

OUR ROMAN LETTER

(By "SCOTTUS.")

(Concluded from last week.)

A short distance further, on the side of the same road, there stands a church, which since the ninth century has been dedicated to St. Sebastian, but which was previously known as the Basilica of the Apostles. The idea was general that the body of St. Fabian, who was one of those buried in the crypt of the Popes, as mentioned just now had been transferred to the church of St. Praxedes within the city. But a casual entry in an old calendar suggested that its last resting-place was beside that of St. Sebastian in the church of the latter, where as a matter of fact their joint festival has long been, and still is, celebrated on January 20. Moreover, a venerable tradition persisted in maintaining that the neighborhood of that church had been honored in some special way by the presence or the relics of SS. Peter and Paul. Some would have it that the two Apostles really dwelt there for a time; others prefer the supposition that their bodies were hidden there in time of unusual stress when the persecutor in his anger was about to seize and scatter to the winds the venerable bones that seemed to lend fresh courage to the Christian community; while others favor the explanation furnished by the story that tells how the Eastern Christians, hearing of the death of their glorious compatriots in Rome, and anxious to secure their remains to their native land, journeyed to the city, managed to lay hold of the two bodies, and were carrying them off when discovered by the Roman Christians who overtook them and, retaking the precious relics of their Apostles, laid them temporarily to rest where they had recovered them, that is, where the church now stands. Be this as it may, there was no doubt that as early as the fourth century there existed on that spot memorials known as the *Vestiges of the Apostles*, Peter and Paul. A generation ago investigation had led to the surmise that these *Vestiges* had been situated right behind the present church, and precisely in a small circular structure known as the *Platonica*. But many were not so easily convinced, and their doubt was intensified when further excavations and researches showed that this structure was in reality a tiny temple erected in memory of the martyr St. Quirinus. They preferred to think that the *Vestiges* were to be sought within the church, where, according to the chance entry in a tenth-century calendar, reposed the body of St. Fabian, right in the centre of the church, alongside the *Vestiges* of the Apostles.

Amongst those who held this view was Mgr. De Waal, the cultured rector of the Teutonic Institute of St. Mary, one of the most prominent members of the Pontifical Archaeological Commission, who long ago expressed the opinion that the key to the riddle was to be sought underneath the floor of the church. Want of sufficient funds to carry out the necessary excavations had long formed an insurmountable obstacle. But this difficulty being at last overcome, he set to work; and the result was the discovery of Christian memorials, the value of which it would be hard to exaggerate.

Right in the centre of the church, there was known to have existed an altar to the memory of Pope St. Fabian which was removed when the church was re-

modelled and repaired in the early years of the last century; and there, a few feet beneath the floor, Mgr. De Waal found three marble coffins placed side by side. On being carefully opened, the centre coffin was found to contain a fairly well preserved body which had evidently been embalmed, traces of the aromatic spices used in the process being clearly visible, and their fragrant odor still fresh after all these centuries. On the breast lay the withered fragments of a palm branch and beside the head a small marble slab with the simple inscription, "S. Fabianus Ite Requiescit," showing that there lay the mortal remains of Pope Fabian, who had given up his life for the Faith on January 20, A.D. 250.

But, important as was this discovery, it faded into insignificance before what followed. Around the open space where the coffin lay there came to light the lower parts of a structure which was evidently anterior to the basilica built on the spot in the time of Pope Damasus (384), would appear to have been disturbed as little as possible during the building of the latter, bears traces of having been elaborately decorated before the end of the third century, and most important of all, is covered with what is known as *graffiti* or scribblings scratched on the plaster with a nail or similar instrument by the devout who took this means of giving expression to the devotion that brought them to the spot. In these rude scribblings we are able to read as clearly and unmistakably as if written yesterday that the faithful who frequented that spot came to honor the memory of the Apostles and invoke their intercession: "Paul and Peter (thus they wrote) pray for Victor"; or "Paul and Peter intercede for Erate"; or "Paul and Peter bear Sozomen in mind"—(Pavle ed Petre Petite Pro Victore; Pavle Petre Petite Pro Erate Rogate; Pavle Petre in Mente Habete Sozomen).

Bearing in mind the principle laid down by De Rossi, and accepted by all archaeologists, that such *graffiti*, or chance scribblings made by visitors to places of devotion, constitute a faithful echo of history and may be taken as infallible guides in the search for forgotten shrines and places of veneration, we have here in these simple invocations brought to light by Mgr. De Waal proof positive that we are here in the presence of the *Vestiges* of the Apostles. Between the year 250 and 400 the faithful regarded this particular spot with feelings of profound veneration, and believed that it had been sanctified in some special way by the living presence or the precious relics of the two Apostles of Rome.

CHURCH DESTROYED BY FIRE

ST. PATRICK'S, RAETIHI.

On 19th of March, 1918, St. Patrick's Church, Raetihi, was burnt to the ground in the terrible bush fire that swept over this district. We are now making an effort to raise money to build another Church so that our people may have a proper place of worship.

Who will help us in this good work?

Who will honor St. Patrick by raising a Church to his name?

We are holding a Bazaar in May. Donations in kind or money will be gratefully received and acknowledged. Address—

FATHER GUINANE, Ohakune.



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