

The Catholic.

Quod semper; quod ubique; quod ab omnibus.

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AMICABLE DISCUSSION.

Continued.

LETTER III.

ON THE INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH.

Fifty years before Saint Cyprian, Irenæus, a disciple of Saint John through Polycarp and Papias, and, after the martyrdom of Saint Potinus, second bishop of Lyons, wrote his great work *Upon Heresies*. Hear what he says in Book IV. ch. XLIII: "For this reason we must obey those who preside in the Church, who hold their succession from the apostles, as we have shewn, and who with the succession of the episcopacy, have received the certain grace of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father." Where the certain grace of truth is found, there, assuredly, no error is to be apprehended: and there, of course, must be found infallibility. And again in the XLV. chapter of the same book, speaking of the successors of the apostles, he adds; "It is they, who preserve the faith that we hold of God alone, who made all things they who expound to us the scriptures, without danger of errors." Let us then boldly follow their exposition of scripture, confident as we are with Saint Irenæus, that we can never go astray, while we follow their steps, nor fall into error, while we adopt their interpretations.

Tertullian, so celebrated for his writings, and above all for his excellent book on the *Prescriptions* against the heretics, addresses them in the following ironical strain, "Well! then, for your satisfaction, we will suppose that all the churches have fallen in error!—not one of them has been looked upon by the Holy Spirit; not one directed in truth by the spirit which Christ had sent, and which he had asked of his Father to be for his people the teacher of truth! This agent of God, this vicar of Christ has then we will suppose neglected his ministry, by permitting the Churches to think and believe otherwise, than he had himself announced to them by the mouth of his apostles." Tertullian observed in this passage that, according to the heretics, it would follow that all the churches had fallen into error, because they all were agreed upon the articles, which the heretics rejected. He sets off the absurdity of such a supposition, by introducing the perpetual assistance of the Holy Spirit, promised to the Church by Jesus Christ. It was his belief, therefore, that the Church was always guided in the truth by the Holy Spirit, and under its influence always secure from error: and this his belief was founded upon the same reason and the same

promises that have induced the belief of it in all christian ages before and after.

If I have prolonged the discussion of the three first ages, it is because they are in general less known, because it was necessary to shew that the promises of Jesus Christ, being then more recent must on that account have been more lively in the remembrance of men; because the bishops who illustrated the rising Church were well acquainted with the rights and obligations of their ministry, and because, to discover with more splendour the dogma of infallibility, with which their minds were profoundly impressed, nothing more was wanting in those times than the appearance of favorable circumstances. These circumstances did at last appear when Providence called Constantine* to the throne, and seated religion on it with him. Soon were the bishops of the whole world beheld assembling at Nice,† where the doctrine of Arius was solemnly condemned and banished. The doctrine of Macedonius was afterwards treated the same at the general council of Constantinople,‡ that of Nestorius at Ephesus;§ that of Eutyches at Chalcedon.¶ It would be superfluous to mention all the œcumenical councils that distinguished the following ages up to the council of Trent. Let but an attentive observation be made of the circumstances, and motives which caused the convocation of these councils, the manner of proceeding adopted by the fathers in them and the reception their decrees met with in the world, and it will be perceived that in all ages there prevailed a general persuasion that the episcopal authority was the means instituted by Jesus Christ to preserve unity among all his disciples, and that the opinions adopted by the majority of the bishops are for all an infallible rule of faith. It would be tedious to pursue in detail this examination of the councils: let us confine ourselves to that of Nice,

Arius, being condemned by a synod at Alexandria, makes his complaint to several bishops in other parts, explains to them his principles, declares his submission, implores their light and assistance, succeeds in making himself some friends, some protectors and a great number of preselytes: his cause soon becomes alarming on account of the seditious tumults, and murders which it occasions. Constantine endeavours to apply a remedy to it, but fails in his attempt. In the mean time, the flame is still on the increase, and the Emperor, together with the bishops whom he consults, see no other means of extinguishing it, besides the authori-

*In 306. Proclaimed afterwards at Rome, by the Senate first of Augustus, 313.—†In 325.—‡In 381.—§In 431.—¶In 451.

ty of a general council. He convokes it at Nice. Upon the news of this, the minds of men become calm, parties relent, each one flatters himself that he shall soon see his cause triumph, and remains at peace in the expectation of the definitive decision to be pronounced at Nice. Hither assemble from Europe, Africa and Asia, patriarchs, metropolitans and bishops, to the number of 318, and in their attendance a great number of doctors, and at the head of all the celebrated Osius of Cordova, as proxy for Sylvester, the head of the Church, Arius is cited to appear—many of his partisans were there already. He comes in person to give an account of his opinions. You, see, so far the universal opinion well proved. Every thing bows before the authority that is going to pronounce sentence. Arius and his party pay homage to it, and submit beforehand. The august and venerable senate opens its sessions. Constantine appears in all his imperial pomp. I pray, you, remark this passage, in his answer he gives to an harangue that had just been addressed to him in the name of all the fathers. "The rage of division spreading through the minds and penetrating the hearts of men, excites them one against the other, troubles peace, ruins faith by rendering it uncertain, fills the country with disorder and tumults, and after all this, exposes religion to the contempt, the ridicule, and the blasphemy of our adversaries (the pagans,) who take occasion from thence to tear it in pieces, To remedy so great an evil, I have thought nothing to be so powerful as the whole Church acting with authority in this holy assembly that represents it."*

The first business the council entered upon was that of Arius. It sets about it with that maturity and wisdom that was to be expected from so great and learned an assembly, in which also were sitting a great number of confessors of the faith, mutilated in the persecution of Licinius and covered with scars, which Constantine kissed with respect. Arius and his doctrine were unanimously condemned the consubstantiality of the word recognised and fixed to the immortal symbol, which is still to this day repeated by all christians. The fathers of Nice, at the end of their labours, addressed a synodal letter to all the Churches under heaven, to notify their decisions and to offer them to the acceptance of all the Bishops in the world. In it they say, "that with one voice it had been resolved to anathematize Arius and his impious doctrine." They had already presented the decree of his condemnation to the Emperor, who had received it with the High-

*Eusebius, Sozomen, Theodoret, Nicephorus.