

# The Catholic.

Quod scilicet; quod ubique; quod ab omnibus.

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## SELECTED.

### AMICABLE DISCUSSION.

Continued.

#### LETTER V.

##### ON THE DOCTRINE TAUGHT BY THE CHURCH.

ON reading the proceeding chapter, I anticipate there may probably have arisen a difficulty in your mind. How can we be certain, will you have said, that such or such a doctrine is truly of apostolic tradition, that such an article, sufficient traces of which I do not find in Scripture, has been actually taught by the apostles and faithfully transmitted from them to us? This point, I flatter myself, shall soon be cleared up for you, if you will have patience to examine what I have to lay before you, and if I succeed in expressing to you with perspicuity those ideas which I shall now attempt to develop.

If each of us were obliged to distinguish, among many articles, those which come from tradition & those which do not, we should find ourselves, in a general way, condemned to a labour above our strength. In fact, that part of the preaching of the apostles which they did not commit to writing, was at first confided solely to the memory of the faithful, fixed in particular Churches by the oral and successive instructions of the first bishops and afterwards collected partially and as occasion fell out, in the writings of the fathers, and in the acts of the synods and councils. Whence it follows, that to prove that such an article is truly of apostolic tradition, we must consult the belief of the particular Churches, examine carefully the acts of the councils and the voluminous writings of the fathers of the Greek and Latin Churches. Who does not see that this labour requires a space of time and extent of erudition, that render it in general impracticable? There are, indeed, to be found men of an extraordinary capacity and application, whose taste and inclination lead them to this kind of research: with the aid of the rules of criticism, all founded upon good sense, they balance and weigh authorities, they distinguish between what the fathers taught, as individual teachers, and what they depose as testifiers to the belief and practice of their time, and they attach with discrimination the different degrees of credibility that are due, whether to their doctrine or their disposition. The world is well aware that such a labour is calculated but for a small number: and again, after all, how successful soever it may be, it scarcely ever leads to incontestible conclusions. We therefore are in want of some other means that

may enable us altogether with certainty to arrive at the apostolic and divine tradition. The question is, what is this means?

Call to mind, Sir, what we have said upon the holy scripture: we have clearly discovered that, seeing the ignorance and incapacity of some, and the pride and infatuation of others, the authority of an interpreter, of an infallible judge, was absolutely necessary to make known and cause to be uniformly adopted the dogmas contained in scripture. We must say as much, and with still better right, for the tradition. The same judge, the same interpreter that unfolds to us the sense of the divine books, manifests to us also of that tradition. Now this judge, this interpreter, I must tell you here again, is the teaching body of the Church, the bishops united in the same opinion, at least in a great majority. It is to them that, in the person of the apostles, were made the magnificent promises: "Go teach, I am with you; he that heareth you heareth me, The Spirit of truth shall teach you all truth, &c." They alone then have the right to teach what is revealed, to declare what is in the written or unwritten word. They alone also have always been in possession of the exercise of it. No other ecclesiastics have ever pretended to it, whatever have been their rank, their dignity, and learning. They may be consulted and heard; it is even proper for they form the council of the bishops, and their erudition acquired by long study throws light upon the discussions. But as they have not the plenitude of the priesthood, they are not members of the eminent body that has succeeded to the college of the apostles, and with it received the promises. They are then without power and authority to pronounce: their duty is respectfully to await the decision, and when once it is passed, to submit to it. Before the decision, they were at liberty and permitted to discuss the question on the opposite side, to support their opinion with the weight of their erudition, the strength and warmth of their eloquence: after superiors have pronounced, all disputations are forbidden, discussion is closed: mixed up from henceforth with the simple and little ones, the most learned doctors lay down their private opinions, humbly confess that they were in error, and receive the decision of the bishops as decrees emanating from heaven. Such is the regulation of Jesus Christ, who suffers not in his Church either pride, or bloated conceit, or obstinacy, whether in the rich, the great, or the learned ones of the world. Immediately he has spoken by his ministers, he wills that all heads, those even by means of which he has made himself heard; he

wills, I say, that all heads should with equal humility and lowliness bow before his oracles.

Let it then be established as a principle, that to the bishops exclusively belongs the right of declaring what has or has not been revealed, that is, what is conformable or contrary to Scripture and tradition, or simply to one of the two. This is precisely the extent of their authority. never does it go farther. They can add nothing to revelation: they can take nothing from it. they are its interpreters and judges, but not its masters. In teaching us what we have to believe, they point out to us what has always been believed: they merely render the belief more explicit and clear, there, where before it was more vague and indistinct. It is therefore always the ancient faith that they propose to us, and never a new faith that they introduce. For revelation is not a new faith which we are permitted to revise and retract. it came forth in full perfection from Jesus Christ; and his disciples, inspired by him, have faithfully transmitted it whether by word of mouth or by writing, to their successors, enjoined them at the same time to transmit it with the same fidelity to those who should succeed them.

Thus the bishops, on succeeding the apostolic ministry, find themselves specially commissioned to guard the Scriptures and tradition. They had already spent their clerical years and those of their priesthood in becoming acquainted with them, studying them and meditating upon them. Being by their episcopacy, become the guardians and interpreters of this double deposit of revelation, they have it more assiduously in their hands and under their eyes. Does any new doctrine arise that must soon require on their part a dogmatical decision, they prepare themselves for it by redoubling their application, by consulting each deposit alternately, by comparing them together, by making deeper researches into them with all the care which humanity speaking they are capable of: and, assuredly, when they shall come to the decision, He, who is always with them, and who is to instruct them all truth, will never permit them all to agree in giving an erroneous sense to the written word, or the word that is not written. Their common decision will necessarily and uniformly be conformable to them, whether they infer it from both at once, or only from one of them. You and I might not have perceived it in either one or the other of these sources, but eyes interiorly enlightened by a celestial ray discover with certainty what which escapes a merely human penetration. We can therefore no longer admit a doubt respecting any dogma, that the teaching body of the Church has