

THE POPE IN THE SECOND CENTURY.

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ALTHOUGH constantly opposed and cruelly persecuted the church was in its perfectly organized condition in the earliest ages of its existence. It has been asserted that the authority of the Pope was not everywhere accepted. In the Church of Asia, for instance, Bishops ruled, it was said, without reference to Papal authority. An important case which arose and was much discussed, by its final settlement put an end to this fallacy. The Asiatics kept Easter according to the time of the Jewish Passover—a practice which they derived from their predecessors, the Jewish converts who chiefly constituted in their time, the Asiatic Church. This might have been tolerated as long as it was only a matter of discipline. But when its supporters dragged it into the sphere of doctrine by maintaining that they held the practice by apostolic institution, it could no longer have the sanction or even the silent approval of the Pope. The Asiatics were obstinate, and Pope Saint Victor found it necessary to act with the greatest vigour, in other words, to apply the highest exercise of Papal authority. He cut them off from the Communion of the faithful. Even in that early age excommunication was recognized as a powerful as well as severe punishment. It was felt to be such by the Asiatics; and they, at first, resisted. After much discussion and the powerful mediation of the celebrated Irenæus, Bishop of Lyons, they abandoned their heretical opinion and were reconciled to the Pope. This being done, it was not thought necessary that they should change their time of keeping Easter for that of the universal Church. They were allowed to hold it as coming from the Jewish converts, their predecessors. The Pope's authority, as sanctioning or forbidding, could not be more

clearly illustrated. In ordinary matters the Bishops rule; ("In quo vos posuit Episcopes regere Ecclesiam Dei,") while on occasions of great difficulty and high importance, such as that which occurred in the Church of Asia, the supreme power confided to Peter must intervene, ("Confirmo Fratres tuos.")

In Asia Minor it had been the custom in honour of St. John, who founded the churches of that country, to celebrate Easter according to the time of the Jewish Passover, that is, on the fourteenth day of the moon of the Jewish month of Nisan, on whatever day of the week it should occur. Early in the second century Pope Anicetus endeavoured to persuade Polycarp to hold the feast on the following Sunday, as was the practice at Rome and all the other Churches of the world. Polycarp, however, from respect to Saint John, whose disciple he was, did not relinquish the established custom, but persevered in observing it without any breach of friendly relations with the chief Pastor. The successors of Anicetus, Soter and Eleutherius laboured still more in order to obtain uniformity in the matter. In doing so they were not wanting in veneration to Saint John and the other apostles, who in the beginnings of the Church of Asia Minor had to deal with many Jewish converts, and hence were obliged to admit several Jewish observances. But now that all other Churches had abandoned such observances, there existed no longer any cause for continuing them. Jerusalem itself, its people having become chiefly Gentile Christians, had ceased to celebrate Easter according to the time of the Passover. There remained no reason, therefore, why the Christians of Asia Minor should persist in retaining a Jewish custom. At the beginning, indeed, the Jewish converts were the most numerous. But, in the time of Pope Saint Victor, the Christians of Gentile origin were more prevalent, both as regarded numbers and importance.