

LESSON ELEVENTH.

ON THE CHURCH.

BEFORE speaking of the Church I wish to give you a short account of the true religion before the coming of Our Lord. When Adam was created in a state of grace, God communicated with him freely ; he knew God even better than we do now. But after their sin our first parents fell from the friendship of God. Cain—one of Adam's sons—murdered his brother Abel, and for this he and his posterity were cursed by God, and all his descendants became very wicked (Gen. iv. 11). The other children of Adam remained faithful to God as long as they kept away from the children of Cain ; but just as soon as they associated and intermarried with them, they also became wicked. This should teach us to avoid evil company, for there is always more likelihood that the good will become bad than that the bad will be converted by the good. You know the old saying, that if you take a basket of good apples and place a bad one among them, in a short time they will all be spoiled.

After the deluge Noe and his family settled once more upon the land, and for a time their descendants remained faithful to God ; but later they became wicked and undertook to build a great tower (Gen. xi.), which they thought would reach up to heaven. They believed, perhaps, that if ever there should be another deluge upon the earth, they could take refuge in the tower. But God was displeased with their conduct and prevented them from completing the tower by confusing their tongues or language so that they could not understand one another. Then those who spoke the same

language went to live in the same part of the country, and thus the human race was scattered over the earth, and the different nations had different languages.

After a time they were all losing the knowledge of the true God and beginning to worship idols. God did not wish that the whole human race should forget Him, so He selected Abraham to be the father and head of one chosen people who should always worship the true God. He sent Abraham from his own country into another, and promised him great things, and renewed to him the promises of the Redeemer first made to Adam and Eve. After the death of Abraham, God raised up, from time to time, prophets to tell the people His holy will, to warn them of their sins and the punishment they would receive, and to remind them of the promised Messias. Prophets are men that God inspires to tell the future. They tell what will happen often hundreds of years after their own death. They do not guess at these things, but tell them with certainty. At times, statesmen can foresee that there will be a war in a country at a certain time; but they are not prophets, because they only guess at such things, or know them by natural signs; and very often things thus foretold do not occur. True prophecy is the foretelling of something which could not be known by any means but inspiration from God.

Neither are persons who call themselves fortune-tellers prophets, but only sinful people, who for money tell lies or guess at the future. It is a great sin to go to them or listen to them, as we shall see later in another question.

At the time promised, God sent His Son—Our Lord—to redeem the world and save all men. He came to save all men, and yet He remained upon earth only thirty-three years. We can easily understand that by His death He could save all those who lived before He did; but how were they to be saved who should live after Him, down to the end of the world? How was His grace to be given to them? How were they to know of Him, or of what He taught? All this was to be accomplished by His Church.

114 Q. Which are the means instituted by Our Lord to enable men at all times to share in the fruits of the Redemption?

A. The means instituted by Our Lord to enable men at all times to share in the fruits of the Redemption are the Church and the sacraments.

Our Lord instituted the Church to carry on the work He Himself was doing upon the earth—teaching the ignorant, visiting the sick, helping the poor, forgiving sins, etc. He commanded all men to hear the Church teaching, just as they would hear Himself. But suppose some persons should establish a false Church and claim that it was the true Church of Our Lord, how could people know the true Church from false churches? When a man invents anything to be sold, what does he do that people may know the true article—say a pen? Why, he puts his trade-mark upon it. Now the trade-mark is a certain sign which shows that the article bearing it is the genuine article; and if others use the trade-mark on imitation articles, they are liable to be punished by law. Now Our Lord did the same. He gave His Church four marks or characteristics to distinguish it from all false churches. He said, “My Church will be one; it will be holy; it will be catholic; it will be apostolic; and if any church has not these four marks, you may be sure it is not My Church.” Some false church may seem to have one or two, but never all the marks; so when you find even one of the marks wanting, you will know it is not the true Church established by Christ. Therefore, all the religions that claim to be the true religion cannot be so. If one man says a thing is white and another says it is black, or if one says a thing is true and another says it is false, they cannot both be right. Only one can be right, and if we wish to know the truth we have to find out which one it is. So when one religion says a thing is true and another religion says the same thing is false, one of them must be wrong, and it is our duty to find out the one that is right. Therefore, of all the religions claiming to be the true religion of Our Lord, only one can be telling the

truth, and that one is the religion or Church that can show the four given marks. The Roman Catholic Church is the only one that can show these marks, and is, therefore, the only true Church, as we shall see in the next lesson.

“Fruits of His redemption”—that is, to receive the grace merited by Our Lord when He redeemed us by His death.

115 Q. What is the Church?

A. The Church is the congregation of all those who profess the faith of Christ, partake of the same sacraments, and are governed by their lawful pastors under one visible head.

“Congregation.” Not the building, therefore; because if Mass was offered up in an open field, with the people kneeling about, it would still be the church of that place. The buildings that we use for churches might have been used for anything else—a public hall, theatre, or school, for example; but when these buildings we call churches are blessed or consecrated, they become holy. They are holy also because the gospel is preached in them, the sacraments are administered in them, and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is offered in them. But they are holy especially because Our Lord dwells in them in the tabernacle, where He lives and sees and hears just as truly as He did when He was Man upon earth.

In the early ages the Christians had no churches—they met secretly in private houses. Later, when the cruel pagan emperors began to persecute and put to death the Christians, they made large tunnels under ground and in these places they heard Mass and received the sacraments. These underground churches were called the catacombs, and some of them may still be seen at Rome. In these catacombs, too, the Christians buried their dead, especially the bodies of the holy martyrs. On their tombs—generally of stone—Mass was celebrated.

In every altar the table, or flat part on which the priest celebrates Mass, should be of stone; but if the altar is made of wood, then at least the part just in front of the tabernacle

must be of stone and large enough to hold say two chalices—that is, about ten or twelve inches square. In this stone are placed some relics of the holy martyrs. A piece is cut out of the stone and the relic placed in the opening. Then the bishop puts the little piece of stone back into its place over the relic, seals the opening, blesses the stone, and gives it to the church. This is called the altar-stone. You cannot see it because it is covered with the altar-cloth; but unless it is in the altar the priest cannot say Mass. This stone reminds us of the stone tombs of the saints upon which Mass was celebrated.

The Church—that is, the Christians—was persecuted for about three hundred years after the death of Our Lord. These persecutions took place at ten different times and under different Roman emperors. Orders were given to put to death all the Christians wherever they could be found. Some were cast into prison, some exiled, some taken to the Roman Coliseum—an immense building constructed for public amusements—where they were put to death in the most terrible manner in the presence of the emperor and people assembled to witness these fearful scenes. Some were stripped of their clothing and left standing alone while savage beasts, wild with hunger, were let loose upon them. Sometimes by a miracle of God the animals would not harm them, and then the Christians were either put to death by the sword, mangled by some terrible machine, or burned. In these dreadful sufferings the Christians remained faithful and firm, though they could have saved their lives by denying Our Lord or offering sacrifice to idols. The few who through fear did deny their faith are now forgotten and unknown; while those who remained steadfast are honored as saints in heaven and upon earth; the Church sings their praises and tells every year of their holy lives and triumph over all their enemies.

Even some pagans who came to see the Christians put to death were so touched by their patience, fortitude, courage,

and constancy, that they also declared themselves anxious to become Christians, and were put to death, thus becoming martyrs baptized in their own blood. How many lessons we may learn from all this: (1) How very respectful we should be in the church, which is holy for all the reasons I have given. (2) What a shame it is for us not to hear Mass when we can do so easily. Our churches are never very far from us, and generally well lighted, ventilated, furnished with seats and every convenience, and in these respects unlike the dark, damp, underground churches of the early Christians. Moreover, we may attend our churches freely and without the least danger to our lives; while the Christians of the early ages were constantly in dread and danger of being seized and put to death. Even at the present day, in many countries where holy missionaries are trying to teach the true religion, their converts sometimes have to go great distances to hear Mass, and even then it is not celebrated in comfortable churches, but probably on the slope of a rugged mountain or in some lonely valley or wood where they may not be seen, for they fear if they are captured—as often happens—both they and their priest will be put to death. You can read in the account of foreign missions that almost every year some priests and many people are martyred for their faith. Is it not disgraceful, then, to see some Catholics giving up their holy faith and the practice of their religion so easily—sometimes for a little money, property, or gain; or even for a bad habit, or for irreligious companions and friends? What answer will they make on the day of judgment when they stand side by side with those who died for the faith?

“**All those who profess the faith,**” etc. The pope, bishops, priests, and people all taken together are the Church, and each congregation or parish is only a part of the Church.

“**Partake**”—that is, receive. “**Lawful pastors**”—that is, each priest in his own parish, each bishop in his own diocese, and the pope throughout the world. “**Visible head**”—that is, one who can be seen, for invisible means, cannot be seen.

116 Q. Who is the invisible head of the Church?

A. Jesus Christ is the invisible head of the Church.

“Invisible head.” If, for example, a merchant of one country wishes to establish a branch of his business in another, he remains in the new country long enough to establish the branch business, and then appointing some one to take his place, returns to his own country. He is still the head of the new establishment, but its invisible head for the people of that country, while its visible head is the agent or representative he has placed in charge to carry on the business in his name and interest. When Our Lord wished to establish His Church He came from heaven; and when about to return to heaven appointed St. Peter to take His place upon earth and rule the Church as directed. You see, therefore, that Our Lord, though not on earth, is still the real head and owner of the Church, and whatever His agent or vicar—that is, our Holy Father, the pope—does in the Church, he does it with the authority of Our Lord Himself.

117 Q. Who is the visible head of the Church?

A. Our Holy Father the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, is the vicar of Christ on earth and the visible head of the Church.

The “Bishop of Rome” is always pope. If the Bishop of New York, or of Baltimore, or of Boston, became pope, he would become the Bishop of Rome and cease to be the Bishop of New York, Baltimore, or Boston, because St. Peter, the first pope, was Bishop of Rome; and therefore only the bishops of Rome are his lawful successors—the true popes—the true visible heads of the Church. The bishops of the other dioceses of the world are the lawful successors of the other apostles who taught and established churches throughout the world. The bishops of the world are subject to the Pope, just as the other apostles were subject to St. Peter, who was appointed their chief by Our Lord Himself.

“Vicar”—that is, one who holds another’s place and acts in his name.

*** 118 Q.** Why is the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, the visible head of the Church?

A. The Pope, the Bishop of Rome, is the visible head of the Church because he is the successor of St. Peter, whom Christ made the chief of the apostles and the visible head of the Church.

"Of Rome." That is why we are called Roman Catholics; to show that we are united to the real successor of St. Peter, and are therefore members of the true apostolic Church.

*** 119 Q.** Who are the successors of the other apostles?

A. The successors of the other apostles are the bishops of the holy Catholic Church.

We know the apostles were bishops, because they could make laws for the Church, consecrate other bishops, ordain priests, and give confirmation,—powers that belong only to bishops, and are still exercised by them.

*** 120 Q.** Why did Christ found the Church?

A. Christ founded the Church to teach, govern, sanctify, and save all men.

"Teach" religion. **"Govern"** in things that regard salvation. **"Sanctify,"** make good. **"Save"** all who wish to be saved.

*** 121 Q.** Are all bound to belong to the Church?

A. All are bound to belong to the Church, and he who knows the Church to be the true Church and remains out of it, cannot be saved.

Any one who knows the Catholic religion to be the true religion and will not embrace it cannot enter into heaven. If one not a Catholic doubts whether the church to which he belongs is the true Church, he must settle his doubt, seek the true Church, and enter it; for if he continues to live in doubt, he becomes like the one who knows the true Church and is deterred by worldly considerations from entering it.

In like manner one who, doubting, fears to examine **the** religion he professes lest he should discover its falsity and be convinced of the truth of the Catholic faith, cannot be saved.

Suppose, however, that there is a non-Catholic who firmly believes that the church to which he belongs is the true Church, and who has never—even in the past—had the slightest doubt of that fact,—what will become of him?

If he was validly baptized and never committed a mortal sin, he will be saved; because, believing himself a member of the true Church, he was doing all he could to serve God according to his knowledge and the dictates of his conscience. But if ever he committed a mortal sin, his salvation would be very much more difficult. A mortal sin once committed remains on the soul till it is forgiven. Now, how could his mortal sin be forgiven? Not in the Sacrament of Penance, for the Protestant does not go to confession; and if he does, his minister—not being a true priest—has no power to forgive sins. Does he know that without confession it requires an act of truly perfect contrition to blot out sin, and can he easily make such an act? What we call contrition is generally only imperfect contrition—that is, sorrow for our sins because we fear their punishment in hell or dread the loss of heaven. If a Catholic, with all the graces he has received in the sacraments, finds it difficult to make an act of perfect contrition—that is, sorrow for sin out of pure love for God, Who is so good in Himself, how much more difficulty will the Protestant, who does not receive such graces, experience in making it? It is to be feared either he would not know of this necessary means of regaining God's friendship, or he would be unable to elicit the necessary act of perfect contrition, and thus the mortal sin would remain upon his soul and he would die an enemy of God.

If, then, we found a Protestant who never committed a mortal sin after baptism, and who never had the slightest doubt about the truth of his religion, that person would be saved; because, being baptized, he is a member of the Church, and being free from mortal sin he is a friend of God and

could not in justice be condemned to hell. Such a person belongs to what we call the soul of the Church. He would belong to the body of the Church—that is, he would attend Mass and receive the sacraments—if he knew the Catholic Church to be the only true Church.

I am giving you an example, however, that is rarely found, except in the case of infants or very small children baptized in Protestant sects. All infants rightly baptized by any one are really children of the Church, no matter what religion their parents may profess. Indeed, all persons who are baptized are children of the Church; but those among them who deny its teaching, reject its sacraments, and refuse to submit to its lawful pastors, are rebellious children known as heretics.

I said I gave you an example that can scarcely be found, namely, of a person not a Catholic, who really never doubted the truth of his religion, and who, moreover, never committed during his whole life a single mortal sin. There are so few such persons that we can practically say for all those who are not members of the body of the Catholic Church, believing its doctrines, receiving its sacraments, and being governed by its visible head, our Holy Father, the Pope, salvation is an extremely difficult matter.

I do not speak here of pagans who have never heard of Our Lord or His holy religion, but of those outside the Church who claim to be good Christians without being members of the Catholic Church.