

# THE TESTIMONY OF HISTORY FOR THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

If we pause to survey the historical occurrences from the dawn of Christianity, we are struck by an ever present fact. Perhaps many may not discern it until attention is fixed or drawn specifically to it, just as we may be oblivious of many of our most commonplace surroundings until they attract or are forced upon our notice; but that the Papacy has been the great visible fact that has endured since the birth of Christianity to the present day, is a proposition that it would be extreme rashness to deny. Its life is measured by the life of Christianity itself. It has seen nations rise and fall; it has beheld customs, ideas, and characters come and go; it has witnessed the ceaseless springing into being, changes, disintegrations, and endings in the world around it, and yet it is the one power that has endured without change, in spite of terrible trials and even, at times, violent opposition and will for destruction.

What is the Papacy? The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes it as “the name most commonly applied to the office and position of the Bishop of Rome, in respect both of the ecclesiastical and temporal authority claimed by him, i. e., as successor of St. Peter and Vicar of Christ over the Catholic Church, and as sovereign of the former Papal States.” The Catholic Encyclopaedia says: “This term is used in an ecclesiastical and in an historical signification. In the former of these uses it denotes the ecclesiastical system in which the Pope as successor of St. Peter and Vicar of Jesus Christ governs the Catholic Church, as its supreme head. In the latter, it signifies the papal influence viewed as a political force in history.”

Why should the Bishop of Rome have pre-eminence over all other ecclesiastics; and why should supremacy in spiritual affairs be accorded to him? The Scriptural authority for the claim of the Catholic Church is, of course, based upon Christ’s words to St. Peter found in the Gospels: “Blessed art thou Simon, Bar-Jona (son of John); because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but My Father Who is in heaven; and I say to thee: That thou art Peter (a rock); and upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be found also in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven.” Plain and clear these words certainly are, in spite of the controversy that rages about their meaning. Passing, however, the theological aspect, we find in the historical facts abundant evidence to support the claim of Peter’s supremacy.

The Church is supposed to have been established at Rome during the reign of the Emperor Claudius (A. D. 41-54) which would be perhaps four years after the death of Christ. Under the stress of controversy, it has been denied that St. Peter was ever in Rome, and, of course, the supremacy of the Roman bishops, has, likewise, been denied, it being claimed that their pre-eminence was due to accidental causes. Neither, however, will stand the scrutiny of history. As pointed out by Dr. Livius, the Roman Episcopate of St. Peter was never questioned, even by the heretics or schismatics, until the thirteenth century; indeed, until the Reformation, it was the universal persuasion of the Christian people that from his See the constitution and authority of the Church were derived, and it is a striking fact that none of the Eastern schismatics, who broke away from Rome in the early days, ever denied the Roman Episcopate of St. Peter, although it would prove one of the strongest justifications of their schism.

It is rather puerile to deny that St. Peter was ever in Rome, in view of the many fair-minded, scholarly, non-Catholic historians, like Cave, Grotius, Whiston, Lardner, Hales, Claudius, Mynster, Schaff, Neander, Stieger, Whitby, DeWette, Weisler, Credner, Pearson, Bleck, Meyer, Renan, Hilgengeld and Mangold, who admit it. Whiston, the translator of Josephus, says: “That St. Peter was at Rome is so clear in Christian antiquity, that it is a shame for any Protestant to confess that any Protestant ever denied it.” Dr. Lardner says: “It is the general uncontradicted, disinterested testimony of ancient writers in the several parts of the world—Greeks, Latins, Syrians.” Without further citations it may be said that it is now generally admitted that St. Peter visited Rome and suffered martyrdom there.

Some historians, however, while admitting that he taught and died in Rome, deny that he was ever its bishop, asserting that the Episcopate of St. Peter is a novelty dating from the early part of the third century, and supplanting the older tradition that Peter and Paul were co-founders of the Roman Church and Linus was its first bishop. It is said that St. Peter's labors were carried on in a spirit of rivalry, not to say antagonism, to those of St. Paul, being bestowed on a Judaizing Church, while those of his fellow Apostle were devoted to the Gentile community. The Roman episcopacy of St. Peter is, however, historically certain. Dr. Lardner and many other non-Catholic historians admit it. In A. D. 160, St. Hegessippus compiled a succession of Bishops of Rome to the time of Anicetus, which contained the name of St. Peter as the first. About 178, St. Irenaeus speaks of Hyginus as the ninth bishop of Rome, an enumeration that must have included St. Peter as the first, because if Linus was the first, Hyginus would be the eighth instead of the ninth.' In 190 we find Clement of Alexandria stating that Peter had proclaimed the Word, publicly at Rome. In the same year Tertullian states that the Church of the Romans recounts that Clement was ordained by Peter. A poem, "Adverse Marcionem," written about this time, speaks of Linus being the first "whom Peter bade to take his place and sit upon this chair in mightiest Rome where he himself had sat." In 214, Caius calls Pope Victor the thirteenth bishop of Rome from Peter. In 225, St. Hippolytus counts Peter as the first bishop of Rome. In 250, St. Cyprian relates that Cornelius (the twenty-first Roman bishop) was chosen bishop "and mounted the lofty summit of the Priesthood the place of Fabian (the twentieth Roman bishop), that is when the place of Peter and the rank of the Sacerdotal chair, was vacant." In 257, Fermilian, writing hostilely, and who would have denied it if he could, states that Stephen I. "contends that he holds the succession of Peter," and that he "who proclaims that he occupies by succession the Chair of Peter, is moved by no zeal against heretics."

So, by the middle of the third century, the Roman Episcopate of St. Peter was admitted by those best qualified to know, not only in Rome, but in the Churches of Africa and Asia Minor as well.

As to the supremacy of the Roman bishops being due to accidental causes, the claims of historians advocating this theory may be summarized in the views set forth by Ranke in his History of the Popes. He says: "The pretense that the Roman bishops, whose supremacy was acknowledged in the East and West, existed in the first centuries of the Church is utterly groundless; but it is unquestionable that they soon acquired a consideration that raised them above all other ecclesiastical authorities. Many things contributed to secure this for them." He then enumerates a number of so-called causes, such as Rome being "one of the most eminent Apostolic seats"; as "the ancient capital of that vast empire to which it had given its name," and as being favored by the Roman Emperor "who found it expedient to favor the rise of the great patriarchal authority." Perhaps the centralization of authority in the bishops of Rome was not, in the first two or three centuries, as obvious and well developed as it is today, but that it always existed, there can be no doubt. It is no answer to this claim of supremacy to say that at its birth it was not mature; that its growth and development contributed to its vigor and power, and solidly entrenched it as an institution. The same may be said of any social organism, only in a much greater degree, for in no social institution known to man, was the evidence of centralization of power, at its beginnings, so pronounced and unmistakable as was the case of the Roman Episcopate of St. Peter. It may be, as Cardinal Newman suggests, that "there was from the first a certain element at work, or in existence, divinely sanctioned, which, for certain reasons, did not at once show itself on the surface of ecclesiastical affairs, and of which the events of the fourth century are the development, and that the evidence of its existence and operation in the earlier centuries, be it much or little, is just such as ought to occur." It is a fact that the supremacy of the Roman episcopate was acknowledged by the Eastern Churches until after the middle of the ninth century, and by Western and Central Europe until the beginning of the sixteenth. If in the early centuries the evidence of its affirmation is not as overwhelming as in later centuries, the significant fact remains that it was never denied, and from its universal recognition at a very early date thereafter, the inference that it existed is, not only reasonable, but compelling. However, unmistakable evidence of the supremacy of the jurisdiction of the Roman bishops in the early centuries of the Church exists and is historically established.

In the four Gospels, Peter is always named first and Judas last in the lists of the Apostles, while the names of the others, for the most part, vary in their order. St. Matthew expressly calls him the first, i. e., the primate or chief one. In the Acts he is given pre-eminence, e.g., "Peter standing up with the eleven"; "They said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles";

“Peter and the Apostles answering, said, etc.”

Peter’s exercise of supreme ecclesiastical jurisdiction appears even before he came to Rome. He presided at the Assembly of the Apostles that chose a successor to Judas; he determined the course of the Council of Jerusalem. Concerning this Council, we read: “And when there had been much disputing, Peter, rising, said to them: ‘Men and brethren, you know that in former days God made choice among us that by my mouth, the Gentiles should hear the word of the Gospel and believe.’ “

The claim of ecclesiastical authority is asserted by St. Peter’s immediate successors. In less than thirty years after his death (about A. D. 92) we find St. Clement, the fourth bishop of Rome, writing to the far-off Corinthians, over the head of the Apostle St. John, who was still alive, on the subject of their sedition against their priests, claiming their obedience of “things written by us through the Holy Spirit,” and requiring them “who laid the first foundation of this schism” to “submit themselves unto their priests and be instructed unto repentance,” and warning them that “if any disobey the words spoken by God through us, let them know they will entangle themselves in transgression and no small danger.” In 107, St. Ignatius of the Eastern Church, and St. Peter’s successor to the See of Antioch, addresses the Roman Church as the one “which Presides in the place of the country of the Romans and Presiding in the covenant of Love.” In 178, St. Irenaeus, a person who stands in the closest relation with the age of the Apostles, writes that with the Church of Rome, on account of her more powerful Headship, it is necessary that every Church, i.e., the faithful everywhere dispersed—should agree “or be in communion.” In 190, St. Victor, the fourteenth Roman bishop, threatens to excommunicate the Asiatic Churches “from the common unity” unless they conform to the Roman usage in the observance of Easter. In 195, Tertullian, a hostile critic, mentions the claim of Pope Callistus to forgive sins as the successor of Peter. In 248, St. Cyprian, who teaches plainly that there is one Church founded on Peter for the origin and purpose of unity, calls the Roman Church, in which is the See or Chair of Peter, the “Chief or Ruling Church, whence the unity of the Priesthood has its source.” In 254, as we have seen, Fermilian, writing in a hostile spirit against Pope Stephen I., states that he claims the power to decide a controversy regarding rebaptism, as the successor of St. Peter.

In the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, the evidence increases and becomes more emphatic and distinct. To cite but a very few instances: In 342, the Council of Sardica speaks of the head of the Church as the “See of the Apostle Peter.” In 416, the Council of Carthage petitions Pope Innocent to seal their statutes .with the authority of the Holy See. In the same year the Council of Milevis petitions the Pope to apply his pastoral diligence .to the great dangers, because those who hold pernicious principles “will more easily yield to the authority of His Holiness, derived as it is from the authority of the Holy Scriptures.” In 533, the Code of Justinian recites that “we do not allow any point, however manifest and indisputable it be, which relates to the Churches, not being brought to the cognizance of your Holiness, since you are the head of all the holy Churches.” Popes Innocent in 416, Zosimus in 418, Boniface in 419, Leo the Great in 450, Gelasius in 492, and Gregory the Great in 604 plainly affirm the supremacy of the See of Rome, declaring as Innocent that it is the head and summit of the episcopate; as Zosimus that no one should dare dispute about a judgment given by it; as Boniface that never was it lawful to discuss any matter that was once decided by the Apostolic See; that this See stands in relation to the Churches spread over the world, as the Head to its own members; as Leo the Great, that the See of the Blessed Peter was made head of the Universe; the first of all Sees, the Head, that See which the Lord appointed to preside over the rest; as Gelasius, that the Roman See judged the whole world and that itself passed under the judgment of none; and as Gregory the Great, that the Church of Constantinople is subject to the Apostolic See, as the Apostolic See is the head of all the Churches.

What is offered to contradict or overthrow this over whelming mass of historical evidence? For the most part it is conjecture and speculation, or inference drawn from distorted facts. The arguments of a single historian are typical and illustrative. J. Bass Mullinger, in the ninth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, puts the case as strongly as it can be put for those holding the opposite view. He states that the question of whether or not St. Peter was designed for pre-eminence among the Apostles, resolves itself into one of New Testament criticism, but that from the time of Origen, who visited Rome early in the third century, there has always been a certain section in the Church who have distinctly

repudiated the affirmative assumption. "For," he continues, "'if,' says Origen, 'you say the Church was built upon Peter alone, what will you say of John, the son of thunder, and each of the other Apostles?'" that the labours of Peter and Paul were carried on in a spirit of rivalry, not to say antagonism, those of Peter being devoted to the Judaizing Church, which attaching itself to the Church of Jerusalem, became a depository of Jewish-Christian, rather than of Pauline tradition; and that from the fact that Hippolytus, the bishop of Portus, criticized the administrations of Popes Zephyrinus and Callistus, it is evident that the authority wielded by the Roman Bishops, even in their own diocese, was far from meeting with unquestioned obedience.

It is not meant to give the impression that there were no schisms or revolts against the Papal authority in the early ages of the Church, but these were comparatively few and insignificant and merely serve to emphasize the existence of the seat of power. However, the choice of Origen to illustrate this is particularly unfortunate, for Origen expressly refers to Peter as the great foundation of the Church and the most solid rock upon which Christ founded the Church; upon whom the Church of Christ is built; upon him, as on earth, the Church was founded, and states that there may be discovered "much difference and pre-eminence in the words spoken to Peter," that the other Apostles "do not transcend in power as Peter." The words in the ninth edition of the Britannica constitute an isolated expression which is taken apart from its text and, as very often happens in such a case, is misleading. When the whole passage is read, a very different meaning will be perceived. It will then be seen that Origen was writing, not to dispute Peter's claim, but to encourage emulation of his faith. He says: "But if we have also said, as Peter, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God,' not as being revealed to us by 'flesh and blood,' but because the light has shone upon our hearts from the 'Father in Heaven,' we become Peter, then may be said to us by the Word 'Thou art Peter' and the rest. For every disciple of Christ is 'a rock.' But if thou thinkest, that on Peter alone the whole Church is built, what wilt thou say concerning John, that son of thunder, or of each one of the Apostles?"

The remaining contentions are the alleged rivalry between SS. Peter and Paul and the criticism of St. Hippolytus of Popes Zephyrinus and Callistus, the former probably being based on St. Paul's rebuke to St. Peter in his Epistle to the Galatians, "I withstood him to the face." Rebukes or criticism cannot logically be brought forward as an argument against supremacy, unless it be established that it is always unlawful for an inferior to criticize a superior. Such is not the teaching of Christianity. There are daily instances of criticism of high officials and yet their authority is never questioned. Likewise, many holy men and women, as St. Bernard, St. Thomas of Canterbury, and St. Catharine of Siena, have rebuked Popes while fully acknowledging their authority. The contention of rivalry between SS. Peter and Paul contradicts the popular non-Catholic argument that the Episcopacy of St. Peter is a novelty dating from the early part of the third century and supplanting the older tradition that Peter and Paul were co-founders of the Roman Church. The truth is, that the denial of St. Peter's episcopal supremacy is a novelty dating from the sixteenth century as far as Western and Central Europe are concerned, as all impartial historians admit. In the labored efforts to explain away the great visible fact many arguments of the card-castle variety have been built, which tumble at the first touch of the inquisitive finger.

The evidence of the supremacy of the Roman See further increases when we come to a consideration of the first great schism—the schism of the Eastern Church—for we perceive, at the outset, a denial of an authority which had been affirmed. In the discussion of this dissension it is important to note the peculiarity of the Oriental mind which can only give expression to its beliefs in ritualistic ceremonies. The more politic of the Popes were content if unity of faith and belief existed, and did not insist upon unity of liturgy and customs. They were accordingly satisfied to impose as conditions of communion with Rome merely the acceptance of dogmas, permitting the Eastern Church to follow its own rituals and customs. There were indeed differences of customs and manners between the Churches of the East and West. On this account, as well as on account of the remoteness of the East from the center of Rome, the Popes, perhaps, did not exercise that direct authority they exercised over the nearby and contiguous Western States; but that the Eastern patriarchs and bishops were subject to their ecclesiastical jurisdiction, history affirms beyond all peradventure of a doubt.

The cause of this schism was not religious. On the feast of the Epiphany in 857, Bardas, the regent for the infant emperor Michael, was publicly refused Holy Communion by Ignatius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, because he was

living in incest with his daughter-in-law, Eudicia. For this Ignatius was deposed and banished, and the more pliant Photius intruded into his place. Photius was hurried through Holy Orders in six days and ordained Patriarch by the excommunicated Bishop Gregory Asbedas of Syracuse. Both the regent and Photius sent messages to Pope Nicholas I., which specifically acknowledged the Roman primacy and categorically invoked the Pope's jurisdiction to confirm what had happened. Meanwhile Ignatius from exile managed to send an urgent letter to the Pope setting forth his case. The Pope, having heard both sides, decided in favor of Ignatius and answered the letters of the regent and Photius by insisting that Ignatius be restored and that usurpation of the See cease. Instead of obeying the authority he had affirmed, and to which he had appealed, Photius resolved to deny it altogether. In 867 he purported to excommunicate the Pope because (1) the Latins fast on Saturdays, (2) do not begin Lent until Ash Wednesday instead of three days earlier, as in the East, (3) do not allow priests to be married, (4) do not allow priests to administer confirmation, and (5) have added the filioque to the creed. The same year, a revolution having occurred, Basil became emperor and Photius fell and was banished. The Pope then sent legates for a synod, which tried and deposed Photius and restored Ignatius. Photius, however, was afterwards recalled from banishment and managed to ingratiate himself with the emperor and the people, with the result that when Ignatius died a strong party, a very large part of which he built up during his exile, demanded Photius as the successor. Pope John VIII. agreed, absolved him from all censures and confirmed him as Patriarch. Photius then persuaded the Pope to send legates for another synod, which he dominated throughout and caused to revoke all the acts of the former synod and to repeat all his former accusations, dwelling specially on the filioque grievance. The Pope's legates, being heavily bribed, agreed to everything that the majority, dominated and controlled by Photius, desired. Photius sent them back to the Pope with the acts for his confirmation. Instead the Pope naturally excommunicated him. So the schism broke out again. Seven years later the emperor Basil died and was succeeded by Leo VI., who strongly disliked Photius and banished him. He attempted to make his younger brother Stephen the Patriarch, but the Pope refused to recognize him. It was only under Anthony II. that a synod was held which restored reunion for a century and a half, lasting until the time of Michael Caerularius (1043-1058). But Photius had left a strong anti-Roman party, eager to repudiate the Pope's authority, and ready for another schism. It was this party, to which Caerularius belonged, that triumphed at Constantinople under him, so that Photius is rightly considered the author of the schism which still lasts. This schism occurred in 1048. There is no explanation for it except that Caerularius belonged to the strong anti-Latin party that waited for a chance to renew the quarrel with Rome. The old accusations were again repeated: the fast on Saturday, the celibacy of the clergy and the use of un leavened bread for communion being especially complained of. Finally Caerularius declined to hold communication with legates sent by the Pope and was excommunicated. Although the Greek-Russian Church does not today recognize the supremacy of St. Peter and his successors, and does not admit that Christ left a Vicar on earth, nevertheless her present attitude is in striking contrast to her liturgy. Her liturgical books contain such expressions as: "Thou, O Peter, wert the first bishop of Rome." "Having chose thee first, O Peter, Christ crowned thee as Foundation of the Faith." "Let us celebrate the Supreme and First of the Apostles . . . Peter."

And as a further evidence of the former acknowledgment of the supremacy of the Roman episcopate by the Eastern Church, we find today a portion of it in communion with Rome. With different customs, manners and liturgy, as of old, it still, as of old, agrees with the Roman Church in dogma and acknowledges the Pope as the head of the Christian Church.

It is unnecessary to discuss the great Western schism of 1378 to 1417, except to mention it as a further striking evidence of Papal supremacy. This was not a schism in the ordinary sense of the word, for there was no withdrawal of obedience from one who was known to legitimately possess ecclesiastical supremacy. The dispute concerned persons only. All acknowledged the supremacy of the Pope, but there were three claimants to the office. Since there was a universal readiness to acknowledge the authority of the legitimate Pope if it could only be ascertained which claimant had the lawful succession, we have a strong affirmation of the existence of the Papal power. While it seems that Urban VI. and his successors were the legitimate Popes, all doubts as to the Papal succession was set at rest by the election of Martin V., the choice of the Council of Constance.

In the course of its growth and development, the Church attained a tremendous political importance. It was not only a

religious body, like the present day Church, but also a vast political organization, with its own laws, courts and officials, and in this respect it was a constant source of friction and irritation to temporal kings and governments, who many times complained of the Church's encroachment upon their powers. The Church possessed many valuable lands and estates which were generally exempt from taxation. Its courts tried its officers and in certain cases it claimed the right to try every one. It had its own independent income and was not only independent of any government, but often claimed the right to determine the political conduct of temporal princes. In the earlier ages, when feudalism was rampant, and the ideas of patriotism and duties owed to and by a national government, existed very imperfectly and obscurely, if at all, this great Ecclesiastical State was quite necessary. The peoples were then subject to various feudal lords, who, in turn, bound themselves in a sort of a loose confederation to their various kings, but strong central governments, in the sense we know them today, did not exist, and patriotism was almost an unknown word. The Church then served as the great power that protected the weak from the mighty; that compelled the powerful feudal lords to respect, in some degree, the rights of their subjects, and that constituted the one unifying force between all the Christian people, great and small. Gradually, however, the temporal powers, themselves, repressed feudalism, and as governments became more centralized and able to afford protection, the necessity of the Church's political agencies ceased and only served to antagonize the secular governments, which had become zealous of their political rights and prerogatives.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century all Western and Central Europe was Catholic, acknowledging the Pope of Rome as the spiritual head. We have traced this power from the dawn of Christianity and have watched it unfold as it came down the ages to us. The great Eastern revolt against it, at first acknowledged its existence and appealed to it to confirm its acts. The dissension of the Greek Church left Western unity unimpaired. A noted historian observes: "Why did this great institution exist? Why was it loved, venerated and well served? The purpose of the Church, according to its own teaching, was to follow the instructions of its Divine Master, Jesus Christ, in saving souls. Only the Church might interpret those instructions; the Church alone might apply the means of salvation. . . . The salvation of souls for eternity was thus the supreme business of the Church. This salvation of souls involved a theology and a sacramental system. The very center of Catholic theology was the sacramental system, for that was the means, and essentially the only means of saving souls. It was, therefore, for the purpose of the sacramental system that the Church and its hierarchy existed. The sacraments were believed to have been instituted by Christ Himself, and were defined as outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace. The number generally accepted was seven: baptism, confirmation, holy eucharist, penance, extreme unction, holy orders and matrimony. By means of the sacraments the Church accompanied the faithful throughout life.

The holy eucharist was the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the consecration of bread and wine by the priest or bishop, its miraculous transformation (transubstantiation) at his word into the very Body and Blood of Christ, and its reception by the faithful. It was around the eucharist that the elaborate ritual and ceremonies of the Mass developed, that fine vestments and candles and incense and flowers were used, and that magnificent cathedrals were erected. . . . Of the seven sacraments it will be noted that . . . two—confirmation and holy orders—required the ministry of a bishop; and all others, except baptism and possibly matrimony, required the ministry of at least a priest. The priest was, therefore, the absolutely indispensable agent of the Church in the administration of the sacramental system. It was the priesthood that absolved penitents from their sins, wrought the great daily miracle of transubstantiation and offered to God the holy sacrifice of the Mass."

This was the picture of the Church at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Then occurred that great change, commonly called the Reformation, that has marred and is still marring Christian unity, for the process of division is still continuing among the Protestant sects.

Now that the heat of the controversy has somewhat subsided and we can examine impartially into the cause, we discern, at the outset, that the religious element has been greatly overestimated. A well-known Protestant historian asserts: "The motives both remote and proximate which led to the Lutheran revolt, were largely secular, rather than religious. We may dismiss the religious charges incident to the Reformation with the remark that they were not the object sought, but the means for obtaining the object."

The theory advanced by Buckle, in his History of Civilization that the “knowledge of men gradually advanced and made them indignant at superstition they formerly admired,” will find no support in history. The “superstitions” he points out are the “adoration” of saints and the “worship” of the Virgin, neither of which ever existed in fact, although both the Blessed Virgin and the saints have always been venerated and honored.

The argument that the spread and growth of the Protestant Reformation shows that it was divinely inspired will, likewise, not stand the scrutiny of an historical examination. That it received a very large popular following there can be no doubt, but the miracle is, not that it spread so extensively, but that it stopped. The development of the political powers of the Church doubtless had its undesirable elements. It had the effect of attracting many unworthy persons to the priesthood. The sons of powerful lords entered the religious life because that afforded them a luxurious living. The abbacy of a rich benefice was a decided attraction and a lure not easily ignored. There were also many worldly Popes, whose object was to secure political, rather than spiritual power, so that the result was many and grave abuses among the religious, who were actuated by worldly and not godly considerations. These abuses existed for centuries and the cry for reformation was not confined to the dissenters. Many faithful sons of the Church had protested loudly against them. Sir Thomas More, who gave his life for the faith, denounced them vigorously. They believed however, that the desired reforms could be obtained within the Church, and that it was both improper and needless to openly revolt against it. This general discontent with prevailing conditions needed but opportunity for general expression. All these contributed to pave the way for the great revolt that has proved so unfortunate for Christianity.

The great mass of the people were the poor and ignorant, who were the victims of much oppression by unworthy ecclesiastics. Their confidence in them was naturally destroyed. The new religion relieved them of many disagreeable duties, such as confession and fasting. Add to this the more potent factor that its observance was compelled by the dissatisfied temporal rulers, especially in England, where the practice of Catholic beliefs was punished by such dire penalties as to effectually prevent them, and we can account for its growth.

That the great underlying cause was the friction between Church and State, all impartial historians now affirm. The chief sources have been summarized by a noted non-Catholic historian as follows. “(1) The growth of the practice of ‘reservations,’ and ‘provision,’ by which the Popes reserved the right to appoint their own nominees to vacant sees and other benefices in defiance of the claims of the Crown; (2) The great question as to how far the lands and other property of the clergy should be subject to taxation; (3) The inevitable jealousy between the secular and ecclesiastical courts, and the serious problem of the extent of the jurisdiction of the Roman Curia; (4) The most fundamental difficulty of all, the extent to which the Pope, as the universally acknowledged head of the Church, was justified in interfering in the internal affairs of particular states.”

The growing nationalism, with its attendant increased political ambition among laymen, probably contributed to accentuate the antagonism that was steadily growing between Church and State. National pride tolerated, less and less, anything that was foreign, and in this way the complaints of temporal rulers against the interferences of the Popes in political matters found an echo among the mass of the people.

The Protestant dissenters were divided into three main groups—Lutherans, Calvinists and Anglicans. The first to revolt was a group in Germany under Martin Luther. Luther was a Catholic priest who claimed to have developed from the writings of St. Paul a conviction that salvation could be procured by faith alone. The Church taught that good works, in addition to faith, were necessary for salvation. The separation of Luther from the Church was brought about by the disposal of indulgences by a certain papal agent, named Tetzl, in the great Archbishopric of Mainz. Some Protestant historians have been unfair enough to assert that an indulgence was the remission of all sins, past, present and future, but the Church taught no such doctrine. The word, derived from the Latin word *indulgeo*, meaning to be kind or tender, originally meant kindness or favor; in post classic Latin it came to mean the remission of a tax or debt. In the Roman law and Vulgate of the Old Testament, it was used to express the release from captivity or imprisonment. In theological language the word is sometimes used in the primary sense to signify the kindness or mercy of God. But, in the special sense in which it is here considered, an indulgence is the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin, the guilt of

which has been forgiven, and can only be obtained when the recipient is in the state of grace, that is, free from mortal sin. Indulgences would be granted for almsgiving and donations for religious and charitable purposes, as well as pious and laudable acts and devotions. Luther launched invective against Tetzel for disposing of indulgences for donations for religious purposes, claiming that they were being “sold” and were a corruption of the religious doctrines and a swindling of the poor people. If indulgences were sold, the offense of simony would have been committed, according to the Canon Law, which prohibited the sale of spiritual favors. In those days of ecclesiastical abuses, simony may have been committed, but Luther’s charge of Tetzel’s sale of indulgences has never been proved.

“Martin Luther,” says a noted non-Catholic historian, “was beyond doubt, the most important single figure in the Protestant revolt, but his influence was by no means so decisive and pervasive as has commonly been supposed and his attacks on the evils of the Church were no bolder or more comprehensive than those of Marisigilio or Wycliffe, or of several among his contemporaries who owed nothing to his example. Had the German princes not found it to their interest to enforce his principles, he might never have been more than the leader of an obscure mystic sect.”

Luther’s chief appeal was his appeal to the German nobility. Concerning it, it has been observed: “He urged the German princes to free their people from foreign control and shrewdly called their attention to the wealth and power of the Church which they might appropriate for themselves.” The German princes were not slow to espouse his cause. His teachings spread and found favor with the great mass of the peasant class. Nor is the reason hard to find. Justification by faith alone is a decidedly consoling teaching and would naturally find popularity among the multitudes whose confidence in their clergy had been destroyed and the acceptance of which would relieve them from the performance of many irksome religious duties. Their ignorant state could hardly enable them to differentiate between the divine and human notes of the Church. Their undeveloped intellect could not grasp that the Church could be pure in her teachings and dogmas, notwithstanding the corruption of many of her administrators. Then, too, there was the confirmation and sanction of such authority as their powerful lords, whose quarrel with the Church was interference with their secular jurisdiction. It also appealed to the worldly minded who longed to seize Church lands and revenue, and it probably received a sympathetic response in the patriotism, which was exalted by the growing national spirit that resented foreign interference in purely national and temporal affairs.

The peasants’ espousal of Luther’s cause proved to be too logical to suit him, for they broke out in revolt against both their oppressors, the secular as well as the ecclesiastical lords. When Luther urged the German princes to assail the ecclesiastics, seize their lands and confiscate their property, the peasants listened joyfully and rendered most willing assistance, but when they directed their violence against all feudalism, he realized the danger ahead of him. The peasants’ efforts against the ecclesiastics found sympathy and encouragement from Luther, but when the revolt became general all over central and southern Germany and was directed, not only against the Catholic clergy, but against all feudal lords, many of whom were Lutherans, a split in the religion between nobles and peasants was quickly discerned. Luther sided with the nobles, for he had most to expect from them. The revolt was crushed with terrible cruelty. Generally speaking the nobles became more powerful, while the lot of the peasants became infinitely worse. The influence of Luther, who they believed had betrayed them, rapidly declined among the peasantry, and wavering Catholic princes, who had before their eyes the object of Luther’s appeal to revolution, now cast their lot decisively with the ancient Church. The Peasants’ revolt registered a distinct check to the further spread of Lutherism.

Calvinism, the forerunner of Presbyterianism, Congregationalism and of the Reformed Churches, was the second general type of Protestant dissension. Its way was prepared by Huldreich Zwingli in Switzerland, who, like Luther, was a Catholic priest. His opposition to the Roman Church was at first based upon political grounds. He preached against the practice of hiring out Swiss troops to foreign rulers and abused the Church for its share in this traffic of soldiers. He then denounced the abuses in the ecclesiastical system and finally denied the supremacy of the Pope and proclaimed the Scriptures as the sole guide of faith and morals. He preached against fasting, the veneration of saints and the celibacy of the clergy, and himself took a wife. In 1523, the Pope appealed to Zurich to abandon Zwingli. The answer was the Canton’s declaration of independence from the Catholic Church. The revolt spread rapidly in Switzerland, except in the

five forest Cantons, in the very heart of the country, where Catholicism was firmly entrenched. Zwingli attempted to convert the five forest Cantons to his new religion by force of arms. Civil war ensued, but the Catholic mountaineers gained a great victory and Zwingli himself was killed. A truce was effected by which each Canton could determine for itself its own religion. As a result Switzerland has remained to this day part Catholic and part Protestant.

Zwingli's death left Protestantism without a leader, but at this time the more celebrated Calvin took up his residence at Geneva. He was by far the most cultured and scholarly of the reform leaders. In 1529 he is said to have experienced a great "conversion." The French king, Francis I., announced a determination to put an end to dissension among his subjects and Calvin sought a hiding place in the Swiss town, of Basel. There he published his Institutes of the Christian Religion, which contained the germ of all that subsequently developed as Calvinism. In 1536, he went to Geneva where he was appointed chief pastor and preacher of the City, which position he held, except for a short period, until his death. This position enabled him, as it proved, not only to direct the affairs of the town, but to give form and substance to an important branch of Protestant Christianity. His fundamental doctrine was "predestination" or salvation by choice or election only. Following Zwingli, he taught that the Lord's Supper is not a miracle, but merely a symbol and a memorial. His doctrines spread to Scotland and England under the name of "Presbyterianism," being brought to the former by John Knox and greatly influenced the theology of the Anglican Church under Edward VI.

The third and last form of Protestantism is known as Anglicanism and had its beginning under Henry VIII., of England. The cause of England's break with the Church was the matrimonial difficulties of the English monarch. Married to the widow of his deceased brother, the Princess Catherine of Aragon, he, after eighteen years and when only one daughter, the Princess Mary, out of six children survived, pretended to believe that he was living in "mortal sin" and "downright incest" with her. At this time he was smitten by the beautiful Anne Boleyn, a maid in waiting at the court, but she repelled Henry's amorous advances, and refused cohabitation with him, except as his queen. Alleging that a marriage to a brother's widow was forbidden by Canon Law, Henry sought an annulment of his marriage to the Princess Catherine by Pope Clement VII. He had secured a dispensation for the marriage from Pope Julius II., but Henry thought that could be revoked by Clement. Simple as it appeared to Henry, the Pope was confronted with two difficulties: It would be a dangerous precedent to reverse a decision of his predecessor, and the emperor Charles V., a nephew of Catherine, espoused the cause of his aunt. Clement truthfully complained that he was between the anvil and the hammer. He sent legates to try the case and kept putting off a decision. The long delay irritated Henry. He thought to coerce the Pope by a few salutary enactments. He terrified the clergy into paying a fine of over a half a million dollars for violating an obsolete statute forbidding the reception of papal legates, without royal sanction and forced them to recognize him as the supreme head of the Church, "as far as that is permitted by the law of Christ." His subsequent parliament then empowered him to stop the payment of annates and appoint bishops without recourse to the Pope. He appointed one of his own creatures, Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, and without waiting longer for a papal decision, he caused him to declare his marriage with Catherine null and void, and his union with Anne Boleyn, to whom in the meantime he had been secretly married, canonical and legal. Pope Clement then handed down his long delayed decision in favor of Queen Catherine and excommunicated Henry for adultery. Henry then caused his parliament to pass a series of laws declaring the king "the only supreme head on earth of the Church of England," and cutting off all communication with the Pope and inflicting the penalty of treason upon anyone who should deny the king's ecclesiastical supremacy. Thus for the first time was denied what had been affirmed for centuries, viz.: the supremacy of the Pope.

Under Edward VI., the Church became Protestant, being largely influenced by Calvinism. In the reign of Mary, Catholicism was restored, but under Elizabeth it again reverted to Protestantism.

That no fundamental doctrinal changes were made under Henry VIII., is attested by a recent decision in a law case decided by the House of Lords, where the various statutes are referred to and cited. "His disputes with the Pope," says this decision, "were mainly on questions of jurisdiction." The Mass was in all essentials the same, he himself directing in his will that Masses be said for the repose of his soul. When Edward VI., came to the throne, the Mass was still recognized, his first parliament opening, in accordance with the ancient practice, with the Mass of the Holy Ghost. In 1548, sweeping

changes were made in the form of the Mass and a Book of Common Prayer was adopted. There were many who refused to obey this book, and, accordingly, a further provision to compel its adoption was made. A statute was enacted which recited the establishment of the book and referred to the “old and superstitious service” and required, among other things, all obnoxious images and books to be destroyed. By the Act of Uniformity in the reign of Elizabeth (1559), the second Book of Common Prayer of Edward VI. was altered and again made obligatory, and the use of any other in its place was prohibited. “The effect was to render the saying of Mass illegal, and there are many instances of people being arrested for attending Mass, and even the services at Ambassadors’ chapels were interfered with, in order to prevent the attendance there of English subjects.” It was not until the twenty-third year of Elizabeth’s however, that the saying of Mass was expressly declared to be a criminal offense. “To be a ‘Papist,’ or ‘hear Mass’ which were construed as the same thing, was punishable by death as high treason.”

What has the Reformation effected? We have heard it said that it has brought about liberty of conscience, enlightenment of understanding and broadness of vision; that it has freed religion from superstition and corruption and has made the Bible the final authority for the Word of God. But as Cardinal Newman has well said: “When I hear speakers declaim about ‘Freedom of Conscience,’ the ‘Gospel,’ ‘large and enlightened views,’ I am far from denying that some amongst them know what they are talking about, but it would be satisfactory in a particular case to be sure of the fact, for it seems to us that these household words may stand in a man’s mind for some thing or other very glorious indeed, but very misty, pretty much like the idea of civilization which floats before the mental vision of a Turk—that is if, when he interrupts his smoking, he condescends to reflect whether it has any meaning at all.”

Doubtless the Church did not then and will not now, permit one to accept her as the infallible teacher of Christ and nevertheless determine for himself what His teachings mean, for it will not permit one to deny what he affirms. This is license—not liberty of conscience. In spite of the confusion attendant on loose declamation, the facts may be easily separated and a correct conclusion reached. A noted non-Catholic historian speaks of its place in the history of progress and enlightenment in the following terms:

“In conclusion a word may be said of the place of the Reformation in the history of progress and enlightenment. A ‘philosopher,’” as Gibbon long ago pointed out, “who asks from what article of faith above and against reason the Reformers enfranchised their followers, will be surprised at their timidity rather than scandalized by their reply. They remained severely orthodox in the doctrines of the Fathers—the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the plenary inspiration of the Bible, and they condemned those who rejected their teachings to hell whose fires they were not tempted to extenuate. Although they surrendered transubstantiation, the loss of one mystery was amply compensated by the stupendous doctrines of original sin, redemption, faith, grace, and predestination. They ceased to appeal to the Virgin and the saints and to venerate images and relics, procure indulgences and go upon pilgrimages; they deprecated the monastic life and no longer nourished faith by daily repetitions of miracles, but in the witch persecutions their demonology cost the lives of thousands of innocent women. They broke the chain of authority without, however, recognizing the propriety of toleration. In any attempt to determine the relative importance of Protestant and Catholic countries in promoting modern progress, it must not be forgotten that religion is naturally conservative and that its avowed business has never been to forward scientific research or political reform. Luther and his contemporaries had not in any degree the modern idea of progress, which first becomes conspicuous with Bacon and Descartes, but believed, on the contrary, that the strangling of reason was the most precious offering to God. ‘Freethinker’ and ‘rationalist’ have been terms of opprobrium whether used by Protestant or Catholic. The pursuit of salvation does not dominate by any means the whole life or ambition of even ardent believers; statesmen, philosophers, men of letters, scientific investigators and inventors have commonly gone their way regardless of the particular form of Christianity which prevailed in the land in which they lived. The Reformation was fundamentally then, but one phase, if the most conspicuous, in the general decline of the majestic medieval State, for this decline has gone on in France, Austria, Spain and Italy, countries in which the Protestant revolt against the ancient Church, ended in failure.”

Its effect on the doctrines, organization and practices in the Catholic Church, is stated by the same authority to be

“difficult to estimate, still more to substantiate. It is clear that the doctrinal conclusions of the Council of Trent were largely determined by the necessity of condemning Protestant tenets, and the result of the Council was to give the Roman Catholic Faith a more precise form than it would have had. It is much less certain that the disciplinary reforms, which the Council, following the examples of its predecessors, re-enacted, owed anything to Protestantism, unless, indeed the Council would have shown itself less intolerant in respect to such innovations as the use of the vernacular in the services, had not this smacked of evangelicalism. In the matter of the Pope’s supremacy, the Council followed the Canon Law and Thomas Aquinas, not the decrees of the Council of Constance. It prepared the way for the dogmatic formulation of the plenitude of papal power three centuries later by the Council of the Vatican. The Protestants have sometimes taken credit to themselves for the indubitable reforms in the Roman Catholic Church, which by the end of the sixteenth century had done away with many of the crying abuses which the councils and diets had been so long protesting. But this conservative reformation had begun before Luther’s preaching and might conceivably have followed the same course had his doctrines never found popular favor or been ratified by the princes.”

As to its effect on the people it is stated: “For the peasantry—still the bulk of European population—the religious and ecclesiastical changes seem to have been peculiarly unfortunate. What they gained through a diminution of ecclesiastical dues and taxes was more than lost through the growth of royal despotism and the exactions of hard-hearted lay proprietors. The peasants had changed the names of their oppressors and found themselves in a worse position than before. There is little doubt that at least as far as the German and Scandinavian countries are concerned, the lot of the peasants was less favorable immediately after, than immediately before, the rise of Protestantism.”

In the last analysis, then, the effect of the Reformation was to divide Christianity into hundreds of sects. This division occurred solely among the dissenters and is the natural outgrowth of the Protestant doctrine of “private judgment,” or the liberty of the individual to interpret the Bible for himself. The disintegration is still continuing and is reaching such lamentable results as the denial of the Divinity of Christ, His Virgin birth, and the assignment to the theological scrap heap of the doctrine of the fall of man as a fable “unworthy” of the “intellect” of this “enlightened” age. It is evident that there can be no unity under such a doctrine for the simple reason that there can be no criterion of religious truth. If the dissenting Churches did unite, what would be their united belief? Would they compromise their individual beliefs? ‘What compromise can there be between the affirmance and denial of Christ’s divinity? But if they did what would be the result? If they surrendered their right of private judgment their doctrines would be the mere compromise of individual human opinion and not the revelation of God. If they retained their right of private judgment, what guarantee would there be for the permanency of their union? Dissension could and would occur anew.

To summarize:

**FIRST:** The papal supremacy was recognized and never denied by Western and Central Europe until the beginning of the sixteenth century, nor by the Eastern and Asiatic Churches until the middle of the ninth.

**SECOND:** The break of the Eastern Churches with Catholic unity was not due to religious causes. It was only after an appeal to the Pope, as having supreme ecclesiastical jurisdiction, to confirm the uncanonical appointment of the Patriarch of Constantinople, resulted in failure, that the emperor and Patriarch denied the existence of the power they had appealed to. We have here a notorious case of denying what had been affirmed.

**THIRD:** The breach of Western and Central Europe likewise involved no doctrinal belief; at least the doctrinal differences were not the end sought, but merely the means used for procuring the end. The cause of the break was the majestic ecclesiastical State or the political part of the Church. Its encroachment on the rights of secular rulers, the attractions it offered worldly and unscrupulous persons to embrace the priesthood and the consequent shameful ecclesiastical abuses paved the way for the revolt. In England, the immediate and proximate cause was the lust of the English monarch and at first concerned mainly the question of jurisdiction. There the jurisdiction of the Pope was denied only after an unsuccessful appeal to him to annul as uncanonical the marriage of the English king and queen had been made, thus denying what had been invoked. The great underlying cause, however, was the friction between Church and State. The observance of the new religions were compelled by the secular rulers and the practice of the old religion

forbidden, especially in England, where Catholic worship was punished by such dire penalties as to effectually prevent it.

The demand for reform was not confined to the dissenters, as many faithful sons of the Church were loud in their denunciation of the abuses of the clergy, but believed the desired reforms could be secured from within, instead of an open revolt. The reforms sought have since been had, and that the Reformation was not necessary to bring about the separation between Church and State, is shown by the disintegration of the ecclesiastical State in countries where the Protestant revolt ended in dismal failure.

FOURTH: The Protestant sects have divided and subdivided and are in the process of disintegration. The doctrine that each individual is at liberty to determine the meaning of the Bible for himself has left no criterion of religious truth. The net result is that Christianity is now divided into hundreds of sects and is all but unrecognizable.

FIFTH: Spiritually the Catholic Church has remained as intact and as virile as ever and is the one human institution that has survived the ages since the dawn of Christianity. The Papacy is the great visible fact of the world today.

This is the testimony of history for the Roman Catholic Church.

Nihil Obstat:  
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