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THE
FIRST FIVE CENTURIES
OF
THE CHURCH;
OR,
THE EARLY FATHERS
NO SAFE GUIDES.

* BY
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“Will you be ready with all faithful diligence to banish and drive away all
erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God’s word,” &c.?

“I will, the Lord being my helper.”

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FIRST FIVE

CENTURIES OF THE CHURCH.

EACH generation of men ought to be wiser than those which have preceded it. The world is growing older : and as a man at the age of sixty, provided he has had common sense, and common observation, is wiser than he was at sixteen ; so the world is wiser now than it was sixteen centuries ago. Supposing the faculties of men to remain the same, each generation has all the knowledge of those which went before it, and all its own besides. Each man therefore starts in the race of knowledge, at a point much nearer to the goal than the men of a past generation : and with the same diligence and speed, can also reach a further point than they did. The means too of acquiring knowledge increase with civilization. Larger numbers are educated, books are more diffused, discussions

multiply, errors are exploded, doctrines are established by common consent, and the boundaries of recognized truth are continually enlarged. Thus the astronomer and political economist of our day have more knowledge on these subjects than earlier philosophers had. Sir John Herschel knows more than Sir Isaac Newton, and Mr. M'Culloch, can correct the errors of Adam Smith. In like manner the speeches of Mr. Canning and Lord Brougham, have more of political wisdom than was possessed by Sir Francis Walsingham, Lord Bacon, or either of the Cecils ; and the histories of Mill and Hallam, are more philosophical than the chronicles of Froissart, or the narratives of Herodotus. In all departments of knowledge, the world is affording proofs of a more masculine understanding, and more extended information, than belonged to earlier, less peaceful, and less cultivated ages. This seems to be equally true of Christians. The church and the world are alike advancing to their maturity : and as from age to age the world understands better the laws of nature and the principles of civil government ; so does the church become better acquainted with the doctrines and the precepts of the Word of God. The knowledge of God which our first parents possessed, was soon lost among their barbarized posterity, till the whole earth became utterly corrupt : the knowledge of the divine will possessed by Moses and Joshua, with their contemporaries, was speedily exchanged

by their successors for ignorance and idolatry : and in like manner the more perfect knowledge of the divine will conveyed to the church of Christ, by himself and by his apostles, was soon corrupted and obscured. The antediluvians soon forgot the revelation made to Adam, the Israelites that to Moses, and the Christians in a considerable degree that made to the apostles. The first churches were poor and widely scattered, with few means of education at the best times ; and above 200 years they were exposed to a persecution, which rendered education almost impossible. Placed at the same time in the midst of the profound ignorance, and inveterate superstitions of heathenism, it was impossible that they should escape the intellectual infirmities of the whole population by which they were surrounded. It is true that they possessed the sacred scriptures ; but the manuscript copies were comparatively few ; and they necessarily brought to the interpretation of them much of the credulity, and of the love of forms, which characterize the childhood of individuals and of nations. Religious knowledge therefore rapidly deteriorated, through the first four centuries ; on which account it is unsafe for us to follow the precedents which we find in that remote antiquity, except with constant reference to scripture. “ HOLY SCRIPTURE CONTAINETH ALL THINGS NECESSARY TO SALVATION : SO THAT WHATSOEVER IS NOT READ THEREIN, NOR MAY BE PROVED

THEREBY, IS NOT TO BE REQUIRED OF ANY MAN TO BE BELIEVED AS AN ARTICLE OF THE FAITH.”* Early doctrines and practices should therefore be brought to the test of scripture no less than those of modern times; and we should endeavour to draw the church on to what is scriptural, rather than to bring it back to what is ancient. What is ancient may be good or bad; what is scriptural must be good. Ancient practice may be ancient folly: but scriptural practice is the result of divine wisdom. The half-educated expositors of the scriptures to an uneducated people in the second and third centuries may lead us wrong; the scriptures themselves must lead us right. But because a disposition has grown up in the minds of some to idolize even the frailties of the early fathers, as the Hindoo drinks the water in which the Brahmin has washed his feet, I have thought it might be useful to mention some of the practices of the early church, under their guidance, which seem to prove that we must not too implicitly depend upon their wisdom or spiritual understanding.

Clergy. I. The early Christians gave magnificent titles to their clergy. Their bishops were called apostles, successors of apostles, sons of apostles, princes of the church, princes of the clergy, princes of the people, *pontifices maximi*, high priests, papa or pope, *episcopi episcoporum*,

* Article VI.

bishops of bishops, patriarchs, vicars of Christ, Christ's vicegerents and vicars of God.*

As early as the beginning of the second century Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote thus of them, "Sotio the deacon in whom I rejoice, forasmuch as he is subject unto his bishop as unto the grace of God." "I exhort you that ye study to do all things in a divine concord; your bishop presiding in the place of God, and your presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles." † "Inasmuch as ye are subject to your bishop as to Jesus Christ, ye appear to me to live not after the manner of men. It is, therefore, necessary that ye do nothing without your bishop even as ye are wont: and that ye be also subject to the presbytery as to the apostles of Christ. In like manner, let all reverence the deacons as Jesus Christ, and the bishop as the Father, and the presbyters as the council of God." ‡ "See that ye all follow your bishop as Jesus Christ the Father, and the presbytery as the apostles. It is good to bear due regard both to God and to the bishop. He that honours the bishop shall be honoured of God. § "Hearken ye all unto the bishop that God also may hearken unto you. My soul be security for those who submit to their bishop, presbyters, and deacons. And may my portion be together with theirs in God." **

* Bingham's Antiquities of the Christian Church, Vol. I. pp. 50—59. London, 1834.

† Epistle to the Magnesians.

‡ Epistle to the Trallians.

§ Epistle to the Smyrneans.

** Epistle to Polycarp.

These exhortations of Ignatius were soon improved upon. "Bishops were persons to whom all the world bowed the head, *quibus omnis terra caput inclinabat*." "Kings and princes," says St. Ambrose, "did not disdain to bend and bow their necks to the knees of the priests, and to kiss their hands." The people sang hosannas to their bishops, as the multitude did to our Saviour at his entrance into Jerusalem, saying, "Blessed be ye of the Lord, and blessed be your coming. Hosanna in the highest." And though Jerome, who was not himself a bishop, condemned this custom, yet it is not said that any other of the fathers did. When a person addressed a bishop, he would say, *Precor coronam vestram*, as we should say to a Sovereign, I pray your Majesty, and the bishop's seat in the church was termed, *θρόνος υψηλός*, the lofty throne. *

2. While the bishops were thus exalted, the clerical orders also began to multiply. Besides bishops, priests, and deacons, who were termed the *ιερωμενοί*, holy and sacred, there were several other orders who were *insacрати*, unconsecrated. These were (1) the sub-deacons, who at their ordination received a paten and cup from the bishop, with a ewer and towel from the archdeacon; (2) the acolythists who at their ordination received a candlestick and taper, with an empty pitcher; (3) the exorcists, who at their ordination received from the bishop a book containing the forms for ejecting devils, with these words, "Receive

* Bingham, vol. I. 98, 99, 100, 102.

thou these, and have thou power to lay hands upon the energumens, whether they be baptized or only catechumens ;” (4) the readers ; (5) the ostiarii or door-keepers, who at their ordination received from the bishop the keys of the church with these words, “ Behave thyself as one who must give account to God of the things that are kept locked under these keys ;” (6) the psalmistæ, whose office it was to sing from the ambo or singing desk ; all except these “ canonical singers ” being forbidden by a canon of the Council of Laodicea to sing in the Church ; (7) the fossarii or grave-men, whose office it was to wind up the body, dig the earth, build the vault, and make ready the grave ;” (8) the parabolani who watched over the sick.*

3. The numbers of the secular clergy were soon rivalled by swarms of monks. In the first three centuries there were ascetics ; some of whom, like the Pythagoreans, abstained entirely from flesh ; others continued their fasts for two or three days together, taking no food at all ; and others “ exercised themselves with uncommon hardships for the greater promotion of piety and religion, as in frequent washings, humicubations and the like.” These all were styled by Clemens Alexandrinus, *Εκλεκτων Εκλεκτοτεροι*, elect of the Elect. †

In the 4th century, numbers improved on the ascetic life, by becoming monks. Some were

* Bingham, vol. I. 273—302.

† Ib. vol. II. 1—9.

anchorites who lived alone in caves or cells. Some were cœnobites who lived together. Some were Sarabaites who fasted to an extraordinary degree and then indulged in riot and excess. And some were stylites or pillarists. One of these, Simeon Stylites, was said to have lived sixty-eight years on the top of a pillar; and of another, Alipius, bishop of Adrianople, it was recorded that he lived thus, after renouncing his see, seventy years, with two choirs of virgins, and one of monks to attend him!!*

Character of
the Clergy.

4. During the third century the face of things, says Mosheim, began to change in the Christian church. "The bishops aspired to higher degrees of power than they had formerly possessed: and not only violated the rights of the people; but also made gradual encroachments upon the privileges of the presbyters. And that they might cover these usurpations with an air of justice, they published new doctrines concerning the nature of the church, and of the episcopal dignity."† "This change in the form of ecclesiastical government was soon followed by a train of vices, which dishonored the character and authority of those to whom the administration of the church was committed. For, though several yet continued to exhibit to the world illustrious examples of primitive piety and Christian virtue, yet many

* Bingham, vol. II. 10, 12, 13.

† Mosheim's Ecclesiastical History, by Maclaine, London, 1823. vol. I. pp. 265, 266.

were sunk in luxury and voluptuousness, puffed up with vanity, arrogance and ambition, possessed with a spirit of contention and discord ; and addicted to many other vices, that cast an undeserved reproach upon the holy religion, of which they were the unworthy professors and ministers. This is testified in such an ample manner, by the repeated complaints of many of the most respectable writers of this age, that truth will not permit us to spread the veil, which we should otherwise be desirous to cast over such enormities among an order so sacred. The bishops assumed, in many places, a princely authority, particularly those who had the greatest number of churches under their inspection, and who presided over the most opulent assemblies. They appropriated to their evangelical function, the splendid ensigns of temporal majesty. A throne, surrounded with ministers, exalted above his equals the servant of the meek and humble Jesus ; and sumptuous garments dazzled the eyes and the minds of the multitude into an ignorant veneration for their arrogated authority. The examples of the bishops was ambitiously imitated by the presbyters, who neglecting the sacred duties of their station, abandoned themselves to the indolence and delicacy of an effeminate and luxurious life. The deacons, beholding the presbyters deserting thus their functions, boldly usurped their rights and privileges ; and the

effects of a corrupt ambition were spread through every rank of the sacred order.*

During the fourth century this lamentable decay of piety continued to increase. “The additions made by the emperors and others to the wealth, honours, and advantages of the clergy, were followed with a proportionable augmentation of vice and luxury, particularly among those of that sacred order, who lived in great and opulent cities; and that many such additions were made to that order after the time of Constantine is a matter that admits of no dispute. The bishops, on the one hand contended with each other in the most scandalous manner, concerning the extent of their respective jurisdictions; while, on the other, they trampled upon the rights of the people, violated the privileges of the inferior ministers, and imitated in their conduct and in their manner of living, the arrogance, voluptuousness, and luxury of magistrates and princes. This pernicious example was soon followed by the several ecclesiastical orders. The presbyters, in many places, assumed an equality with the bishops in point of rank and authority. We find also many complaints made, at this time of the vanity and effeminacy of the deacons. Those more particularly of the presbyters and deacons who filled the first stations of these orders, carried their pretensions to an extravagant length;

* Mosheim, vol. I. 266, 267.

and were offended at the notion of being placed upon an equal footing with their colleagues.”*

“An enormous train of different superstitions were gradually substituted in the place of true religion. Frequent pilgrimages were undertaken to Palestine, and to the tombs of the martyrs, as if there alone the sacred principles of virtue, and the certain hope of salvation, were to be acquired. The reins being once let loose to superstition, which knows no bounds, absurd notions and idle ceremonies multiplied every day. Quantities of dust and earth brought from Palestine and other places remarkable for their supposed sanctity, were handed about as the most powerful remedies against the violence of wicked spirits, and were sold and bought every where at enormous prices. The public processions and supplications, by which the pagans endeavored to appease their gods, were now adopted into Christian worship, and celebrated with great pomp and magnificence in several places. The virtues that had formerly been ascribed to the heathen temples, to their lustrations, to the statues of their gods and heroes, were now attributed to Christian churches, to water consecrated by certain forms of prayer, and to the images of holy men.” “Some buried the bones of dead men in certain retired places, and then affirmed, that they were divinely admonished by a dream that the body of some

* Mosheim, vol. I. 356, 357.

friend of God lay there. Many, especially of the monks travelled through the different provinces ; and not only sold, with the most frontless impudence their fictitious relics, but also deceived the eyes of the multitude with ludicrous combats with evil spirits or genii. A whole volume would be requisite to contain an enumeration of the various frauds which artful knaves practised with success to delude the ignorant, *when true religion was almost entirely superseded by horrid superstition.**”

Authors. 5. In the first four centuries there were various authors distinguished for learning and ability, but many of them seem to have been tainted by the errors of their day. The work which is entitled “The Shepherd of Hermias,” because the angel who bears the principal part in it, is represented as a shepherd, was composed in the second century by Hermes, who was brother to Pius, Bishop of Rome. “This whimsical and visionary writer has taken the liberty to invent several dialogues between God and the angels: and the discourse which he puts into the mouths of those celestial beings is more insipid and senseless than what we commonly hear among the meanest of the multitude.”† Yet this book was so much esteemed in the church, that while the catechumens were not to read the whole

* Mosheim, vol. I. 366, 367. † Ib. vol. I. 113, 114.

‡ Bingham, vol. III. 10.

of the bible, they were allowed to read this.† Tertullian in the second century, was a man of learning and ability, but “his credulity and superstition were such as might have been expected from the darkest ignorance,” and eventually he became a disciple of Montanus, who pretended to be the Comforter promised by our Lord to the church.* Respecting the exposition of the scriptures in this century, Mosheim observes, “They were more studious to darken the holy scriptures with their idle fictions than to investigate their true and natural sense.” “Their excessive veneration for the septuagint, which they regarded almost as of divine authority, confined their views, fettered as it were their critical spirit and hindered them from producing any thing excellent in the way of sacred criticism or interpretation. Their explication and defence of many of the doctrines of Christianity are defective and unsatisfactory.” “The most of them appear to have been destitute of penetration, learning, order, application and force. They frequently make use of arguments void of all solidity.”† “Some represent them as the most excellent guides in the paths of piety and virtue; while others place them in the very lowest rank of moral writers; and treat their precepts and decisions as perfectly insipid, and in many respects

* Mosheim, vol. I. 182. † Ib. vol. I. 187. 189, 190.

pernicious. They abound with precepts of an excessive and unreasonable severity, with stoical and academical dictates, vague and indeterminate notions, and, what is yet worse, with decisions that are absolutely false, and in evident opposition to the precepts of Christ. Before the question mentioned above, concerning the merit of the ancient fathers, as moralists, be decided, a previous question must be determined; namely, What is meant by a bad director in point of morals? and, if by such a person be meant, one who has no determinate notion of the nature and limits of the duties incumbent upon Christians, no clear and distinct ideas of virtue and vice; who has not penetrated the spirit and genius of those sacred books, to which alone we must appeal in every dispute about Christian virtue, and who, in consequence thereof fluctuates often in uncertainty or falls into error in explaining the divine laws, though he may frequently administer sublime and pathetic instructions; if, by a bad guide in morals such a person, as we have now delineated be meant, then it must be confessed, that this title belongs indisputably to many of the fathers."

Origen, presbyter of Alexandria, the most distinguished writer of the third century, pious, learned and able, but tainted with the Platonic philosophy, rejected generally the literal sense of scripture, seeking hidden meanings throughout,

maintained the pre-existence of souls, and denied the eternity of punishment.*

“The number of interpreters in the fourth century was very considerable: but few have discovered a just discernment; or a sound judgment in their expositions of the sacred writings, most of them being laborious in the search of far-fetched interpretations, and perverting the expressions of scripture, which they but half understood, by straining them to matters with which they have no connexion.”†

II. Some of the ceremonies and customs of these Ceremonies early ages were objectionable.

1. In some of their Churches they had golden Lamps. lamps burning by day and by night. This custom was condemned by the Council of Eliberis in the following canon, “Let no one presume to set up lights in the day time in any cemetery or church; *for the spirits of the saints are not to be molested.*”

2. The apostolical canons, the date of which Incense. is uncertain, mention incense as being early offered with “the oblation:” and St. Ambrose says, “I wish the angel may stand by us when we incense the altar, and offer our sacrifice. Yea doubtless, the angel stands by us, at the time that Christ stands there and is offered upon the altar.”

3. “About the latter end of the fourth century, Pictures and Images.

* Mosheim, vol. I. 277, 288. † Vol. I. 368, 369.

pictures of saints and martyrs began to creep into churches. Paulinus, bishop of Nola, to keep the country people employed, and to prevent their running into riot and excess, when they met together to celebrate the anniversary festival of the dedication of the church of St. Felix, ordered the church to be painted with the images of saints and Scripture histories, such as Esther, Tobit, and Judith." To these were afterwards added, the pictures of kings and bishops.

Washings, &c.

4. Various marks of respect were usually paid in those ages towards their churches and baptisteries. In the atrium or court before the church, was a cistern in which the worshippers washed their hands and faces before entering. In the Greek church they bowed towards the altar. It was also usual to kiss and embrace the altar, the threshold, the doors, and the pillars. And when the candidates for baptism came near the baptistery, which Chrysostom calls, "the bride-chamber of the Spirit and the port of grace:" they were all to cast themselves together on their knees.*

Relics.

5. In the account of the martyrdom of Ignatius, given by those who witnessed it, it is said, "Only the more solid parts of his holy remains were left, which were carried to Antioch, and wrapped in linen, as an inestimable treasure left to the holy church.† Of the death of Poly-

* Bingham, II. 232, 235, 234,

† Chevallier's Translation of the Epistles of Clement, &c. p. 145.

carp it is said, “When the flame began to blaze to a very great height, a wonderful sight appeared to us, for the flame making a kind of arch, encompassed the body of the martyr, which was in the midst as gold or silver glowing in the furnace. Moreover, we perceived as fragrant an odour as if it came from frankincense. At length when these wicked men saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded the executioner to go near, and pierce him with his sword. Which being accordingly done, there came forth so great a quantity of blood, as extinguished the fire and raised an admiration among the people, to consider what a difference there is between the infidels and the elect. After which, we taking up his bones, more precious than the richest jewels, deposited them where it was fitting.”* “This kind of superstition calculated to encourage covetousness and religious cheats, was stirring among some in the church betimes.” “The gainful trade of getting and selling the relics of martyrs, prevailed among some of the more senseless and covetous clergy.” St. Austin tells us, “that there were in his time a great many wandering idle monks, hypocritical men, who by the instigation of Satan went about the world selling relics:” Which practice so much prevailed, that towards the close of the fourth century, a law of Theodosius the Great, was expressly levell-

* Chevallier, 161, 163.

ed against it :* and this with so little success that a law of Valentinian III. who reigned from A.D. 423 to A.D. 455, speaks of "bishops and others of the clergy who were concerned in robbing of graves, who digged up the bones of the martyrs, and sold them as holy relics."†

Miracles. III. Various miracles of the following kind were then believed. Proculus, having plundered a church, made himself a shirt of the covering of the altar ; and "not long after fell into a phrenzy, which made him eat off his own tongue piece by piece." Two officers Felix and Julian, having plundered a church in Antioch, "the impious wretches did not long go unpunished, for Julian was immediately seized with an ulcer, which turned all his bowels to putrefaction ; and Felix by the same divine vengeance, voided blood at his mouth without intermission, day and night till he died." Some Donatist bishops having thrown the bread consecrated by their opponents to their dogs, "an immediate sign of divine vengeance fell upon them : for their dogs immediately tore them to pieces, as robbers and profaners of the Holy body of Christ." In relating which, Optatus applies to the Donatists those words of Christ, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you."‡

Ambrose in his disputes with the Arians pro-

* Bingham, vol. VII. 365—367. † Ib. vol. VII. 367.

‡ Ib. vol. II. 229.

duced men possessed with devils, who, *upon the approach of the relics of Gervasius and Protasius*, were obliged to acknowledge with loud cries that the doctrine of the Council of Nice, concerning the three persons of the Godhead was true. In reference to which mode of argumentation, Mosheim observes, “I fear that the greatest part of those who used such arguments, however illustrious or respectable they may have been, will be found upon examination, chargeable with the dangerous and criminal design of imposing upon their brethren.*

As the relics of Gervasius wrought a miracle against the doctrine of Arius, so another miracle was thought to occasion his death. The following is the account given by Socrates, who wrote his history of the Church about the year 440. Alexander, bishop of Constantinople, expecting a discussion with Arius, shut himself up alone in the church, prostrated himself on the earth before the altar, and during several days and nights intreated the Lord that if Arius were in error he might be punished. After this, the Emperor Constantine ordered him to admit Arius to the communion in his church: this order was given on Saturday, and the next day Arius was to be admitted. “But the divine justice was ready to stop the course of his criminal enterprises.” Having left the palace of the emperor with a

* Mosheim, vol. I. 372.

crowd of partisans, he felt his bowels suddenly tormented with a violent colic ; retired from the crowd, and there miserably died. Dr. Maclaine thinks that he was poisoned, but not so either the emperor, or the historian. For Socrates thus continues, “The emperor seeing that the faith of the Council of Nice was confirmed by so evident a miracle ; (par un miracle si evident que Dieu avoit fait en sa faveur,) attached himself to it more closely than ever, and felt incredible joy at all that had happened.”*

Catechumens. IV. The following were some of their regulations respecting Catechumens.

1. They were admitted to that state by imposition of hands with the sign of the cross.

2. They were then allowed to read “SOME PORTIONS of the Scripture,” together with the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobit, and *the Shepherd of Hermas*.

3. They were then admitted to hear sermons in the Church, “but were not allowed to stay to any of the prayers, but immediately after the sermon, at the word of command then solemnly used, ‘*Ne quis audientium,*’ let none of the hearers be present,’ they were to depart the Church.”

4. For twenty days before baptism they were exorcised by a form of prayer, imposition of hands, insufflation, and the sign of the cross. With refer-

* History of the Church by Socrates, translated by Cousin, Book I. chaps. 37, 38. Mosheim, vol. I. 418.

ence to this ceremony, Gregory Nazianzen says to the catechumen, "Despise not thou the medicinal office of exorcism." And Cyril bade him, "receive exorcism with diligence, for whether it was insufflation or exorcism, it was to be esteemed salutary to the soul. For as mixed metals could not be purged without fire, so neither could the soul be purged without exorcisms which were divine and gathered out of the Holy Scriptures. Exorcists did thus, by the power of the Holy Spirit cast a terror upon the evil spirit and make him fly from the soul, and leave it in a salutary state and a hope of eternal life." At the same time the ears of the catechumen were touched, and the word ephphatha was pronounced over him; his eyes were anointed with clay; and he then received "his sacrament," which was a little salt.*

5. While the catechumens were being thus prepared for baptism, there were on the other hand various "mysteries" which were carefully concealed from them. They must never learn the manner of administering baptism: they might never enter the baptistery nor even look into it: they might never see the sacred oil: they might not join in the liturgy of the church: nor, till immediately before their baptism might they learn the mystery of the Trinity, the creed, or the Lord's prayer.†

* Bingham, vol. III. 2—29.

† Ib. vol. III. 100—106.

Baptism. V. Baptism was called the *indulgentia* or remission of sins, the sacrament of grace, the regeneration, the unction, the illumination, the salvation, the royal mark, the water of life, the divine fountain, the garment of immortality : and Tertulian says of it, *Nos pisciculi secundum, ἰχθῦν, nostrum Jesum Christum in aquâ nascimur*, “we little fishes according to our fish, (ἰχθῦν) Jesus Christ, are born in the water.”* Before baptism the candidate was anointed by the bishop with a holy oil, over which a prayer of this kind had been previously offered : that God “would sanctify the oil in the name of the Lord Jesus, and grant it spiritual grace and efficacious power that it might be subservient to the remission of sins, that such as were anointed therewith, being freed from all impiety, might become worthy of the initiation, according to the command of his only begotten Son.” By all the canons of the ancient councils the power of consecrating this oil was reserved to the bishop.† Of this unction, Cyril of Jerusalem says, “men were anointed from head to foot with this exorcised or consecrated oil, *and this made them partakers of the true olive-tree Jesus Christ*” “For as the insufflations of the saints and invocation of God, do like a vehement flame burn and put the devils to flight ; so this exorcised oil by prayer and invocation of God, gains such

* He gave this irreverent name to our blessed Lord, because the word ἰχθῦς is composed of the initial letters of the following words, *Τησους, Χριστος, Θεου Υιος, Σωτηρ*, Bingham, vol. III. 114.

† Bingham, vol. III. 253.

a power as not only to burn up and purge away the footsteps of sin, but also to repel all the powers of the invisible wicked-one, the devil :* while the priests were finishing the unction “the bishop comes,” says Dionysius, “to the mother of adoption, (the font,) and by invocation sanctifies the water in it, thrice pouring in some of the holy chrism in a manner representing the sign of the cross.”† Thus, says Tertullian, “the waters are made the sacrament of sanctification. The Spirit immediately descends from heaven and resting upon them, sanctifies them by himself; and they being so sanctified imbibe the power of sanctifying.”‡

In this sanctified water, men and women were baptized quite naked; “as naked as Adam” says St. Chrysostom. In which custom St. Cyril thus exulted, “O wonderful thing, ye were naked in the sight of men, and were not ashamed :” and Bingham strangely thinks that there was no indecency in it, because women were baptized apart from the men, in a different baptistery or at a different time.§ Immediately after baptism, the person was again anointed, crossed, and received the imposition of hands.|| Of all these ceremonies, Tertullian speaks thus : “The flesh is washed that the soul may be cleansed; the flesh is anointed that the soul may be consecrated; the flesh is overshadowed by the imposition of hands, that the soul may be illumin-

* Bingham, vol. III. 254 † Ib. vol. 260. ‡ Ib. vol. 260.

§ Ib. vol. III. 269—272. || Ib. vol. 286.

ated by the Spirit; the flesh is fed by the body and blood of Christ, that the soul may receive nourishment or fatness from God.”* After confirmation, the neophytes were dressed in white robes; carried lighted tapers in their hands; received a little honey and milk; and were then required to say the Lord’s prayer standing upright.”† Infants also, as well as adults, when they were baptized received the chrism, and the imposition of hands; after which the Lord’s Supper was administered to them.‡ This custom continued in the church from the third century to the seventh or eighth.§ Unbaptized infants were thought by Gregory Nazianzen and others to have a middle state between heaven and hell: but the Latins concluded that since for want of washing away original sin, they could not be admitted into heaven, they must of necessity be in hell.||

Funerals.

VI. In the book ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite, it is said that in their funeral service the bishop prayed for the deceased, “that God would forgive him all his sins, contracted by human infirmity, and translate him into the place of light.”** Then he anointed him with the holy oil, and so committed him to the earth. “Bring me,” said, St. Ambrose in his oration upon the death of a friend, “the holy mysteries; let us pray for his rest with a pious affection.”††

* Bingham, vol. III. 258.

† Ib. vol. III 322—330.

‡ Ib. vol. III. 288. § Ib. vol. III. 290. || Ib. vol. III. 44.

** Ib. vol. VII. 339.

†† Ib. vol. VII. 341.

One of the forms of prayer at funerals was as follows:—"First, the deacon said, let us pray . . . that the merciful God who hath taken the soul of this our brother, would forgive him all his sins, voluntary and involuntary, and of his great mercy and good-will place him in the regions of the just." Then the bishop said, "O God . . . look down now upon this thy servant whom thou hast chosen and received to another state; pardon him what he has willingly or unwillingly sinned against thee. Grant him favorable angels, and place him in the bosom of patriarchs," &c.* Similar prayers were made in the communion service for the dead in general, that God would receive their souls to the place of rest and happiness, pardon their human failures and increase their happiness.†

VII. Under this system of clerical domination, ^{Heresies and Schisms.} frivolous ceremonies, and false exposition, while religion decayed, various heresies flourished, and the church was rent by schism.

1. First came the Gnostics who ascribed the creation of the world to an evil being; denied the divine authority of the Old Testament; venerated the serpent as the author of sin; honoured some of the worst characters in the Bible; and denied the deity of Jesus Christ.‡ Notwithstanding the monstrous character of their errors, they branched off into various sects, and during

* Bingham, vol. VII. 343. † Ib. vol. VII. 341.

‡ Mosheim's Eccles. Hist. vol. I. 133—136.

the second century spread astonishingly through Asia, Africa, and Europe.*

2. Then followed the Ebionites, who held obedience to the Mosaic Law to be necessary to salvation, made use of a spurious gospel, and despised St. Paul and his writings.†

3. These were succeeded by Montanus, an obscure fanatic, who proclaimed himself the promised Comforter, and formed a church in Phrygia; whence his doctrine, after perverting Tertullian, spread through Asia, Africa, and part of Europe.‡

4. The third century witnessed the rise and progress of the Manichæans, followers of Manes, who pretended to inspiration, avowed himself to be the Divine Comforter, and rejected the Old Testament and the four Gospels.¶ At this period also, several other heretics flourished; as Hierax, Noetus, Sabellius, and Paul of Samosata.§

5. In the beginning of the fourth century, Arius broached his notions, which were embraced by many persons of rank and learning. He was condemned by the Council of Nice in the year 325, and banished; but in the year 330, he was recalled from banishment: and Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, for refusing to admit him again into the church of that place, was deposed by an act of the Council of Tyre. At this time the church was much distracted. The emperors Con-

* Mosheim's Eccles. Hist. vol. I. 218—229.

† Ib. vol. I. 215.

‡ Ib. vol. I. 236—7.

¶ Ib. vol. I. 295—6.

§ Ib. vol. I. 368.

stantine and Constans were orthodox: the emperor Constantius was an Arian. Hence council was arrayed against council, and contradictory decrees filled Christendom with perplexity and confusion. Liberius, Bishop of Rome, becoming a follower of Arius, the conflict continued to rage till the year 378; during which period both parties shewed too much violence and injustice.*

While thus the church had to maintain an incessant warfare with those who had left it, it was far from being internally quiet.

Towards the close of the second century, the Asiatic bishops were excommunicated by Victor, Bishop of Rome, because they differed from him in some points respecting the observation of Easter.†

In the third century, the Eastern Christians were excommunicated by Stephen, bishop of Rome, because they established by the canons of several councils, that heretics, upon their being restored to communion with the church, should be re-baptized. And when Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, with the African bishops, declared that they agreed with the Asiatic Christians, they were also excommunicated.‡

After this, Origen being ordained by the bishops of Cæsarea and Jerusalem, was exposed to the anger of Demetrius, bishop of Alexandria, who called a council, condemned him unheard, and

* Mosheim, vol. I. 412—421. † Ib. vol. I. 209. ‡ Ib. vol. I. 286.

degraded him from the sacerdotal office. While the majority of bishops approved this act of Demetrius, those of Achaia, Palestine, Phœnicia, and Arabia, expressed great displeasure at it.*

And lastly, throughout the fourth century, the Church was torn by the schism of the Donatists. Cæcilianus being chosen bishop of Carthage, by one part of the Carthaginian Church, and Majorinus by another ; Cæcilianus was opposed by the presbyter Donatus, whence arose the party of the Donatists. Nineteen Bishops at Rome decided for Cæcilianus ; but Majorinus had been elected by 70. At length in the year 314, the Council of Arles was called to decide between the parties, and determined against Majorinus. The Donatists were now deprived of their churches, and some of them were put to death. Being afterwards supported by a body of armed ruffians, called Circumcelliones, who filled Africa with rapine and slaughter, these disorderly bands were routed by the general of the Emperor Constans, and the party suppressed. They were however restored by Julian ; and at the close of the century had still four hundred bishops.†

It appears from these few extracts, how far these early Christians had departed from the simplicity of the primitive church ; thereby laying the foundation for all the subsequent superstitions of the Church of Rome. Their servility to the

* Mosheim, vol. I. 286—288.

† vol. I. 403—409.

clergy, their multiplied orders, their ascetics and monks, their lamps and incense, their bowings and crossings, their attachment to relics, their credulity respecting miracles, their pictures of saints, their washing at the church door, their kissing of altars, doors and pillars, their value for the apocrypha, their holy unctions and touching of ears, their consecrated salt and honey, their misconception of the sacraments, and their prayers for the dead, very naturally grew into the more gigantic corruptions of the middle ages, when the Bible was more forgotten, the people were still less instructed, and the clergy established over the consciences of men an unchecked dominion. Let their errors make us wiser. By slow degrees we have been throwing off our superstitions, and have been growing towards a right understanding of the Gospel. Consulting therefore now, with great reserve, the opinions of the early fathers, let us keep close to the doctrine and practice of the apostles. In the days of Ignatius and Tertullian, the church was in its childhood; and may now say with St. Paul, "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." We have seen that the unscriptural exaltation of the clergy laid the foundation for all the other abuses which crept into the church; almost all the false doctrines and senseless ceremonies which then disfigured it being introduced by them. Christian

men ought to learn by these facts to maintain their independence of thought, and keep close to the Word of God as their guide. Under its guidance we shall no more wish to enrol among the orders of our clergy, sub-deacons and acolythists, exorcists and door-keepers, psalmistæ and fossarii. We shall not again become anchorites or cœnobites, saraibites or stylites, “watchers” or “grazers;” we shall not return to the exorcisms and humicubations, the candles and chrisms, the ephphathas and the concealment of mysteries which distinguished those early ages; we shall continue to dispense with the pictures of saints, and the pictorial histories of the apocrypha in our churches; and we shall still be satisfied with simple water in baptism, without the aid of that oil, “possessed of spiritual grace which could make a sinner partaker of Christ,” without those “insufflations of saints” which, “like a vehement flame, could burn the devils and put them to flight,” or that sanctified water which, “by the descent of the Holy Spirit, imbibed the power of sanctifying.”

If any persons would persuade us to come back as much as possible to the practice of these early times, let us tell them that the church is not yet old enough for its second childhood; and that we hope through the grace of God, that there is before it a long course of improvement, in which it will advance towards the light and love of the inspired apostles of Christ. Some progress we have already made towards this desirable consum-

mation. There is evidently less ignorance, less credulity, and less superstition among Christians in general. The scriptures are generally circulated and much read. The ministers of Christ, when faithful and exemplary, are much respected, but have no dominion over the faith of the church. Few serious persons now believe in baptismal regeneration, approve of prayers for the dead, or advocate the concealment of any of the great doctrines of the gospel. The administration of the Lord's Supper to infants is happily discontinued; and there is not now quite so fierce a spirit as that which raged throughout the fourth century, between the friends of Cæcilian and the supporters of Majorinus. Having advanced so far, let us endeavour after further improvement. We ought to bring every church practice, and every prevailing opinion to the test of scripture; and, where that is silent, to the test of usefulness and of common sense. We should simplify whatever is complicated, remove whatever is mischievous, and accommodate all the institutions of the church, which are not of divine appointment, to the wants of a highly civilized and intelligent community. It is greatly to be lamented that there is no General Assembly of the Church of England, to examine into abuses, and originate needful reforms. The voice of truth would be heard in such an assembly; and it would be to the church what Parliament is to the nation, the protector

of our liberties and the source of much improvement. But above all, let all the members of the universal church, seek by earnest prayer, such a knowledge of Christ, and such an outpouring of the Holy Spirit as may inspire us with all the zeal and piety of the Primitive Christians,* and make us say from our hearts with an apostle, “Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.” “For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them and rose again.”

* See Acts ii. 41—47, iv. 32, 33.

