

The Charlottetown Herald.

NEW SERIES

CHARLOTTETOWN, PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND, WEDNESDAY, FEB. 1, 1911

Vol. XL, No. 5

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LATIN.

Volume IX of "The Catholic Encyclopedia" contains some uncommonly interesting information about things not generally known—or, what is worse, known amiss. Of this order of "res scilicet" is, beyond question, the nature of that vaguely defined idiom "Church Latin." Nearly every man who has in his youth learned how to define "mensa" pretends to entertain vigorous opinions about "Church Latin": this "Church Latin" is barbarous; it is shocking to ears and eyes accustomed to Cicero; it ought to be quarantined, that the literary tastes of the rising generation may be saved from its microbe. "Let us clear our minds of cant." These common-places, intended to show a fastidious attitude of mind, are certainly cant—cant fabricated from bygone generations of priggish scholars, who only thoroughly knew one-half of what they were talking about; by a later generation, who know next to nothing of either the classical half or the medieval. Contemporary scholarship has realized, appreciated, and exploited the fact that what is conventionally called "classical Latin" is only one-half of the language, and that the other—half is not a corruption, not strictly a deterioration, but a genuine development of the original matrix from which the gems of Cicero and Sallust, of Virgil, Horace, and Lucretius were cut.

Owing to the exigencies of alphabetical order, the very complete treatment of this subject of continuity in the Latin language and literature is presented in "The Catholic Encyclopedia" in two articles—"Latin, Ecclesiastical," and "Latin Literature, Christian"—separated by another article, "Latin Church," which has no direct bearing on the matter. The second article of the two is very judiciously subdivided by periods: Professor Paul Lejay, of the Catholic University of Paris, deals with the earlier period, closing with the sixth century; while the Jesuit Father Scheidt, of Feldkirch, brings the discussion down to our own times. The first article ("Latin, Ecclesiastical") affords an opportunity for introducing the general subject of post-classical Latin, which its author (Professor Degert, of Toulouse) uses to excellent effect.

"Classical Latin," he says, "did not long remain at the high level to which Cicero had raised it. The aristocracy, who alone spoke it, were decimated by proscription and civil war, and the families who rose in turn to social position were mainly of plebeian or foreign extraction, and in any case uncustomed to the delicacy of the literary language. Thus the decadence of classical Latin began with the age of Augustus, and went on more rapidly as that age receded. As it forgot the classical distinction between the language of prose and that of poetry, literary Latin, spoken or written, began to borrow more and more freely from the popular speech. Now it was at this very time that the Church found herself called on to construct a Latin of her own; and this in itself was one reason why her Latin should differ from the classical. There were two other reasons, however; first of all, the Gospel had to be spread by preaching, that is, by the spoken word; moreover, the heralds of the good tidings had to construct an idiom that would appeal not alone to the literary classes, but to the whole people."

"Passing over the attribution of such supreme honor to Cicero, which many scholars will be inclined to question, the cause of the change from classical to Christian Latin could hardly be better stated in as few words as those of Professor Degert. The series of articles, written by a Parisian, a meridional, and a German, loses nothing in unity of informing effect by the diversity of its origin, and gains here and there in interest by the contrast of viewpoints. Professor Degert, it seems, inclines somewhat to the time-honored "centus" of a few classical authors, who were the idols of the rhetoricians even in St. Augustine's day. He traces with fine scholarly acumen the various sources of the ecclesiastical language, giving more ample space to the African element. But while "Ecclesiastical Latin" as a descriptive term covers a variety of literary forms, the most interesting as well as the most elaborately cultivated compositions in the language are those which may be grouped as liturgical; and it is in this part of Professor Degert's article that cultivated readers who have made no special study of the subject will probably find the freshest and most curiously interesting information. "In the liturgy," says this author, "ecclesiastical Latin shows its vitality by its triflingness." Most people who have listened attentively

to the recital of the Church's ancient prayers are conscious of a certain sonorous balance of accents; it will be news to many that this fine rhythm is a cultivated product, an effect attained "secundum artem." From the fourth century to the seventh "rhythmical cursus" gained the upper hand. "The prayer of the 'Angelus' is the simplest example of this; it contains all three kinds of 'coursus' that are to be met with in the prayers of the Mass and the Breviary: (1) the cursus planus, 'nostris infunde'; (2) the cursus tardus, 'in orationem cognovimus'; (3) the cursus velox, 'gloriam perducimus.'"

This topic of verse-structure, and the contrast between the classical (metrical) and medieval (accentual) systems, is also rightly touched upon in Father Scheidt's article on Christian Latin after the sixth century. In his share of the discussion (the earliest period) Professor Lejay has his hands full dealing with the less mechanical and more psychological aspects of the development of Christian Latin literature out of Greek thought and classical Latin forms, and the influence of the new national—barbarian—civilization which began, very soon after St. Augustine's time, to supplant the crumbling Greco-Roman unity of culture in the Empire. So rich is this period in prose works in the domains of history, of apologetics and of homiletics that there is but little space left for the consideration of the then nascent type of Christian devotional poetry. Especially interesting is this passing glance at the ancient origins of what many may have been inclined to regard as the exclusively Christian "pulpit style" in prose.

"From remote antiquity there had existed a moral literature, more exalted a preaching, which brought certain truths within the reach of the masses, and by the character of its audience was compelled to employ certain modes of expression. On this common ground the Cynic and the Stoic philosophies had met since the third century before Christ. From the still extant remains of Theophrastus and of Boethius we can form some idea of this style of preaching. From this source the satire of Horace borrows some of its themes. This Cynico-Stoic morality finds expression also in the Greek of Musonius, Epictetus, and some of Platon's treatises, likewise in the Latin of Seneca's letters and 'opuscules.' Its decidedly oratorical character it owes to the fact that with the beginning of the Christian era rhetoric became the sole form of literary culture and of teaching. This tradition was perpetuated by the Fathers. It furnished them the forms most needed for their work of instruction; the latter, developed into a brief treatise or reasoned exposition of opinion in the correspondence of Seneca with Lucilius; the treatise in the shape of a discourse, or, as Seneca again calls it, a 'dialogue'; lastly, the sermon itself, in all its varieties of conference, funeral oration, and homily. Indeed, homily (homilia) is a technical term of the Cynic and Stoic moralists."

In the middle ages, Latin, in which a distinct abstracter, placing it in strong contrast with even the colloquial Latin of Terence or of Plautus, is plainly evident, lived and served the everyday purposes of the philosophical schools, of ecclesiastical administration, of diplomatic intercourse between princes. No matter what the language of Norway, of Scotland, or of Poland, within their own borders, the Norman, Scottish, or Polish student of the Middle Ages had little or no difficulty in understanding the Flemish or Italian lecturer whose "presentation" in the schools of Paris might be his first university exercise; the King of England admonished his church barons, or addressed a letter to the German Emperor, in the same language in which the Pope's Bulls were written. Father Scheidt condenses [in] seven columns a vast amount of interesting and enlightening erudition on the drama, and the lyrical and epic poetry of which this post-classical, but genuine, Latin is the medium. The range of topics upon which this author has had to touch briefly in the course of his article and the easy skill with which he acquires himself in his task afford a brilliant example of encyclopedic writing—the same of familiarity with a difficult subject combined with the knack of condensation. One wonders all the more at the successful handling of the subject because, in all probability, the article must have been originally written in German; if so, "The Catholic Encyclopedia" is to be congratulated on the capability of its translator.

This notice of medieval Latin is fittingly, and of historical necessity, rounded out with a glance at the rise and progress of that humanistic movement which tended to make charobmen in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ashamed of idioms in which Venantius Fortunatus and St. Bernard, Ekkehard and St. Thomas Aquinas had written. The Renaissance had taught men that "late Confessor" is not exactly modeled on Horace's Supplices, but had left them in ignorance of the philological truth that there are other Latins besides that of the fashionable quarters of Rome in the Age of Augustus.

It is difficult to imagine how a more thoroughly capable handling of this subject, for the general reader, could have been accomplished than is presented in this group of articles, occupying in all less than twelve pages. The work has been done in such a way as to whet the reader's appetite for more information on the same subject; and should this appetite tend in the direction of curiosity as to the share of the Catholic Church in the cultivation of strictly classical Latin, there is Professor Lejay's further article of three pages on "Latin Literature, Classical." But after all, the main interest of this series of articles lies in its evidence that Latin is not, and never has been, a "dead language."

Dr. Alfred Suedekam, for years a member of the German Reichstag, a well-known writer on the Vorwärts staff, and acclaimed by the followers an expert in civic matters, recently paid an extended visit to the United States. The distinguished visitor used the opportunity to lecture before the League for Political Education and kindred bodies interested in the problems growing out of municipal development. Incidentally he did not neglect to tell his hearers that German Municipal Government is much superior to that in America, and among the three things to which he ascribed this superiority, he gave the first place to the growth of Socialism in that empire. It will be news to most of us that the generally excellent city administration one finds in the municipalities of that country is due to any such reason. We have, in our wisdom, credited German Socialism with an entirely different place in the undoubted progress of civic reform in the Fatherland. We have looked upon the experience of German Socialism rather as a striking object lesson of the repressive energy with which a strong government deals with what it deems a subversive and revolutionary propaganda among the people. Mayhap the followers of Socialism in Germany are quite as ready as those nearer home to make wild and unprovable claims. Mayhap, too, they are quite as disposed there as elsewhere to ostentatiously assume credit for every social betterment which the sane sense of progressive civic reform sanctions in excluding, no matter how tenuous the relation such an improvement may bear to Socialism's essential principles. Certainly the hard-headed, good sense of the Germans as yet has not allowed to appear in the administration of German cities any disposition to realize the "ideal city" described by Dr. Suedekam: "the city which supports every one of its members from the cradle to the grave."

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