

From the Catholic Advocate.

## THE TRUE CHURCH.

[CONTINUED.]

It is quite an easy matter to protest, or pull down and destroy, and for this work a strong combination of hostile and discordant forces may be made. Whatever may be the principles of the parties, and however discordant, it is enough, to ensure their union for the work of destruction, that they all feel opposed to the existence of that which they desire to subvert. But after the work of ruin is complete, those forces, which for a time were united, again dissolve into their original elements, and they cannot unite to build up again, in any shape or form, the scattered materials of the subverted edifice. The sects can all unite to subvert the Catholic Church, but they cannot unite to furnish a substitute. They all adopt principles, which did not Christ protect his Church as he promised, would really bring her to ruin and desolation, but they cannot agree upon any substitute, in case the ruin which they desire, were in fact accomplished. See their sects, their churches, their doctrines, arrayed against each other in open antagonism—a war of churches and creeds, a war of systems and principles; and no combination, no agreement, as to what are the doctrines of Christ, or which is the Church of Christ.

In order to prove still more conclusively that the texts of scripture, which we have placed under the view of the reader, do really establish the tenet, that the Church professes an *unerring infallible authority*, in matters of faith, we have only to consider the conduct of the Christian Church from its first establishment to the present time, as manifest in the decrees of her Councils, and in the testimonies of the Fathers and doctors of the different ages of Christianity.

The conduct of the Church, unvaried from the beginning, is a *practical exposition* of the meaning of these texts of scripture, far more enlightened and correct, far more worthy of attention and reverence, than all the ingenious criticisms of modern Bible readers. The clear, explicit and harmonious *traditionary testimony*, furnished by Christendom throughout its whole extent, and by each successive age, is a commentary upon the revelations of God, and the sense and import thereof, of a credibility, weight, and importance, such as cannot be counterbalanced by any earthly testimony which can possibly be arrayed. The opinions, theories, views and speculations of the reformers, were they even harmonious, instead of discordant, could not weigh as a feather in the balance against this venerable testimony, consisting as it does of the combined voices of the Christian people and teachers of every part of the world and of every age. And even the present Catholic Church, with its unanimous faith on this point of the *unerring authority* of the Church, presents to the world near one hundred and eighty millions of Christians, who give the same interpretation to these texts of scripture, against those who claim the privilege to think more highly of their private understand-

ing and wisdom, than of the combined learning and wisdom of all nations and ages.

That in the Church of Christ the pastors have always taught with authority; when disputes and contests arose among the Christian people of any particular congregation, city, or province; that the pastors decided the questions in dispute, with a *positive authority*, even saying *Anathema*, to those who refused to submit to their decision; that the majority of Christians, always bowed reverently to these authoritative decisions; and that the rebellious were forthwith cut off from Christian communion: are *facts*, which, no person, ever so little acquainted with ecclesiastical history, will pretend to deny.

The Church, in all ages, from the meeting of the Apostles in the Council of Jerusalem to decide the dispute about the necessity of circumcision, to the time, when Protestants were condemned by the Council of Trent, has *always exercised* a supreme authority in proposing and explaining the doctrines of Faith. The proofs which establish this position, are numerous, solemn and certain. Plain historical evidences, confirmed by political and ecclesiastical institutions, and bearing the seal of public authority, throng forward to place this fact beyond dispute. From the assembling of Bishops in the first general Council of Nice, in the commencement of the fourth century, to that of Trent in the sixteenth, not only the chief pastors, the Bishops, but other learned doctors, and even Emperors and Princes personally, or by their representatives, attended these grand and imposing assemblies, where the authority of the chair of Peter presided, and the more essential points of Catholic Faith were set forth in precise terms, such as they had been first taught by the Apostles, and delivered from mouth to mouth, from heart to heart, and by daily practice exemplified, among the faithful of every country and clime, and of every generation. The decisions of these Councils are matters of historical record. They were hailed throughout Christendom as conclusive upon the points implicated. They were received with submission by the faithful in all parts of the world.

The custom of assembling the Bishops, as far as persecution allowed it to be practicable, existed long before the first general Council of Nice, held in 325, for the condemnation of Arius. Thus we read of an assembling of Bishops at Rome in 138, under Pope Victor, to settle the dispute about the time of celebrating the festival of Easter. We read of other assemblies in Palestine, and in different parts of the Western Church.

A Council was held at Rome in 251 to condemn the heresy of Novatian. Another was held in Arabia in 271 to condemn the error of those, who maintained that the soul died with the body, and would be raised up together with it at the last day.

In 272 a great council was held at Antioch, which deposed Paul of Samosata, who denied the divinity of the Saviour.\*

\* For these facts, see Fleury's Ecclesiastical History. Vol. 2 & 3.

The Church, in exercising this authority so positively and unequivocally, relied confidently, upon the promises of Christ to be with her, and that "the Spirit of Truth should abide with her, to guide her unerringly." She had either received from her Divine Founder the right thus to govern the Church with supreme authority; or else, in the days of her very first existence, when her confessors were languishing amid chains, and her martyrs bleeding for her doctrines, she had already *usurped* a supreme authority; changed the fundamental principles of her constitution as settled by her Founder; altered the rule of Faith; annihilated the supreme authority of God's written word, and the glorious gospel privileges of private interpretation; effectually overturned the whole work of Christ; and substituted a system which, in its operation, soon brought "all christendom into a state of error, superstition, and damnable idolatry," in which it remained till the sixteenth century, "totally buried," and in which, even since Luther's reformation, the majority of Christians have remained, still continue, and no doubt will, in spite of the sects of the reformation, and liberal distribution of Bibles, persevere to the end of time itself. Can we for a moment imagine, that, so soon after the time of Christ, and while some of the very disciples of his Apostles still lived, and occupied the Episcopal Chairs which had been founded and occupied by the Apostles, the Church could have thus fallen away from Christ and become unfit to preserve and propagate the doctrines of Faith! This is absolutely incredible.

The Pastors of the church exercised the authority which the Apostles, their predecessors, had exercised in their assembly at Jerusalem. It was Christ who delegated this authority. It was the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of Truth, who spoke by the voice of this authority.—When the church was disturbed by the winds of heretical doctrine; when she was agitated by the waves of controversy and disputation; when the storm raged and the sea swelled and heaved, and disaster seemed inevitable; lo! was always heard amid the din of the tempest and the cries of alarm, the voice of Christ himself, saying; "Peace, be still!" and the winds subsided, the water fell, the danger disappeared, and calm was restored to the Christian people.

It is an historical fact that the Church of Christendom was accustomed to hold Councils for deciding what was the Catholic faith handed down from Apostolic times through descending generations, and in passing their decrees, they virtually testified to the whole world that the authority, to decide disputed points with unerring certainty, had been vested in them by the Divine Founder of the Church. This unerring authority was indispensable to justify their positive decisions. For without an *unerring authority*, those positive decisions, enforced as they were by solemn ecclesiastical censures, and spiritual anathemas and ex-

communications, would have been most bold and destructive usurpations, such as the Church of Christ could not, so soon after her foundation, have possibly made. For this would have been the accomplished triumph of the "Gates of Hell" over the Church which Christ founded, inasmuch as the continued exercise of such usurped authority, submitted to as it was by all Christians, would engraft upon Catholic, or universal faith, human errors, falsehoods, heresies, superstitions, and various principles and tenets, ruinous to the souls of those who believed them—By this, the whole Church, both teachers and believers, would have been forcibly rooted out of Christ, and made fondly and blindly to follow Satan, as his trophies of victory over Christ himself.

Each succeeding General Council virtually claimed the attribute of the *same unerring authority*, and each succeeding General Council respected and confirmed the determinations which had been made by those which preceded.

Through the whole course of revolving centuries, the undisputed existence and exercise of authority considered *infallible* or *unerring*, is seen in the history of the progress of the Church. Why should the chief pastors and bishops of the Church hold Councils and issue solemn decisions if they had not this authority? Why should the bishops of each succeeding period of time claim for General Councils this same authority? Why should each such Council profoundly respect the determinations which had preceded, and consider the points involved as *finally decided*? Why should the Christian people, every where dispersed, most reverently receive these determinations and decisions of Councils? Why were those who refused submission, always cut off from the communion of the faithful, and always regarded by the faithful as really *excommunicated*? Why does the present Catholic Church, with its millions diffused through the whole earth, still reverently respect the authoritative decisions of these grand, imposing assemblies of the venerable prelates of past times, in which the various dioceses of Christendom were represented by their chief pastors and rulers? Why can the sects of Protestants show no General Council, no assembly of ancient prelates and bishops, with whom they can claim religious sympathy and Christian Communion? Why do all the ancient Councils belong to Catholics, and their acts and decisions all uphold the authority of the present Catholic Church?

We are aware that Protestants strive to evade the force of those arguments, which, on this ground, are brought forward to show that they are in a state of rebellion against a just and divinely constituted authority, by resting their defence upon the written word of God, understood in the sense, and *only* in the sense, which they are pleased to put upon it, by their own ingenious interpretation. But an impartial inquirer, not interested to deceive himself, will view things by the light of evidence. To such we say, that having admitted that Christ established a Church and left with it his revela-