

St. Vincent Of Lérins ‘Commonitorium’ Part II

Chapter 10.

Why Eminent Men are permitted by God to become Authors of Novelties in the Church.

[27.] But some one will ask, How is it then, that certain excellent persons, and of position in the Church, are often permitted by God to preach novel doctrines to Catholics? A proper question, certainly, and one which ought to be very carefully and fully dealt with, but answered at the same time, not in reliance upon one's own ability, but by the authority of the divine Law, and by appeal to the Church's determination.

Let us listen, then, to Holy Moses, and let him teach us why learned men, and such as because of their knowledge are even called Prophets by the apostle, are sometimes permitted to put forth novel doctrines, which the Old Testament is wont, by way of allegory, to call “strange gods,” forasmuch as heretics pay the same sort of reverence to their notions that the Gentiles do to their gods.

[28.] Blessed Moses, then, writes thus in Deuteronomy: “If there arise among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams,” that is, one holding office as a Doctor in the Church, who is believed by his disciples or auditors to teach by revelation: well—what follows? “and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder come to pass whereof he spoke,”— he is pointing to some eminent doctor, whose learning is such that his followers believe him not only to know things human, but, moreover, to foreknow things superhuman, such

as, their disciples commonly boast, were Valentinus, Donatus, Photinus, Apollinaris, and the rest of that sort! What next? “And shall say to you, Let us go after other gods, whom you know not, and serve them.” What are those other gods but strange errors which you know not, that is, new and such as were never heard of before? “And let us serve them;” that is, “Let us believe them, follow them.” What last? “You shall not hearken to the words of that prophet or dreamer of dreams.” And why, I pray you, does not God forbid to be taught what God forbids to be heard? “For the Lord, your God, tries you, to know whether you love Him with all your heart and with all your soul.” The reason is clearer than day why Divine Providence sometimes permits certain doctors of the Churches to preach new doctrines— “That the Lord your God may try you;” he says. And assuredly it is a great trial when one whom you believe to be a prophet, a disciple of prophets, a doctor and defender of the truth, whom you have folded to your breast with the utmost veneration and love, when such a one of a sudden secretly and furtively brings in noxious errors, which you can neither quickly detect, being held by the prestige of former authority, nor lightly think it right to condemn, being prevented by affection for your old master.

Chapter 11.

Examples from Church History, confirming the words of Moses— Nestorius, Photinus, Apollinaris.

[29.] Here, perhaps, some one will require us to illustrate the words of holy Moses by examples from Church History. The demand is a fair one, nor shall it wait long for satisfaction.

For to take first a very recent and very plain case: what sort of trial, think we, was that which the Church had experience of the other day, when that unhappy Nestorius, all at once metamorphosed from a sheep into a wolf, began to make havoc of the flock of Christ, while as yet a large proportion of those whom he was devouring believed him to be a sheep, and consequently were the more exposed to his attacks? For who would readily suppose him to be in error, who was known to have been elected by the high choice of the Emperor, and to be held in the greatest esteem by the priesthood? Who would readily suppose him to be in error, who, greatly beloved by the holy brethren, and in high favor with the populace, expounded the Scriptures in public daily, and confuted the pestilent errors both of Jews and Heathens? Who could choose but believe that his teaching was Orthodox, his preaching Orthodox, his belief Orthodox, who, that he might open the way to one heresy of his own, was zealously inveighing against the blasphemies of all heresies? But this was the very thing which Moses says: “The Lord your God does try you that He may know whether you love Him or not.”

[30.] Leaving Nestorius, in whom there was always more that men admired than they were profited by, more of show than of reality, whom natural ability, rather than divine grace, magnified, for a time in the opinion of the common people, let us pass on to speak of those who, being persons of great attainments and of much industry, proved no small trial to Catholics. Such, for instance, was Photinus, in Pannonia, who, in the memory of our fathers, is said to have been a trial to the Church of Sirmium, where, when he had been raised to the priesthood with universal approbation, and had discharged the office for some time as a Catholic, all of a sudden, like that evil prophet or dreamer of dreams whom Moses refers to, he began to persuade the people whom God had entrusted, to his charge, to follow “strange gods,” that is, strange errors, which before they knew not. But there was nothing unusual in this: the mischief of the matter was, that for the perpetration of so great wickedness he availed himself of no ordinary helps. For he was of great natural ability and of powerful eloquence, and had a wealth of learning, disputing and writing copiously and forcibly in both languages, as his books which remain, composed partly in Greek, partly in Latin, testify. But happily the sheep of Christ committed to him, vigilant and wary for the Catholic faith, quickly turned their eyes to the premonitory words of Moses, and, though admiring the eloquence of their prophet and pastor, were not blind to the trial. For from thenceforward they began to flee from him as a wolf, whom formerly they had followed as the ram of the flock.

[31.] Nor is it only in the instance of Photinus that we learn the danger of this trial to the Church, and are admonished withal of the need of double diligence in guarding the faith. Apollinaris holds out a like warning. For he gave rise to great burning questions and sore perplexities among his disciples, the Church's authority drawing them one way, their Master's influence the opposite; so that, wavering and tossed here and there between the two, they were at a loss what course to take.

But perhaps he was a person of no weight of character. On the contrary, he was so eminent and so highly esteemed that his word would only too readily be taken on whatsoever subject. For what could exceed his acuteness, his adroitness, his learning? How many heresies did he, in many volumes, annihilate! How many errors, hostile to the faith, did he confute! A proof of which is that most noble and vast work, of not less than thirty books, in which, with a great mass of arguments, he repelled the insane calumnies of Porphyry. It would take a long time to enumerate all his works, which assuredly would have placed him on a level with the very chief of the Church's builders, if that profane lust of heretical curiosity had not led him to devise I know not what novelty which as though through the contagion of a sort of leprosy both defiled all his labours, and caused his teachings to be pronounced the Church's trial instead of the Church's edification.

Chapter 12.

A fuller account of the Errors of Photinus, Apollinaris and Nestorius.

[32.] Here, possibly, I may be asked for some account of the above mentioned heresies; those, namely, of Nestorius, Apollinaris, and Photinus. This, indeed, does not belong to the matter in hand: for our object is not to enlarge upon the errors of individuals, but to produce instances of a few, in whom the applicability of Moses' words may be evidently and clearly seen; that is to say, that if at any time some Master in the Church, himself also a prophet in interpreting the mysteries of the prophets, should attempt to introduce some novel doctrine into the Church of God, Divine Providence permits this to happen in order to try us. It will be useful, therefore, by way of digression, to give a brief account of the opinions of the above-named heretics, Photinus, Apollinaris, Nestorius.

[33.] The heresy of Photinus, then, is as follows: He says that God is singular and sole, and is to be regarded as the Jews regarded Him. He denies the completeness of the Trinity, and does not believe that there is any Person of God the Word, or any Person of the Holy Ghost. Christ he affirms to be a mere man, whose original was from Mary. Hence he insists with the utmost obstinacy that we are to render worship only to the Person of God the Father, and that we are to honour Christ as man only. This is the doctrine of Photinus.

[34.] Apollinaris, affecting to agree with the Church as to the unity of the Trinity, though not this even with entire soundness of belief, as to the Incarnation of the Lord, blasphemes openly. For he says that the flesh of our Saviour was either altogether devoid of a human soul, or, at all events, was devoid of a rational soul. Moreover, he says that this same flesh of the Lord was not received from the flesh of the holy Virgin Mary, but came down from heaven into the Virgin; and, ever wavering and undecided, he preaches one while that it was co-eternal with God the Word, another that it was made of the divine nature of the Word. For, denying that there are two substances in Christ, one divine, the other human, one from the Father, the other from his mother, he holds that the very nature of the Word was divided, as though one part of it remained in God, the other was converted into flesh: so that whereas the truth says that of two substances there is one Christ, he affirms, contrary to the truth, that of the one divinity of Christ there have become two substances. This, then, is the doctrine of Apollinaris.

[35.] Nestorius, whose disease is of an opposite kind, while pretending that he holds two distinct substances in Christ, brings in of a sudden two Persons, and with unheard of wickedness would have two sons of God, two Christs, — one, God, the other, man, one, begotten of his Father, the other, born of his mother. For which reason he maintains that Saint Mary ought to be called, not Theotocos (the mother of God), but Christotocos (the mother of Christ), seeing that she gave birth not to the Christ who is God, but to the Christ who is man. But if any one supposes that in his writings he speaks of one Christ, and preaches one Person of Christ, let him not lightly credit it. For either this is a

crafty device, that by means of good he may the more easily persuade evil, according to that of the apostle, “That which is good was made death to me,” Romans 7:13 — either, I say, he craftily affects in some places in his writings to believe one Christ and one Person of Christ, or else he says that after the Virgin had brought forth, the two Persons were united into one Christ, though at the time of her conception or parturition, and for some short time afterwards, there were two Christs; so that forsooth, though Christ was born at first an ordinary man and nothing more, and not as yet associated in unity of Person with the Word of God, yet afterwards the Person of the Word assuming descended upon Him; and though now the Person assumed remains in the glory of God, yet once there would seem to have been no difference between Him and all other men.

Chapter 13.

The Catholic Doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation explained.

[36.] In these ways then do these rabid dogs, Nestorius, Apollinaris, and Photinus, bark against the Catholic faith: Photinus, by denying the Trinity; Apollinaris, by teaching that the nature of the Word is mutable, and refusing to acknowledge that there are two substances in Christ, denying moreover either that Christ had a soul at all, or, at all events, that he had a rational soul, and asserting that the Word of God supplied the place of the rational soul; Nestorius, by affirming that there were always or at any rate that once there were two Christs. But the Catholic Church, holding the right faith both concerning God and concerning our Saviour, is guilty of blasphemy neither in

the mystery of the Trinity, nor in that of the Incarnation of Christ. For she worships both one Godhead in the plenitude of the Trinity, and the equality of the Trinity in one and the same majesty, and she confesses one Christ Jesus, not two; the same both God and man, the one as truly as the other. One Person indeed she believes in Him, but two substances; two substances but one Person: Two substances, because the Word of God is not mutable, so as to be convertible into flesh; one Person, lest by acknowledging two sons she should seem to worship not a Trinity, but a Quaternity.

[37.] But it will be well to unfold this same doctrine more distinctly and explicitly again and again.

In God there is one substance, but three Persons; in Christ two substances, but one Person. In the Trinity, another and another Person, not another and another substance (distinct Persons, not distinct substances); in the Saviour another and another substance, not another and another Person, (distinct substances, not distinct Persons). How in the Trinity another and another Person (distinct Persons) not another and another substance (distinct substances)? Because there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Ghost; but yet there is not another and another nature (distinct natures) but one and the same nature. How in the Saviour another and another substance, not another and another Person (two distinct substances, not two distinct Persons)? Because there is one substance of the Godhead, another of the manhood. But yet the Godhead and the manhood are not another and another Person (two distinct Persons), but one and the same Christ, one and the same Son of God,

and one and the same Person of one and the same Christ and Son of God, in like manner as in man the flesh is one thing and the soul another, but one and the same man, both soul and flesh. In Peter and Paul the soul is one thing, the flesh another; yet there are not two Peters, — one soul, the other flesh, or two Pauls, one soul, the other flesh—but one and the same Peter, and one and the same Paul, consisting each of two diverse natures, soul and body. Thus, then, in one and the same Christ there are two substances, one divine, the other human; one of (ex) God the Father, the other of (ex) the Virgin Mother; one co-eternal with and co-equal with the Father, the other temporal and inferior to the Father; one consubstantial with his Father, the other, consubstantial with his Mother, but one and the same Christ in both substances. There is not, therefore, one Christ God, the other man, not one uncreated, the other created; not one impassible, the other passible; not one equal to the Father, the other inferior to the Father; not one of his Father (ex), the other of his Mother (ex), but one and the same Christ, God and man, the same uncreated and created, the same unchangeable and incapable of suffering, the same acquainted by experience with both change and suffering, the same equal to the Father and inferior to the Father, the same begotten of the Father before time, (“before the world”), the same born of his mother in time (“in the world”), perfect God, perfect Man. In God supreme divinity, in man perfect humanity. Perfect humanity, I say, forasmuch as it has both soul and flesh; the flesh, very flesh; our flesh, his mother's flesh; the soul, intellectual, endowed with mind and reason. There is then in Christ the Word, the soul, the flesh; but the whole is one Christ, one Son of God, and one our Saviour and Redeemer: One, not by

I know not what corruptible confusion of Godhead and manhood, but by a certain entire and singular unity of Person. For the conjunction has not converted and changed the one nature into the other, (which is the characteristic error of the Arians), but rather has in such wise compacted both into one, that while there always remains in Christ the singularity of one and the self-same Person, there abides eternally withal the characteristic property of each nature; whence it follows, that neither does God (i.e., the divine nature) ever begin to be body, nor does the body ever cease to be body. The which may be illustrated in human nature: for not only in the present life, but in the future also, each individual man will consist of soul and body; nor will his body ever be converted into soul, or his soul into body; but while each individual man will live forever, the distinction between the two substances will continue in each individual man forever. So likewise in Christ each substance will forever retain its own characteristic property, yet without prejudice to the unity of Person.

Chapter 14.

Jesus Christ Man in Truth, not in Semblance.

[38.] But when we use the word “Person,” and say that God became man by means of a Person, there is reason to fear that our meaning may be taken to be, that God the Word assumed our nature merely in imitation, and performed the actions of man, being man not in reality, but only in semblance, just as in a theatre, one man within a brief space represents several persons, not one of whom himself is. For when one undertakes to sustain the part of another, he

performs the offices, or does the acts, of the person whose part he sustains, but he is not himself that person. So, to take an illustration from secular life and one in high favour with the Manichees, when a tragedian represents a priest or a king, he is not really a priest or a king. For, as soon as the play is over, the person or character whom he represented ceases to be. God forbid that we should have anything to do with such nefarious and wicked mockery. Be it the infatuation of the Manichees, those preachers of hallucination, who say that the Son of God, God, was not a human person really and truly, but that He counterfeited the person of a man in feigned conversation and manner of life.

[39.] But the Catholic Faith teaches that the Word of God became man in such wise, that He took upon Him our nature, not feignedly and in semblance, but in reality and truth, and performed human actions, not as though He were imitating the actions of another, but as performing His own, and as being in reality the person whose part He sustained. Just as we ourselves also, when we speak, reason, live, subsist, do not imitate men, but are men. Peter and John, for instance, were men, not by imitation, but by being men in reality. Paul did not counterfeit an apostle, or feign himself to be Paul, but was an apostle, was Paul. So, also, that which God the Word did, in His condescension, in assuming and having flesh, in speaking, acting, and suffering, through the instrumentality of flesh, yet without any marring of His own divine nature, came in one word to this:— He did not imitate or feign Himself to be perfect man, but He showed Himself to be very man in reality and truth. Therefore, as the soul united to the flesh, but yet not changed into flesh, does not imitate man, but is man, and man not feignedly but substantially, so also God the

Word, without any conversion of Himself, in uniting Himself to man, became man, not by confusion, not by imitation, but by actually being and subsisting. Away then, once and for all, with the notion of His Person as of an assumed fictitious character, where always what is is one thing, what is counterfeited another, where the man who acts never is the man whose part he acts. God forbid that we should believe God the Word to have taken upon Himself the person of a man in this illusory way. Rather let us acknowledge that while His own unchangeable substance remained, and while He took upon Himself the nature of perfect man, Himself actually was flesh, Himself actually was man, Himself actually was personally man; not feignedly, but in truth, not in imitation, but in substance; not, finally, so as to cease to be when the performance was over, but so as to be, and continue to be substantially and permanently.

Chapter 15.

The Union of the Divine with the Human Nature took place in the very Conception of the Virgin. The appellation “The Mother of God.”

[40.] This unity of Person, then, in Christ was not effected after His birth of the Virgin, but was compacted and perfected in her very womb. For we must take most special heed that we confess Christ not only one, but always one. For it were intolerable blasphemy, if while you confess Him one now, you should maintain that once He was not one, but two; one forsooth since His baptism, but two at His birth. Which monstrous sacrilege we shall assuredly in no wise avoid unless we acknowledge the manhood united to the Godhead

(but by unity of Person), not from the ascension, or the resurrection, or the baptism, but even in His mother, even in the womb, even in the Virgin's very conception. In consequence of which unity of Person, both those attributes which are proper to God are ascribed to man, and those which are proper to the flesh to God, indifferently and promiscuously. For hence it is written by divine guidance, on the one hand, that the Son of man came down from heaven; John 3:13 and on the other, that the Lord of glory was crucified on earth. 1 Corinthians 2:8 Hence it is also that since the Lord's flesh was made, since the Lord's flesh was created, the very Word of God is said to have been made, the very omniscient Wisdom of God to have been created, just as prophetically His hands and His feet are described as having been pierced. From this unity of Person it follows, by reason of a like mystery, that, since the flesh of the Word was born of an undefiled mother, God the Word Himself is most Catholicly believed, most impiously denied, to have been born of the Virgin; which being the case, God forbid that any one should seek to defraud Holy Mary of her prerogative of divine grace and her special glory. For by the singular gift of Him who is our Lord and God, and withal, her own son, she is to be confessed most truly and most blessedly— The mother of God “Theotocos,” but not in the sense in which it is imagined by a certain impious heresy which maintains, that she is to be called the Mother of God for no other reason than because she gave birth to that man who afterwards became God, just as we speak of a woman as the mother of a priest, or the mother of a bishop, meaning that she was such, not by giving birth to one already a priest or a bishop, but by giving birth to one who afterwards became a priest or a

bishop. Not thus, I say, was the holy Mary “Theotocos,” the mother of God, but rather, as was said before, because in her sacred womb was wrought that most sacred mystery whereby, on account of the singular and unique unity of Person, as the Word in flesh is flesh, so Man in God is God.

Chapter 16.

Recapitulation of what was said of the Catholic Faith and of divers Heresies, Chapters xi-xv.

[41.] But now that we may refresh our remembrance of what has been briefly said concerning either the afore-mentioned heresies or the Catholic Faith, let us go over it again more briefly and concisely, that being repeated it may be more thoroughly understood, and being pressed home more firmly held.

Accursed then be Photinus, who does not receive the Trinity complete, but asserts that Christ is mere man.

Accursed be Apollinaris, who affirms that the Godhead of Christ is marred by conversion, and defrauds Him of the property of perfect humanity.

Accursed be Nestorius, who denies that God was born of the Virgin, affirms two Christs, and rejecting the belief of the Trinity, brings in a Quaternity.

But blessed be the Catholic Church, which worships one God in the completeness of the Trinity, and at the same time adores the equality of the Trinity in the unity of the Godhead, so that neither the singularity of substance

confounds the propriety of the Persons, not the distinction of the Persons in the Trinity separates the unity of the Godhead.

Blessed, I say, be the Church, which believes that in Christ there are two true and perfect substances but one Person, so that neither does the distinction of natures divide the unity of Person, nor the unity of Person confound the distinction of substances.

Blessed, I say, be the Church, which understands God to have become Man, not by conversion of nature, but by reason of a Person, but of a Person not feigned and transient, but substantial and permanent.

Blessed, I say, be the Church, which declares this unity of Person to be so real and effectual, that because of it, in a marvellous and ineffable mystery, she ascribes divine attributes to man, and human to God; because of it, on the one hand, she does not deny that Man, as God, came down from heaven, on the other, she believes that God, as Man, was created, suffered, and was crucified on earth; because of it, finally, she confesses Man the Son of God, and God the Son of the Virgin.

Blessed, then, and venerable, blessed and most sacred, and altogether worthy to be compared with those celestial praises of the Angelic Host, be the confession which ascribes glory to the one Lord God with a threefold ascription of holiness. For this reason moreover she insists emphatically upon the oneness of the Person of Christ, that she may not go beyond the mystery of the Trinity (that is by making in effect a Quaternity.)

Thus much by way of digression. On another occasion, please God, we will deal with the subject and unfold it more fully. Now let us return to the matter in hand.

To Be Cont'd.