

From the U.S. Catholic Miscellany.

### THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF CALVIN.

The *Presbyterian* of the 26th ult., contains a reprint (the references and authorities being omitted) of the Rev. Thomas Smyth's "Discourse in Vindication of Calvin." Our townsman has evinced his usual industry in the preparation of his Essay; and although the subject is pretty well worn, he has presented an interesting epitome of that reformer's biography. Of course there is a sufficient quantity of the seasoning of anti-papery declamation; and we are neither surprised nor pained at it. Could a Presbyterian Parson address the alumni of a Presbyterian Seminary upon such a theme, without ranting about "the long reign of ignorance and superstition—the extreme corruption of the Romish clergy—the gibbet, the stake, the cell, and various modes of torture—and Te deums resounding through cloistered walls in commemoration of the death of infamous heretics" &c.—he could not—and we freely admit that Mr. Smyth has conformed to the necessity of his position, as mildly as we could have expected, and with far more regard to decency than a certain Professor would have manifested in the like circumstances. As we said, the subject is nearly exhausted, and it is not to be supposed that Smyth's reputation will be much increased by handling it. He seems to have pursued the beaten track, without hoping to start any new points of discussion: and this forms the first charge that we make against his performance—he has followed too closely, and made too much use of Waterman. He might have done better. A few parts of Calvin's life require to be more satisfactorily cleared of doubts; for example, whether he was ever admitted to the sacerdotal office, and by whom—and whether it was by his informing that Servetus was detected, in Vienna, as the author of the *Christianismi Restitutio*, and therefore imprisoned. The first of those queries is one of much moment to his followers: and we are surprised that a professed apologist should have refrained from discussing it, at a time when Episcopalians are challenging proofs of Calvin's ordination and he (the apologist) published a work in defence of Presbyterianism. The second inquiry also concerns Calvin's reputation very nearly. The allegation was made during his lifetime, and denied by him, rather feebly, I think. And whilst we do not make the charge, we avow our doubts respecting it. Our wish to see it more distinctly removed. Mr. Smyth desires to diminish to the smallest possible degree, the responsibility of Calvin for the execution of Servetus. On this topic he has not exhibited much fairness as we were prepared to expect from him. He insinuates that this treason is falsely imputed by Calvin's "agency, although consummated by the civil authorities of the Republic." We have Calvin's own declarations that he caused Servetus (who was trying to escape through Geneva) to be arrested—then the accuser (who was his friend or servant) proceeded at his request—that he caused the formulary against

the prisoner—prepared the proofs from his writings—argued against his opinions and explanations—and expressed the hope, that the sentence would be capital, but wished the kind of death, *genus mortis*, to be changed. These admissions are all contained in Waterman's Life of Calvin. He caused the arrest, and procured the condemnation—their inevitable consequences must always be charged to his account. Mr. Smyth's disposition to extenuate Calvin's criminality is further apparent in the statement, that Calvin had given Servetus "previous notice that if he came to the city he should be under the necessity of prosecuting him." Mr. Smyth knows the importance of a word—*prosecute*, *foresooth!* Calvin had avowed his predetermination, if Servetus came to Geneva, *not to let him escape alive*. We would be pleased to hear Mr. Smyth's distinction between *prosecute* and *execute*. Hallam's view of this event is probably as impartial as any that will be published for a long time to come. He affirms that "Servetus, in fact, was burned, not so much for his heresies as for some personal offence, he had several years given to Calvin." The latter wrote, to Bolsec in 1545, Servetus cupit huc venire, sed a me accersitus. Ego an tem nunquam committant, ut fidem meam eatens obstrictam habeat. Jam enim constitutum habeo, si veniat, nunquam pati ut salvus exeat.—*Ailorwoerden*, p. 48.

A similar letter to Farel differs in some phrases, and especially by the word *vivus* for *salvus*. The latter was published by Wittenbogart, in an ecclesiastical history written in Dutch. Servetus had, in some printed letters, charged Calvin with many errors, which seems to have exasperated the great reformer's temper, so as to make him resolve on what he afterward executed. The death of Servetus has perhaps as many circumstances of aggravation as any execution for heresy that ever took place. One of these, and among the most striking, is that he was not the subject of Geneva, nor domiciled in the city, nor had the *Christianismi Restitutio* been published there, but a Vienne. According to our laws, and those, I believe, of civilized nations, he was not amenable to the tribunals of the republic.\* Mr. Smyth would, finally, persuade his readers, that "the Romish Church, in short, as has been truly said, is answerable for the execution of Servetus." As how?—Why Calvin and the other reformers, who advocated and practised persecution, "drew the milk of intolerance from her breasts." This reasoning, which as an excuse for their conduct, does not deserve consideration, suggests a remark relative to Calvin's literary merits. Mr. Smyth justly extols his labor and his skill as a writer. Yet he would at the same time keep up the belief that education was then at a low ebb, the study of languages neglected, and the Latin of that day "a jargon bearing all the blemishes of eleven centuries of corruption and bad taste." Calvin wrote purely and clearly in Latin; and we claim

\* *Literature of Europe*, N. Y. Edition, vol. 1, p. 280.

for the seminaries and masters of his youth, a large share of the praise which, as a linguist, he is entitled. And we are prepared to show, that the charge of "monkish ignorance" which Protestants continue to bring against the era of which we are writing, has a far more limited application than they are willing to admit.—The age that produced Alciandro, Aseolti, Emser, Erasmus, Sadoleto, and a host of other literati, cannot properly be styled ignorant or barbarous. Calvin wrote in Latin, if you so please, 'as well as possible in a dead language,' but he did not excel, conceding that he equalled those whom we have specified, in the higher characteristics of style and composition.\*

As we approach to the close of our remarks, we feel a sentiment of sadness stealing over us. We have spent some moments in recollecting the character and career of a man who is revered as the Father of several numerous divisions of Protestants. He is regarded as an Apostle; and his opinion has been received as true, if not authoritative interpretations of the revelations of God. Yet he was uncommissioned to preach a new gospel—neither the old. He set his single judgment in opposition to the voice of God's appointed ministers—he preferred, & persuaded many to prefer, his speculations to the facts of Christianity,—and risked his own salvation, and caused others to trust theirs, upon the chance, that he could be right and the church of Christ's institution wrong. And strange to say, some of those who presumptuously act upon this principle, nevertheless declare, as Mr. Smyth does, that in some particulars, "Calvin certainly erred, and is not by any to be believed or followed." He who makes this admission, has no assurance that the reformer did not as certainly and fatally err in other of his opinions, besides those that he has specified; nor has he any assurance that his own suppositions about the meaning of the Divine Word, are nearer the truth, than those of the great prophet of the Mormons. "Calvin certainly erred"—and the church is the pillar and ground of truth! Yet Mr. Smyth chooses to be a Calvinist rather than a Catholic!

PETER DENS.—The public press generally condemns the notorious Sperry, for having circulated excerpts from Dens made into English, and illustrated with obscene notes. We have not seen the foul production, but we never met in Dens anything that need offend any person fit to read Leviticus, Ezekiel, and St. Paul. Whatever may be thought of his principles on repressing heresy, he is an excellent moralist, and the serious study of his work would tend greatly to the improvement of Sperry, Berg, and their compeers. Our friend, the *Churchman*, would doubtless withdraw his conditional vote for its suppression. We had prepared to compliment him on his apology

\* "Who would compare, as a literary work, this magnificent composition [the Bull of 1520 against Luther] with any thing that ever came from the Reformers?" *Audin, Life of Luther*, c. 15.

for Dens, when we read his caution not to mistake it for an apology. 'Be just, and fear not.'

We may apply to Dens what Dr. Pusey, in his proface to the Confessions of St. Augustine, has observed concerning them: "There is then no gratuitous mention of sin, nor will any one here learn any thing of sin: and while modern descriptions of penitence, veiled in language, are calculated to produce an unhealthy excitement, and may rather prepare people to imitate the sin, with the hope that they may afterwards imitate the repentance, St. Augustine, in unveiled language, creates the loathing which himself felt at the sin. Moderns have an outward purity of language; the ancient church, with the Bible, a fearless plainness of speech, which belongs to inward purity. This has been here and there modified in the translation, in consequence of our present condition; yet it must be, with the protest, that the purity of modern times is not the purity of the Gospel; it is the purity of those who know and have delighted in evil as well as good; it is often the hypocritical purity, which would willingly dwell upon things which ought not to be named, so that it does but not name them; it is veiled impurity; and what is in itself pure and speaks purely of things impure, it associates with its own impurity and calls impure because it thinks impurely. And so the very Bible has been to them, what they call improper, i.e. unbecoming them, verifying herein the awful Apostolic saying, 'unto the pure all things are pure, but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure: but even their mind and conscience is defiled.' Thus much must be said, because it is easy to foresee that an age of spurious delicacy, i.e. of real indelicacy, will raise charges of indelicacy against passages in the Fathers, (as it does, though in a lower murmuring tone against the Bible) when the fault is in itself."—*Cath. Herald*.

*Symbolism: By John Adam Mochler, D. D.* New York: Published by Edward Dunigan.

The enterprise of Mr. Dunigan in publishing this most valuable work deserves to be sustained by the Catholic community; and is likely to be encouraged by a large portion of Episcopalians. The high character of the work is well known to our readers. It is judged to be the most profound and complete view of controversy that has been taken since the days of Bossuet. The Oxford Divines have freely used and quoted Mochler. Mr. Dunigan has compressed the two volumes of the English edition into one large octavo, containing near 600 pages. The work is preceded by a memoir of the lamented author, whose premature death gives a melancholy interest to this immortal production of his pen. Intellectual readers of every religious hue will peruse the work with pleasure and advantage.—*Id.*

*The Garden of Roses, and Valley of Lilies.* This beautiful work of the devout A Kempis will serve to lead souls in the