

The Catacombs

IN these days of Christianity and civilization, when the laws of just rulers afford to all that liberty and freedom of religious worship which alone is right, we, who are blest in being members of the one true fold of Christ, often think little of the hardships and privations endured by those who in the early years of the Christian era followed, too, the emblem of the Cross. Trials and persecutions there were raised against the youthful Church of Christ in those centuries which marked not only the fall but also the rise of Rome—for as she was falling from the power she had held in the days of her idolatry, so also was she rising in the power that was becoming hers by the Triumphs of the Cross. For here on the banks of the Tiber, where had risen during the course of nearly eight hundred years that great imperial city, was also rising that power that was destined to send into the farthest recesses of the earth the divine message of the Nazarine. Here in Rome, in those ages when the heathen Emperors tortured the Church with long and protracted persecutions, were being firmly established the pillars and the grounds of Christianity. When these pagan sovereigns thought they were doing most harm to the bark of Peter, they were but giving it the strength and the enlivenment which showed itself in the glorious examples of the early martyrs; when they thought that they were confining Christ's Church to subterranean regions near Rome, they were but building a monument which should stand forth as an unperishable memorial of the undying faith of the early Christians. So to-day among the ancient ruins of Rome stand out the Catacombs as a powerful light in illustration of the life, and in evidence of the faith, of the Christians in the primitive ages. Let us therefore visit, as it were, in our imagination the suburbs of that ancient city and learn something of those vast subterranean structures in which the peoples of all Christian countries are so much interested.

Although there are Catacombs in several other places, those of Rome are the most extensive with

which we are acquainted and, as might be expected in the centre of the Christian world, are in many respects the most remarkable. They are scattered about the hills and valleys around Rome, and so vast and numerous are they that it is said if the galleries and chambers of which they are composed were stretched out in a straight line, it would be between three and four hundred miles in length. Few are more than two miles from the city walls. The greater number of the Catacombs and those of most importance are situated to the south-east of Rome near the Appian Way. In this vicinity are the Catacombs of San Callisto, St. Sebastian, St. Soteris and several others which are of great importance.

The ground, of the regions in which these underground passages are constructed, consists of three grades of soil of which a species called the stratum of tufa rock is that in which the Catacombs are nearly always found. This grade of soil was suitable to the excavators in digging out those structures, as the formation of the rock was such as did not require the employment of any other building materials in making the subterranean chambers.

The Catacombs are in few cases connected with one another, but each excavation constitutes an intricate labyrinth of passages and galleries in which the guideless wanderer might become as hopelessly astray as in the densest forest. The entrances to the Catacombs, of which there are usually more than one, are stairways of from thirty-three to forty-nine feet in depth and bring the visitor to as irregular and intricate a net work of corridors and passages as can be imagined. Air shafts are connected with these galleries for the purpose of letting light and fresh air into the impenetrable darkness of these chambers. The Catacombs are composed chiefly of these galleries which are from three to four feet wide and between ten and thirteen feet high, although there are many chambers, too, which have been hewn out of the rock and which are wider and higher than the passages. There might be also a second and a third and even a fourth storey of those passages in one Catacomb.

Along the walls of the galleries are the "loculi"

which are the burial-places of the dead and in each of which is buried one corpse. The method of burial was to dig out in the wall of the passage a groove large enough to hold the dead body, having the excavation at right angles to the gallery. Then the corpse having been placed, the hole was sealed over with a marble slab on which was usually written an inscription. In this way several "loculi" might be situated in a wall, one above the other. Besides the "loculi" there were other resting-places for the dead in the Catacombs called the "cubicula" which correspond to our family vaults. These "cubicula" were small chambers around the walls of which the dead members of the family were buried, and in the centre of the chamber might be the burial spot of an ancestor or the tomb of a deeply venerated martyr, which would serve as an altar for the celebration of a funeral or an anniversary mass. Here too among the bones of the martyrs the pious Christian of Rome might withdraw to invoke God's mercy on a bereaved relative or to honor those who had died in proclaiming the faith of Christ.

The walls of the "Cubicula" as well as those of the outer halls were frequently adorned with paintings and inscriptions, illustrating examples of Christian teaching or representing scenes of Biblical story. There have been found very often too on tombs, or elsewhere in the Catacombs, a great deal of sculpture and engraving. Thus, amid the silence of the chambers of the dead, have come down to us many valuable works of early Christian art.

It is therefore, to-day, as a noble monument of the faith and lives of the early Christians and as a beautiful memorial of the triumphs of the martyrs, that the peoples of all ages cherish these cemeteries, and during the centuries that have passed since their discovery in 1578 men have given their whole lives to acquiring a knowledge of the Catacombs.

As to the origin and history of the Catacombs it is now universally known, that, even before the spreading of Christianity over the Roman Empire, the Jews of Rome used to bury their dead in cemeteries, contrary to the custom of that time, of cremation. Then in later

years, when from out the Capital issued the imperial edicts of the masters of the universe against the new religion of Christ, those of Rome who had found the Truth and who professed Christianity used too this method of subterranean burial. Later still when the hardness and obduracy of these heathen hearts grew more bitter, and when they raised persecutions so terrible against the new religion that it was ordered that every Christian should be put to death, then it was, that down into the darkness of those underground vaults, these early followers of the Nazarene retreated to obtain from the Martyr of Golgotha that strength and courage they must have to fight on the amphitheatres of Rome for the everlasting crown of martyrdom. Here amongst the bones of their ancestors, in the midst of that which the Romans most revered and respected—the bodies of the dead—the Christians were for the time safe from the arrest, imprisonment, and death which by the law was theirs. Then afterwards at that blessed time when the “Labarum” was raised on high as the battle-standard of Constantine and when the great “Magna Charta” of the Church proclaimed its decree of justice and right, did the Catacombs cease to be used by the Christians. For some time they continued to be used as cemeteries by Christianized Rome, but soon they no longer served even this purpose and when, on the invasions of Rome by the barbarians, the Catacombs were in a degree destroyed, the Popes of those centuries made efforts to keep revived in the minds of the people their use in the years of persecution. They were later, however, practically forgotten till only a few centuries ago when again an interest in them was roused, when men like Basio and De Rossi spent their whole lives in studying the wonders of the Catacombs and in communicating to others by the didactic powers of the pen all that they had been able to learn of those remarkable structures.

It is therefore, with the deepest reverence and the most profound respect that the people of all Christian Countries venerate the Catacombs as being a memorial of the faith of those who conquered and who won for themselves eternal bliss. The bright and vivifying