

THE  
INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

*A COURSE OF LECTURES*

DELIVERED IN THE  
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## XVI.

### GENERAL COUNCILS.

#### PART 1.

I COME today to speak of that theory which makes General Councils the main organ of the Church's infallibility, a theory of historic interest, but which now is rapidly becoming obsolete. In fact the general arguments for the necessity of an infallible judge to determine controversies are not satisfied by such a judge as a Council, since that judge is not always at hand, there having been whole centuries without Councils; while, the mode of settling disputes by consulting the decisions of past Councils is liable to the same objections as that by consulting the Scriptures, with the additional objection that the former are so much more voluminous. In the Roman Church at present there is so little disposition unduly to exalt the authority of Councils that the topics which come before us today may almost be said to be no part of the Roman Catholic controversy, the greater part of all I wish to assert being not now controverted. The dispute in the Roman Church, concerning the organ of the Church's Infallibility, has had the natural effect that those who claim that prerogative for the Pope, and whose ascendancy was completely established at the Vatican Council of 1870, have been quite as anxious as we can be, that no rival claim for Councils shall be allowed to establish itself. Consequently, when I shall presently produce evidence that even those Councils, to whose decisions we cordially assent, were composed of frail and fallible men; that the proceedings of some of them were conducted in a way that does not command our respect, and that the ultimate triumph of orthodoxy was due to other causes besides the decisions of these Councils, I am trying to prove no more than has been asserted by eminent Roman Catholic divines, as, for example, by Cardinal Newman. But it would not be safe to take quite silent possession of territory which our adversaries have evacuated only in comparatively recent times; and it is necessary to give some examination to the claims of Councils, because it was to these venerable bodies that the attribute of infallibility first attached itself, and even in the early stages of the Reformation those who resisted the authority of the Pope declared themselves willing to submit to the authority of a General Council freely assembled.

Local Councils.—Local Councils took their origin almost inevitably, as you will easily see, from the fact that Christian Churches in different towns regarded themselves as all belonging to one great society. We know that in Apostolic times a Church would separate from her communion a member

who had disgraced himself by immorality of a scandalous kind; so in like manner would one be rejected who denied the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. Now in modern times excommunication has ceased to be an effective penalty, on account of the want of harmonious action between the different bodies into which Christendom is divided. If a man is put out of communion by one body, he finds quite a welcome reception in another. It was not so in the early Church. A Christian migrating from one town to another had only to take with him credentials from his original Church, and he was received on equal terms in his new abode. But one whom his own Church censured found the doors of other Churches also closed to him until those censures had been withdrawn. This mutual recognition of each other's acts made it necessary that one Church should be permitted to review the acts of another. If a bishop were arbitrary and wrong-headed, and excommunicated an innocent man, it were surely unreasonable if no redress were possible; and a Church could scarcely insist on keeping out of communion a man elsewhere condemned for false doctrine, without investigating his case, if he protested that he was perfectly orthodox, and that it was the bishop who had censured him whose views were eccentric. My belief is, that it was the review of excommunications for ratification or rejection which constituted the chief business of the Councils of neighbouring bishops, which we know to have met periodically in very early times.

One of the most interesting examples I know of an attempt, by means of local Councils, to collect the opinion of the universal Church, was in the case of the Quartodeciman controversy at the end of the second century. You all, no doubt, know how the attempt of Victor of Rome to put the Asiatic Churches out of the communion of the Church universal was frustrated by the resistance of Irenaeus. There is reason to think that Victor did not move in this matter without provocation. Churches distant from each other might celebrate Easter on different days without serious inconvenience; but it would evidently be intolerable if some members of a Church made it a matter of conscience to refuse to conform to the prescribed rule of that Church, and insisted on holding their feast, while their brethren around were still keeping the preliminary fast. I consider that it was the schismatical attempt of a presbyter, Blastus, thus to force Quartodecimanism on the Church of Rome, which moved Victor to endeavour to put an end to diversity of practice. Now it is important that you should know that Victor did not make his attempt without first writing to the leading bishops in different parts of the Christian world, asking them to report to him the practice of their Church;<sup>1</sup> and it was only when he had thus obtained evidence that the Asiatic Quartodecimanism was a mere local custom, and that the practice

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<sup>1</sup> This appears from the letter of Polycrates (Euseb. *H. E.* v. 24).

of the rest of the Christian world was to keep Easter on the Sunday, that he thought himself strong enough to call on the dissentients to conform or be excommunicated.

Obviously it was only by a number of separate Councils that the opinion of the collective episcopate could be ascertained in heathen times. The collection into one city of such a representation of the Christian episcopate as was assembled under the Christian emperors would, in heathen times, have been a challenge for persecution; and even if the meeting had been safe, a majority of the bishops could not have borne the expense of the long journey. When Constantine afterwards gathered all the bishops to Nicaea, he had them conveyed free of charge, putting all the posting resources of the Empire at their disposal.

*General Councils.*— Coming now to speak of General Councils, I feel it to be a disagreeable thing that the extravagant claims made by our adversaries for both Popes and Councils force me to dwell on the frailties and imperfections of what is on the whole entitled to the respect and gratitude of the Church. It is a disagreeable thing when a man for whom you have on many grounds respect and liking is proposed with extravagant laudations as a candidate for a situation for which you believe him to be totally unfit. If it is impossible for you to acquiesce, the mistaken zeal of his friends may then force you to give proof of his unfitness, by stating things over, which, if you might, you would gladly have cast a veil. It would be a disgrace to Christianity if the bishops of its principal see did not include among them many men of piety, learning and zeal, who had done much benefit to the Church. Much rather would I dwell on the services bishops of Rome have rendered to the Church, than on the frailties; immoralities, or heresies which have disfigured that chair; but when Rome is made the hinge on which the whole Church turns—the rock on which it rests—then it is necessary to give proof that Rome has not strength to bear the weight which it is proposed to lay upon it. Similarly I should be glad to dwell altogether on the services rendered by Councils to the Church; but when claims are made for the authority of Councils to which they have no pretensions, we are forced to give evidence how unfounded these claims are. It is no pleasure to me to bring before you the proofs that those who took part in the early Councils were men of like passions with ourselves. Many of them, I doubt not, were holy men; several of them learned and wise men. When they met together in assemblies there was good reason for thinking that the blessing of God would rest on their deliberations. He has promised to them that ask Him His Spirit to guide them into truth; and He has made a special promise to prayer offered where two or three are assembled in His name. Experience, however, has taught us that two men, both of whom pray for the Spirit's guidance, will often arrive at opposite conclusions—a fact which may

be explained, first, by the human passions, from which even the best are not free, and which cannot but affect the correctness of the conclusions arrived at by those whose breasts they stir (for it is not wonderful that the Holy Spirit should not completely clear from error the minds of those whose hearts He does not completely clear from sin); and, secondly, by the fact that the disagreements of which I speak often relate to matters which, however, important they may appear to the disputants, we may well believe do not affect the essentials of the Faith. Thus, we who, when an assembly of ourselves meet together to consult on questions affecting the interests of the Church, invoke God's Spirit to assist our deliberations, and expect to receive a real answer to our prayers, need not hesitate to believe that the prayers made for His presence with the Fathers at the early Councils were not made in vain. Yet, as we do not expect any such assembly of our own to be free from error, so we hold that even the most venerable assembly of former times consisted of imperfect men, who were collectively as well as individually fallible.

Nor have we any reason to suppose that their deliberations were unaffected by perturbations of human passions. With regard to such exhibitions of human passion, I may quote the apology made in the *Tablet* (R. C. newspaper) for some stormy scenes at the Vatican Council in 1870. It said: 'The human element comes out so strongly in some of the Fathers that a sensitive and unwise or thoughtless spectator might easily be shocked and scandalized. We ought to be in no way astonished if angry expressions, sharp comments, unworthy plans, and vexatious agitations did from time to time betray the passions to which human nature is subject. If this were ten times worse than it is, it would probably be less than many of the most important early Councils have witnessed.'

What is here said of the display of human passions at early Councils is no more than the truth; but this does not at all affect the real value of the transactions of these bodies. This value I hold to be, not any special infallibility attaching to their decisions, but the witness they bear to the belief of the Church of their day. At Nicaea, for instance, we are told that Constantine's first act was to burn unread the mutually accusatory *libelli* of the bishops. And when we read further, in praise of the orthodoxy of the Fathers, that they stopped their ears and refused to listen to the blasphemy of Arius, an Arian might conclude that his master had got no fair hearing. But if the Nicene Fathers are on that account entitled to the less respect as judges, they are all the better witnesses. Imagine an assembly of the English clergy called after the publication of Bishop Colenso's book: who can doubt that there would be much violence and clamour; that many would condemn without having read; that many would be incompetent from want of learning to form an opinion of much value? Yet, however unjudicial all

this might be, it would put beyond controversy that the opinions condemned were novelties repudiated, and felt to be in the highest degree offensive, by the bulk of the English clergy. And so the Nicene Council has done us the inestimable service of showing beyond controversy that, at the beginning of the fourth century, the denial of our Lord's co-eternity with the Father was regarded as an offensive novelty. The voice of an overwhelming majority of a body, very well entitled to represent the Church of the time, gives us a compendious assurance of their sentiments, which would be ill replaced by the results of searching and weighing the sentiments of individual writers. The function of Councils at any time in witnessing to the opinion of the Church at that time is most important; and if we value the earlier Councils more than the later, it is because, as we hold that the Christian truth is to be attained not by a new revelation, but by handing down faithfully the old revelation, it is far more important for us to know what was believed in the early Church than in the later.

But, indeed, belief in the infallibility of Councils can hardly be held by anyone who has studied the history of Councils, and who knows anything of their violence and party spirit, and of the bad arguments on the strength of which many of their infallible conclusions were arrived at. Any proofs of these that I could lay before you could scarcely establish more than is acknowledged by Romanist writers. Cardinal Manning fairly gives up the attempt to defend the goodness of the arguments used at Councils, and declares that the Holy Spirit only guarantees the truth of the conclusion arrived at, while for the arguments which led to that conclusion only the individual writers are responsible. And he quotes to this effect a dictum of St. Francis de Sales, that the arguments take place only in the porch, the final decision in the sanctuary.<sup>2</sup> This dictum appears to me to put a severe strain on the faith of those who receive it. We might accept the pretensions of a professional accountant without dreaming of examining his work. But if we heard him performing his additions by the process, six and four are eleven, and five are thirteen, and seven are twenty-four, how could our belief in him be restored? Who would have the face to say, It is true not a single column in my preliminary calculations is added correctly, but you may rely implicitly that I never fail somehow or another to bring out the correct sum total?

*The Nicene Council.*—Let me say something now about the history of those first four General Councils, the conclusions arrived at in which we ourselves accept. And first I speak about the Nicene.

Constantine, you may remember, at first tried to silence the Arian disputes as about a subject too trifling to be worthy of serious controversy. If

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<sup>2</sup> Temporal Mission of the Holy Ghost, p. 116.

this surprises you, you must remember that Arius was far indeed from teaching that the Saviour was mere man. He may almost be said not to have denied His divinity, since he had no scruple in applying to Him the name God, and in offering Him worship. He owned Him to be ‘the Word which was with God from the beginning, and which was God,’ the ‘Wisdom of the Father’ (described in Proverbs viii.), before all creatures, and through whom God made the worlds. His point, however, was, that as any son must be posterior to his father, so the name Son, applied to our Lord, indicated that He was not, like the Father, from all eternity; but that there was—he would not say a time when the Son was not, for he owned Him to be anterior to all time—but at least that there was when the Son was not. You can conceive then that Constantine, at the time not a baptized Christian, and as a politician anxious above everything for the peace of his Empire, should be impatient of a dispute in which the Christian bishops made themselves angry about, as he thought, mere metaphysical subtleties. When, however, he could not find a hearing for his pacific exhortations, he devised the magnificent plan of assembling all the bishops of Christendom, and obtaining their verdict on the point in dispute. Thus peace would be restored by a decision which no one would be so bold as to resist.

I may anticipate the next branch of our subject, to point out how this history proves that the idea of the infallibility of the Bishop of Rome had not then entered any Eastern person’s head. If to consult the Bishop of Rome would have sufficed, his opinion could have been had with little expense or trouble. The history of the next century or two presents a constant succession of councils. A heathen writer complains that the whole posting system of the empire was deranged through its being constantly occupied by bishops hastening to councils.<sup>3</sup> Why, at so much cost and labour, bring a

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<sup>3</sup> I refer above to what is said by Ammianus Marcellinus in his estimate of the character of Constantius at the end of Book 21. I quote the passage in full because it illustrates how educated heathen were repelled from Christianity by the spectacle of bitter dissensions among Christians: ‘Christianam religionem absolutam et simplicem, anili superstitione confundens; in qua scrutanda perplexius quam componenda gravius, excitavit plurima discidia, quae progressa fusius aluit concertatione verborum: ut catervis antistitum jumentis publicis ultro citroque discurrentibus per synodos, quas appellant, dum ritum omnem ad suum trahere conantur arbitrium, rei vehiculariae succideret nervos.’ The serious cost of a Synod to the public revenue is further illustrated by the fact that when Pope Liberius was anxious that the charge against Athanasius should be investigated, not in the West, where Constantius was thinking of holding a Council, but at Alexandria, where the alleged offences were said to have occurred; with the view of making his plan more acceptable to the Emperor, he proposed that the bishops should travel to Alexandria, not at the public expense, but each at his own proper cost (Sozom. H. E. iv. 11). It seems to me likely that Liberius had the idea that if any such order were made, the bishops would be willing to sign an acquittal of Athanasius without taking the journey. But one thing is clear, that if the Emperor’s authority was necessary for a journey to be made by bishops at their own cost and by desire of the Bishop of Rome, it was not possible in those days for the Bishop

number of fallible men together, if one infallible man could have settled the whole question in his closet? From the modern Roman point of view Dr. Newman is right in the difficulty he finds in seeing that the third General Council was at all necessary. See his Essay on Theodoret, *Historical Sketches*, ii. 347-349: 'What could be stronger than a decision at Rome followed by the assent to it of the Catholic world?' He thinks (p. 336) that 'Cyril and Theodoret would have been happier had they kept at home and settled the points in dispute, as they began them, with theological treatises, dispensing with hostile camps, party votings, and coercive acts. Their controversies, I know, were on vital subjects, the settlement of them was essential, and in settling them the Church was infallible; but in matter of fact and after all they were carried on to their irreversible issue by the Pope and the civil power, not by the Council to which they were submitted.' This represents a modern judgment; but in the fourth century a 'decision at Rome' was not sufficient to secure the 'assent to it of the Catholic world.' Constantine had had experience in the case of the Donatist controversy (into the details of which I need not enter at present) that the decision of the Roman bishop would not be accepted as final; for if it had failed to settle a purely Western dispute, what probability was there that it would be owned as decisive by contending Easterns? Nor can I find any trace that at this stage of the dispute the Pope was consulted at all. Certainly there is no foundation for what is asserted by a few of the less scrupulous Romanists, that it was the Pope who summoned the Nicene Council.<sup>4</sup> The bringing it together was entirely the Emperor's idea. The Pope got his summons like other bishops, but being too old and infirm to obey in person, sent two of his presbyters to represent him. This accident made a precedent which his successors followed, as if it were beneath the dignity of the Pope to journey to a Council.

Now, certainly, I have not the least desire to detract from the respect to which the verdict of so venerable a meeting of bishops is entitled. It was such a representative assembly as the world up to that time had never seen. It brought together men from the most remote parts of the world. There were many there who could show in their bodies signs of their sufferings for the faith; for it was not more than some twenty years since the terrible Diocletian persecution, under which many suffered imprisonment or tortures, who survived to tell at Nicaea what was the faith which they had con-

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of Rome to 'gather a General Council together without the commandment and will of princes.'

<sup>4</sup> The earliest authority I can find for it is nearly four centuries after the event, namely, the sixth General Council in 680 (Mansi, *Concil.*, xi. 661). It is to be noted, however, that though, according to Roman theory, the office of convoking a General Council properly belongs to the Pope, yet a Council otherwise convoked may be recognized as general, provided the Pope have given his consent to the convocation previously, or even afterwards (Bellarmine, *De Conciliis et Ecclesia*, i. 12).

fessed. And the memory of that Council deserves to be kept in honour for the good service it did in repelling an assault which struck at the very life of our religion. For I verily believe that Christianity would now be extinct if the Arian had been adopted as its authorized form. How many Arians are there now? There are many now who refuse to believe that our Blessed Lord is 'of one substance with the Father'; but I doubt if there are in all the world a score of those who would be willing to hold what amounts to Deism, acknowledging our Lord as a kind of inferior divinity, pre-existent before all worlds, but though thus the oldest and highest of creatures, still no more than a creature.

Nor is the respect we owe that Council liable, as in the case of some later Councils, to deduction on account of turbulence in its proceedings. Our information, indeed, is but scanty. No official acts have been preserved, as they have in the case of later Councils; and there is not only no official record, but no authentic report of the proceedings. We do not even know with any certainty who presided over the deliberations. Eusebius, the historian to whom we owe so much of our knowledge of the early Church, was present, and, if he could have known how grateful after ages would have been for it, perhaps might have left us a detailed account of what went on. But he had no reason to be proud of his own share in the proceedings of a Council where his opinion was overruled. Though not an Arian himself, he was not in favour of the measures taken for the exclusion of the Arians; and he presented to the Council for adoption the creed of his own Church, Caesarea, which was something which the Arians could have signed. So Eusebius in the end found himself obliged to sign a formula drawn up in opposition to his judgment. The consequence was that he did not care to write the history of the Council, and his silence is ill-supplemented by other sources. One of the best of these is found in the writings of Athanasius; and I should by no means venture to say that that Father's defence of the truth was untinged by human passion, or that he shows himself likely to have put any very charitable construction on the sayings of one whom he regarded as a dangerous heretic, by all means to be banished from the Church.

One little passage from Athanasius<sup>5</sup> gives an interesting glimpse how the orthodox found phrase after phrase which they had devised, insufficient to exclude their adversaries. The Arians were overheard consulting with each other, and coming to the conclusion that they could agree to apply to the Son each successively proposed title of honour; being always however ready with a text of Scripture in which the same title is applied to a creature. I will repeat one as a puzzle for you. When it was proposed to predicate eternity of the Son, that too they thought might be conceded, because it

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<sup>5</sup> *De decret. Nic. Syn.* c. 21.

is said of ourselves, 'we which are alive are always'. Can you tell where these words are to be found?<sup>6</sup>

Another phrase deserves a little more comment. The Arians would own the Son to be God of God. I have said that they had no objection to give Him the title God; and as for the description 'of God,' they said, we are all of God, quoting the text, 'all things are of God.'. Now there is an ambiguity about the English preposition 'of,' of which you ought to be aware. When we say 'man was made *of* the dust of the earth,' you cannot mistake the meaning. Now the Son was 'begotten, not made.'. But when we say 'begotten of the Father,' we are apt to understand the word 'of' in quite a different sense, as equivalent merely to 'by.'. In the fourth century it was inquired *of* what was the Son in the other sense of the word, a question which the English language is almost too coarse to state. One does not like to put it in the form, From what materials was the substance of the Son derived? It could not be from any created substance, for it was owned on all hands that the Son was antecedent to all creation. The more thorough-going Arians answered, 'since nothing was before the Son, the Son was of nothing' whence they were called Exucontians. The answer embodied in the Creed of the Council was that the Son was of the substance of the Father; and in like manner they insisted that the Son was of the same substance with the Father. Leading Arians had already committed themselves to the rejection of

this word 'Homoousios,' and by the adoption of it the orthodox found what they were in search of—a test term which would have the effect of excluding Arius and his party from the Church.

Whether or not it was practically wise to be satisfied with nothing which would not bring about this result, even we who live after the event find it hard to answer with certainty. We know all the evils which resulted from the course of action actually adopted: what would have followed from the opposite course it is not so easy to say. Our own experience tells us that theological opinions are apt so to shade off into one another, that it is difficult to put out of communion even men whose opinions seem to us clearly outside the permissible limits, without wounding the sympathies of others whom we have no desire to disturb or offend. It was so in this Arian controversy. There were a number of thoroughly orthodox men who took deep offence at a non-scriptural word being made essential to communion. There was a further objection to this word that it had been disapproved of at the Council of Antioch, in 264, which condemned Paul of Samosata. Paul had argued that if the Father and Son were of the same substance, this common substance must be looked on as a third thing antecedent to both Father and Son; and the orthodox then were content to allow this reason against the use

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Cor. iv. 11.

of the word to prevail. The advocates for the doctrine of Development appeal to this instance of a word, condemned at a Council of great weight, being afterwards approved at a still greater Council; but it is absurd to treat as a case of development of doctrine what is really only an example of change as to the use of a word. We need no special theory to explain the fact that the Church, while retaining the same doctrine, may vary the language in which she propounds it, according as words, limited to no special sense by Scripture, come in the course of time to be differently understood.

What I have said as to there being a number of men, themselves quite orthodox, who disapproved of the measures taken to exclude Arius, may in part account for the unexpected vicissitudes of the Arian controversy. Arius had less than a score of bishops to take his side at Nicaea: and we might imagine that after he had been condemned by an assembly of bishops, unprecedented in numbers and weight of dignity, and after the Emperor had backed with all his might the decrees of the Council, treating Arius as no better than a heathen, and condescending even to comments on his personal appearance—it might have been expected, I say, that the heresy would be completely suppressed. Quite the contrary proved to be the case. It is difficult to imagine that if Alexandria had been presided over by the most latitudinarian of bishops, who should have permitted Arius to propagate his doctrines with the utmost impunity, they would ever have won so many converts, or gained such confidence in the Christian world, as were obtained after so formal a condemnation. The Church's history for the next fifty years presents a spectacle of convulsive struggling, with alternate success: Council after Council meeting: one of about twice the numbers of the Nicene setting aside its decisions; Athanasius sometimes in exile, sometimes flying for his life. Arianism became the creed of the whole nation of the Goths. A little before the meeting of the second General Council, when Gregory Nazianzen came to Constantinople as a kind of apostle of orthodoxy, it was with difficulty he could find a single church in which to deliver his sermons.

The interest of the subject has led me to say more about the Nicene Council than is strictly relevant to the controversy with Roman Catholics, which is this Term's work; but the point I want to bring out is this: If any Council can claim infallible authority it is the Nicene. Rather more than a century after its date the Council of Chalcedon declared, 'We will neither allow ourselves nor others to transgress by a syllable what our fathers at Nicaea have resolved; remembering the command, "remove not the landmarks which thy fathers have placed," for it was not they that spake there, but the Spirit of God Himself.' A like position of honour was conceded, when time had made them venerable, to all the first four General Councils. The Emperor Justinian decreed that the decisions of these four Councils

should have the force of laws, adding ‘we receive the dogmas of these four Synods as the sacred Scriptures.’ Pope Gregory the Great says that he venerates these four as the four Gospels, and describes them as the four-square stones on which the structure of faith rests.<sup>7</sup> Yet the hard struggle each of these Councils had to make, and the number of years which the struggle lasted before its decrees obtained general acceptance, show that they obtained their authority because of the truth which they declared, and it was not because of their authority that the decrees were recognized as true.

Euclid is recognized as an authority because all the propositions which he enunciates are true, and are capable of being proved; and it is not that he was recognized as infallible, and that it was thence inferred that his propositions were true. If anyone should hereafter put forward a theory that in matters of science there is always an infallible guide; that at one time it was Euclid, a couple of hundred years ago it was Sir Isaac Newton, while in our age it was Mr. Darwin; no evidence that our age knew nothing of such a doctrine would be needed beyond the fact that Mr. Darwin’s theories, even supposing they afterwards come to be universally received, did not gain their acceptance until after long years of controversy. The way to see whether anyone is recognized as a judge is to observe how parties behave after the judge speaks. If they go on disputing the same as before, it is plain enough that his authority is not acknowledged. And so the fact that we ourselves believe the doctrine of Nicaea to be true does not set aside the fact that general acknowledgment of its truth was not obtained until after hot and violent controversies, which lasted longer than the average lifetime of a man.

And so it was no point of faith in the early Church to receive these Councils as infallible. The deniers of their dogmas were met by tendering to them the proof, which is the proper evidence of them. Thus Augustine, in a well-known passage, reasoning with Maximinus the Arian, when the authority of the Council of Nicaea had been cited for the Homoousion, and that of Ariminum against it, says, ‘I must not press the authority of Nicaea against you, nor you that of Ariminum against me; I do not acknowledge the one, as you do not the other; but let us come to ground that is common to both—the testimony of the Holy Scriptures.’<sup>8</sup> It would thus appear that it

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<sup>7</sup> Sicut sancti Evangelii quatuor libros, sic quatuor Concilia suscipere et venerari me fateor . . . quia in his velut in quadrato lapide, sancta fidei structura consurgit’ (*Epist. i. 25, ad Johan. Episc. Const.*). Gregory’s words, quoted in the text, have suggested to a much respected writer an unwarranted inference, ‘Gregory evidently considering these four as far more important than *those* which followed them.’ I must therefore note that Gregory goes on to say, ‘Quintum quoque concilium pariter veneror.’ The sixth General Council did not take place till after his death.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Sed nunc nee ego Nicaenum, nee to debes Ariminense, tanquam praejudicaturus, proferre concilium. Nee ego hujus auctoritate, nee to illius detineris. Scripturarum auctori-

was not a point of faith to acknowledge the infallibility of Councils, as it is to acknowledge the authority of Scripture; but that the decisions of the Councils were re-received because they could be proved from Scripture.

On these grounds our own Church is commonly said to have received the first four Councils. Thus, Jeremy Taylor says (*Dissuasive*, Part II, Book i, § i. 4), ‘The Church of England receives the four first generals as of the highest regard, not that they are infallible, but that they have determined wisely and holily.’ But this reception by the Church of England is only to be understood with reference to the language constantly used by her divines,<sup>9</sup> and has not been expressed in any authoritative document. The only formal acknowledgment of these Councils that I know of is in a statute passed in the first year of Elizabeth, in which the power to try for heresy is limited to what has been adjudged to be heresy by the authority of canonical Scriptures, or by some of the first four General Councils, or by any other General Council wherein the same was declared heresy by the express and plain words of the said canonical Scriptures, or such as shall hereafter be determined to be heresy by the High Court of Parliament, with the assent of the clergy in their convocation (Eliz., cap. i, sec. 36, A.D. 1558). Incidentally the authority of the first four General Councils is appealed to in the Homily ‘on Fasting’; and again in one of the canons passed by the Convocation of 1640, in which Socinianism is described as being ‘a complication of many ancient heresies condemned by the first four General Councils.’ All this, however, comes very far short of any formal acknowledgment of the authority of these Councils, and only shows that the doctrine taught by them is accepted by us as true. We accept the doctrines on their own evidence, and are no more concerned with any impeachment of the wisdom or piety of the Fathers who made the decrees, than the value we attach to Magna Charta would be affected by any evidence that might be produced of turbulence, greediness, or self-seeking on the part of the barons who gained it.

*The Council of Constantinople.*—From the first General Council I pass to the second—that of Constantinople which indeed may be said to have only become an Ecumenical Council *ex post facto*. Originally it was but an assembly of Eastern bishops. Rome was not represented there. Nor does it seem for seventy years after its occurrence to have enjoyed the consideration of such a Council. It was the respect with which its acts were quoted at

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tatibus, non quorumque propriis, sed utrisque communibus testibus, res cum re, causa cum causa, ratio cum ratione concertet’ (August, *Cont. Maximin. Arian.* ii. 14, vol. viii. 704).

<sup>9</sup> Several of them extend the acknowledgment to the first six Councils, e.g. Field, *of the Church*, v. 51; Hammond, *of Heresy*, iii., 7-11. In the second part of the Homily on ‘Peril of Idolatry’, mention is made of pictures placed by Pope Constantine in St. Peter’s at Rome of ‘the ancient Fathers which had been at those six Councils which were allowed and received of all men.’

Chalcedon, in 451, which seems first to have given it that character. The history of every one of the Councils tends to support the theory that infallibility, if it exist at all, resides in the Church diffusive, not in a Council. Every one of the Councils has had to struggle for its reception. When its decrees are new they have but disputed authority. When time has mellowed them, and when the results arrived at by the Council have been long accepted by the Church, then we first hear of the Council's infallibility. On this Council of Constantinople some light is thrown by a venerable Father who was present, and who has as good a title saint as many who have been honoured with it, Gregory Nazianzen. Indeed I believe he is almost the only Father who is not accused of having sometimes in his writings fallen into doctrinal error. You will all be familiar with that saying of his, quoted by Browne in his *Commentary on the Articles*, 'If I must write the truth, I am disposed to avoid every assembly of bishops; for of no synod have I seen a profitable end, but rather an addition to than a diminution of evils; for the love of strife and the thirst for superiority are beyond the power of words to express.'<sup>10</sup> But it may be no harm to remind you what good cause Gregory had had for expressing himself so energetically.

Constantinople had been for some time in the hands of Arians; and Gregory, who had come there as a kind of missionary in the cause of Orthodoxy, had by his eloquence and exertions raised the orthodox side from almost extinction to pre-eminence. In return for such services Gregory was rewarded with the Episcopate of Constantinople, though not without much reluctance on his own part; for having lived an ascetic and retired life, he had much distaste for the pomp and luxury that surrounded the bishop of the metropolis, while he felt more acutely the worries incident to the office than a man might have done who had lived more in the world. You probably know that there was at this time a schism in the Church of Antioch, into the history of the origin of which I need not enter. Suffice it to say, that on the one hand Meletius was owned as bishop by the great bulk of the Christians of Antioch, and was generally accepted as such through the East; on the other hand, Paulinus had a comparatively small following in Antioch itself, but was strong in external support; for having been recognized by Athanasius, he was acknowledged as bishop of Antioch in the West. In an earlier stage of the dispute the schism had consisted in a refusal of the orthodox to acknowledge a prelate whom they regarded as Arian. But there was now no difference of doctrine between the contending parties. Meletius had disappointed the expectations of those who thought he would have taught Arianism, and had proved to be a staunch adherent to the Nicene Creed. In character he was saintly, in disposition mild and conciliatory: but

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<sup>10</sup> *Epist. 130, Procopio, vol. ii, p. 110: Caillau.*

overtures which he made to Paulinus for a termination of the schism were sternly rejected, it being thought an inexcusable blot that Meletius had owned his election to Arian support.

It is worthy of attention that the party in this dispute which gained the support of the Roman bishops was in the end not successful, and that Meletius, though not acknowledged by Rome in his lifetime, has since been honoured by her as a saint. The fact that Meletius presided over the second General Council is on this account remarkable. In other cases Romanist advocates have asserted, often without the least evidence, that the bishops who actually presided did so as deputed by the bishop of Rome. In this case the president of a Council, which has since been accepted as Ecumenical, was one whom Rome did not recognize as bishop; yet the Council willingly put him at their head.

Meletius died during the sitting of the Council. The controversy having been merely personal, and there being no disagreement in doctrine, wise and moderate men on both sides had wished that, on the death of either, no successor should be elected, and that the survivor should hold the see without dispute. It is even said—but the thing has been denied—that some compact of the kind had been assented to by leading presbyters at Antioch, including him who was afterwards chosen as Meletius's successor. At all events, when the death of Meletius took place, Gregory desired that the schism should be healed by all recognizing Paulinus as bishop. He held that the Church ought not to be divided on a merely personal question, and that if the controversy had been about two angels, it would not be worth the scandal it caused. Gregory's reputation and influence had extended to the West: the celebrated Jerome sat at his feet as his disciple. Consequently, the need of conciliating the West was felt, and was pressed strongly by Gregory. But these counsels were unacceptable to the greater part of the assembly, who were jealous in maintaining their independence against Western attempts at domination. The sun, they said, went from the East to the West, and not from the West to the East. They saw no reason why they should yield to a small and insolent minority at Antioch. Gregory tells us that a yell, rather than a cry, broke from the assembled Episcopate. In verses in which, after he got home, he gave vent to his feelings, he says that they buzzed about him like a swarm of wasps; that they cawed against him as an army of jackdaws. Then on the arrival at Constantinople of a detachment of bishops, who had other reasons for being unfriendly to Gregory, the assault was turned against himself. The bishops in question came from Egypt; and in order to understand the history of the Eastern Church for centuries after the adoption of Constantine's new capital, you must bear in mind the bitter jealousy that raged between Alexandria and Constantinople. The bishop of Alexandria had hitherto ranked as the second bishop in Christendom; and

he saw with disgust the rivalry of the upstart Byzantium. In the present case the election of Gregory had foiled an attempt of the Alexandrian bishop to thrust into the see of Constantinople a nominee of his own. Consequently Gregory must be got rid of. The point was raised, that as he had been originally consecrated to another see, his translation to Constantinople was a violation of the ancient canons. Gregory, though indignant that an obsolete canon should be invoked against him, professed himself much delighted to return to his retirement, and willing to be thrown overboard, like Jonah, if it would give peace to the Church. We need not doubt his sincerity. A man who undertakes uncongenial work may cheerfully continue at it as long as he feels he is doing it successfully, but be glad to retire when it is perceived that he has been a failure. Yet when Gregory was taken at his word, there remained on his mind, as was not unnatural, the greatest soreness at his treatment; and he has left both in prose, and still more in the verses in which he was fond of giving vent to his feelings, descriptions which show that the one hundred and fifty venerable fathers of Constantinople looked much less venerable when seen close at hand than at a distance.

He begins his verses by saying: 'You may boldly face a lion; a leopard is a gentle beast after all; a snake may frighten you and yet flee from you: there is just one animal to be dreaded—a bad bishop.' The context of the verses themselves, and the occasion on which they were written, leave no reasonable room for doubt that the bad bishops whom he proceeds to describe were those who formed the majority of the Council, and from whom he had personally suffered. It seems to me likely that in the coarse, illiterate men whom he describes, he had especially in view the Egyptian contingent; for, as we shall presently see, there is abundant evidence of the rude and unchristian violence with which theological controversy was carried on in that part of the world. It has been suggested that Gregory had only Arian bishops in view; but he brings no charge of false doctrine against the objects of his invective: if he counts them unfit for their office, it is because of their want of education, and still more on account of their low morality. They seem to him to have arrived at their dignity in answer to the call of a herald who had summoned all the gluttons, villains, liars, false swearers, of the empire; they are "chameleons that change their colour with every stone over which they pass;" "illiterate, lowborn, filled with all the pride of upstarts, fresh from the tables of false accountants," "peasants from the plough," "unwashed blacksmiths," "deserters from the army or navy, still stinking from the holds of the ships." But it may be said the Apostles were unlearned. True; and give me a real apostle and I will reverence him however illiterate; but these are time-servers, waiting not on God, but on the rise and flow of the tide, or the straw on the wind; angry lions to the small, fawning spaniels to the great; flatterers of ladies; snuffing up the smell of

good dinners; ever at the gates, not of the wise, but of the powerful; unable to speak themselves, but having sufficient sense to stop the mouths of those who can; made wild by their elevation; affecting manners not their own; the long beard, the downcast look, the head bowed, the subdued voice, the slow walk, the got-up devotee; the wisdom anywhere but in the mind.

‘Councils, congresses, we greet afar off, from which (to use moderate terms) we have suffered many evils. I will not sit in one of these Councils of geese and cranes; I fly from every meeting of bishops; for I never saw a good end of any such, nor termination, but rather an addition of evils.’

But I find that I had better reserve to another lecture the rest of what I have to say about Councils.