structure of the Church
The Church is Catholic and Apostolic
The Church is One
The Church is Holy
The Teaching of Truth

XIV THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST . . 127

XV THE MOTHER OF GOD 132
The Son Who Chose His Mother
Immaculate Conception and Assumption
Our Mother

XVI GRACE, VIRTUES, GIFTS 139
The Moral Virtues
Actual Grace
The Gifts of the Holy Ghost
How Grace is Lost

XVII THE SACRAMENTS 147
The Sacramental System
The Minister
How Administered
What the Sacraments Do
Forgiveness of Sin

XVIII EUCHARIST AND MASS 158
The Real Presence
Transubstantiation
Communion in One Kind
The Sacrifice of the Mass

XIX THE NEXT LIFE 168
Death
Hell
Purgatory
Heaven

XX THE END OF THE WORLD 179

EPILOGUE 182
The Layman in the Church

I

WHY STUDY THEOLOGY?

A COUPLE of years ago I visited a town where I was to lecture. A young woman told me she was coming to my lecture, and then asked what it was to be about. I said: "The Blessed Trinity." She said "Oh," and then after a distinct pause, "Ah well." In other words, if her bishop wanted her to listen to a lecture on the Blessed Trinity, she would listen to it: she hoped, doubtless, that she would do even harder things if her bishop called for them. The one thing that emerged most definitely was that she expected no joy. And in that she represented any number of millions of her fellow Catholics. As a body, we hope to go to heaven, which means spending eternity with the Blessed Trinity, and we expect the experience to be wholly blissful; but in the prospect of spending an hour with the Blessed Trinity here below, there is no anticipation of bliss.

The incident took me back thirty years. I was a boy, and I had remarked to a theologian how sad it was that a layman could not get a course in theology. He said: "But why should you study theology? You are not obliged to." In my new excitement over dogma, I was quite incapable of giving any lucid answer to his question why. I mumbled something to the effect that the truth would make me free, and I wanted to be free. I shall try now to answer that question of thirty years back.

In a way I am still hampered now as I was then by a feeling of the strangeness of having to make a case for anything so

exciting and so joy-giving. But the joy and excitement of theological knowledge is like the joy and excitement of any other love—it cannot be explained to one who has not experienced it; it need not be explained to one who has. I shall keep, therefore, to the plainest of reasons. Truth is food and truth is light.

"Not on bread alone doth man live," said Christ Our Lord, quoting Deuteronomy to the devil. Everybody knows the phrase, and most people tend to complete it according to their own fancy of what is most important to the hungry soul of man. But it had its own completion in Deuteronomy and Our Lord reminded the devil of that too—"but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God." Revealed truth, then, is food. Now it is a peculiarity of food that it nourishes only those who eat it. We are not nourished by the food that someone else has eaten. To be nourished by it, we must eat it ourselves.

Truth is light too. Not to see it is to be in darkness, to see it wrong is to be in double darkness. The greater part of reality can be known only if God tells us; doctrine is what He tells; lacking it, we lack light. To be stumbling along in the dark, happy in the knowledge that our guides can see, is not at all the same thing as walking in the light. It is immeasurably better than stumbling through the dark with blind guides but it is poverty all the same.

It will be said that no Catholic can go wholly unnourished, for there is the Eucharist, or wholly in the dark, because of the truths that the Church does manage to get through to the least interested of her children. As to the Eucharist, this is most gloriously true, though even there a man will be helped by going as far into the doctrine as the Church can take him, that he may know better by what food his soul lives. But as to the truths, I am not at all so sure. Some monstrous shapes flit about the Catholic mind: I remember an educated Catholic

who was asked how God could be in three Persons and answered: "God is omnipotent, and can be in as many persons as He likes"; and another who, having broken his fast and wishing to go to Communion, thought it would be all right provided he went to confession first; and having kept no record, I cannot tell the number of times I have heard the phrase "The poor Holy Ghost, He is so neglected"—that is, He does not get much of our attention and must make out as best He can with the company of the Father and the Son!

Let us not labour this. A Catholic, thank God, never can be wholly unnourished or wholly in the dark. But he may be living an undernourished life in the half-dark, and that is a pity.

I cannot say how often I have been told that some old Irishman saying his rosary is holier than I am, with all my study. I daresay he is. For his own sake, I hope he is. But if the only evidence is that he knows less theology than I, then it is evidence that would convince neither him nor me. It would not convince him, because all those rosary-loving, tabernacle-loving old Irishmen I have ever known (and my own ancestry is rich with them) were avid for more knowledge of the faith. It does not convince me, because while it is obvious that an ignorant man can be virtuous, it is equally obvious that ignorance is not a virtue; men have been martyred who could not have stated a doctrine of the Church correctly, and martyrdom is the supreme proof of love: yet with more knowledge of God they would have loved Him more still.

Knowledge serves love—it *can* turn sour of course and serve pride or conceit and not love, and against this we poor sons of Eve must be on our guard.

Knowledge does serve love. It serves love in one way by removing misunderstandings which are in the way of love,

which at the best blunt love's edge a little—for example, the fact of hell can raise a doubt of God's love in a man who has not had his mind enriched with what the Church can teach him; so that he is driven piously to avert his gaze from some truth about God in order to keep his love undimmed. But knowledge serves love in a still better way—because each new thing learned and meditated about God is a new reason for loving Him.

A Catholic might still feel that all this was convincing enough, but that none of it was for him all the same: the Church does not command him to go deep into theology; if his soul is not getting all the food it might, it suffers no hunger pangs; the half-dark seems pretty light to him; he knows he loves God; and anyhow it is his own business.

Now in so far as a Catholic is satisfied with what he is getting, there is no more to be said. It *is* his business; at least it's not mine. But life is not only getting; it must be giving as well, and a Catholic can hardly be so easily satisfied, or satisfied at all, with what he is giving. The most obvious fact of our day is that we are surrounded by millions who are starved of food that Christ Our Lord wanted them to have—they are getting too small a ration of truth, and of the Eucharist no ration at all. We regret their starvation, of course, but we do not lose any sleep over it; which raises the question of whether we really appreciate the food we ourselves get from the Church. We should not take it so calmly if their starvation were bodily: for we do know the value of the bread that perishes.

If spiritual starvation is to be relieved, it must be largely the work of the laity, who are in daily contact with starvation's victims. We must come to an understanding of the great dogmas, so that we know them in themselves and in their power to nourish; we must bend every effort to mastering their utterance. Only thus can we relieve the starvation

that now lies all about us. Once we see it, we see that we must set about it—primarily and overwhelmingly for the sake of these others, since it is intolerable that men should be perishing for want of truth that we could bring them. But not only for their sake. For our own sake too: for it is not good for us, or our children, to be the sane minority in a society that is losing contact with God.

This book will be concerned with theology as meeting the twofold need—the need of our own souls for the food and light and love of God that the great dogmas bring with them; and the need of men all about us, a need which can be met only if we meet it.

The reading of this, and indeed of all theological books, should be accompanied by the reading of Scripture. Without that, it is possible to obtain an accurate knowledge of the truths of revelation, but Scripture has a wonderful power of making the truths come alive in the soul: it is possible for a man to possess the truth, while yet the truth does not possess him. The Gospels must of course be read; after them, the Acts of the Apostles and some of St. Paul's Epistles—especially 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians; not hastily, but sooner or later, the whole of Scripture should be read. For those who come new to serious Gospel reading, Maisie Ward's *They Saw His Glory* will be useful. It studies the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

II

SPIRIT

Spirit Knows, Loves, is Powerful

WHEN I was very new as a street-corner speaker for the Catholic Evidence Guild, a questioner asked me what I meant by *spirit*. I answered, "A spirit has no shape, has no size, has no colour, has no weight, does not occupy space." He said, "That's the best definition of nothing I ever heard." Which was very reasonable of him. I had given him a list of things spirit is not, without a hint as to what it is.

In theology, spirit is not only a key word, it is *the* key word. Our Lord said to the Samaritan woman: "God is a spirit." Unless we know the meaning of the word spirit, we do not know what He said. It is as though He had said "God is a —." Which tells us nothing at all. The same is true of every doctrine; they all include spirit. In theology we are studying spirit all the time. And the mind with which we are studying it is a spirit too.

We simply must know what it is. And I don't mean just a definition. We must master the idea, make it our own, learn to handle it comfortably and skilfully. That is why I shall dwell upon it rather lengthily. Slow careful thinking here will pay dividends later. This book is not planned as a hand-gallop over the fields of revelation. It is an effort to teach the beginnings of theology.

We begin with our own spirit, the one we know best. Spirit

is the element in us by which we know and love, by which therefore we decide. Our body *knows* nothing; it *loves* nothing (bodily pleasures are not enjoyed by the body; it reacts to them physically, with heightened pulse, for instance, or acid stomach; but it is the knowing mind that enjoys the reactions or dislikes them); the body *decides* nothing (though our will may decide in favour of things that give us bodily pleasure).

Spirit knows and loves. A slightly longer look at ourselves reveals that spirit has power, too. It is the mind of man that splits the atom; the atom cannot split the mind, it cannot even split itself, it does not know about its own electrons.

Spirit Produces What Matter Cannot

Mind, we say, splits the atom and calculates the light-years. It is true that in both these operations it uses the body. But observe that there is no question which is the user and which is the used. The mind uses the body, not asking the body's consent. The mind is the principal, the body the instrument. Is the instrument essential? *Must* the mind use it to cope with matter? We have evidence in our own experience of mind affecting matter directly. We will to raise our arm, for example, and we raise it. The raising of the arm is a very complicated anatomical activity; but it is set in motion by a decision of the will. And as we shall see, the direct power the human mind has over its own body, mightier spirits have over all matter.

This mingling of spirit and matter in human actions arises from a fact which distinguishes man's spirit from all others. Ours is the only spirit which is also a soul—that is to say the life principle in a body. God is a spirit, but has no body; the angels are spirits, but have no body. Only in man spirit is united with a body, animates the body, makes it to be a living body. Every living body—vegetable, lower animal, human—

has a life principle, a soul. And just as ours is the only spirit which is a soul, so ours is the only soul which is a spirit. Later we shall be discussing the union of spirit and matter in man to see what light it sheds upon ourselves. But for the present our interest is in *spirit*.

We have seen that in us spirit does a number of things: it knows and loves, and it animates a body. But what, at the end of all this, *is* spirit?

We can get at it by looking into our own soul, examining in particular one of the things it does. It produces ideas. I remember a dialogue one of our Catholic Evidence Guild speakers had with a materialist, who asserted that his idea of justice was the result of a purely bodily activity, produced by man's material brain.

> SPEAKER: How many inches long is it?
> QUESTIONER: Don't be silly, ideas have no length.
> SPEAKER: O.K. How much does it weigh?
> QUESTIONER: What are you doing? Trying to make a fool of me?
> SPEAKER: No. I'm taking you at your word. What colour is it? What shape?

The discussion at this point broke down, the materialist saying the Catholic was talking nonsense. It is nonsense, of course, to speak of a thought having length or weight or colour or shape. But the materialist had said that thought is material, and the speaker was simply asking what material attributes it had. In fact, it has none; and the materialist knew this perfectly well. Only he had not drawn the obvious conclusion. If we are continuously producing things which have no attribute of matter, there must be in us some element which is not matter, to produce them. This element we call spirit.

Oddly enough, the materialist thinks of us as superstitious people who believe in a fantasy called spirit, of himself as the plain blunt man who asserts that ideas are produced by a bodily organ, the brain. What he is asserting is that matter produces offspring which have not one single attribute in common with it, and what could be more fantastic than that? We are the plain blunt men and we should insist on it.

Occasionally a materialist will argue that there are changes in the brain when we think, grooves or electrical discharges or what not. But these only accompany the thought, they are not the thought. When we think of justice, for instance, we are not thinking of the grooves in the brain; most of us are not even aware of them. Justice has a meaning, and it does not mean grooves. When I say that mercy is kinder than justice, I am not comparing mercy's grooves with the stricter grooves of justice.

Our ideas are not material. They have no resemblance to our body. Their resemblance is to our spirit. They have no shape, no size, no colour, no weight, no space. Neither has spirit, whose offspring they are. But no one can call it nothing; for it produces thought, and thought is the most powerful thing in the world—unless love is, which spirit also produces.

Spirit is not in Space

We have now come to the hardest part of our examination of spirit. It will have much sweat and strain in it, for you, for me; but everything will be easier afterwards.

We begin with a statement that sounds negative, but isn't. A spirit differs from a material thing by having no parts. Once we have mastered the meaning of this, we are close to our goal.

A part is any element in a being which is not the whole of it, as my chest is a part of my body, or an electron a part of

an atom. A spirit has no parts. There is no element in it which is not the whole of it. There is no division of parts as there is in matter. Our body has parts, each with its own specialized function: it uses its lungs to breathe with, its eyes to see with, its legs to walk with. Our soul has no parts, for it is a spirit. There is no element in our soul which is not the whole soul. It does a remarkable variety of things—knowing, loving, animating a body—but each of them is done by the whole soul; it has no parts among which to divide them up.

This partlessness of spirit is *the* difficulty for the beginner. Concentrate on what follows—a being which has no parts does not occupy space. There is hardly anything one can say to make this truth any clearer: you merely go on looking at it, until suddenly you find yourself seeing it. The most any teacher can do is to offer a few observations. Think of anything one pleases that occupies space, and one sees that it must have parts, there must be elements in it which are not the whole of it—this end is not that, the top is not the bottom, the inside is not the outside. If it occupies space at all, be it ever so microscopic, or so infinitesimally submicroscopic, there must be *some* "spread". Space is simply what matter spreads its parts in. But a being with no parts at all has no spread: space and it have nothing whatever in common: it is spaceless: it is superior to the need for space.

The trouble is that we find it hard to think of a thing existing if it is not in space, and we find it very hard to think of a thing acting if it has no parts. As against the first difficulty we must remind ourselves that space is merely emptiness, and emptiness can hardly be essential to existence. As against the second we must remind ourselves that parts are only divisions, and dividedness can hardly be an indispensable aid to action.

As against both we may be helped a little by thinking of one of our own commonest operations, the judgements we are all the time making. When in our mind we judge that in a

given case mercy is more useful than justice, we hardly realize what a surprising thing we have done. We have taken three ideas or concepts, mercy, justice and usefulness. We have found some kind of identity between mercy and usefulness: mercy is useful. This means that we must have got *mercy* and *usefulness* together in our mind. There can be no "distance" between the two concepts: if there were, they could not be got together for comparison and judgement. If the mind were spread out as the brain is, with the concept *mercy* in one part of the mind, and the concept *usefulness* in another, they would have to stay uncompared. The concepts *justice* and *usefulness* must similarly be together and some identity affirmed between them, the judgement made that justice is useful. That is not all. All three concepts must be together, so that the superior usefulness of mercy can be affirmed. The power to make judgements is at the very root of man's power to live and to develop in the mastery of himself and his environment. And the power to make judgements is dependent upon the partlessness of the soul: one single, undivided thinking principle to take hold of and hold in one all the concepts we wish to compare.

One further truth remains to be stated about spirit. It is the permanent thing, the abiding thing.

Spirit is Always Itself

As we have seen, a steady gaze will show us that a being which has no parts, no element in it that is not the whole of it, cannot occupy space. Continue to gaze, and we see that it cannot be changed into anything else, it cannot by any natural process be destroyed. We have at last arrived at the deepest truth about spirit—spirit is the being which has a permanent hold upon what it is, so that it can never become anything else.