

## OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

### THE CATHOLICITY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

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[The following is one of the course of lectures on "Presbyterian Topics," recently delivered in Montreal.]

"I believe in the Holy Catholic Church." Although these words were not dictated by James, the son of Alphaeus, as Rufinus asserted, nor had any place in the Church's Confessions of Faith till the second century, they are true and good words for any Christian to utter. And yet they may stand in need of some explanation, as a reminiscence of my school days tells me. The head-master of one of my earliest schools was a strict Episcopalian, and required that on a certain day of the week his scholars, after reading a portion of the Scripture, should recite the Apostle's Creed. But one of them, the son of a Welsh Minister, stoutly refused, basing his objections on the article relating to the Church, and maintained that, being neither a Catholic nor a Churchman, it would be an act of base apostasy to make any such confession. The boy was wrong undoubtedly, and yet he had too good reason for being wrong. Ask the majority of people what the Catholic Church is and they will direct you to the Church of Rome. Ask the larger half of the minority and they will either inform you that it is their particular denomination, or, if not so highly favoured as to belong to a religious body claiming the name Catholic, that it consists of narrow-minded people who think themselves in the right and everybody else in the wrong. I need hardly inform this enlightened audience that the Greek word "catholic" simply means universal, and nothing more. That organization which contains in itself all the Christian teachers and disciples of Christ in the whole wide world, may call itself Catholic. The Presbyterian Church has never made this claim. It cannot do so consistently with the least regard for truth, nor has it ever shown the slightest desire so to unchurch the rest of Christendom. But if our Presbyterian Church cannot and will not arrogate to itself the title of universality, it does not thereby place itself in an inferior position to any sect of professing Christians; for no other Church can assume the name Catholic without, on the one hand, casting contempt upon the body of Christ, or, on the other, playing the fool's part with words that have no meaning.

For the catholicity of the Presbyterian Church, therefore, we must look below the rent fabric of modern Christendom, and beyond the mere vision of a visible unity to the lofty ideal that rules the mind of the true Churchman, and to the warm emotions that flow from his generous heart. I shall, indeed, before I close, direct your attention to the constant recognition in the Church of our Presbyterian faith and polity, and to their present wide diffusion, but would first seek to exhibit our catholicity in the conception of the Church which our co-religionists have ever held, and in the relations they have sustained to Christendom and the world at large.

Who has not known the value of a high ideal, a master principle of thought, a purifier of the moral nature, a rebuker of the base and sordid, a grand incentive to noble deeds and life-long labours. Though its beauty and proportions be never mirrored in the real world without, he runs no wild-goose chase, follows no will-of-the-wisp dance, that pursues it with heart and mind, for it leaves its impress on the more real world within, and stamps the soul with one God-like character at least. The artist and the poet, the philosopher and the statesman, have only begun in these degenerate days to pretend to limit the flight of their art and science by the well-defined horizon that separates the actual and the sensible from the great depths and heights beyond. I say they pretend thus to limit themselves only, for there is not one who, while shutting out from his mental vision the radiant heights of the unseen universe, has not lost himself at times in depths obscure, to which no human observation has ever penetrated. The science of the Christian is transcendental. His facts, it is true, are among the most real and universal in man's experience, but for their causes and their ends alike, he must transcend the limits of time and space and the fleeting show of all earthly things. The Godhead has indeed been revealed but revealed under a dark veil of humiliation and suffering. The Divine antitype of perfect man-

hood the world has seen, and its image is before us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but the vision of perfect manhood glorified has been vouchsafed for a few brief moments only to three poor Galilean fishermen in the holy mount. True theology seeks to free itself from the traditions of men and the imperfections of human thought and experience, influenced as these are by time and circumstance, that it may rise to an apprehension of thoughts and ways that are higher than man's. The devout naturalist strives to attain to the Master Builder's plan, to a knowledge of the archetypes in the Divine mind, according to which the different departments of nature assumed their wonderful varieties of form and structure. These archetypes he finds in no existing individual or species. They are ideals that the eye of sense has never beheld. Fictions men may call them as far as material existence is concerned, yet they are necessary fictions to the mind that looks beyond the chaos of the phenomenal to the order and harmony of the real. So it is with the true churchman's conception of the Church. He finds his model is no species or individual, though they be called of Paul or of Apollos, of Cephas or of Christ. Yet is his ideal no abstraction, the result of induction from a comparison of existing communities, but one revealed from heaven itself in the words of that Son of Man, who came down from heaven to pray in the garden of Gethsemane and suffer on the bitter cross, "that they all may be one."

There are those who hold that these words, and kindred expressions of the inspired apostles, bear no reference to a visible unity. I am happy in being permitted to leave such objections in the hands of the rev. lecturer on the Constitution of the Church. Dealing, as I am, not with arguments but with facts, I can simply say that such views have always been those of a very small minority in the Church; that in many centuries they have had no exponent even among the worst of Separatists; and that from Presbyterians they have never met with an ounce of sympathy. As early as the time of Tertullian in the second century, though he himself was in a measure a schismatic, the churches of Africa required from their members a profession of faith in the Church catholic. It was high time; for the divisions foreshadowed in the days of Paul had become a matter of painful anxiety to devout believers in the pillar and ground of the truth. Then followed the martyr Cyprian, a grander character by far than he whom in his humility he delighted to call "the Master." Diligent and faithful in the discharge of his immediate duties to his people, his soul burned with a great longing for the unity of the Church. He erred in working out the details of that unity, and laid the foundations of the Episcopal and Papal system in his errors, yet the end he aimed at was a visible realization of the petition of Gethsemane. No man ever believed more firmly in the holy Catholic Church. The œcumenical councils, beginning in the reign of Constantine, testified, as provincial synods long before had done in part, to the doctrine which the African father had advocated. Augustine again, that wondrous combination of strong, stern intellect and bleeding heart, was roused by the schism of the Donatists, the first voluntaries of ecclesiastical history, to follow in the footsteps of his African brethren, and to declare that God desires His Church's unity. And so the truth passed on to the time of Gregory the Great, who, disdaining the title of universal bishop and charging him who held it with blasphemy, did, nevertheless, more than any other pontiff to bring the Christian world to the feet of Rome. He was a sixth century Cyprian in his conception of what the Church should be, and unhappily went far beyond the martyr of Carthage in his erroneous methods for carrying out the great design. A wish for uniformity and subject-ion took the place of the old desire for unity; and force and fraud superseded the intercessory prayer. Noble missionary churches, full of life and zeal, and purer far than those of Rome and Constantinople, fell before the rage for centralization. The Churches of the East and West were mutually excommunicated; witnesses for the truth arose in both to upbraid them with their gross defection, a defection that increased and intensified from year to year; yet still the grand ideal remained, and the words "I believe in the holy Catholic Church." They found an echo on the lips of British Culdees and Italian Waldenses, English Lollards and Bohemian Hussites; for corruption could not corrupt, nor blood quench, nor martyr fires destroy the Church's archetype. It was this that kept holy men

in the Church of Rome, even when its days were darkest and its crimes called most loudly to heaven. The reformers before the Reformation were no schismatics, that causelessly withdrew from Rome's communion. They did not wish to go. Rightly or wrongly she was to them the Church, and they would fain have remained within her borders to carry on a work of purification that should have made the unfaithful spouse of Christ once more all glorious. They were driven out with fire and sword and fierce anathemas, still clinging to the doctrine of the Church universal. And so it was with the Reformers proper. They would fain have reformed the Church, but it would not be reformed; they would have remained in visible unity with Rome as a protesting section of the Church, had liberty to carry out their own reforms been granted them. In individual states Presbyterianism itself was no schism, but the effect of provincial reformations. No new churches arose in the Protestant cantons of Switzerland, but, in these, sections of the old Church accepted a reformation, a restoration to primitive faith and polity, that the Church elsewhere refused. In Scotland so thoroughly was this the case that even those bishops were retained in their sees who did not receive the new order of things. In England also the Presbyterian Church, which was for a time supreme in the days of the Commonwealth, was no sect. It was the Church of England purified by those who from the Reformation had protested against mere partial amendment of Rome's unapostolic ways. Independency was a sect in the judgment of our Presbyterian forefathers, and, with all respect for the piety and worth of Independents here and wherever they may be found, I must say that it was they who under the Protectorate gave English Presbyterianism its death-blow. But for Cromwell the Church of England might have been Presbyterian to-day. The Puritans were no seceders; they hated the very thought of schism. And this perhaps is why in Milton's eyes "new presbyter was but old priest writ large." The idea of setting up another Christian communion alongside of the Church of England never entered their minds. They were the Church of England, purified and thus brought into those relations with the reformed Churches of Scotland, France, Germany and Switzerland, for which Knox and Beza, Zanchius and Bullinger had pleaded in vain.

It may be new to many of my hearers that in a land so famous for ecclesiastical secessions as Scotland, the doctrine of the Church's catholicity found numerous and strenuous supporters. A glance at Walker's Theology and Theologians of Scotland will show that their number was legion and their views as decided as those of Cyprian and Augustine. "This conception of the Church," says Walker, "of which in at least some aspects we have practically so much lost sight, had a firm hold of the Scottish theologians of the seventeenth century. It enabled them to meet the Church idealism of Rome—in many ways so grand and attractive—with a nobler Church idealism. It enabled them to throw back the charge that Protestantism fails to realize the Bible doctrine of Church unity—that it dismembers and breaks up the kingdom of heaven upon earth in severing it from its visible centre of unity—with the reply that Protestant unity is as much a reality as Roman unity, only that the centre of it is in heaven, not on the banks of the Tiber. Of this great visible Church the various separate true Churches are members, in communion with one another, related to one another like the departments of a kingdom; and though differences may exist between them, they are not on that account to be regarded as in opposition or conflict. In accordance with this idea, the œcumenical Council or Assembly was acknowledged by them to be the supreme Church authority on the sort of questions which naturally fall within its scope, questions bearing on such matters as are necessary, not indeed to the Church's being or well-being, but certainly to its highest well-being. It was also held that it was only the evil of the times that prevented a Protestant œcumenical from assembling and pronouncing sentence of excommunication on the Church of Rome as a false Church, or in some form cutting it off from ecclesiastical fellowship."

The Church of to-day would hardly care to homologate all that these old divines have said on the subject of catholicity, yet in its essentials the doctrine remains the same. Modifications have arisen in the application of it, but it has never lost its hold upon the Scottish mind. Good men went out from the Church of Scotland not lightly, but with strong and weighty rea-