

St. Vincent Of Lérins 'Commonitorium' Part III

Chapter 17.

The Error of Origen a great Trial to the Church.

[42.] We said above that in the Church of God the teacher's error is the people's trial, a trial by so much the greater in proportion to the greater learning of the erring teacher. This we showed first by the authority of Scripture, and then by instances from Church History, of persons who having at one time had the reputation of being sound in the faith, eventually either fell away to some sect already in existence, or else founded a heresy of their own. An important fact truly, useful to be learned, and necessary to be remembered, and to be illustrated and enforced again and again, by example upon example, in order that all true Catholics may understand that it behoves them with the Church to receive Teachers, not with Teachers to desert the faith of the Church.

[43.] My belief is, that among many instances of this sort of trial which might be produced, there is not one to be compared with that of Origen, in whom there were many things so excellent, so unique, so admirable, that antecedently any one would readily deem that implicit faith was to be placed all his assertions. For if the conversation and manner of life carry authority, great was his industry, great his modesty, his patience, his endurance; if his descent or his erudition, what more noble than his birth of a house rendered illustrious by martyrdom? Afterwards, when in the cause of Christ he had been deprived not only of his father, but also of all his property, he attained so high a standard in the midst of the straits of holy poverty, that he suffered several times, it is said,

as a Confessor. Nor were these the only circumstances connected with him, all of which afterwards proved an occasion of trial. He had a genius so powerful, so profound, so acute, so elegant, that there was hardly any one whom he did not very far surpass. The splendour of his learning, and of his erudition generally, was such that there were few points of divine philosophy, hardly any of human which he did not thoroughly master. When Greek had yielded to his industry, he made himself a proficient in Hebrew. What shall I say of his eloquence, the style of which was so charming, so soft, so sweet, that honey rather than words seemed to flow from his mouth! What subjects were there, however difficult, which he did not render clear and perspicuous by the force of his reasoning? What undertakings, however hard to accomplish, which he did not make to appear most easy? But perhaps his assertions rested simply on ingeniously woven argumentation? On the contrary, no teacher ever used more proofs drawn from Scripture. Then I suppose he wrote little? No man more, so that, if I mistake not, his writings not only cannot all be read through, they cannot all be found; for that nothing might be wanting to his opportunities of obtaining knowledge, he had the additional advantage of a life greatly prolonged. But perhaps he was not particularly happy in his disciples? Who ever more so? From his school came forth doctors, priests, confessors, martyrs, without number. Then who can express how much he was admired by all, how great his renown, how wide his influence? Who was there whose religion was at all above the common standard that did not hasten to him from the ends of the earth? What Christian did not reverence him almost as a prophet; what philosopher as a master? How great was the veneration with which he was

regarded, not only by private persons, but also by the Court, is declared by the histories which relate how he was sent for by the mother of the Emperor Alexander, moved by the heavenly wisdom with the love of which she, as he, was inflamed. To this also his letters bear witness, which, with the authority which he assumed as a Christian Teacher, he wrote to the Emperor Philip, the first Roman prince that was a Christian. As to his incredible learning, if anyone is unwilling to receive the testimony of Christians at our hands, let him at least accept that of heathens at the hands of philosophers. For that impious Porphyry says that when he was little more than a boy, incited by his fame, he went to Alexandria, and there saw him, then an old man, but a man evidently of so great attainments, that he had reached the summit of universal knowledge.

[44.] Time would fail me to recount, even in a very small measure, the excellencies of this man, all of which, nevertheless, not only contributed to the glory of religion, but also increased the magnitude of the trial. For who in the world would lightly desert a man of so great genius, so great learning, so great influence, and would not rather adopt that saying, That he would rather be wrong with Origen, than be right with others.

What shall I say more? The result was that very many were led astray from the integrity of the faith, not by any human excellencies of this so great man, this so great doctor, this so great prophet, but, as the event showed, by the too perilous trial which he proved to be. Hence it came to pass, that this Origen, such and so great as he was, wantonly abusing the grace of God, rashly following the bent of his own genius, and placing overmuch confidence in

himself, making light account of the ancient simplicity of the Christian religion, presuming that he knew more than all the world besides, despising the traditions of the Church and the determinations of the ancients, and interpreting certain passages of Scripture in a novel way, deserved for himself the warning given to the Church of God, as applicable in his case as in that of others, “If there arise a prophet in the midst of you,”... “you shall not hearken to the words of that prophet,”...”because the Lord your God does make trial of you, whether you love Him or not.” Deuteronomy 13:1 Truly, thus of a sudden to seduce the Church which was devoted to him, and hung upon him through admiration of his genius, his learning, his eloquence, his manner of life and influence, while she had no fear, no suspicion for herself—thus, I say, to seduce the Church, slowly and little by little, from the old religion to a new profaneness, was not only a trial, but a great trial.

[45.] But someone will say, Origen’s books have been corrupted. I do not deny it; nay, I grant it readily. For that such is the case has been handed down both orally and in writing, not only by Catholics, but by heretics as well. But the point is, that though himself be not, yet books published under his name are, a great trial, which, abounding in many hurtful blasphemies, are both read and delighted in, not as being someone else’s, but as being believed to be his, so that, although there was no error in Origen’s original meaning, yet Origen’s authority appears to be an effectual cause in leading people to embrace error.

Chapter 18.

Tertullian a great Trial to the Church.

[46.] The case is the same with Tertullian. For as Origen holds by far the first place among the Greeks, so does Tertullian among the Latins. For who more learned than he, who more versed in knowledge whether divine or human? With marvellous capacity of mind he comprehended all philosophy, and had a knowledge of all schools of philosophers, and of the founders and upholders of schools, and was acquainted with all their rules and observances, and with their various histories and studies. Was not his genius of such unrivalled strength and vehemence that there was scarcely any obstacle which he proposed to himself to overcome, that he did not penetrate by acuteness, or crush by weight? As to his style, who can sufficiently set forth its praise? It was knit together with so much cogency of argument that it compelled assent, even where it failed to persuade. Every word almost was a sentence; every sentence a victory. This know the Marcions, the Apelleses, the Praxeases, the Hermogeneses, the Jews, the Heathens, the Gnostics, and the rest, whose blasphemies he overthrew by the force of his many and ponderous volumes, as with so many thunderbolts. Yet this man also, notwithstanding all that I have mentioned, this Tertullian, I say, too little tenacious of Catholic doctrine, that is, of the universal and ancient faith, more eloquent by far than faithful, changed his belief, and justified what the blessed Confessor, Hilary, writes of him, namely, that “by his subsequent error he detracted from the authority of his approved writings.” He also was a great trial in the Church. But of

Tertullian I am unwilling to say more. This only I will add, that, contrary to the injunction of Moses, by asserting the novel furies of Montanus which arose in the Church, and those mad dreams of new doctrine dreamed by mad women, to be true prophecies, he deservedly made both himself and his writings obnoxious to the words, “If there arise a prophet in the midst of you,”...you shall not hearken to the words of that prophet. For why? “Because the Lord your God does make trial of you, whether you love Him or not.”

Chapter 19.

What we ought to learn from these Examples.

[47.] It behooves us, then, to give heed to these instances from Church History, so many and so great, and others of the same description, and to understand distinctly, in accordance with the rule laid down in Deuteronomy, that if at any time a Doctor in the Church have erred from the faith, Divine Providence permits it in order to make trial of us, whether or not we love God with all our heart and with all our mind.

Chapter 20.

The Notes of a true Catholic.

[48.] This being the case, he is the true and genuine Catholic who loves the truth of God, who loves the Church, who loves the Body of Christ, who esteems divine religion and the Catholic Faith above everything, above the authority, above the regard, above the genius, above the eloquence, above the philosophy, of every man whatsoever; who sets light by all of these, and

continuing steadfast and established in the faith, resolves that he will believe that, and that only, which he is sure the Catholic Church has held universally and from ancient time; but that whatsoever new and unheard-of doctrine he shall find to have been furtively introduced by some one or another, besides that of all, or contrary to that of all the saints, this, he will understand, does not pertain to religion, but is permitted as a trial, being instructed especially by the words of the blessed Apostle Paul, who writes thus in his first Epistle to the Corinthians, “There must needs be heresies, that they who are approved may be made manifest among you:” 1 Corinthians 2:9 as though he should say, This is the reason why the authors of Heresies are not immediately rooted up by God, namely, that they who are approved may be made manifest; that is, that it may be apparent of each individual, how tenacious and faithful and steadfast he is in his love of the Catholic faith.

[49.] And in truth, as each novelty springs up incontinently is discerned the difference between the weight of the wheat and the lightness of the chaff. Then that which had no weight to keep it on the floor is without difficulty blown away. For some at once fly off entirely; others having been only shaken out, afraid of perishing, wounded, half alive, half dead, are ashamed to return. They have, in fact swallowed a quantity of poison — not enough to kill, yet more than can be got rid of; it neither causes death, nor suffers to live. O wretched condition! With what surging tempestuous cares are they tossed about! One while, the error being set in motion, they are hurried wherever the wind drives them; another, returning upon themselves like refluent waves, they are dashed back: one while, with rash presumption, they give their approval to what seems

uncertain; another, with irrational fear, they are frightened out of their wits at what is certain, in doubt whither to go, whither to return, what to seek, what to shun, what to keep, what to throw away.

[50.] This affliction, indeed, of a hesitating and miserably vacillating mind is, if they are wise, a medicine intended for them by God's compassion. For therefore it is that outside the most secure harbour of the Catholic Faith, they are tossed about, beaten, and almost killed, by various tempestuous cogitations, in order that they may take in the sails of self-conceit, which, they had with ill advice unfurled to the blasts of novelty, and may betake themselves again to, and remain stationary within, the most secure harbour of their placid and good mother, and may begin by vomiting up those bitter and turbid floods of error which they had swallowed, that thenceforward they may be able to drink the streams of fresh and living water. Let them unlearn well what they had learned not well, and let them receive so much of the entire doctrine of the Church as they can understand: what they cannot understand let them believe.

Chapter 21.

Exposition of St. Paul's Words. — 1 Tim. vi. 20.

[51.] Such being the case, when I think over these things, and revolve them in my mind again and again, I cannot sufficiently wonder at the madness of certain men, at the impiety of their blinded understanding, at their lust of error, such that, not content with the rule of faith delivered once for all, and received from the times of old, they are every day seeking one novelty after another, and are constantly longing to add, change, take away, in religion, as though the

doctrine, “Let what has once for all been revealed suffice,” were not a heavenly but an earthly rule—a rule which could not be complied with except by continual emendation, nay, rather by continual fault-finding; whereas the divine Oracles cry aloud, “Remove not the landmarks, which your fathers have set,” Proverbs 22:28 and “Go not to law with a Judge,” Sirach 8:14 and “Whoso breaks through a fence a serpent shall bite him,” Ecclesiastes 10:8 and that saying of the Apostle wherewith, as with a spiritual sword, all the wicked novelties of all heresies often have been, and will always have to be, decapitated, “O Timothy, keep the deposit, shunning profane novelties of words and oppositions of the knowledge falsely so called, which some professing have erred concerning the faith.” 1 Timothy 6:20

[52.] After words such as these, is there any one of so hardened a front, such anvil-like impudence, such adamantine pertinacity, as not to succumb to so huge a mass, not to be crushed by so ponderous a weight, not to be shaken in pieces by such heavy blows, not to be annihilated by such dreadful thunderbolts of divine eloquence? “Shun profane novelties,” he says. He does not say shun “antiquity.” But he plainly points to what ought to follow by the rule of contrary. For if novelty is to be shunned, antiquity is to be held fast; if novelty is profane, antiquity is sacred. He adds, “And oppositions of science falsely so called.” “Falsely called” indeed, as applied to the doctrines of heretics, where ignorance is disguised under the name of knowledge, fog of sunshine, darkness of light. “Which some professing have erred concerning the faith.” Professing what? What but some (I know not what) new and unheard-of doctrine. For you may hear some of these same doctors say,

“Come, O silly wretches, who go by the name of Catholics, come and learn the true faith, which no one but ourselves is acquainted with, which same has lain hid these many ages, but has recently been revealed and made manifest. But learn it by stealth and in secret, for you will be delighted with it. Moreover, when you have learned it, teach it furtively, that the world may not hear, that the Church may not know. For there are but few to whom it is granted to receive the secret of so great a mystery.” Are not these the words of that harlot who, in the proverbs of Solomon, calls to the passengers who go right on their ways, “Whoso is simple let him turn in hither.” And as for them that are void of understanding, she exhorts them saying: “Drink stolen waters, for they are sweet, and eat bread in secret for it is pleasant.” What next? “But he knows not that the sons of earth perish in her house.” Proverbs 9:16-18 Who are those “sons of earth”? Let the apostle explain: “Those who have erred concerning the faith.”

Chapter 22.

A more particular Exposition of 1 Tim. vi. 20.

[53.] But it is worthwhile to expound the whole of that passage of the apostle more fully, “O Timothy, keep the deposit, avoiding profane novelties of words.”

“O!” The exclamation implies fore-knowledge as well as charity. For he mourned in anticipation over the errors which he foresaw. Who is the Timothy of today, but either generally the Universal Church, or in particular, the whole body of The Prelacy, whom it behooves either themselves to possess or to

communicate to others a complete knowledge of religion? What is “Keep the deposit”? “Keep it,” because of thieves, because of adversaries, lest, while men sleep, they sow tares over that good wheat which the Son of Man had sown in his field. “Keep the deposit.” What is “The deposit”? That which has been entrusted to you, not that which you have yourself devised: a matter not of wit, but of learning; not of private adoption, but of public tradition; a matter brought to you, not put forth by you, wherein you are bound to be not an author but a keeper, not a teacher but a disciple, not a leader but a follower. “Keep the deposit.” Preserve the talent of Catholic Faith inviolate, unadulterate. That which has been entrusted to you, let it continue in your possession, let it be handed on by you. You have received gold; give gold in turn. Do not substitute one thing for another. Do not for gold impudently substitute lead or brass. Give real gold, not counterfeit.

O Timothy! O Priest! O Expositor! O Doctor! If the divine gift has qualified you by wit, by skill, by learning, be a Bazaleel of the spiritual tabernacle, engrave the precious gems of divine doctrine, fit them in accurately, adorn them skillfully, add splendor, grace, beauty. Let that which formerly was believed, though imperfectly apprehended, as expounded by you be clearly understood. Let posterity welcome, understood through your exposition, what antiquity venerated without understanding. Yet teach still the same truths which you have learned, so that though you speak after a new fashion, what you speak may not be new.

Chapter 23.

On Development in Religious Knowledge.

[54.] But someone will say, perhaps, Shall there, then, be no progress in Christ's Church? Certainly; all possible progress. For what being is there, so envious of men, so full of hatred to God, who would seek to forbid it? Yet on condition that it be real progress, not alteration of the faith. For progress requires that the subject be enlarged in itself, alteration, that it be transformed into something else. The intelligence, then, the knowledge, the wisdom, as well of individuals as of all, as well of one man as of the whole Church, ought, in the course of ages and centuries, to increase and make much and vigorous progress; but yet only in its own kind; that is to say, in the same doctrine, in the same sense, and in the same meaning.

[55.] The growth of religion in the soul must be analogous to the growth of the body, which, though in process of years it is developed and attains its full size, yet remains still the same. There is a wide difference between the flower of youth and the maturity of age; yet they who were once young are still the same now that they have become old, insomuch that though the stature and outward form of the individual are changed, yet his nature is one and the same, his person is one and the same. An infant's limbs are small, a young man's large, yet the infant and the young man are the same. Men when full grown have the same number of joints that they had when children; and if there be any to which maturer age has given birth these were already present in embryo, so that nothing new is produced in them when old which was not already latent in

them when children. This, then, is undoubtedly the true and legitimate rule of progress, this the established and most beautiful order of growth, that mature age ever develops in the man those parts and forms which the wisdom of the Creator had already framed beforehand in the infant. Whereas, if the human form were changed into some shape belonging to another kind, or at any rate, if the number of its limbs were increased or diminished, the result would be that the whole body would become either a wreck or a monster, or, at the least, would be impaired and enfeebled.

[56.] In like manner, it behooves Christian doctrine to follow the same laws of progress, so as to be consolidated by years, enlarged by time, refined by age, and yet, withal, to continue uncorrupt and unadulterate, complete and perfect in all the measurement of its parts, and, so to speak, in all its proper members and senses, admitting no change, no waste of its distinctive property, no variation in its limits.

[57.] For example: Our forefathers in the old time sowed wheat in the Church's field. It would be most unmeet and iniquitous if we, their descendants, instead of the genuine truth of grain, should reap the counterfeit error of tares. This rather should be the result—there should be no discrepancy between the first and the last. From doctrine which was sown as wheat, we should reap, in the increase, doctrine of the same kind — wheat also; so that when in process of time any of the original seed is developed, and now flourishes under cultivation, no change may ensue in the character of the plant. There may supervene shape, form, variation in outward appearance, but the nature of each

kind must remain the same. God forbid that those rose-beds of Catholic interpretation should be converted into thorns and thistles. God forbid that in that spiritual paradise from plants of cinnamon and balsam, darnel and wolfsbane should of a sudden shoot forth.

Therefore, whatever has been sown by the fidelity of the Fathers in this husbandry of God's Church, the same ought to be cultivated and taken care of by the industry of their children, the same ought to flourish and ripen, the same ought to advance and go forward to perfection. For it is right that those ancient doctrines of heavenly philosophy should, as time goes on, be cared for, smoothed, polished; but not that they should be changed, not that they should be maimed, not that they should be mutilated. They may receive proof, illustration, definiteness; but they must retain withal their completeness, their integrity, their characteristic properties.

[58.] For if once this license of impious fraud be admitted, I dread to say in how great danger religion will be of being utterly destroyed and annihilated. For if any one part of Catholic truth be given up, another, and another, and another will thenceforward be given up as a matter of course, and the several individual portions having been rejected, what will follow in the end but the rejection of the whole? On the other hand, if what is new begins to be mingled with what is old, foreign with domestic, profane with sacred, the custom will of necessity creep on universally, till at last the Church will have nothing left untampered with, nothing unadulterated, nothing sound, nothing pure; but where formerly there was a sanctuary of chaste and undefiled truth,

thenceforward there will be a brothel of impious and base errors. May God's mercy avert this wickedness from the minds of his servants; be it rather the frenzy of the ungodly.

[59.] But the Church of Christ, the careful and watchful guardian of the doctrines deposited in her charge, never changes anything in them, never diminishes, never adds, does not cut off what is necessary, does not add what is superfluous, does not lose her own, does not appropriate what is another's, but while dealing faithfully and judiciously with ancient doctrine, keeps this one object carefully in view—if there be anything which antiquity has left shapeless and rudimentary, to fashion and polish it, if anything already reduced to shape and developed, to consolidate and strengthen it, if any already ratified and defined, to keep and guard it. Finally, what other object have Councils ever aimed at in their decrees, than to provide that what was before believed in simplicity should in future be believed intelligently, that what was before preached coldly should in future be preached earnestly, that what was before practised negligently should thenceforward be practised with double solicitude? This, I say, is what the Catholic Church, roused by the novelties of heretics, has accomplished by the decrees of her Councils, — this, and nothing else—she has thenceforward consigned to posterity in writing what she had received from those of olden times only by tradition, comprising a great amount of matter in a few words, and often, for the better understanding, designating an old article of the faith by the characteristic of a new name.

To Be Cont'd