

A Sketch of the Belief of the Old Catholics.

By Joseph René Vilatte.

James Kerr & Son, Printers, Fort Howard, Wisconsin, 1890.

Transcribed by Richard Mammana, 2013.

A SKETCH
OF
THE BELIEF
OF THE
OLD CATHOLICS.

PARATI SEMPER AD SATISFACTIONEM OMNI
POSCENTI VOS RATIONEM DE EÂ, QUÆ IN
VOBIS EST, SPE. EP. 1., B. PETRI, III., 15.

DYCKESVILLE, WISCONSIN.
1890.

PREFACE.

We publish this little pamphlet to satisfy the numerous demands of persons who put us the questions: *Who are you?* And *What do you believe?* By so doing we bear in mind the injunction of S. Peter, to “be always ready to give a reason for the hope that is in us.” These few pages are but a concise *résumé*, necessarily imperfect, of our faith. But it is, we think, sufficient to demonstrate that we are as far removed from Protestantism on the one hand as we are from Romanism on the other: in a word, that we are Catholics without any other qualification.

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July 7th, 1889,
Feast of the Precious Blood.

HISTORICAL.

The first Pentecost after the Ascension of Christ was the origin of the Church of Jerusalem, which became thus the mother of all the Churches, and was also the inauguration of the Church Universal.

The Acts of the Holy Apostles certify us that *election* was the source of all ecclesiastical dignities in the Early Church. Hence Matthias was elected by the votes of the brethren, and being approved by the Holy Ghost, was added to the College of the Apostles. Acts i, 23-26. Likewise in the ordinations of the first deacons, the Apostles convoked an assembly of the faithful, and proposed to them that they should elect seven men from among them for the office. This being done, they presented those elected to the Apostles, who ordained them by the laying on of hands. Acts vi, 3-6.

From the Holy Gospels we learn that the Apostles were endowed with equal power and authority. [5/6] It was not to Peter alone that Jesus gave the power to bind and to loose, but to all. Whosoever heareth thee heareth Me, and whosoever despiseth thee despiseth Me; but to *all* the Apostles: Whosoever heareth *you* heareth Me, and whosoever despiseth *you* despiseth Me. When Christ gave the commission—Teach all nations; whosoever sins you forgive they are forgiven, whosoever sins you retain they are retained—he was not speaking to Peter in any sense different from the others. (S. Matt. xviii, 18; S. John xx, 23; S. Matt. xvi, 18-19). Undoubtedly Christ said to Peter, “thou art Peter (a rock) and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against It.” Peter was the oracle of the Holy Ghost on this occasion and the mouthpiece of the Apostolic College. But the promise *I will build*, began to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, and the Seal of the Holy Spirit, and the power, fell upon all alike, as to all alike had been given the promise of the keys of the kingdom of heaven—the power of binding and loosing. That Peter is only *one* of the foundation stones of the Church we are taught by the Holy Ghost in the Epistle to the Ephesians, ii chap., 20 ver. The Church is built upon the foundation of the Prophets and Apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the Chief Corner Stone. Peter is a foundation stone, the Prophets and Apostles are foundations stones too, but Christ is the Chief Corner Stone.

[7] We are called Old Catholics because we have returned to the Catholicity of Scriptural and primitive times. But Catholicism is neither old nor new, or rather, it is ever old and ever new.

For us, the Pope of Rome is neither the source, nor the unique channel of authority in the Church of God. For, as Michaud says: The Pope holds his authority from the Church, not the Church from him. The Scriptures and the history of the Church show that the sovereignty

resides, not in the will of any chief, but in the Church, in the will of the Christian community, and that the government of the Church ought to be democratic.

This was the principle which animated the Old Catholic Church of Holland when she began her conflict with the Court of Rome. She was determined never to yield her ancient rights and privileges into the hands of the Bishops of Rome. For nearly 200 years she has valiantly combatted for her liberties, and we cannot but believe God will reward her for her fidelity, and that the ancient archbishopric of Utrecht will attain to a consideration and dignity hitherto unknown. We, in America, her children, by reason of our Apostolic ministry derived from her, remain true to the ancient faith she so zealously guards and transmits.

Since the eighteenth of July, 1870, the Churches of German and Switzerland have felt constrained to act in a similar way by rejecting the unchristian pretensions of the papacy to preserve themselves from ever-increasing innovations in matters of faith, and from foreign intervention in National Church Government. Consequently they do not recognize a supremacy of divine institution nor the infallibility of the Bishop of Rome, neither do they attribute to him any power superior to that possessed by other bishops save what has been conferred by the Church in her General Councils.

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES.

Old Catholics receive the Holy Scriptures as God's inspired Word. This precious revelation is accepted in the sense intended by the Holy Ghost and as interpreted by the Church, to whom it pertains to judge of the true sense and true interpretation of the Bible. They never understand or interpret the Oracles of God except in accordance with the unanimous sentiments of the Fathers. Those books are received as canonical which are generally received by the Catholic Churches throughout the world. The Bishops and priests of this Church inculcate the duty and privilege of reading the Word of God upon all the faithful. In truth, they do but re-echo the words of S. Boniface, when he said: "Cast aside whatever may hinder you from studying the Holy Scriptures; seek therein the divine wisdom which is brighter than gold, purer than silver, more sparkling than diamonds, clearer than crystal, more precious than the topaz; the young cannot seek a better guide, the aged cannot possess a more precious boon than the Holy Scripture, [8/9] which directs the vessel of our soul, and brings it without shipwreck to the blessed shores of paradise, even to the sojourn of joys divine where the angels dwell."

CREEDS.

We heartily believe and receive the three Symbols, the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Creed of S. Athanasius; for they are consonant with the teachings of the Fathers and the testimony of Holy Scripture.

THE COUNCILS.

We accept as Ecumenical the Seven General Councils recognized by all the Catholic Churches, namely:

First at Nicea, A.D. 325, against Arianism.

Second at Constantinople, A.D. 381, against Apolinarians and Macedonians.

Third at Ephesus, A.D. 431, against Nestorianism.

Fourth at Chalcedon, A.D. 451, against Monophysites.

Fifth at Constantinople, A.D. 529, Nestorianism and Monophysites.

Sixth at Constantinople, A.D. 680, against Monothelites.

Seventh at Nicea, A.D. 787, against Iconoclasts.

We likewise accept the definitions of the Council of Trent concerning the Seven Sacraments, as being the clearest and most concise statement of the doctrine held by all the Catholic Churches throughout the world.

THE SACRAMENTS.

We believe that the Sacraments of the New Dispensation are not merely sacred signs which represent grace to us, nor the seals which confirm [9/10] it in us, but that they are the instruments of the Holy Ghost which apply and confer grace upon us in virtue of the words pronounced and the act performed upon us from without, provided we do not raise any obstacle by our own bad dispositions. [In the administration of the Sacraments, the Old Catholics scrupulously follow the Ritual of the Latin Church. In the consecration of Bishops and the ordination of the inferior clergy, using the *Pontificale Romanum*, for the other Sacraments following the *Rituale Romanum*, translated into the vernacular, the only exception being the giving of the cup to the laity, in communion.]

BAPTISM.

We acknowledge Baptism as the Sacrament established by Christ to cleanse men from original sin and to make them Christians. It is the Sacrament of the new birth. S. John, iii, 5,—*Verily, verily, I say unto thee, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.*

CONFIRMATION.

We believe that the Bishop is the ordinary minister of Confirmation, and that in this Sacrament the Holy Ghost is given with the fulness of His gifts. “*For they had only been baptized in the Name of the Lord Jesus; then the Apostles laid their hands upon them and they received the Holy Ghost.*” Acts viii, 14-17.

PENANCE.

We believe that it has pleased Jesus Christ to give to his Church the authority to pardon those [10/11] who have broken the law of the Gospel after Baptism, and that every priest validly ordained has this power through the merits and in the person of Christ. *Whose soever sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose soever sins you shall retain, they are retained.* S. John, xx, 23.

EUCCHARIST.

We profess that the Eucharist is both a sacrifice and a sacrament. That in the unbloody Sacrifice of the Mass, which is the central rite and most essential act of public worship a Christian owes to God, there is offered a true, proper, propitiatory sacrifice for the living and the dead. We maintain that the Liturgy ought to be said in the tongue understood by the people to be in accordance with the Word of God and the custom of the Primitive Church. We believe that in the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist there is truly and really the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. We affirm that the cup of the Lord is not to be denied to the laity; for both the parts of the Lord’s Sacrament, by Christ’s ordinance and commandment ought to be ministered to all men alike. *Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.* S. John, vi, 53.

EXTREME UNCTION.

We believe Extreme Unction to be a Sacrament of the New Dispensation, instituted for the spiritual and corporate solace of the

sick. Its [11/12] efficacy and mode of administration are plainly indicated in the Catholic Epistle of S. James, v, 14-15: *Is any one sick among you, let him bring in the priests of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Name of the Lord.*

SACRED ORDERS.

We believe that Orders is a Sacrament which confers upon those who validly receive it the power to exercise the several functions of the ministry. Bishops are the ministers of this Sacrament.

The Catholic Church makes a distinction between the minor orders and the greater, or Holy Orders; the latter being so called by reason of the eminent dignity they confer and the grave obligations they impose.

MATRIMONY.

We believe that Holy Matrimony is a Sacrament which sanctifies the lawful union of a Christian man and woman. *For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great Sacrament, but I speak in Christ and in the Church.* S. Paul to the Eph. v, 32. And no man has a right to dissolve the bonds of marriage. *For what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.* S. Matt. xix, 6.

None of our priests has the right to contract marriage after his ordination. [The Church of Holland protests against the decision of the Synod of Bonn regarding the marriage of priests.] But a married [12/13] man having a vocation for the sacred ministry, may receive holy orders notwithstanding his previous marriage contract, in accordance with the discipline which dates from the earliest ages of the faith, and is still in vigor in all the Oriental Churches.

THE CHURCH.

The visible Church of Christ is a society in which all the faithful are joined together by the profession of the same faith, and forming a body of which Jesus Christ is the Head and Source of all sanctity.

THE EPISCOPATE.

We believe that the Episcopate is as necessary for the life of the Church as breath is for the life of man; that it is the common centre of unity and the guardian of the deposit of divine revelation; that bishops

are equal in power and authority by divine right, and that to them belongs the duty of defending the truth and Catholic traditions; to the end that, the whole Church being united under their guidance, there may ever be *one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God, the Father of all, who is above all, over all, and in us all.* S. Paul to the Eph. iv, 5.

MONASTIC LIFE.

Old Catholics recognize that religious orders are a source of strength and benediction not to be neglected, but to be cherished and developed among the children of God. The life of sacrifice and of supereminent love towards God and man [13/14] which characterized the Apostles, ought to be imitated by elect souls in the Church, chosen by the Holy Ghost, for a free-will immolation of self upon the altar of charity, so that thus the example of Evangelical virtues may be offered to the world. We believe, therefore, that voluntary celibacy is most agreeable to God, to which many are called for the glory of God, their own souls' surer salvation, and the solace of the sick and the poor. *For he who is unmarried careth for the things of the Lord; he seeketh how he may please God; but he who is married busieth himself with the affairs of the world, he seeketh how he may please his wife, and is divided.* i. Epis. S. Paul to the Cor. vii, 32-33.

SACRED IMAGES.

We emphatically deny the accusation of our separated brethren who pretend that Catholics adore the images of Christ, the Blessed Virgin and the Saints. We venerate them as sacred things, and representing sacred persons. The Catholic Church compels no one to use sacred images or pictures in his worship. It is recommended as a pious practice, but it is neither necessary for justification, nor for salvation. We furthermore believe that when it is practiced, it should be done wisely according to the spirit and rules of the universal church, in order to avoid the abuses which are always so easy and so hurtful in this matter.

[15] THE SAINTS.

We believe there is but "One Mediator (of redemption) between God and man, to wit: the Man Christ Jesus." i Tim. ii, 5. But that it is a good and useful thing to invoke the saints, who are our glorified brethren, in order that they may help us by their prayers; for if "the prayers of a righteous man availeth much" on this earth, how much

more powerful must they not be when near the throne of God in the realms of glory. That our departed brethren pray for us we know from the universal tradition of the Church and from Holy Writ. As an example, we find the Prophet Jeremias interceding for the people long after his death. This is the lover of his brethren, and of the people of Israel: this is he who prayeth much for the people, and the entire holy nation, even Jeremias, the Prophet of God. ii Mach., xv, 14.

OUR BOND OF UNION.

We allow no dissidence in matters of faith. As already said, we recognize the Seven Ecumenical Councils as the fountain-head for the unity of the faith. In them are the ways of peace. From them flow the stream of grace, which one day shall efface all divisions. Their kindly light shall lead all sects to unity by a sincere return to Old Catholicism. Should any member of our Church unhappily rebel against this faith, he would cease to be a member, and would be regarded as a heathen and a publican. For no one has a right to add to, or take away from, the defined faith.

PRAISE THE PRECIOUS BLOOD.