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THE ACTIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.

(From the Dublin Review.)

When, some numbers back, we treated first of the Parables, and then of the Miracles, of the New Testament, and showed how they could only receive their obvious explanation, as instructions, through the Catholic system, we felt that the same principle was applicable to all that our Redeemer said or did to make us wise unto salvation. To suppose that the less direct teaching of the Gospel belonged exclusively to the Spouse, and that the more immediate announcement of religious truth was common property to her and to her rivals, would indeed be an anomaly of reasoning, whereof we should be sorry to have any one suspect us. The miracle was for the unbelieving multitude; the parable was for the heartless priest and scribe; for friends and dear ones were the ordinary and domestic actions of Christ's earthly life; for Apostles and disciples were His words of eternal life, the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. The Church that alone can claim succession, in ministry, in truth, in grace, and even in history, from these, must alone be entitled to appropriate to herself what was done and said for them. Others may stand in the skirts of the crowd, and listen; some may even penetrate into the inner circle that stands about Jesus, to interrogate, being doctors of the law, or to tempt, being pharisees. And if, like those who were sent to apprehend Him, but remained to listen to Him, they attend with sincerity to His doctrines in parables and in mighty works, they will find them directed, as we have before seen, to force them into communion with, and submission to, the one Holy and Apostolic Church, in which alone His teaching ends, which alone His miracles illustrate.

But when the day's labor is closed, and no Nicodemus comes by night, to prolong it, before our heavenly Teacher retires to the mountain-top, or to His humble chamber, to pass the hours of repose in His rest, "the prayer of God," we see Him seated in the company of the few, of the faithful, and the loving; the Shepherd of the little flock, the Father of a slender household, partaking with them of their homely fare, and sharing with them in their untutored conversation. That His speeches to the multitude and to the Priests were clothed in noble and elegant language, no one can doubt. The people admired not only the wisdom, but the grace which flowed from His lips; the learned, like Nicodemus, conversed with Him respectfully; and all wondered at the gifts, ordinarily of education, spontaneously springing from the mind of a reputed carpenter's son. But without repressing the ground trodden over in the first of the articles referred to, we will content ourselves with saying, that had the language or accent of our Saviour betrayed any symptoms of Galilean rudeness, the ridicule which might have been cast upon it would have been too keen and too useful a weapon, to have been refused by His unprincipled foes. The Jewish writers are unsparingly severe upon it. But when we come to contemplate our Blessed Redeemer, retired from the crowd into the society of His disciples and familiar friends, we cannot but see Him descend into the familiar dialect of His own country; as senators in Venice, or nobles in Provence, would do when in the bosoms of their families. With Peter, whose speech in the priest's hall made him known for a Galilean; he would converse in those homely phrases, and with those local tones, which formed the language of the more favored cottage, as of the surrounding dwellings, of Nazareth, and which He condescended to lip in infancy, as if caught from the sweet lips of His humble Mother. For affection must be removed, as much as coarseness, from our estimate of His character who chose to be poor among the poor.

And thus also we come to contemplate the frugal meal at which this heavenly conversation was held, as corresponding in its outer form and features. Rude furniture in an unadorned chamber, rough-hewn tables and stools, the wooden platter, and the earthenware beaker, are the preparation for a repast, of which the bread is not from Aser; nor the wine from Engaddi. Yet what a banquet! Here it is that the parable is explained, and the want of faith censured; that contentions for precedence are checked, and deep lessons of charity and humility are taught; that, in fine, the mysteries of revelation are disclosed, and the gospel seed is dropped into warm and panting hearts.

Surely then, if the Church can claim the more mysterious teaching of adverse or curious crowds, as all directed for her improvement, she must have as fair a right to appropriate to herself that more intimate and direct instruction, which was addressed to those, whom she alone represents, and succeeds, on earth. And such is the teaching by actions and by words. To the first we shall confine ourselves in this paper, reserving the second to a future opportunity.

But though we have drawn a faint outline of our Lord's dealings with His Apostles and friends, by way of describing the scenes of familiar life in which we may find instruction, in so doing we have kept before us an ulterior view.

I. In fact, if "Christian" signifies a follower and disciple of Christ, one who looks up to his Master's example as a perfect model, there must, and will, be among those who bear that name, many that will gladly copy whatever He has been pleased to do. To all, this may not be given, any more than it is granted them to resemble Him in His ministry, or in His sufferings, or in His more spiritual prerogatives. But as His type is not to be found reproduced in any one of His disciples, as John came nearest to Him in love, Peter in elevation and headship, Paul in eloquence, James in prayer, Andrew in death; and as in later times His sacramental grace lives in His priesthood, His patience in His martyrs, His union of soul with God in His holy Virgins; so may we expect to find in some class of His chosen imitators this love and choice of poverty, this denudation of worldly comfort, and neglect of bodily ease. Our Blessed Redeemer is indeed a fount of burning light, the very sun of the spiritual firmament in His Church; and the rays that are concentrated, with dazzling intensity in Him, diverge and are scattered over earth as they descend; and one is reflected back from one soul, and another from another, reproducing jointly the image of Himself; but each one brightly rendering back only one, though absorbing many more. Now if one of the virtues of our Lord was contempt of earthly things, and love necessarily of abjection, it must yet be reflected upon earth somewhere in His Church; and if this virtue be found only in one among contending parties, it surely will form a moral note, a seal of Christ not to be mistaken.

We imagined, for instance, just now, this heavenly teacher joining His disciples in their temperate repast, entertaining them meanwhile with that word, on which man lives, no less than upon bread.—Now let us descend eleven hundred years in time, and travel from Palestine to a more westerly region. There is a cleft in a mountain's side, down which, though most precipitous, and seemingly carved out by an ancient torrent, rarely a drop of water flows, into whose dismal avenue no songster of the grove is known to penetrate. Patched against the side of this gloomy glen, and rooted in its grey crags is a dwelling, half built, half excavated, which, at the period alluded to, had just been constructed. The inmates are at meat. Just enter in. Their refectory is low, dark, and damp, for one part of it has its walls of rock. All else is in admirable keeping; the tables and forms are scarcely less rugged. And what is on the former does not fall much behind. A few herbs from the impracticable garden, seasoned poorly, bread of the coarsest, and drink of the sourest, form the provision. At this are seated young men and old, all simply clad, of grave aspect and modest demeanor. One alone is not engaged as the rest. He is seated apart, and reads to them that eat. Let us listen to his words, which seem to rivet the attention of all, and give a dainty relish to their homely food. Is it from the "Romant of the Rose" that he is reading? Is he reciting scraps of minstrelsy, that tell of chivalrous deeds, or of some high-born dame on her ambling palfrey, escorted by a gallant knight? Something of the sort, forsooth; but sweeter, Oh! by far! From the Book of books he is reading, how in cold winter a gentle maiden rode from Nazareth to Bethlehem upon an ass, attended by a poor carpenter; and at her journey's end, lodged in a stable. At this simple tale, behold, he who presides puts away his frugal platter, and rises from his hard seat, trembling with emotion, his eyes glistening with tears, his hands clasped convulsively. What has caused this sudden outburst of grief? Why, he seems to himself a base poltroon, a dainty delicate fellow, lodged gloriously, clothed luxuriously, fed sumptuously, the very rich glutton of the Gospel, when he compares himself with her, who, delicate, and pure as the lily bending over the snow-drop, adores the heavenly Infant who has come, in that hour, to share her cold and poverty. And so he crouches down in shame and humility on the clay-pavement of his refectory, and in a low wailing, broken with sobs, exclaims: "Woe is me! The Mother of my God seated on the ground and I comfortably placed at table! My infant Saviour poor and desolate, and I enjoying an abundant meal!"

Now to the Scripture read, this was then a commentary, and it it must be allowed a practical one. It said, more plainly than the nearest print of modern fount could convey it, that if Jesus Christ chose poverty and discomfort for Himself and those whom He best loved, He cannot but be pleased with those who, out of dear love of Him, choose a similar state. It goes on to say, that even when we have done our best to copy, the divine original stands far above us,

and beyond our reach, and there is room left for humility at seeing our distance. And so the holy St. Francis, one of whose many beautiful actions we have been narrating, as well as many of his companions, had been rich, but had become poor, may, wretchedly poor, and mortified, and neglectful of self, and all for God's sake. Yes, though in a cavern, clad in a single tunic, girt with a cord, and feeding on commonest fare, he saw enough to make him weep, in the greater abasement of God made man.

A proud supercilious age will no doubt tell us that St. Francis did not rightly read the Gospel. Was he wrong, then, in understanding from it, that our Saviour loved and choose poverty? Or was he wrong in believing it good to love and choose what He loved and chose? If the meal which we have described is not to be considered as approaching to the character and spirit of the repast enjoyed by the apostolic college, with their divine Head, then we will agree to go elsewhere to look for a parallel. Whither shall we go? To the workhouse, with its inflexible dietary? Or to the hospital, like St. Cross, with its stunted fare? But it is the voluntary imitation of the divine example, in the Church, that we are seeking; and not the compulsory fasts inflicted on others by the State or the Church. Perhaps when churchmen meet in hall—the nearest approach to the monastic refectory—for example, in one of our universities, may be expected the closest adaptation of necessary reflection to the evangelical standard. On a fast-day, particularly of the Establishment's appointment, we may hope to see how well it reads the gospel injunctions. Beneath the well-carved, lofty roof-tree, beside the emblazoned oriel, amidst the portraits of the great and rich men, who have sanctified the hall before them, around tables well furnished—we will say no more—sit the ministers of a dispensation, which if it be of invisible and spiritual goods, neglects not the ponderable and the perceptible. Perhaps, after the duties of the hour are over, one of them will wipe his mouth, and proceed to evening lecture in the pulpit, there to assure his hearers that, among the superstitions of popery is that of embracing a life of poverty and abjection, voluntarily suffering privations, subjecting the body by austerity; all which comes of not studying the scriptures; as neither the example of our Lord, nor the writings of Paul, give the least warranty for such unnatural conduct. And he will instance, as proof, the grovelling Francis, who quite lost sight of his Saviour, by going on the path of poverty.

In the life of St. Gregory the Great, we read that he daily entertained, and served, at table twelve poor men, in honor of the twelve apostles; and that one day a thirteenth unbidden guest sat with them. "And none of them that were at meat durst ask Him—Who art Thou? knowing that it was the Lord."—Jo. xxi. 12. Now were it to please that same divine Being to visit thus, in visible form, the haunts of men, and seat Himself at table, where most congenial to His meek heart; we are simple enough to believe that He would be more naturally to be expected in that refectory of St. Francis's *Cave*, yet existing in that cloven Apennine, near Assisi, where the same poverty and fragility are still practised, than in the midst of a clerical party, in the combination room of any University college.

It may perhaps be said, that our parallel is unfair. But we are driven to it, by the absence from the "pure and apostolic branch of the Church established in this country" of anything more likely, a priori, to bear analogy with our Saviour's repasts among His apostles. And we cannot forbear remarking, how, in every Catholic community, the presence of Christ instructing His disciples, at their common table, is imitated by the reading of scripture, during meals; a practice, we believe, confined to our "unscriptural" and "scripture-hating" Church. But our main purpose hitherto has been to show, how this unaligned, but only faithful Spouse has alone read her Lord's poverty as a practical lesson, has artlessly believed that it was not a chance but a choice, has unaffectedly deemed it a virtue, has found it a key to many otherwise locked-up treasures, a way rugged and steep over Calvary to Thabor. And this poverty of Christ, our Saviour, may be well put at the head of His actions, as ruling, modifying, and coloring them all, from His cradle to His cross.

It is not, of course, our intention, or we might properly say, our presumption, to go over even the principal actions of that life. We will only cull out a few, and we must premise that our selection will not be systematic; only we shall begin with the beginning, and choose classes or groups of actions, in preference to single acts. In the early period of the divine life on earth, we have necessarily to contemplate the influence which it had upon another person, inferior indeed by far, but nearer to him of whom we speak than any other created being. A Catholic at once understands us to mean His Blessed Mother.

II. Now it has appeared to us, when contemplating the early scenes of the gospel history, that her place has been far from duly considered, with reference to questions controversially agitated. It is true that the Catholic attaches importance to all recorded concerning her in the gospel; and finds there proofs incontrovertible of her virtue, her dignity, her privileges, and her influence, or rather power. The Protestant is, on the contrary, prone to depress, to extenuate, to disattach importance from all that relates to her; nay, he seeks to overlook it all, as merely secondary, casual, and almost dangerous. Now it is surely important, and it can hardly fail to be interesting, to ascertain what place is appointed to her by the Word, and the Spirit, of God, in the twofold economy, of faith, and of grace. In the earlier part of gospel history we must look for our answer.

1. We shall perhaps a little weary our readers by the course of remarks through which we must beg to lead them. They will contain nothing new, and nothing very brilliant.

It is clear that the historical books of the New Testament present a twofold aspect, as trust-worthy, and as inspired, compositions. Their writers used every human industry and pains, to record what they believed and knew to be true; and the Divine Spirit superintended, guided, secured from smallest error, and sealed the work which Himself had suggested to the writer's mind. There were two excellent reasons, among others, for this mode of dealing. First, those books had to go forth and be examined by men who were unbelievers, and before whom their authors came merely as honest, accurate, and credible historians. They were to be received by Pagan and Jew, and later, by sceptic and sophist, antecedently to any recognition of their inspiration. They were to be submitted to all the tests of human ingenuity, and even malice; put on the rack; compared with every other sort of document; tried by geography, physics, history, morals; examined by every possible light, heathen, rabbinical, Gnostic, Jewish; tortured philologically in every member of every sentence. Then the character of each writer was to be investigated; when he lived and where; what were his means of knowing; what his right to speak; what his language, his dialect, his idioms, his peculiar turn of thought; what his object and purpose, and what his mode of attaining it; what his interest, his gain, his loss, his chances. In fact, men who were called upon to give up every thing that human nature hugs, and evil passions stiek to, on the strength of certain most extraordinary facts related by what seemed very ordinary people, were not likely to do so upon a claim of inspiration, but would search into the evidence of the facts, through the credibility of their vouchers, with the sharp scrutiny of a repugnant mind. Now this inquiry must be exercised on the varied elements of a human truth. The earthly author must appear, if not in his infirmities, at least in his peculiarities, to lend a grasp to the eager searcher. Where there are no veins, no grain, no color, no separable ingredients, no penetrable point, investigation is hopeless. Hence every defender of the Gospels, from the beginning of the Church till now, has laid hold of those coincidences with, or approximations to, other writers, which proved humanly the perfect veracity of the inspired writers; and even minute research has been employed, to discover apparently trifling corroborations of particular statements. Let the reader but look at the first sentence of Dr. Lardner's "Credibility," and he will see how an able Protestant vindicator of the New Testament undertakes what we have described. The same course is pursued by Catholics, enforcing the credibility of the gospel against unknown believers.*

A second reason for this economy is that of its becomingness. The gift of inspiration could not be supposed to be bestowed on negligent or careless writers. We cannot well imagine a consciousness of inspiration (we do not speak of vision, or revelation) in one who had witnessed facts, superseding all care or effort, accurately to remember what he had witnessed. He did his best to render himself worthy of the marvellous gift, by his own thoughtful and diligent application to the task. He wrote as conscientiously, and with as anxious a desire to give the truth, as though he had no guarantee against error.

The result is, consequently, as we have remarked, a double aspect under which the evangelical records present themselves. First, they will bear the strictest scrutiny as histories, antecedent to all proof of revelation; so as to compel the acknowledgment of the facts contained in them—facts which form the basis of christianity. And this secures moral certainty to one previously an unbeliever. Secondly, they have on them the sacred and divine stamp of inspiration, of which no sufficient evidence can exist

* Every course of theology will show this. E. g. Ferrone, tom. 1. cap. iv. pr. 1; tom. ix. par. ii. sec. 1. c. 1. pr. iii. where the usual arguments for credibility are brought forward.