

The Pride and Glory of the Church

GREGORY, THE GREAT

Left on God's Church an Impres so Great, so Deep, so Lasting, that His Contemporaries, as Well as Posterity Justly Bestowed Upon Him the Title of "GREAT."

Translated from the Original.

(Continued from last week.)

This change was by the right hand of the Most High! Adopting Gregory's view, we are justified in declaring that it was only God who could have brought about these great events. What he wrote to the most holy monk Augustine about this same conversation of the English is applicable to all the rest of his apostolic labor: "Whose work is this but His, who said: 'My Father worketh until now, and I work' (John v., 17.) To show the world that He wished to convert it not by the wisdom of men but by His own power, He chose unlettered men to be preachers to the world; and the same He has now done, vouchsafing to accomplish great things in the English nation by means of weak men." (Reg. xi., 28.) We do need discern much that the Holy Pontiff's profound humility hid from his own sight—his knowledge of affairs, his successful issue, the wonderful prudence shown in all his provisions, his assiduous vigilance, his persevering solicitude. He never put himself forward as one invested with the might and power of the great ones of the earth. Instead of using the lofty diction of Pontifical dignity, he preferred to call himself the "servant of the servants of God," a title which he was the first to adopt. He did not make his way merely by profane science or the "persuasive words of human wisdom" (I. Cor. ii., 4) or by the devices of civil politics, or by systems of social renovation, skillfully studied, prepared and put in effect; nor yet, and this is very striking, by getting before himself a vast programme of apostolic action to be gradually realized. We know that his mind was full of the idea of the approaching end of the world, which was to have left him but little time for great exploits. Though very delicate and fragile of body and constantly afflicted by infirmities which several times brought him to the point of death, he yet possessed an incredible intellectual energy which was forever receiving fresh vigor from his lively faith in the infallible words of Christ and in His divine promises. He moreover counted with unlimited confidence on the supernatural force given by God to the Church for the successful accomplishment of her divine mission in the world. The constant aim of his life, as shown in all his works, was this: To preserve in himself and to stimulate in others this same lively faith and confidence, doing all the good possible in expectation of the divine judgment.

And this produced in him the fixed resolve to adopt for the salvation of all the abundant wealth of supernatural means given by God to His Church, such as the infallible teaching of revealed truth, the preaching of this teaching in the whole world, the sacraments which have the power of infusing or increasing the life of the soul, and the grace of prayer in the name of Christ which assures heavenly protection.

These memories, Venerable Brothers, are a source of unspeakable comfort to us. When we look forth from the Vatican we, like Gregory and perhaps even more than he, have grounds for fear. So many are the storms gathering on every side, so many are the hostile forces massed and advancing against us, and at the same time so utterly deprived are we of all human aid to ward off the former and to help us to meet the shock of the latter. But when we remember the place on which our feet rest and where this Pontifical See is placed, we feel ourselves perfectly safe on the rock of Holy Church. "For who does not know," wrote St. Gregory to the Patriarch Eulogius of Alexandria, "that Holy Church stands on the solidity of the Prince of the Apostles, who got his name from his firmness, for he was called Peter from the word rock?" (Registr. vii., 37 (40).) Supernatural force has never, during the flight of ages been found wanting in the Church, nor have Christ's promises failed; these remain to-day what they were when they brought consolation to Gregory's heart—nay, for us they possess greater authority after having stood the test of centuries and of so many changes of circumstances and events.

Kingdoms and empires have passed away, time and again the nations, as though overwhelmed by the weight of years, have fallen asunder; while the Church, indefeasible in her essence, united by a tie indissoluble with her heavenly spouse, is here to-day, radiant with eternal youth, strong with the same primitive vigor with which she left the Heart of Christ dead upon the cross. Men powerful in the world have risen up against her. They have disappeared and she remains. Philosophical systems without number, of every form and every kind, rose up against her, arrogantly vaunting themselves her masters, as though they had at last destroyed the teaching of the Church, refuted the dogmas of faith and proved the absurdity of her teachings. But those systems, one after another, have passed into books of history, forgotten, bankrupt, while from the Rock of Peter the light of truth shines forth as brilliantly as on the day when Jesus first kindled it on His appearance in the world and fed it with His divine words: "Heaven and earth shall pass, but my words shall not pass." (Matt. xxiv., 35.)

We, strengthened by this faith, firmly established on this rock, realizing to the full all the heavy duties that the Primacy imposes on us, but yet realizing all the vigor that comes to us from the divine will, calmly wait until all the voices be scattered to the winds that about around us proclaiming that the Church is doomed, that her doctrines have become ob-

solete and that the time is at hand when she will be forced either to abandon the tenets of a godless science and a godless civilization or to disappear from human society. But in the midst of all this clamor we, like Pope St. Gregory, have to remind all, great and small, of the absolute necessity of having recourse to this Church in order to have eternal salvation, to follow the right road of reason, to feed on the truth, to obtain peace and even happiness in this life. Wherefore, to use the words of the holy Pontiff: "Turn your steps toward this unshaken rock upon which our Saviour founded the Universal Church, so that the path of him who is sincere of heart may not be lost in devious windings." (Reg. viii., 24, ad Sabin, episcop.) Only the charity of the Church and union with her unite what is divided, restore order where there is confusion, temper inequalities, fill up imperfections." (Registr. v., 58 (53) ad Virgil episc.) It must be remembered that "nobody can rightly govern in earthly things, unless he knows how to treat divine things, and that the peace of states depends upon the universal peace of the Church." (Registr. v., 37 (26) ad Mauricium Aug.) Hence the absolute necessity of a perfect harmony between the two powers, ecclesiastical and civil, each being by the will of God called to sustain the other. For, "power over all men was given from heaven that those who aspire to do well may be aided, that the path to heaven may be made broader and that earthly sovereignty may be handed over to heavenly sovereignty." (Registr. ii., 61 (65) ad Mauricium Aug.)

From these principles Gregory derived his unconquerable firmness, which we will, with the help of God, study to imitate. We are resolved to defend at all costs the rights and prerogatives of which the Roman Pontificate is the guardian and defender before God and man. It was the same Gregory who wrote to the patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch: When the rights of the Church are in question, "we must show even by our death that we do not, through love of some private interest of our own, want anything contrary to the common weal." (Registr. v., 41.) To the Emperor Maurice he wrote: "He who through vainglory raises his neck against God Almighty and against the statutes of the Fathers shall not bend his neck to him, nor even with the cutting of swords, as I trust in the same God Almighty." (Registr. v., 37.) And to the Deacon Sabinian: "I am ready to die rather than permit that the Church be generated in my days. And you well know my ways, that I am long-suffering; but when I decide not to bear any longer, I face danger with a joyful mind." (Registr. v., 6 (iv. 47).)

Such were the fundamental maxims which the Pontiff Gregory constantly proclaimed. Men listened to him. Princes and people docile to him, with the words he regained true salvation, and put itself on the path of a civilization which was noble and fruitful in blessings in proportion as it was founded on the incontrovertible dictates of reason and moral discipline, and derived its force from truth divinely revealed and from the maxims of the gospel.

But in those days the people, albeit, rude, ignorant, and still destitute of all civilization, were eager for life, which no one could give them except Christ through the Church. "I come that they may have life and have it more abundantly." (John x., 10.) And truly they had life and had it abundantly, for the reason that no other life but the supernatural life of souls could come from the Church. This includes in itself and gives additional vigor to all the energies of life, even in the natural order. "If the root be holy so are the branches," said St. Paul to the Gentiles, "and thou being a wild olive art ingrafted in them and art made a partaker of the root and of the fatness of the olive tree." (Ad Rom. xi., 17.)

To-day the world, although it enjoys a light so full of Christian civilization and in this respect cannot for a moment be compared with the times of Gregory, seems as though it were tired of that life, which has been and still is the chief and often the sole fount of so many blessings—not only past but present blessings. Not only does this useless branch cut itself off from the trunk, as happened in other times when heresies and schisms arose, but it first lays the axe to the root of the tree, which is the Church, and strives to dry up its vital sap that its ruin may be the surer and that it may never blossom again.

In this error, which is the chief one of our time and the source whence all the others spring, lies the origin of so much loss of eternal salvation among men and of all the ruins affecting religion which we continue to lament, and of the many others which we still fear will happen if the evil be not remedied. For all supernatural order is denied, which implies a denial of divine intervention in the order of creation and in the government of miracles. In this way the foundations of the Christian religion are necessarily shaken. Men even go so far as to impugn the arguments for the existence of God, denying with unparalleled audacity and against the first principles of reason the invincible force of the proof which from effects ascends to their cause, that is, God, and to the notion of His infinite attributes. "For the invisible things of Him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made; His eternal power also and divinity." (Rom. i., 20.) The way then is opened to other most grievous errors, equally repugnant to right reason and pertain-

ious to good morals.

The gratuitous negation of the supernatural principle, a characteristic "knowledge falsely so called," has actually become the postulate of a historical criticism equally false. Everything that relates in any way to the supernatural order, either as belonging to it, constituting it, presupposing it, or merely finding its explanation in it, is erased without further investigation from the pages of history. Such is the treatment accorded the divinity of Jesus Christ, His incarnation through the operation of the Holy Ghost, His resurrection by His own power and in general all the dogmas of our faith. Science once placed on this false road, there is no law of criticism to hold it back and it cancels at its own desire from the most sacred books everything that does not suit it, or that it believes to be opposed to the pre-established thesis it wishes to demonstrate. For, take away the supernatural order and the story of the origin of the Church must be built on quite another foundation. The innovators, therefore, handle as they list historical documents, citing or not saying what they wish, and not what the authors of those documents meant.

Many are captivated by the great show of erudition which is paraded before them and by the apparently convincing force of the proofs adduced, so that they either lose the faith or feel that it is greatly shaken in their hearts. Many who are firm in the faith, accuse critical science of being destructive. Such science in itself is not blamable, as it is a sure element of investigation when rightly applied. Those who are shaken in their faith by critical science as well as those who condemn that science fail to see that they start from a false hypothesis, that is to say, from science falsely so called, which logically forces them to conclusions equally false. For given a false philosophical principle everything deduced from it is vitiated. But these errors will never be effectually refuted unless by bringing about a change of front, that is to say, unless those in error be forced to leave the field of criticism in which they consider themselves firmly entrenched for the legitimate exercise of philosophy, through the abandonment of which they have fallen into their errors.

Meanwhile it is painful to have to apply to men not lacking in acumen and application the rebuke addressed by St. Paul to those who fail to rise from earthly things to the things that are invisible. They became vain in their thoughts and their foolish heart was inflated; and confessing themselves to be wise they became fools." (Rom. i., 21, 22.) And surely foolish is the proper word to apply to him who consumes all his intellectual forces in building upon sand.

Not less deplorable are the injuries which accrue from the negation to the moral life of individuals and of civil society. Take away the principle that there is anything divine outside this visible world, and you remove all check upon unbridled passion, even those of the lowest and most shameful kind. The minds that become slaves to them riot in every sort. "God gave them up to the desire of their hearts, unto uncleanness, to dishonor their own bodies among themselves." (Rom. i., 24.) You are well aware, Venerable Brothers, how truly the plague of depravity rages on all sides, and how the civil authority, wherever it fails to have recourse to the means of help offered by the supernatural order, finds itself quite unequal to the task of checking it. Civil authority will never be able to heal other evils so long as it forgets or denies that all power comes from God. The only check a government can employ in this case is that of force. But force cannot be constantly employed, nor is it always available. The people suffering by a secret disease become discontented with everything. They proclaim the right to act as they desire, to rebel, to raise again the revolutions in the state, trampling on all rights, human and divine. Take away God, and all respect for civil laws, all regard for even the most necessary institutions disappear; justice is scouted; the very liberty that belongs to the law of nature is trodden underfoot, and men go so far as to destroy the very structure of the family, which is the first and firmest foundation of the social structure. The result is that in these days so hostile to Christ, it has become more difficult to apply the powerful remedies which the Redeemer has put into the hands of the Church in order to keep the people within the lines of duty.

Yet there is no salvation for the world but in Christ: "For there is no other name under heaven given to men whereby we may be saved." (Acts iv., 12.) To Christ then we must return. At His feet we must prostrate ourselves to hear from His divine mouth the words of eternal life, for He alone can show us the way of regeneration. He alone can to the man of Christ, repeated the saying: "We preach Christ crucified, a scandal for the Jews, a folly for the Gentiles." (I. Cor. i., 23.) If ever there was a time in which human prudence seemed to offer the only expedient for obtaining something in a world altogether unprepared to receive doctrines so new, so repugnant to human passions, so opposed to the civilization, then at its most flourishing period, of the Greeks and the Romans, that time was certainly the epoch of the preaching of the faith. But the apostles disdained such prudence, because they understood well the precept of God: "It pleased God by the foolishness of our preaching to save them that believe." (I. Cor. i., 21.) And as it ever was, so it is to-day, this foolishness "to them that are saved, that is, to us, it is the power of God." (I. Cor. i., 18.) The scandal of the Crucified will ever furnish us in the future, as it has done in the past, with the most potent of all weapons; now, as of yore, in that sign we shall find victory.

From all this you will easily see, Venerable Brothers, the absolute necessity imposed upon every one of us to revive with all the energy of our souls and with all the means at our disposal this supernatural life in every branch of society—in the poor workman who earns his morning bread by the sweat of his brow from morning to night and in the great ones of the earth who preside over the destiny of nations. We must, above all else, have recourse to prayer, both public and private, to implore the mercies of the Lord and His powerful assistance. "Lord save us—we perish." (Matthew viii., 25) we must repeat, like the apostles when buffeted by the storm.

But this is not enough. Gregory rebukes a bishop, who, through love of spiritual solitude and prayer, failed to go out into the battlefield to combat strenuously for the cause of the Lord: "The name of bishop which he bears is an empty one." And rightly so, for men's intellects are to be enlightened by continual preaching of the truth, and errors are to be efficaciously refuted by the principles of true and solid philosophy and theology and by all the means provided by the genuine progress of historical investigation. It is still more necessary to inculcate properly on the minds of all the moral maxims taught by Jesus Christ, so that everybody may learn to conquer himself, to curb the passions of the mind, to stifle pride, to live in obedience to authority, to love justice, to show cheer and courage, all to temper with Christian love the bitterness of social inequalities, to detach the heart from the goods of the world, to live contented with the state in which Providence has placed us while striving to better it by the fulfillment of our duties, to thirst after the future life in the hope of eternal reward. But above all it is necessary that the principles be instituted and made to penetrate into the heart so that true and solid piety may strike root there, and all, both as men and as Christians, may recognize by their acts as well as by their words the duties of their state and have recourse with filial confidence to the Church and her ministers to obtain from them pardon for the sins which they have committed, to receive the strengthening graces of the sacraments, and to regulate their lives according to the laws of Christianity.

With these chief duties of the spiritual ministry it is necessary to unite the charity of Christ. When this moves us there will be nobody in affliction who will not be consoled by us, no tears that will not be dried by our hands, no need that will not be relieved by us. To the exercise of this charity let us dedicate ourselves wholly; let our own affairs give way before it, let our personal interests and convenience be set aside for it, making ourselves "all things to all men" (I. Cor. ix., 22) to gain all men to the truth, giving up our very life itself, after the example of Christ, who imposes this as a duty on the pastor of the Church: "The good shepherd gives his life for his sheep." (John x., 11.)

These precious admonitions abound in the pages which the Pontiff St. Gregory has left written, and they are expressed with far greater force in the manifold examples of his admirable life.

Now since all this springs necessarily both from the nature of the principles of Christian revelation and from the intrinsic properties which our Apostolate should have, you see clearly, Venerable Brothers, how mistaken are those who think they are doing service to the Church and producing fruit for the salvation of souls, when by a kind of prudency of the flesh they prefer themselves liberally in concessions to exercise falsely so called, under the fatal illusion that they are thus able more easily to win over those in error. In reality they are in continual danger of being themselves lost. The truth is one and it cannot be halved; it lasts forever and is not subject to the vicissitudes of the times. "Jesus Christ, to-day and yesterday, and the same forever." (Hebr. xiii., 8.)

They, too, are all seriously mistaken who, occupying themselves with the welfare of the people, and especially with upholding the cause of the poorer classes, seek to promote above all things the material well-being of the body and of life, but utterly silent about their spiritual welfare and the very serious duties which their profession as Christians enjoins upon them. They are not ashamed to conceal, sometimes as though with a veil, certain fundamental maxims of the Gospel, for fear lest otherwise the people refuse to heed and follow them. It will certainly be the part of prudence to proceed gradually in laying down the truth, when one has to do with men completely strangers to us and completely separated from God. "Before using the steel, let the wounds be felt with a light hand," as Gregory said (Registr. v., 44 (18) as Joannem episcop.) But even this carefulness would sink to mere prudency of the flesh were it not accompanied as the rule of constant and everyday action—all the more since such a method would seem not to hold in due account that divine grace which sustains the sacerdotal ministry and which is given not only to those who exercise this ministry, but to all the faithful of Christ in order that their words and their action may fall in entrance into hearts of men. Gregory did not at all understand this prudence, either in the preaching of the Gospel or in the many wonderful works undertaken by him to relieve misery. He did constantly what the Apostles had done, for they, when they went out for the first time into the world to bring into it the name of Christ, repeated the saying: "We preach Christ crucified, a scandal for the Jews, a folly for the Gentiles." (I. Cor. i., 23.) If ever there was a time in which human prudence seemed to offer the only expedient for obtaining something in a world altogether unprepared to receive doctrines so new, so repugnant to human passions, so opposed to the civilization, then at its most flourishing period, of the Greeks and the Romans, that time was certainly the epoch of the preaching of the faith. But the apostles disdained such prudence, because they understood well the precept of God: "It pleased God by the foolishness of our preaching to save them that believe." (I. Cor. i., 21.) And as it ever was, so it is to-day, this foolishness "to them that are saved, that is, to us, it is the power of God." (I. Cor. i., 18.) The scandal of the Crucified will ever furnish us in the future, as it has done in the past, with the most potent of all weapons; now, as of yore, in that sign we shall find victory.

But, Venerable Brothers, this weapon will lose much of its efficacy if it is altogether useless; in the hands of men not accustomed to the interior life with Christ, not educated in the school of true and solid piety, not thoroughly inflamed with zeal for the glory of God and for the propagation of His kingdom. So keenly did Gregory feel this necessity that he used the greatest care in creating bishops and priests, ani-

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matated by a great desire for the divine glory and for the true welfare of souls. This is what he aimed at in his book on the Pastoral Rule, where in are gathered together the laws regulating the formation of the clergy and the government of bishops—laws most suitable not for his times only, but for our own. Like an "argus full of light," says his biographer, "he moved all round the eyes of his pastoral solicitude through all the extent of the world." (Joann. Diac. lib. ii. c. 55) to discover and correct the failings and the negligence of the clergy. Nay, he trembled at the very thought that barbarism and immorality might obtain a footing in the life of the clergy. He was deeply moved and gave himself no peace whenever he learned of some infraction of the disciplinary laws of the Church and immediately administered admonition and correction, threatening with canonical penalties transgressors, sometimes immediately applying these penalties himself, and again removing the unworthy from their offices without delay and without human respect.

Moreover, he incultivated many maxims which we frequently find in his writings in such form as this: "In what frame of mind does one enter upon the office of mediator between God and men who is not conscious of being familiar with grace through a meritorious life?" (Reg. Past. i., 10.) "If passion lives in his actions, with what presumption does he hasten to cure the wound when he wears a scar on his very face?" (Reg. Past. i., 9.) What fruit can be expected for the salvation of souls if the apostles "combat in their lives what they preach in their sermons" (Reg. Past. i., 2.) Truly, he cannot remove the delinquencies of others who is himself ravaged by the same." (Reg. Past. i., 11.)

The picture of the true priest, as Gregory understands and describes him, is the man, who, dying to all passions of the flesh already lives spiritually; who has no thought for adversity; who desires only internal things; who does not permit himself to desire what belongs to others, but is liberal of his own; who is all bowels of compassion and inclines to forgiveness, but in forgiving never swerves more than is fitting from the perfection of righteousness; who never commits unlawful actions; who never deplors as though they were his own the unlawful actions of others; who with all affection of the heart compassionates the weakness of others, and rejoices in the prosperity of his neighbors as in his own profit; who in all his doings so renders himself a model for others as to have nothing whereof to be ashamed, at least as regards his external actions; who studies so to live that he may be able to water the parched hearts of his neighbors with the waters of doctrine; who knows through the use of prayer and through his own experiences that he can obtain from the Lord what he asks. (Reg. Past. i., 10.)

How much thought, therefore, Venerable Brothers, must the bishop seriously take with himself and in the presence of God before laying hands on young levites? Let him never dare either as an act of favor to anybody or in response to petitions made to him, to promote any one to sacred orders whose life and actions do not afford a guarantee of worthiness (Registr. v., 63 (58) ad universos episcopos per Heliad.). With what deliberation should he reflect before intrusting the works of the apostolate to newly ordained priests. If they be not duly tried under the vigilant guardianship of more prudent priests, if there be not abundant evidence of their morality, of their inclination for spiritual exercises, of their prompt obedience to all the regulations which are suggested by ecclesiastical custom or proved by long experience, or imposed by those whom "the Holy Ghost has placed as bishops to rule the Church of God" (Acts xx., 28) they will exercise the sacerdotal ministry not for the salvation but for the ruin of the Christian people. For they will provoke discord and excite rebellion, more or less tacit, thus offering to the world, the sad spectacle of something like division amongst us, whereas in truth these deplorable incidents are but the pride and the unwillfulness of a few. Let those who stir up discord be removed from every office. Of such apostles the Church has no need; they are not apostles of Jesus Christ Crucified, but of themselves.

We seem to see still present before our eyes the Holy Pontiff Gregory at the Lateran Council, surrounded by a great number of bishops from all parts of the world. Oh, how fruitful is the exhortation that pours from his lips on the duties of the clergy! How his heart is consumed with zeal! His words are as lightnings rending the perverse, as scourges striking the indolent, as flames of divine love gently enfolding the most fervent. Read that wonderful homily of Gregory, Venerable Brothers, and have it read and meditated by your clergy, especially during the annual retreat (Hom. in Evang. i., 17.)

Among other things, with unspeakable sorrow he exclaims: "Lo, the world is full of priests, but rare indeed is to find a worker in the hands of God; we do indeed assume the priestly office, but the obligation of the office we do not fulfill" (Hom. in Evang. n. 8.) What force the Church would have to-day could she count a worker in every priest! What abundant fruit would the supernatural life of the Church produce in souls were it efficaciously promoted by all. Gregory succeeded in his own times in strenuously

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stimulating this spirit of energetic action, and such was the force of the impulse given by him that the same spirit was kept alive during the succeeding ages. The whole medieval period bears witness that may be called the Gregorian impulse, almost everything it had indeed came to it from that Pontiff—the rules of ecclesiastical government, the manifold phases of charity and philanthropy in its social institutions, the principles of the most perfect Christian asceticism and of monastic life, the arrangement of the liturgy and the art of sacred music.

The times are indeed greatly changed. But, as we have more than once repeated, nothing is changed in the life of the Church. From her Divine Founder she has inherited the virtue of being able to supply at all times, however, much they may differ, all that is required not only for the spiritual welfare of souls, which

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