

The Undivided Church

The Old Catholic Movement maintains that the obvious basis of reuniting the several divisions of the Christian Church is the common acceptance of the Faith of the entire Church prior to the first division in the year 1054 A.D. from whence all the familiar divisions of today ultimately stem. This theory admits that the 16th century Reformation is not principally responsible for the "unhappy divisions" that beset the Christian religion in the western world.

What caused the first division was not a point of faith so much as it was a matter of jurisdiction and administration. History reveals that the early Church was governed by the Apostolic authority vested in all the bishops. Matters of faith and morals affecting the whole Church were brought before an Ecumenical Council (of which there were seven universally accepted) over which the five great bishops of Christendom presided. These bishops, whose Sees represented the important cities of Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople, Alexandria and Rome, were known as patriarchs in whom the Church of the ancients recognized its sovereignty.

If we are to single out the primary cause of the first division of this Church, it would be the deeply rooted objection of the Patriarch of Rome to this particular theory of Church government. Rome maintained that they and their successors held supreme authority over all Christendom as spiritual heirs of St. Peter, whom, they held, was the first Bishop of Rome and to whom, they contended, the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" were alone divinely entrusted. The four patriarchs of the Church in the East maintained the traditional belief in the administration of Christ's Church, offering for the sake of unity the title "primus inter pares" (first amongst equals) to the Roman bishop.

But with the Church of the West developing a strong belief that a kind of primacy resided in the Roman bishop by divine enactment, the breach widened into an open division and henceforth the Christian Church in the East and in the West was to be distinct and divided. In the East, to this day, the patriarchal theory of the Church's government is held, while in the West the emphasis on the personal supremacy of the Pope over all Christendom was gradually increased from the year 1054 until the final definition of Papal infallibility was decreed in the Vatican Council of A.D. 1870 as a dogma which all Christians were bound to accept as an article of faith.

In explanation of the abridged nature of these earlier chapters, the writer would plead his intention of placing before the reader's eye as a picture, as vivid and complete as possible on the state of the early Church, without touching in a controversial spirit upon the sore points of its later history. But since it has been necessary to go this far to bring to light the basic reason for the existence of the Old Catholic Movement, let it be noted, that only the salient points of early history are touched upon, and those wishing to enter more fully into details of the causes that led to the division of Christianity are asked to refer to the pages of ordinary church histories.

What is important for our immediate purpose is merely to establish the basis upon which a school of thought regarding the Church's administration developed within the Roman Church, flourishing time and again in such celebrated and glorious figures as Savonarola, Paulo Sarpl, the Scholars of Port-Royal, the so-called "Jansenists", the Church of Holland and others, to develop finally in the twilight of the nineteenth century into what came to be known as "primitive" or "old" Catholicism.

We are left free now in the following chapters to touch upon the stirring and romantic history of the Port-Royalists of France, the rise of the movement within the Church of Rome and finally the dramatic Vatican Council which culminated in the definite formation of the present Old Catholic movement whose purpose is not a new reformation from without, but a quiet restoration of the Christian Church to its original state from within.

