

The Catholic Register.

"Truth is Catholic; proclaim it ever, and God will effect the rest."—BALMEZ.

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CALUMNY REFUTED.

A Defence of the Popes of the Renaissance.

HALLAM, RANKE, AND MACAULAY CALLED TO WITNESS.

In the Catholic World Mr John J O'Shea takes up for examination a statement made by an anonymous novelist in Harper's Magazine.

The writer in Harper's takes the bold step of blackening the characters of the Pontiffs of a whole era in one grand sweep of his pitch brush. It is of the century in which Joan D'Arc lived and died that this language is used:

"The highest personages in Christendom, the Roman Pontiffs, vice-regents of God, representatives of heaven upon earth, sole authorized agents and purveyors of salvation, only infallible models of human perfection, were able to astonish even that infamous era and make it stand aghast at the spectacle of their atrocious lives, black with unimaginable treacheries, butcheries and fatalities."

This language is conveniently indefinite, inasmuch as it gives no exact limit to enable the investigator to fix as applying to certain individuals its recklessness, no less than the terms in which it is conveyed, defeats its own object. It may well be doubted that any one reader of the magazine is either so ignorant of the truth or so blinded by prejudice as to believe that the Roman Catholic Church ever taught the doctrine of the personal impeccability of the Sovereign Pontiff. Every educated person knows that over and over again has it been solemnly affirmed that human weakness is the common inheritance of the ecclesiastic and the layman, and no Pope ever reigned that did not confess his human frailties as a penitent just the same as the humblest layman in the Church.

It is unquestionably true that the period spoken of was a critical one for the Church. The gates of hell had been long sending forth its legionaries to undermine the Rock of Peter or take it by escalade. Corruption and worldliness in many places had resulted from the contact of the Church with the State. There had been a revival of pagan literature and pagan art and this had infected not only the lay mind but penetrated even the Papal court and the ranks of the higher ecclesiastics. Pagan philosophy was found to be a bad yoke-fellow with Christian purity, and the result of the adoption of the elegant epicureanism of the ancients by the higher classes was a loosening of the morals in the religious life as well as the secular. A powerful contributory agent to such a deplorable position was the long struggle over the central authority. Many different Popes claimed to be lawful successors of St. Peter the words of men became uncertain and foundations of faith began to wobble. With the doubt and distraction that clouded the moral world all through the long period of the Western Schism and the contentions for the papacy, it is matter for wonder that the prestige of the original faith of

Christianity remained to transmit the light to the succeeding ages. There was a mysterious veil over the workings of Heaven in the Church.

Hallam, the English Protestant historian, whose references to the Papacy are characterized by no spirit of philosophy or charity, but by the narrowest rancor of a Scottish covenanter, does not dare to allege any such extraordinary crime against any of the legitimate or pseudo-Popes as the writer in Harper's imputes. Only two of the Popes of that century are singled out by him for strong animadversion. These are John XXII. and Alexander VI. The crime which distinguished the former, in Hallam's eyes, was avarice, Alexander was tainted with licentious prodigality, and this species of immorality in Hallam's eyes is not quite so reprehensible as the other. He sums up his view of the fifteenth century Popes by this loose and indiscriminate indictment against the whole body:

"Men generally advanced in years and born of noble Italian families, made the Papacy subservient to the elevation of their kindred or to the interest of a local faction. For such ends they mingled in the dark conspiracies of that bad age, distinguished only by the more scandalous turpitude of their vices from the petty tyrants and intriguers with whom they were engaged. In the latter part of the fifteenth century, when all favorable prejudices were worn away, those who occupied the most conspicuous station in Europe disgraced their name by the most notorious profligacy that could be paralleled in the darkest age that had preceded."

Here in this latter sentence we have words so nearly identical with some of the phrases in Harper's as to suggest that the writer had Hallam before him as he penned his charge. But it will be noticed that he goes on to indicate darkly what Hallam did not dare to insinuate with all his will to do it.

Let us now turn from the paltry spite of these pettifogging writers to the testimony of more generous but incomparably more able enemies. Ranke was capable of appreciating the difficulties of exalted men dealing in their day with the most serious political complications of a period of national transition and dynastic intrigue, incessant and universal. Hear what he says about one of the Popes included in the frightful accusations of Hallam and the Harper's writer.

"There has doubtless been justice in the complaints raised against the exactions of Rome during the fifteenth century, but it is also true that of the proceeds a small part only passed into the hands of the Pope. Pius Ist enjoyed the obedience of all Europe, yet he once suffered so extreme a dearth of money that he was forced to bring himself and his family to one meal a day. The 200,000 ducats required for the Turkish war that he was meditating had to be borrowed; and those petty expedients, adopted by many Popes, of demanding from a prince, a bishop, or grand master who might have some cause before the court, the gift of a gold cup filled with ducats, or a present of rich furs, only show the depressed and wretched condition of their resources."

Pope Sixtus IV. is set down as the first of the Pontiffs who enlarged the boundaries of the Papal States by taking possession of the territory of several petty nobles; but, observes Ranke:

"There is a certain internal connection between the fact that at this period the temporal princes were regularly seeking possession of the Papal privileges, and the circumstances that enterprise partly social

now began to occupy the most earnest attention of the Pope. He felt himself, above all, an Italian prince."

Ranke ingeniously suppresses the fact that the petty nobles in Rome and its neighborhood in those days were incorrigible lawless. It required a man of courage to deal with such desperadoes at times. The first act of Sixtus V. after he was elected, was to provide for the safety of his people by hanging four of the noble robbers.

Three or four of the Popes of this epoch stand out prominently as worthy of their lofty station. The names of Martin V., Nicholas V., and Leo X. are famous in the annals of the Papacy. Martin V. was confronted with the herculean task of healing the ravages which the great schism caused through out the Church universal. His private character was above reproach. Hallam is obliged to mention the name of the Pontiff once or twice in the course of his history, he makes no charge against him, neither does he eulogize his character. Is it that the historian is capable of appreciating virtue, or unwilling to mete out justice?

But Prof. Ranke had better opportunities of learning the truth about various Popes than any of the other historians. He spent a long time in Rome, in Venice, and other parts of Italy hunting through the rich stores of MSS. dealing with the various epochs which the great Italian houses connected with past Popes carefully preserve. He was frequently allowed to examine the Barberini collection, also that of the Corsini palace, and the Venetian archives. He seems somewhat surprised at the perfect liberty accorded a Protestant in this regard, judging from his prefatory observations. Many of the documents he went through were never intended for public use, he informs us, and consequently they spoke more freely about great personages and events than otherwise would have been the case. It is to be remarked that with all this mass of gossip and rumor and fact at his disposal unreservedly, Ranke does not make any specific charge of the nature hinted at in this terrible indictment in Harper's against any of the Popes. He advances nothing stronger than the vague and shapeless accusations mentioned above. What ever scandal mongering went on about these matters, they were made the subject of serious investigation. We have only to look at what is going on in our own day to find an explanation of such stories. Men occupying high station, have from time immemorial been subjected to slanderous attack for the basest motives—self or the gratification of private spleen.

Of Nicholas V. the august proposer of the classical revival of the fifteenth century, the late Lord Macaulay used these remarkable words in 1850 at Glasgow University:

"At this conjunction—a conjunction of unrivalled interest in the history of letters—a man never to be mentioned without reverence by every lover of letters held the highest place in Europe. Our just attachment to that Protestant faith to which our country owes so much must not prevent us from paying the tribute which, on this occasion and in this place, justice and gratitude demand to the founder of the University of Glasgow, the greatest of the restorers of learning, Pope Nicholas V. He had sprung from the common people, but his abilities and erudition early attracted the great. He had studied much and travelled far. He had

visited Britain, which, in wealth and refinement, was to his Tuscany what the back settlements of America now are to Britain. He had lived with the merchant princes in Florence—those men who first enabled trade by making trade the ally of philosophy, of eloquence, and of taste. It was he who, under the munificent and discerning Cosmo, arranged the first public library that modern Europe possessed. From privacy your founder rose to a throne, but on the throne he never forgot the studies which had been his delight in privacy. He was the center of an illustrious group, composed partly of the last great scholars of Greece, and partly of the first great scholars of Italy. By him was founded the Vatican library, then and long after the most precious and most extensive collection of books in the world. By him were carefully preserved the most valuable intellectual treasures which had been snatched from the wreck of the Byzantine Empire. His agents were to be found everywhere, in the bazaars of the farthest East, in the monasteries of the farthest West, purchasing or copying worn eaten parchments on which were traced words worthy of immortality. Under his patronage were prepared accurate Latin versions of many precious remains of Greek poets and philosophers. But no department of literature owed so much to him as history. By him were introduced to the knowledge of Western Europe two great and unrivalled historical compositions, the works of Herodotus and of Thucydides. By him, too, our ancestors were first made acquainted with the graceful and lucid simplicity of Xenophon, and with the manly good sense of Polybius."

We have now shown what historians whose reputation is world wide have said and left unsaid of several of the Pontiffs who have been held up to execration by the unknown writer in Harper's Magazine. We might add that were it not for the efforts of some of them, the work of the Moslem might have been completed and Europe given over to the swords and the harem of the despoilers of Greece and Armenia. Judging men of such a kind by the microscopic eyes of jealousy is not the mark of intellectual capacity. John J. O'Shea in the Catholic World.

Some Hope.

"Young man," said the sage, "I hear you are about to be married."

"You are right," said the young man.

"Well, young man, the day will come when your wife will make the discovery that you do not know everything on earth. It will be a great shock to her feelings and your supremacy. Still, there is this hope for you. You, while cheerfully admitting that you really do not know it all, may be able to persuade her that the reason for that state of things is that there is so much in the world that is not worth knowing."

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