

fessors buried there; but there is always to be found loving and special mention made by them of a

Confraternity of Guardsmen,

restorers, and diggers, called sextons or fossores. Guides always speak of them with loving mention, and deservedly so. By night these sextons dug underground; with tremendous exertion they built corridors on corridors, and in the walls graves upon graves. In the face of the greatest difficulties and dangers they rescued the bodies of the martyrs from the hands of the executioners, or of the enraged people, bringing them into the safe keeping of these subterranean cemeteries. Then they washed and cleaned and embalmed the dead bodies, wrapped them in white linen and covered them with a marble slab. Whenever the sides of one corridor were filled with graves, a new corridor was excavated. The clay from the new gallery was packed into the old one. In that way we, by modern archaeological explorations, come to graves which have been untouched since the fossores walled them up and filled the galleries some seventeen or eighteen centuries ago. Our guide tells us of the construction of the chapel of the Catacombs, and first he tells us of its altar. The altar in the early Church was a slab of marble covering the remains of a martyr. When some noted Christian gave his life for the faith, when the fossores rescued the mangled remains, perhaps from the lions in the Coliseum, or the half-burned corpses in the gardens of Nero, they gathered up everything belonging to the dying here and carried all reverently and lovingly to the Catacombs. The body was placed within a 'loculus' and an alcove formed above the remains, called an 'arcosolium.' Here, then, was an arched vault, or as it was called, 'a table tomb,' and here alone it was allowed to say Mass in the Catacombs. Strange to say, but it is not strange, no priest is permitted to say Mass anywhere in the world without a table tomb, or as we call it, an altar stone containing a relic of a martyr. We can imagine the feelings of the early priests saying Mass over the remains of their departed brothers.

The Primitive Church

consisted of two small chambers, separated by a corridor; in the one near the altar were the men, in the other the women. The separating of the sexes was strictly enforced in the primitive Church. The guides again call our attention to the luminaria, or air and light holes, bored in the ceiling. We can understand the necessity of these when we remember that there are over two million graves in the Catacombs, and when we think of the many lamps and the crowds of people, we can understand the necessity of these air shafts. Frequently these air holes betrayed the Christians to the pagans, as in the case related by St. Gregory of Tours. Once the Prefect of the city waited until the chapels were filled with worshippers assisting at Mass, and poured down the ventilating shaft earth and stones, and buried the congregation alive. As the crude massacre was made during Mass, our late explorers found there the rough chalice, the remnants of the vestments that were used during the celebration itself.

Following the peace declared by Constantine, the Catacombs became a place of pilgrimage; immense crowds flocked there from the third to the sixth century. Many Popes, especially the great St. Damasus, in the fifth century, made extensive repairs. In the seventh and eighth centuries the Lombard invaders desecrated, plundered, and in part destroyed the Catacombs. This led to what is known as the period of translations, by which the relics of the Popes and the principal martyrs were removed for safety to the churches of Rome.

After 817 the Catacombs were abandoned and closed, and practically lost sight of until the sixteenth century. From 1632 to 1842 the Catacombs were travelled over in every direction by relic hunters and curiosity seekers, and especially by ignorant archaeologists, who did unspeakable harm by their reckless excavations, by their neglect to chronicle intelligently what they met. The Catacombs were in fact treated as a huge quarry; priceless inscriptions were taken away in cartloads, and

sawed into slabs to pave the Roman churches, or to adorn the walls of private houses. The corridors were broken down and clogged up; the shafts for light and air were choked from above with refuse; rich material treasures disappeared without leaving any trace. The frescoes were detached from their original site and perished in the transit to the upper air. Nearly every indignity was offered to these holy places in which St. Damasus feared to repose even in death. The celebrated Jesuit, Father Marchi, did much to stop the vandalism of the Catacombs, but Father Marchi's greatest work was the formation of the world's greatest archaeologist,

The Celebrated John Baptist De Rossi.

For fifty years De Rossi made the Catacombs his home. He excavated hundreds of miles of galleries; he gathered and preserved every inscription, pagan and Christian. He sifted the very sand of the corridors for information; and to-day the Church is enriched with thousands of inscriptions, whole or fragmentary, from the Catacombs, which I think, after the Books of Revelation, are amongst the most precious relics of the Church.

I shall never forget the evenings we spent in the Catacombs with this grand old man. He spoke to us in a little room, where once lay the bodies of all the martyred Popes for three centuries. He told us of the days of persecution, and pictured to us the joys and sorrows, the triumphs and failures of those days of faith. I have tried while bringing you through the Catacombs to tell you of

The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity.

The sword of calumny and ridicule—all in turn and often together, tried to kill the mustard seed of Christianity, to extinguish the newly lit flambeau of the faith. In vain did paganism try to drown the Church in the blood of her children; in vain were armies sent to the four corners of the earth to exterminate the Christians; in vain did they chase the early believers from the surface of the earth, and compelled them to hide in the dark caverns of the Catacombs. All that could not prevent the blood of martyrs from becoming the seed of Christians. So rapid was the spread of Christianity that forty years after the death of St. Paul, one of the officers of the Emperor Trajan, writing to his royal master, declared that the religion of the Christians had gained already the cities, the islands, and the rural districts. One century later Tertullian exclaimed: 'We are but of yesterday, and already we fill your cities, your camps, your council halls, your palace, your senate and forum. We leave you only your temples. If we were to withdraw from you, the Empire would be but a desert. Paganism saw Christianity grow, and recognising and fearing the consequences, came

The Persecution of Diocletian,

the last, the severest in its terms and acts. In this it was like the dying throes of a monster, whose bitterness of spirit increases as his power wanes. In 303, just ten years before the Edict of Milan was issued, there appeared a series of imperial edicts, the very terms of which indicate the despairing and yet determined effort to root out every vestige of the Christian faith and Church. 'By these enactments all Christian assemblies were prohibited; all churches were to be demolished; all copies of the Scriptures to be burned; all Christians who held rank of office to be degraded; all of whatever rank to lose their citizenship, and be liable like slaves to be tortured. Christian slaves were to be incapable of receiving freedom. All bishops and clergy were to be thrown into prison and there compelled to sacrifice, and all Christians everywhere ordered publicly to worship the gods, under the usual penalty of torture and death' (Innes, *Church and State*).

In 311 a sudden and unexpected change of attitude to the Christians. Galerius, recognising that they could not be conquered nor exterminated, resolves to grant them toleration, and to put them on an equal footing with the Jews.

In 312, Constantine, having conquered Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian bridge, ascended the throne as

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