

St. Vincent Of Lérins ‘Commonitorium’ Part IV

Chapter 24.

Continuation of the Exposition of 1 Tim. vi. 20.

[60.] But let us return to the apostle. “O Timothy,” he says, “Guard the deposit, shunning profane novelties of words.” “Shun them as you would a viper, as you would a scorpion, as you would a basilisk, lest they smite you not only with their touch, but even with their eyes and breath.” What is “to shun”? Not even to eat 1 Corinthians 5:11 with a person of this sort. What is “shun”? “If anyone,” says St. John, come to you and bring not this doctrine. What doctrine? What but the Catholic and universal doctrine, which has continued one and the same through the several successions of ages by the uncorrupt tradition of the truth and so will continue forever — “Receive him not into your house, neither bid him Godspeed, for he that bids him Godspeed communicates with him in his evil deeds.” 2 John 10

[61.] “Profane novelties of words.” What words are these? Such as have nothing sacred, nothing religious, words utterly remote from the inmost sanctuary of the Church which is the temple of God. Profane novelties of words, that is, of doctrines, subjects, opinions, such as are contrary to antiquity and the faith of the olden time. Which if they be received, it follows necessarily that the faith of the blessed fathers is violated either in whole, or at all events in great part; it follows necessarily that all the faithful of all ages, all the saints, the chaste, the continent, the virgins, all the clergy, Deacons and Priests, so many thousands of Confessors, so vast an army of martyrs, such multitudes of

cities and of peoples, so many islands, provinces, kings, tribes, kingdoms, nations, in a word, almost the whole earth, incorporated in Christ the Head, through the Catholic faith, have been ignorant for so long a tract of time, have been mistaken, have blasphemed, have not known what to believe, what to confess.

[62.] “Shun profane novelties of words,” which to receive and follow was never the part of Catholics; of heretics always was. In truth, what heresy ever burst forth save under a definite name, at a definite place, at a definite time? Whoever originated a heresy that did not first dis sever himself from the consentient agreement of the universality and antiquity of the Catholic Church? That this is so is demonstrated in the clearest way by examples. For whoever before that profane Pelagius attributed so much antecedent strength to Free-will, as to deny the necessity of God’s grace to aid it towards good in every single act? Whoever before his monstrous disciple Cœlestius denied that the whole human race is involved in the guilt of Adam’s sin? Whoever before sacrilegious Arius dared to rend asunder the unity of the Trinity? Who before impious Sabellius was so audacious as to confound the Trinity of the Unity? Who before cruellest Novatian represented God as cruel in that He had rather the wicked should die than that he should be converted and live? Who before Simon Magus, who was smitten by the apostle’s rebuke, and from whom that ancient sink of everything vile has flowed by a secret continuous succession even to Priscillian of our own time, — who, I say, before this Simon Magus, dared to say that God, the Creator, is the author of evil, that is, of our wickednesses, impieties, flagitiousnesses, inasmuch as he asserts that He

created with His own hands a human nature of such a description, that of its own motion, and by the impulse of its necessity-constrained will, it can do nothing else, can will nothing else, but sin, seeing that tossed to and fro, and set on fire by the furies of all sorts of vices, it is hurried away by unquenchable lust into the utmost extremes of baseness?

[63.] There are innumerable instances of this kind, which for brevity's sake, pass over; by all of which, however, it is manifestly and clearly shown, that it is an established law, in the case of almost all heresies, that they evermore delight in profane novelties, scorn the decisions of antiquity, and, through oppositions of science falsely so called, make shipwreck of the faith. On the other hand, it is the sure characteristic of Catholics to keep that which has been committed to their trust by the holy Fathers, to condemn profane novelties, and, in the apostle's words, once and again repeated, to anathematize everyone who preaches any other doctrine than that which has been received. Galatians 2:9

Chapter 25.

Heretics appeal to Scripture that they may more easily succeed in deceiving.

[64.] Here, possibly, someone may ask, Do heretics also appeal to Scripture? They do indeed, and with a vengeance; for you may see them scamper through every single book of Holy Scripture—through the books of Moses, the books of Kings, the Psalms, the Epistles, the Gospels, the Prophets. Whether among their own people, or among strangers, in private or in public, in speaking or in

writing, at convivial meetings, or in the streets, hardly ever do they bring forward anything of their own which they do not endeavour to shelter under words of Scripture. Read the works of Paul of Samosata, of Priscillian, of Eunomius, of Jovinian, and the rest of those pests, and you will see an infinite heap of instances, hardly a single page, which does not bristle with plausible quotations from the New Testament or the Old.

[65.] But the more secretly they conceal themselves under shelter of the Divine Law, so much the more are they to be feared and guarded against. For they know that the evil stench of their doctrine will hardly find acceptance with any one if it be exhaled pure and simple. They sprinkle it over, therefore, with the perfume of heavenly language, in order that one who would be ready to despise human error, may hesitate to condemn divine words. They do, in fact, what nurses do when they would prepare some bitter draught for children; they smear the edge of the cup all round with honey, that the unsuspecting child, having first tasted the sweet, may have no fear of the bitter. So too do these act, who disguise poisonous herbs and noxious juices under the names of medicines, so that no one almost, when he reads the label, suspects the poison.

[66.] It was for this reason that the Saviour cried, “Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” Matthew 7:15 What is meant by “sheep’s clothing”? What but the words which prophets and apostles with the guilelessness of sheep wove beforehand as fleeces, for that immaculate Lamb which takes away the sin of the world? What are the ravening wolves? What but the savage and rabid glosses of

heretics, who continually infest the Church's folds, and tear in pieces the flock of Christ wherever they are able? But that they may with more successful guile steal upon the unsuspecting sheep, retaining the ferocity of the wolf, they put off his appearance, and wrap themselves, so to say, in the language of the Divine Law, as in a fleece, so that one, having felt the softness of wool, may have no dread of the wolf's fangs. But what says the Saviour? "By their fruits you shall know them;" that is, when they have begun not only to quote those divine words, but also to expound them, not as yet only to make a boast of them as on their side, but also to interpret them, then will that bitterness, that acerbity, that rage, be understood; then will the ill-savour of that novel poison be perceived, then will those profane novelties be disclosed, then may you see first the hedge broken through, then the landmarks of the Fathers removed, then the Catholic faith assailed, then the doctrine of the Church torn in pieces.

[67.] Such were they whom the Apostle Paul rebukes in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, when he says, "For of this sort are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ." 2 Corinthians 11:12 The apostles brought forward instances from Holy Scripture; these men did the same. The apostles cited the authority of the Psalms; these men did so likewise. The apostles brought forward passages from the prophets; these men still did the same. But when they began to interpret in different senses the passages which both had agreed in appealing to, then were discerned the guileless from the crafty, the genuine from the counterfeit, the straight from the crooked, then, in one word, the true apostles from the false apostles. "And no wonder," he says, "for Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of

light. It is no marvel then if his servants are transformed as the servants of righteousness.” Therefore, according to the authority of the Apostle Paul, as often as either false apostles or false teachers cite passages from the Divine Law, by means of which, misinterpreted, they seek to prop up their own errors, there is no doubt that they are following the cunning devices of their father, which assuredly he would never have devised, but that he knew that where he could fraudulently and by stealth introduce error, there is no easier way of effecting his impious purpose than by pretending the authority of Holy Scripture.

Chapter 26.

Heretics, in quoting Scripture, follow the example of the Devil.

[68.] But someone will say, What proof have we that the Devil is wont to appeal to Holy Scripture? Let him read the Gospels wherein it is written, “Then the Devil took Him (the Lord the Saviour) and set Him upon a pinnacle of the Temple, and said unto Him: If you be the Son of God, cast yourself down, for it is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning you, that they may keep you in all your ways: In their hands, they shall bear you up, lest perchance you dash your foot against a stone.” What sort of treatment must men, insignificant wretches that they are, look for at the hands of him who assailed even the Lord of Glory with quotations from Scripture? “If you be the Son of God,” says he, “cast yourself down.” Wherefore? “For,” says he, “it is written.” It behooves us to pay special attention to this passage and bear it in mind, that, warned by so important an instance of Evangelical authority, we

may be assured beyond doubt, when we find people alleging passages from the Apostles or Prophets against the Catholic Faith, that the Devil speaks through their mouths. For as then the Head spoke to the Head, so now also the members speak to the members, the members of the Devil to the members of Christ, misbelievers to believers, sacrilegious to religious, in one word, Heretics to Catholics.

[69.] But what do they say? “If you be the Son of God, cast yourself down;” that is, If you would be a son of God, and would receive the inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven, cast yourself down; that is, cast yourself down from the doctrine and tradition of that sublime Church, which is imagined to be nothing less than the very temple of God. And if one should ask one of the heretics who gives this advice, How do you prove? What ground have you, for saying, that I ought to cast away the universal and ancient faith of the Catholic Church? He has the answer ready, “For it is written;” and immediately he produces a thousand testimonies, a thousand examples, a thousand authorities from the Law, from the Psalms, from the apostles, from the Prophets, by means of which, interpreted on a new and wrong principle, the unhappy soul may be precipitated from the height of Catholic truth to the lowest abyss of heresy. Then, with the accompanying promises, the heretics are wont marvellously to beguile the incautious. For they dare to teach and promise, that in their church, that is, in the conventicle of their communion, there is a certain great and special and altogether personal grace of God, so that whosoever pertain to their number, without any labour, without any effort, without any industry, even though they neither ask, nor seek, nor knock, have such a dispensation from

God, that, borne up by angel hands, that is, preserved by the protection of angels, it is impossible they should ever dash their feet against a stone, that is, that they should ever be offended.

Chapter 27.

What Rule is to be observed in the Interpretation of Scripture.

[70.] But it will be said, If the words, the sentiments, the promises of Scripture, are appealed to by the Devil and his disciples, of whom some are false apostles, some false prophets and false teachers, and all without exception heretics, what are Catholics and the sons of Mother Church to do? How are they to distinguish truth from falsehood in the sacred Scriptures? They must be very careful to pursue that course which, in the beginning of this Commonitory, we said that holy and learned men had commended to us, that is to say, they must interpret the sacred Canon according to the traditions of the Universal Church and in keeping with the rules of Catholic doctrine, in which Catholic and Universal Church, moreover, they must follow universality, antiquity, consent. And if at any time a part opposes itself to the whole, novelty to antiquity, the dissent of one or a few who are in error to the consent of all or at all events of the great majority of Catholics, then they must prefer the soundness of the whole to the corruption of a part; in which same whole they must prefer the religion of antiquity to the profaneness of novelty; and in antiquity itself in like manner, to the temerity of one or of a very few they must prefer, first of all, the general decrees, if such there be, of a Universal Council, or if there be no such, then, what is next best, they must follow the consentient belief of

many and great masters. Which rule having been faithfully, soberly, and scrupulously observed, we shall with little difficulty detect the noxious errors of heretics as they arise.

Chapter 28.

In what Way, on collating the consentient opinions of the Ancient Masters, the Novelties of Heretics may be detected and condemned.

[71.] And here I perceive that, as a necessary sequel to the foregoing, I ought to show by examples in what way, by collating the consentient opinions of the ancient masters, the profane novelties of heretics may be detected and condemned. Yet in the investigation of this ancient consent of the holy Fathers we are to bestow our pains not on every minor question of the Divine Law, but only, at all events especially, where the Rule of Faith is concerned. Nor is this way of dealing with heresy to be resorted to always, or in every instance, but only in the case of those heresies which are new and recent, and that on their first arising, before they have had time to deprave the Rules of the Ancient Faith, and before they endeavour, while the poison spreads and diffuses itself, to corrupt the writings of the ancients. But heresies already widely diffused and of old standing are by no means to be thus dealt with, seeing that through lapse of time they have long had opportunity of corrupting the truth. And therefore, as to the more ancient schisms or heresies, we ought either to confute them, if need be, by the sole authority of the Scriptures, or at any rate, to shun them as having been already of old convicted and condemned by universal councils of the Catholic Priesthood.

[72.] Therefore, as soon as the corruption of each mischievous error begins to break forth, and to defend itself by filching certain passages of Scripture, and expounding them fraudulently and deceitfully, immediately, the opinions of the ancients in the interpretation of the Canon are to be collected, whereby the novelty, and consequently the profaneness, whatever it may be, that arises, may both without any doubt be exposed, and without any tergiversation be condemned. But the opinions of those Fathers only are to be used for comparison, who living and teaching, holily, wisely, and with constancy, in the Catholic faith and communion, were counted worthy either to die in the faith of Christ, or to suffer death happily for Christ. Whom yet we are to believe in this condition, that that only is to be accounted indubitable, certain, established, which either all, or the more part, have supported and confirmed manifestly, frequently, persistently, in one and the same sense, forming, as it were, a consentient council of doctors, all receiving, holding, handing on the same doctrine. But whatsoever a teacher holds, other than all, or contrary to all, be he holy and learned, be he a bishop, be he a Confessor, be he a martyr, let that be regarded as a private fancy of his own, and be separated from the authority of common, public, general persuasion, lest, after the sacrilegious custom of heretics and schismatics, rejecting the ancient truth of the universal Creed, we follow, at the utmost peril of our eternal salvation, the newly devised error of one man.

[73.] Lest anyone perchance should rashly think the holy and Catholic consent of these blessed fathers to be despised, the Apostle says, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, “God has placed some in the Church, first Apostles,” 1

Corinthians 12:27-28 of whom himself was one; “secondly Prophets,” such as Agabus, of whom we read in the Acts of the Apostles; Acts 11:28 “then doctors,” who are now called Homilists, Expositors, whom the same apostle sometimes calls also “Prophets,” because by them the mysteries of the Prophets are opened to the people. Whosoever, therefore, shall despise these, who had their appointment of God in His Church in their several times and places, when they are unanimous in Christ, in the interpretation of some one point of Catholic doctrine, despises not man, but God, from whose unity in the truth, lest anyone should vary, the same Apostle earnestly protests, “I beseech you, brethren, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” 1 Corinthians 1:10 But if any one dissent from their unanimous decision, let him listen to the words of the same apostle, “God is not the God of dissension but of peace;” 1 Corinthians 14:33 that is, not of him who departs from the unity of consent, but of those who remain steadfast in the peace of consent: “as,” he continues, “I teach in all Churches of the saints,” that is, of Catholics, which churches are therefore churches of the saints, because they continue steadfast in the communion of the faith.

[74.] And lest anyone, disregarding everyone else, should arrogantly claim to be listened to himself alone, himself alone to be believed, the Apostle goes on to say, “Did the word of God proceed from you, or did it come to you only?” And, lest this should be thought lightly spoken, he continues, “If any man seem to be a prophet or a spiritual person, let him acknowledge that the things which I write unto you are the Lord’s commands.” As to which, unless a man be a

prophet or a spiritual person, that is, a master in spiritual matters, let him be as observant as possible of impartiality and unity, so as neither to prefer his own opinions to those of everyone besides, nor to recede from the belief of the whole body. Which injunction, whoso ignores, shall be himself ignored; 1 Corinthians 14:33 that is, he who either does not learn what he does not know, or treats with contempt what he knows, shall be ignored, that is, shall be deemed unworthy to be ranked of God with those who are united to each other by faith, and equalled with each other by humility, than which I cannot imagine a more terrible evil. This it is however which, according to the Apostle's threatening, we see to have befallen Julian the Pelagian, who either neglected to associate himself with the belief of his fellow Christians, or presumed to dissociate himself from it.

[75.] But it is now time to bring forward the exemplification which we promised, where and how the sentences of the holy Fathers have been collected together, so that in accordance with them, by the decree and authority of a council, the rule of the Church's faith may be settled. Which that it may be done the more conveniently, let this present Commonitory end here, so that the remainder which is to follow may be begun from a fresh beginning.

[The Second Book of the Commonitory is lost. Nothing of it remains but the conclusion: in other words, the recapitulation which follows.]

To Be Cont'd