

5.

I have said that Certitude, whether in human or divine knowledge, is attainable as regards general and cardinal truths; and that in neither department of knowledge, on the whole, is certitude discredited, lost, or reversed: for, in matter of fact, whether in human or divine, those primary truths have ever kept their place from the time when they first took possession of it. However, there is one obvious objection which may be made to this representation, and I proceed to take notice of it.

It may be urged then, that time was when the primary truths of science were unknown, and when in consequence various theories were held, contrary to each other. The first element of all things was said to be water, to be air, to be fire; the framework of the universe was eternal; or it was the ever-new combination of innumerable atoms: the planets were fixed in solid crystal revolving spheres; or they moved round the earth in epicycles mounted upon circular orbits; or they were carried whirling round about the sun, while the sun was whirling round the earth. About such doctrines there was no certitude, no more than there is now certitude about the origin of languages, {241} the age of man, or the evolution of species, considered as philosophical questions. Now theology is at present in the very same state in which natural science was five hundred years ago; and this is the proof of it,—that, instead of there being one received theological science in the world, there are a multitude of hypotheses. We have a professed science of Atheism, another of Deism, a Pantheistic, ever so many Christian theologies, to say nothing of Judaism, Islamism, and the Oriental religions. Each of these creeds has its own upholders, and these upholders all certain that it is the very and the only truth, and these same upholders, it may happen, presently giving it up, and then taking up some other creed, and being certain again, as they profess, that it and it only is the truth, these various so-called truths being incompatible with each other. Are not Jews certain about their interpretation of their law? yet they become Christians: are not Catholics certain about the new law? yet they become Protestants. At present then, and as yet, there is no clear certainty any where about religious truth at all; it has still to be discovered; and therefore for Catholics to claim the right to lay down the first principles of theological science in their own way, is to assume the very matter in dispute. First let their doctrines be universally received, and then they will have a right to place them on a level with the certainty which belongs to the laws of motion or of refraction. This is the objection which I propose to consider.

Now first as to the want of universal reception which is urged against the Catholic dogmas, this part of the {242} objection will not require many words. Surely a truth or a fact may be certain, though it is not generally received;—we are each of us ever gaining through our senses various certainties, which no one shares with us; again, the certainties of the sciences are in the possession of a few countries only, and for the most part only of the educated classes in those countries; yet the philosophers of Europe and America would feel certain that the earth rolled round the sun, in spite of the Indian belief of its being supported by an elephant with a tortoise under it. The Catholic

41 Church then, though not universally acknowledged, may without inconsistency claim to
42 teach the primary truths of religion, just as modern science, though but partially
43 received, claims to teach the great principles and laws which are the foundation of
44 secular knowledge, and that with a significance to which no other religious system can
45 pretend, because it is its very profession to speak to all mankind, and its very badge to
46 be ever making converts all over the earth, whereas other religions are more or less
47 variable in their teaching, tolerant of each other, and local, and professedly local, in
48 their *habitat* and character.

49 This, however, is not the main point of the objection; the real difficulty lies not in the
50 variety of religions, but in the contradiction, conflict, and change of religious certitudes.
51 Truth need not be universal, but it must of necessity be certain; and certainty, in order to
52 be certainty, must endure; yet how is this reasonable expectation fulfilled in the case of
53 religion? On the contrary, those who have been the most certain in their beliefs are
54 sometimes found to lose them, Catholics {243} as well as others; and then to take up
55 new beliefs, perhaps contrary ones, of which they become as certain as if they had
56 never been certain of the old.

57 In answering this representation, I begin with recurring to the remark which I have
58 already made, that assent and certitude have reference to propositions, one by one. We
59 may of course assent to a number of propositions all together, that is, we may make a
60 number of assents all at once; but in doing so we run the risk of putting upon one level,
61 and treating as if of the same value, acts of the mind which are very different from each
62 other in character and circumstance. An assent, indeed, is ever an assent; but given
63 assents may be strong or weak, deliberate or impulsive, lasting or ephemeral. Now a
64 religion is not a proposition, but a system; it is a rite, a creed, a philosophy, a rule of
65 duty, all at once; and to accept a religion is neither a simple assent to it nor a complex,
66 neither a conviction nor a prejudice, neither a notional assent nor a real, not a mere act
67 of profession, nor of credence, nor of opinion, nor of speculation, but it is a collection of
68 all these various kinds of assents, at once and together, some of one description, some
69 of another; but, out of all these different assents, how many are of that kind which I have
70 called certitude? Certitudes indeed do not change, but who shall pretend that assents
71 are indefectible?

72 For instance: the fundamental dogma of Protestantism is the exclusive authority of Holy
73 Scripture; but in holding this a Protestant holds a host of propositions, explicitly or
74 implicitly, and holds them with assents of various character. Among these propositions,
75 he {244} holds that Scripture is the Divine Revelation itself, that it is inspired, that
76 nothing is known in doctrine but what is there, that the Church has no authority in
77 matters of doctrine, that, as claiming it, it condemned long ago in the Apocalypse, that
78 St. John wrote the Apocalypse, that justification is by faith only, that our Lord is God,
79 that there are seventy-two generations between Adam and our Lord. Now of which, out
80 of all these propositions, is he certain? and to how many of them is his assent of one
81 and the same description? His belief, that Scripture is commensurate with the Divine
82 Revelation, is perhaps implicit, not conscious; as to inspiration, he does not well know
83 what the word means, and his assent is scarcely more than a profession; that no

84 doctrine is true but what can be proved from Scripture he understands, and his assent
85 to it is what I have called speculative; that the Church has no authority he holds with a
86 real assent or belief; that the Church is condemned in the Apocalypse is a standing
87 prejudice; that St. John wrote the Apocalypse is his opinion; that justification is by faith
88 only, he accepts, but scarcely can be said to apprehend; that our Lord is God perhaps
89 he is certain; that there are seventy-two generations between Adam and Christ he
90 accepts on credence. Yet, if he were asked the question, he would most probably
91 answer that he was certain of the truth of "Protestantism," though "Protestantism"
92 means these things and a hundred more all at once, and though he believes with actual
93 certitude only one of them all,—that indeed a dogma of most sacred importance, but not
94 the discovery of {245} Luther or Calvin. He would think it enough to say that he was a
95 foe to "Romanism" and "Socinianism," and to avow that he gloried in the Reformation.
96 He looks upon each of these religious professions, Protestantism, Romanism,
97 Socinianism and Theism, merely as units, as if they were not each made up of many
98 elements, as if they had nothing in common, as if a transition from the one to the other
99 involved a simple obliteration of all that had been as yet written on his mind, and would
100 be the reception of a new faith.

101 When, then, we are told that a man has changed from one religion to another, the first
102 question which we have to ask, is, have the first and the second religions nothing in
103 common? If they have common doctrines, he has changed only a portion of his creed,
104 not the whole: and the next question is, has he ever made much of any doctrines but
105 such as are if otherwise common to his new creed and his old? what doctrines was he
106 certain of among the old, and what among the new?

107 Thus, of three Protestants, one becomes a Catholic, a second a Unitarian, and a third
108 an unbeliever: how is this? The first becomes a Catholic, because he assented, as a
109 Protestant, to the doctrine of our Lord's divinity, with a real assent and a genuine
110 conviction, and because this certitude, taking possession of his mind, led him on to
111 welcome the Catholic doctrines of the Real Presence and of the Theotocos, till his
112 Protestantism fell off from him, and he submitted himself to the Church. The second
113 became a Unitarian, because, proceeding on the principle that Scripture was the rule of
114 faith and that a man's private judgment was its rule of interpretation, {246} and finding
115 that the doctrine of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds did not follow by logical
116 necessity from the text of Scripture, he said to himself, "The word of God has been
117 made of none effect by the traditions of men," and therefore nothing was left for him but
118 to profess what he considered primitive Christianity, and to become a Humanitarian.
119 The third gradually subsided into infidelity, because he started with the Protestant
120 dogma, cherished in the depths of his nature, that a priesthood was a corruption of the
121 simplicity of the Gospel. First, then, he would protest against the sacrifice of the Mass;
122 next he gave up baptismal regeneration, and the sacramental principle; then he asked
123 himself whether dogmas were not a restraint on Christian liberty as well as sacraments;
124 then came the question, what after all was the use of teachers of religion? why should
125 any one stand between him and his Maker? After a time it struck him, that this obvious
126 question had to be answered by the Apostles, as well as by the Anglican clergy; so he
127 came to the conclusion that the true and only revelation of God to man is that which is

written on the heart. This did for a time, and he remained a Deist. But then it occurred to him, that this inward moral law was there within the breast, whether there was a God or not, and that it was a roundabout way of enforcing that law, to say that it came from God, and simply unnecessary, considering it carried with it its own sacred and sovereign authority, as our feelings instinctively testified; and when he turned to look at the physical world around him, he really did not see what scientific proof there {247} was there of the Being of God at all, and it seemed to him as if all things would go on quite as well as at present, without that hypothesis as with it; so he dropped it, and became a *purus, putus* Atheist.

Now the world will say, that in these three cases old certitudes were lost, and new were gained; but it is not so: each of the three men started with just one certitude, as he would have himself professed, had he examined himself narrowly; and he carried it out and carried it with him into a new system of belief. He was true to that one conviction from first to last; and on looking back on the past, would perhaps insist upon this, and say he had really been consistent all through, when others made much of his great changes in religious opinion. He has indeed made serious additions to his initial ruling principle, but he has lost no conviction of which he was originally possessed.

I will take one more instance. A man is converted to the Catholic Church from his admiration of its religious system, and his disgust with Protestantism. That admiration remains; but, after a time, he leaves his new faith, perhaps returns to his old. The reason, if we may conjecture, may sometimes be this: he has never believed in the Church's infallibility; in her doctrinal truth he has believed, but in her infallibility, no. He was asked, before he was received, whether he held all that the Church taught, he replied he did; but he understood the question to mean, whether he held those particular doctrines "which at that time the Church in matter of fact formally taught," whereas it really meant "whatever the Church then or at any future time {248} should teach." Thus, he never had the indispensable and elementary faith of a Catholic, and was simply no subject for reception into the fold of the Church. This being the case, when the Immaculate Conception is defined, he feels that it is something more than he bargained for when he became a Catholic, and accordingly he gives up his religious profession. The world will say that he has lost his certitude of the divinity of the Catholic Faith, but he never had it.

The first point to be ascertained, then, when we hear of a change of religious certitude in another, is, what the doctrines are on which his so-called certitude before now and at present has respectively fallen. All doctrines besides these were the accidents of his profession, and the indefectibility of certitude would not be disproved, though he changed them every year. There are few religions which have no points in common; and these, whether true or false, when embraced with an absolute conviction, are the pivots on which changes take place in that collection of credences, opinions, prejudices, and other assents, which make up what is called a man's selection and adoption of a form of religion, a denomination, or a Church. There have been Protestants whose idea of enlightened Christianity has been a strenuous antagonism to what they consider the unmanliness and unreasonableness of Catholic morality, an antipathy to the precepts of

171 patience, meekness, forgiveness of injuries, and chastity. All this they have considered
172 a woman's religion, the ornament of monks, of the sick, the feeble, and the old. Lust,
173 revenge, ambition, courage, pride, these, they {249} have fancied, made the man, and
174 want of them the slave. No one could fairly accuse such men of any great change of
175 their convictions, or refer to them in proof of the defectibility of certitude, if they were
176 one day found to have taken up the profession of Islam.

177 And if this intercommunion of religions holds good, even when the common points
178 between them are but errors held in common, much more natural will be the transition
179 from one religion to another, without injury to existing certitudes, when the common
180 points, the objects of those certitudes, are truths; and still stronger in that case and
181 more constraining will be the sympathy, with which minds that love truth, even when
182 they have surrounded it with error, will yearn towards the Catholic faith, which contains
183 within itself, and claims as its own, all truth that is elsewhere to be found, and more than
184 all, and nothing but truth. This is the secret of the influence, by which the Church draws
185 to herself converts from such various and conflicting religions. They come, not so much
186 to lose what they have, as to gain what they have not; and in order that, by means of
187 what they have, more may be given to them. St. Augustine tells us that there is no false
188 teaching without an intermixture of truth; and it is by the light of those particular truths,
189 contained respectively in the various religions of men, and by our certitudes about them,
190 which are possible wherever those truths are found, that we pick our way, slowly
191 perhaps, but surely, into the One Religion which God has given, taking our certitudes
192 with us, not to lose, but to keep them more securely, and to understand and love their
193 objects more perfectly. {250}

194 Not even are idolaters and heathen out of the range of some of these religious truths
195 and their correlative certitudes. The old Greek and Roman polytheists had, as they
196 show in their literature, clear and strong notions, nay, vivid mental images, of a
197 Particular Providence, of the power of prayer, of the rule of Divine Governance, of the
198 law of conscience, of sin and guilt, of expiation by means of sacrifices, and of future
199 retribution: I will even add, of the Unity and Personality of the Supreme Being. This it is
200 that throws such a magnificent light over the Homeric poems, the tragic choruses, and
201 the Odes of Pindar; and it has its counterpart in the philosophy of Socrates and of the
202 Stoics, and in such historians as Herodotus. It would be out of place to speak
203 confidently of a state of society which has passed away, but at first sight it does not
204 appear why the truths which I have enumerated should not have received as genuine
205 and deliberate an assent on the part of Socrates or Clantes, (of course with divine
206 aids, but they do not enter into this discussion), as was given to them by St. John or St.
207 Paul, nay, an assent which rose to certitude. Much more safely may it be pronounced of
208 a Mahometan, that he may have a certitude of the Divine Unity, as well as a Christian;
209 and of a Jew, that he may believe as truly as a Christian in the resurrection of the body;
210 and of a Unitarian that he can give a deliberate and real assent to the fact of a
211 supernatural revelation, to the Christian miracles, to the eternal moral law, and to the
212 immortality of the soul. And so, again, a Protestant may, not only in words, but in mind
213 and heart, hold, as if he were a {251} Catholic, with simple certitude, the doctrines of the
214 Holy Trinity, of the fall of man, of the need of regeneration, of the efficacy of Divine

215 Grace, and of the possibility and danger of falling away. And thus it is conceivable that a
216 man might travel in his religious profession all the way from heathenism to Catholicity,
217 through Mahometanism, Judaism, Unitarianism, Protestantism, and Anglicanism,
218 without any one certitude lost, but with a continual accumulation of truths, which claimed
219 from him and elicited in his intellect fresh and fresh certitudes.

220 In saying all this, I do not forget that the same doctrines, as held in different religions,
221 may be and often are held very differently, as belonging to distinct wholes or *forms*, as
222 they are called, and exposed to the influence and the bias of the teaching, perhaps
223 false, with which they are associated. Thus, for instance, whatever be the resemblance
224 between St. Augustine's doctrine of Predestination and the tenet of Calvin upon it, the
225 two really differ from each other *toto cœlo* in significance and effect, in consequence of
226 the place they hold in the systems in which they are respectively incorporated, just as
227 shades and tints show so differently in a painting according to the masses of colour to
228 which they are attached. But, in spite of this, a man may so hold the doctrine of
229 personal election as a Calvinist, as to be able still to hold it as a Catholic.

230 However, I have been speaking of certitudes which remain unimpaired, or rather
231 confirmed, by a change of religion; on the contrary there are others, whether we call
232 them certitudes or convictions, which perish in the {252} change, as St. Paul's
233 conviction of the sufficiency of the Jewish Law came to an end on his becoming a
234 Christian. Now how is such a series of facts to be reconciled with the doctrine which I
235 have been enforcing? What conviction could be stronger than the faith of the Jews in
236 the perpetuity of the Mosaic system? Those, then, it may be said, who abandoned
237 Judaism for the Gospel, surely, in so doing, bore the most emphatic of testimonies to
238 the defectibility of certitude. And, in like manner, a Mahometan may be so deeply
239 convinced that Mahomet is the prophet of God, that it would be only by a quibble about
240 the meaning of the word "certitude" that we could maintain, that, on his becoming a
241 Catholic, he did not unequivocally prove that certitude is defectible. And it may be
242 argued, perhaps, in the case of some members of the Church of England, that their faith
243 in the validity of Anglican orders, and the invisibility of the Church's unity, is so absolute,
244 so deliberate, that their abandonment of it, did they become Catholics or sceptics, would
245 be tantamount to the abandonment of a certitude.

246 Now, in meeting this difficulty, I will not urge (lest I should be accused of quibbling), that
247 certitude is a conviction of what is true, and that these so-called certitudes have come to
248 nought, because, their objects being errors, not truths, they really were not certitudes at
249 all; nor will I insist, as I might, that they ought to be proved first to be something more
250 than mere prejudices, assents without reason and judgment, before they can fairly be
251 taken as instances of the defectibility of certitude; but I simply ask, as regards the zeal
252 of the {253} Jews for the sufficiency of their law, (even though it implied genuine
253 certitude, not a prejudice, not a mere conviction,) still was such zeal, such professed
254 certitude, found in those who were eventually converted, or in those who were not; for, if
255 those who had not that certitude became Christians and those who had it remained
256 Jews, then loss of certitude in the latter is not instanced in the fact of the conversion of
257 the former. St. Paul certainly is an exception, but his conversion, as also his after-life,

was miraculous; ordinarily speaking, it was not the zealots who supplied members to the Catholic Church, but those "men of good will," who, instead of considering the law as perfect and eternal, "looked for the redemption of Israel," and for "the knowledge of salvation in the remission of sins." And, in like manner, as to those learned and devout men among the Anglicans at the present day, who come so near the Church without acknowledging her claims, I ask whether there are not two classes among them also,—those who are looking out beyond their own body for the perfect way, and those on the other hand who teach that the Anglican communion is the golden mean between men who believe too much and men who believe too little, the centre of unity to which East and West are destined to gravitate, the instrument and the mould, as the Jews might think of their own moribund institutions, through which the kingdom of Christ is to be established all over the earth. And next I would ask, which of these two classes supplies converts to the Church; for if they come from among those who never professed to be {254} quite certain of the special strength of the Anglican position, such men cannot be quoted as instances of the defectibility of certitude.

There is indeed another class of beliefs, of which I must take notice, the failure of which may be taken at first sight as a proof that certitude may be lost. Yet they clearly deserve no other name than prejudices, as being founded upon reports of facts, or on arguments, which will not bear careful examination. Such was the disgust felt towards our predecessors in primitive times, the Christians of the first centuries, as a secret society, as a conspiracy against the civil power, as a set of mean, sordid, despicable fanatics, as monsters revelling in blood and impurity. Such also is the deep prejudice now existing against the Church among Protestants, who dress her up in the most hideous and loathsome images, which rightly attach, in the prophetic descriptions, to the evil spirit, his agents and instruments. And so of the numberless calumnies directed against individual Catholics, against our religious bodies and men in authority, which serve to feed and sustain the suspicion and dislike with which everything Catholic is regarded in this country. But as a persistence in such prejudices is no evidence of their truth, so an abandonment of them is no evidence that certitude can fail.

There is yet another class of prejudices against the Catholic Religion, which is far more tolerable and intelligible than those on which I have been dwelling, but still in no sense certitudes. Indeed, I doubt whether they would be considered more than presumptive opinions by the persons who entertain them. Such {255} is the idea which has possessed certain philosophers, ancient and modern, that miracles are an infringement and disfigurement of the beautiful order of nature. Such, too, is the persuasion, common among political and literary men, that the Catholic Church is inconsistent with the true interests of the human race, with social progress, with rational freedom, with good government. A renunciation of these imaginations is not a change in certitudes.

So much on this subject. All concrete laws are general, and persons, as such, do not fall under laws. Still, I have gone a good way, as I think, to remove the objections to the doctrine of the indefectibility of certitude in matters of religion, though I cannot assign to it an infallible token.

301 One further remark may be made. Certitude does not admit of an interior, immediate
302 test, sufficient to discriminate it from false certitude. Such a test is rendered impossible
303 from the circumstance that, when we make the mental act expressed by "I know," we
304 sum up the whole series of reflex judgments which might, each in turn, successively
305 exercise a critical function towards those of the series which precede it. But still, if it is
306 the general rule that certitude is indefectible, will not that indefectibility itself become at
307 least in the event a criterion of the genuineness of the certitude? or is there any rival
308 state or habit of the intellect, which claims to be indefectible also? A few words will
309 suffice to answer these questions. {256}

310 Premising that all rules are but general, especially those which relate to the mind, I
311 observe that indefectibility may at least serve as a negative test of certitude, or *sine quâ*
312 *non* condition, so that whoever loses his conviction on a given point is thereby proved
313 not to have been certain of it. Certitude ought to stand all trials, or it is not certitude. Its
314 very office is to cherish and maintain its object, and its very lot and duty is to sustain
315 rude shocks in maintenance of it without being damaged by them.

316 I will take an example. Let us suppose we are told on an unimpeachable authority, that
317 a man whom we saw die is now alive again and at his work, as it was his wont to be; let
318 us suppose we actually see him and converse with him; what will become of our
319 certitude of his death? I do not think we should give it up; how could we, when we
320 actually saw him die? At first, indeed, we should be thrown into an astonishment and
321 confusion so great, that the world would seem to reel round us, and we should be ready
322 to give up the use of our senses and of our memory, of our reflective powers, and of our
323 reason, and even to deny our power of thinking, and our existence itself. Such
324 confidence have we in the doctrine that when life goes it never returns. Nor would our
325 bewilderment be less, when the first blow was over; but our reason would rally, and with
326 our reason our certitude would come back to us. Whatever came of it, we should never
327 cease to know and to confess to ourselves both of the contrary facts, that we saw him
328 die, and that after dying we saw him alive again. The overpowering strangeness of our
329 experience {257} would have no power to shake our certitude in the facts which created
330 it.

331 Again, let us suppose, for argument's sake, that ethnologists, philologists, anatomists,
332 and antiquarians agreed together in separate demonstrations that there were half a
333 dozen races of men, and that they were all descended from gorillas, or chimpanzees, or
334 ourangoutangs, or baboons; moreover, that Adam was an historical personage, with a
335 well-ascertained dwelling-place, surroundings and date, in a comparatively modern
336 world. On the other hand, let me believe that the Word of God Himself distinctly
337 declares that there were no men before Adam, that he was immediately made out of the
338 slime of the earth, and that he is the first father of all men that are or ever have been.
339 Here is a contradiction of statements more direct than in the former instance; the two
340 cannot stand together; one or other of them is untrue. But whatever means I might be
341 led to take, for making, if possible, the antagonism tolerable, I conceive I should never

342 give up my certitude in that truth which on sufficient grounds I determined to come from
343 heaven. If I so believed, I should not pretend to argue, or to defend myself to others; I
344 should be patient; I should look for better days; but I should still believe. If, indeed, I had
345 hitherto only half believed, if I believed with an assent short of certitude, or with an
346 acquiescence short of assent, or hastily or on light grounds, then the case would be
347 altered; but if, after full consideration, and availing myself of my best lights, I did think
348 that beyond all question God spoke as I thought He did, {258} philosophers and
349 experimentalists might take their course for me,—I should consider that they and I
350 thought and reasoned in different mediums, and that my certitude was as little in
351 collision with them or damaged by them, as if they attempted to counteract in some
352 great matter chemical action by the force of gravity, or to weigh magnetic influence
353 against capillary attraction. Of course, I am putting an impossible case, for philosophical
354 discoveries cannot really contradict divine revelation.

355 So much on the indefectibility of certitude; as to the question whether any other assent
356 is indefectible besides it, I think prejudice may be such; but it cannot be confused with
357 certitude, for the one is an assent previous to rational grounds, and the other an assent
358 given expressly after careful examination.

359 It seems then that on the whole there are three conditions of certitude: that it follows on
360 investigation and proof, that it is accompanied by a specific sense of intellectual
361 satisfaction and repose, and that it is irreversible. If the assent is made without rational
362 grounds, it is a rash judgment, a fancy, or a prejudice; if without the sense of finality, it is
363 scarcely more than an inference; if without permanence, it is a mere conviction.

Note

ii. n. 154. *Vide* Note I at the end of the volume.