

The Catholic.

Quod semper; quod ubique; quod ab omnibus.

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AMICABLE DISCUSSION.

Continued.

LETTER III.

ON THE INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH.

The conclusion of the passage confirms what has been said in a still more forcible manner. For, following two metaphors of St. Paul, Jesus Christ has given us the ministry of the pastors, in order that, being strengthened by their instructions, we may not float about in uncertainty, like children who, when left to themselves, go as chance leads them to the right or the left without knowing where to direct their steps; and that "we may not be tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine." The doctrine of our conductors is for us, therefore, a solid and weighty anchor. Let us hold fast to this anchor, and let the winds, and the tempests, and the waves work their pleasure. We shall, undoubtedly, be always agitated but never shall we be drawn away. The immovable anchor will firmly keep us within sight of port and uniformly directed among ourselves towards one and the same centre. As for those, who being deceived by the artifices and seductions of some individuals shall withdraw from this powerful support to follow them, you will see them become the sport of the winds, having no longer any guide but their own fancy, always uncertain, in rough ocean wandering from error to error, and, in the confusion of opinions, not knowing what course to steer some disappear at last under the waves, and others rush distractedly into a labyrinth of endless errors. This is the history of the Church and of all the sects that have separated from it; and St. Paul's doctrine is found to be correct by the experience of eighteen hundred years.

2^o But if in the small number of writings that we have upon the preaching of our Saviour and of his apostles, we find such manifest proofs of infallibility, how much more striking and more multiplied proofs must they have had, who had the happiness to hear Jesus Christ, and, after him, his disciples, explain themselves upon this important article! We know that the sacred writers have given but a very succinct account of what was said and done by our Saviour and by themselves. St. John goes so far as to declare that if they desired to give the full detail, they would scarcely contain the books that must be written. These words that we read upon the promises made to the Churches should therefore be regarded as some straggling

evidences. They are sufficient indeed to command our belief; but they must have been more repeated and more developed by the living voice of Jesus Christ. In fact, by imposing upon some the obligation of teaching, and on others that of hearing, he must necessarily have guaranteed all against the danger of deceiving or being deceived. By enjoining them above all things to preserve unity among them from one end of the world to the other, Jesus Christ must strongly have insisted upon the only means which would keep them together, and in their turn the apostles must have repeated it over and over again in every place to which they carried the word of the gospel. They must have explained to the bishops, as they established them, that the right and obligation of instructing would in all ages attach to the episcopal body of the Church: that decisions made by it should become for the people a rule of faith, manifest and at the same time unshakable, by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is even to be supposed that the apostles would have carried their solicitude so far as to explain the manner in which they might one day have a mutual understanding and act in concert with one another, according to the circumstances in which it should please heaven to place the Churches, in the exercise of their authority and the promulgation of their doctrine. These considerations convince me, that, of its own nature, the dogma of infallibility must have been a dogma the most clearly known from the first times of the church. Nevertheless I make no difficulty in confessing that we do not discover so many traces of it in the three first ages as in those that follow. They are not, however, devoid of them, and some of them you shall be made acquainted with. If they are not to be found so frequently, beside that there remain but few monuments of these distant times, I shall moreover give you two particular reasons for it. Whatever certainty there should exist at that time that from the concurrence of the bishops there would result an infallible opinion, there was no necessity of having recourse to it to condemn heresies so evidently contrary to faith, as were those of the first ages, that we know not which to be most astonished at, the audacity or the extravagance of their authors. It was a most simple and easy thing for every teacher to refute such opinions on the ground of their manifest opposition to the doctrine just established by the apostles. The whole of the first age was filled with their disciples; the second possessed many of them, and those who were not had been for the most part instructed by the immediate successors of these disciples. Thus the world was still

echoing with the voice and doctrine of the apostle. The remembrance of them was fresh and present to the minds of the faithful. Their seats, to use the expression of Tertullian, still spoke: it was sufficient in those times to say to the innovators, "The apostles taught not so; they wrote not so; your doctrine is not theirs; this is the first time we have heard such; it is false it is impious." The second reason is the impossibility there existed during the fire of persecutions, for the bishops to assemble and to pronounce decisions in common, and to give at that time to the world splendid proofs of their authority. In those days of researches and of blood there were no other means of meeting novelties but by private condemnations, in which, nevertheless, the bishops discover to us unequivocal traces of their opinion of their infallibility. Every one who then thought proper to dogmatize, to gain credit for his foolish ideas, was marked by the diocesan bishop, who admonished him of his error, charitably reproved him, refuted, threatened, and at last condemned him. The affair then passed from one to another, and according to the facility of circumstances to the neighbouring bishops, to those of the province, to those of the apostolic churches, and with more eagerness and deference still to him who presided upon the eminent chair of the prince of the apostles.

For the greater part of the time it was from this principal see that the condemnation came, which from the centre of unity, reached in every sense to the farthest extremities. The Bishops adhered to it by a consent either expressed or tacit, and their separate approbations formed in their great re-union the irrefragable decision of the dispersed church: the dogma was settled, and the refractory innovator from that time marked out to all the faithful, as he would be in our days after a similar sentence, under the disgraceful name of *heretic*. They in the second age were Saturninus, Basilides, Valentinus, Carpocrates, Cerdo and Marcion, condemned and stigmatized as corruptors of the faith.*

It would be an historical error to imagine that the Churches were then isolated, without communication together, and unknown to one another, whereas from their very origin they tended to nothing but to be united together, being mutually known and of support to one another. Call to mind the circumstances of Fortunatus going to Rome to implore the authority of the Pope in the disturbance that had commenced at Corinth; of Clement, who sends him back with four deputies to labour in re-establishing order; and peace of Polycarp going in person, at his advanced time of life, to confer with the pope Anicetus upon matters of discipline; of Ignatius writing seven epistles to different Churches during the long rout which conducted him