

St. Vincent Of Lérins ‘Commonitorium’ Part V

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

Chapter 29.

Recapitulation.

[76.] This being the case, it is now time that we should recapitulate, at the close of this second Commonitory, what was said in that and in the preceding.

We said above, that it has always been the custom of Catholics, and still is, to prove the true faith in these two ways; first by the authority of the Divine Canon, and next by the tradition of the Catholic Church. Not that the Canon alone does not of itself suffice for every question, but seeing that the more part, interpreting the divine words according to their own persuasion, take up various erroneous opinions, it is therefore necessary that the interpretation of divine Scripture should be ruled according to the one standard of the Church’s belief, especially in those articles on which the foundations of all Catholic doctrine rest.

[77.] We said likewise, that in the Church itself regard must be had to the consentient voice of universality equally with that of antiquity, lest we either be torn from the integrity of unity and carried away to schism, or be precipitated from the religion of antiquity into heretical novelties. We said, further, that in this same ecclesiastical antiquity two points are very carefully and earnestly to be held in view by those who would keep clear of heresy: first,

they should ascertain whether any decision has been given in ancient times as to the matter in question by the whole priesthood of the Catholic Church, with the authority of a General Council: and, secondly, if some new question should arise on which no such decision has been given, they should then have recourse to the opinions of the holy Fathers, of those at least, who, each in his own time and place, remaining in the unity of communion and of the faith, were accepted as approved masters; and whatsoever these may be found to have held, with one mind and with one consent, this ought to be accounted the true and Catholic doctrine of the Church, without any doubt or scruple.

[78.] Which lest we should seem to allege presumptuously on our own warrant rather than on the authority of the Church, we appealed to the example of the holy council which some three years ago was held at Ephesus in Asia, in the consulship of Bassus and Antiochus, where, when question was raised as to the authoritative determining of rules of faith, lest, perchance, any profane novelty should creep in, as did the perversion of the truth at Ariminum, the whole body of priests there assembled, nearly two hundred in number, approved of this as the most Catholic, the most trustworthy, and the best course, viz., to bring forth into the midst the sentiments of the holy Fathers, some of whom it was well known had been martyrs, some Confessors, but all had been, and continued to the end to be, Catholic priests, in order that by their consentient determination the reverence due to ancient truth might be duly and solemnly confirmed, and the blasphemy of profane novelty condemned. Which having been done, that impious Nestorius was lawfully and deservedly adjudged to be opposed to Catholic antiquity, and contrariwise blessed Cyril

to be in agreement with it. And that nothing might be wanting to the credibility of the matter, we recorded the names and the number (though we had forgotten the order) of the Fathers, according to whose consent and unanimous judgment, both the sacred preliminaries of judicial procedure were expounded, and the rule of divine truth established. Whom, that we may strengthen our memory, it will be no superfluous labour to mention again here also.

Chapter 30.

The Council of Ephesus.

[79.] These then are the men whose writings, whether as judges or as witnesses, were recited in the Council: St. Peter, bishop of Alexandria, a most excellent Doctor and most blessed martyr, Saint Athanasius, bishop of the same city, a most faithful Teacher, and most eminent Confessor, Saint Theophilus, also bishop of the same city, a man illustrious for his faith, his life, his knowledge, whose successor, the revered Cyril, now adorns the Alexandrian Church. And lest perchance the doctrine ratified by the Council should be thought peculiar to one city and province, there were added also those lights of Cappadocia, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, bishop and Confessor, St. Basil of Cæsarea in Cappadocia, bishop and Confessor, and the other St. Gregory, St. Gregory of Nyssa, for his faith, his conversation, his integrity, and his wisdom, most worthy to be the brother of Basil. And lest Greece or the East should seem to stand alone, to prove that the Western and Latin world also have always held the same belief, there were read in the Council certain Epistles of St. Felix, martyr, and St. Julius, both bishops of Rome. And that

not only the Head, but the other parts, of the world also might bear witness to the judgment of the council, there was added from the South the most blessed Cyprian, bishop of Carthage and martyr, and from the North St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan.

[80.] These all then, to the sacred number of the decalogue, were produced at Ephesus as doctors, councillors, witnesses, judges. And that blessed council holding their doctrine, following their counsel, believing their witness, submitting to their judgment without haste, without foregone conclusion, without partiality, gave their determination concerning the Rules of Faith. A much greater number of the ancients might have been adduced; but it was needless, because neither was it fit that the time should be occupied by a multitude of witnesses, nor does anyone suppose that those ten were really of a different mind from the rest of their colleagues.

Chapter 31.

The Constancy of the Ephesine Fathers in driving away Novelty and maintaining Antiquity.

[81.] After the preceding we added also the sentence of blessed Cyril, which is contained in these same Ecclesiastical Proceedings. For when the Epistle of Capreolus, bishop of Carthage, had been read, wherein he earnestly intreats that novelty may be driven away and antiquity maintained, Cyril made and carried the proposal, which it may not be out of place to insert here: For says he, at the close of the proceedings, “Let the Epistle of Capreolus also, the reverend and very religious bishop of Carthage, which has been read, be

inserted in the acts. His mind is obvious, for he intreats that the doctrines of the ancient faith be confirmed, such as are novel, wantonly devised, and impiously promulgated, reprobated and condemned.” All the bishops cried out, “These are the words of all; this we all say, this we all desire.” What mean “the words of all,” what mean “the desires of all,” but that what has been handed down from antiquity should be retained, what has been newly devised, rejected with disdain?

[82.] Next we expressed our admiration of the humility and sanctity of that Council, such that, though the number of priests was so great, almost the more part of them metropolitans, so erudite, so learned, that almost all were capable of taking part in doctrinal discussions, whom the very circumstance of their being assembled for the purpose, might seem to embolden to make some determination on their own authority, yet they innovated nothing, presumed nothing, arrogated to themselves absolutely nothing, but used all possible care to hand down nothing to posterity but what they had themselves received from their Fathers. And not only did they dispose satisfactorily of the matter presently in hand, but they also set an example to those who should come after them, how they also should adhere to the determinations of sacred antiquity, and condemn the devices of profane novelty.

[83.] We inveighed also against the wicked presumption of Nestorius in boasting that he was the first and the only one who understood holy Scripture, and that all those teachers were ignorant, who before him had expounded the sacred oracles, forsooth, the whole body of priests, the whole body of

Confessors and martyrs, of whom some had published commentaries upon the Law of God, others had agreed with them in their comments, or had acquiesced in them. In a word, he confidently asserted that the whole Church was even now in error, and always had been in error, in that, as it seemed to him, it had followed, and was following, ignorant and misguided teachers.

Chapter 32.

The zeal of Celestine and Sixtus, bishops of Rome, in opposing Novelty.

[84.] The foregoing would be enough and very much more than enough, to crush and annihilate every profane novelty. But yet that nothing might be wanting to such completeness of proof, we added, at the close, the twofold authority of the Apostolic See, first, that of holy Pope Sixtus, the venerable prelate who now adorns the Roman Church; and secondly that of his predecessor, Pope Celestine of blessed memory, which same we think it necessary to insert here also.

Holy Pope Sixtus then says in an Epistle which he wrote on Nestorius's matter to the bishop of Antioch, "Therefore, because, as the Apostle says, the faith is one—evidently the faith which has obtained hitherto—let us believe the things that are to be said, and say the things that are to be held." What are the things that are to be believed and to be said? He goes on: "Let no license be allowed to novelty, because it is not fit that any addition should be made to antiquity. Let not the clear faith and belief of our forefathers be fouled by any muddy admixture." A truly apostolic sentiment! He enhances the belief of the Fathers by the epithet of clearness; profane novelties he calls muddy.

[85.] Holy Pope Celestine also expresses himself in like manner and to the same effect. For in the Epistle which he wrote to the priests of Gaul, charging them with connivance with error, in that by their silence they failed in their duty to the ancient faith, and allowed profane novelties to spring up, he says: “We are deservedly to blame if we encourage error by silence. Therefore, rebuke these people. Restrain their liberty of preaching.” But here someone may doubt who they are whose liberty to preach as they list he forbids—the preachers of antiquity or the devisers of novelty. Let himself tell us; let himself resolve the reader’s doubt. For he goes on: “If the case be so (that is, if the case be so as certain persons complain to me touching your cities and provinces, that by your hurtful dissimulation you cause them to consent to certain novelties), if the case be so, let novelty cease to assail antiquity.” This, then, was the sentence of blessed Celestine, not that antiquity should cease to subvert novelty, but that novelty should cease to assail antiquity.

Chapter 33.

The Children of the Catholic Church ought to adhere to the Faith of their Fathers and die for it.

[86.] Whoever then gainsays these Apostolic and Catholic determinations, first of all necessarily insults the memory of holy Celestine, who decreed that novelty should cease to assail antiquity; and in the next place sets at naught the decision of holy Sixtus, whose sentence was, “Let no license be allowed to novelty, since it is not fit that any addition be made to antiquity;” moreover, he condemns the determination of blessed Cyril, who extolled with high praise

the zeal of the venerable Capreolus, in that he would fain have the ancient doctrines of the faith confirmed, and novel inventions condemned; yet more, he tramples upon the Council of Ephesus, that is, on the decisions of the holy bishops of almost the whole East, who decreed, under divine guidance, that nothing ought to be believed by posterity save what the sacred antiquity of the holy Fathers, consentient in Christ, had held, who with one voice, and with loud acclaim, testified that these were the words of all, this was the wish of all, this was the sentence of all, that as almost all heretics before Nestorius, despising antiquity and upholding novelty, had been condemned, so Nestorius, the author of novelty and the assailant of antiquity, should be condemned also. Whose consentient determination, inspired by the gift of sacred and celestial grace, whoever disapproves must needs hold the profaneness of Nestorius to have been condemned unjustly; finally, he despises as vile and worthless the whole Church of Christ, and its doctors, apostles, and prophets, and especially the blessed Apostle Paul: he despises the Church, in that she has never failed in loyalty to the duty of cherishing and preserving the faith once for all delivered to her; he despises St. Paul, who wrote, “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you, shunning profane novelties of words;” 1 Timothy 6:20 and again, “if any man preach unto you other than you have received, let him be accursed.” Galatians 1:9 But if neither injunctions nor ecclesiastical decrees may be violated, by which, in accordance with the sacred consent of universality and antiquity, all heretics always, and, last of all, Pelagius, Cœlestius, and Nestorius have been rightly and deservedly condemned, then assuredly it is incumbent on all Catholics who are anxious to approve

themselves genuine sons of Mother Church, to adhere henceforward to the holy faith of the holy Fathers, to be wedded to it, to die in it; but as to the profane novelties of profane men— to detest them, abhor them, oppose them, give them no quarter.

[87.] These matters, handled more at large in the two preceding Commonitories, I have now put together more briefly by way of recapitulation, in order that my memory, to aid which I composed them, may, on the one hand, be refreshed by frequent reference, and, on the other, may avoid being wearied by prolixity.