

THE PICTORIAL ART OF THE CATACOMBS.

WHEN the great master of Christian archæology, Giovanni Battista de Rossi, passed to his eternal rest ten years ago in the Papal Villa of Castel Gandolfo, it was feared that the science to which his life had been devoted died with him. Happily such was not the case; he himself had provided for the continuance of his work. As the Rev. Dr. Shahan, the illustrious professor of ecclesiastical history in the Catholic University, of Washington, has written in this REVIEW: though de Rossi was never a professor, "one will look in vain for a nearer approach in our day to the old Hellenic teachers or the great scholastics of the Middle Ages, who lived in the tenderest intimacy with their pupils. His real chair was in the depth of the Catacombs or in the Lateran galleries." And as a consequence he had numerous disciples and followers. Some, like Marucchi, Stevenson, Armellini, De Waal, Father Germano, Kirsch and Wilpert, gave themselves up seriously and devotedly under his immediate direction to the study of Christian antiquities or to a kindred subject; and a much more numerous class, in which was the present writer, was quite content to listen and to learn from the lips of the master the wondrous and fascinating story of early Christian Rome as illustrated by its monuments. This was conveyed at times in viva-voce "demonstrations" in the Catacombs that surround the Eternal City on the feast days of saints originally buried in them; and again in conferences on Christian archæology in the library of the Academy of Noble Ecclesiastics at the Minerva, or recorded for the benefit of all in the pages of the "Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana," published by De Rossi. Though no one individual is provided with sufficient knowledge and experience to fill the place left vacant by the death of De Rossi, yet the pupils who have studied under him, and who by long acquaintance with him have acquired his methods, continue to contribute to the advancement of the science which he developed.

Amongst those who have followed most closely in the footsteps of the master, Monsignor Joseph Wilpert is distinguished for the exactness and thoroughness of his labors and for the admirable quality of concentration he has employed in his work. The field of his study embraces the art of the Catacombs. The book which he has recently produced and which is dedicated to the new Pontiff, Pope Pius X., is an exhaustive study of the pictorial art of the subterranean Christian cemeteries which surround the Eternal City, "The Paintings of the Roman Catacombs." It may be described as a complete and scientific account of the immense underground pic-

ture gallery which was formed between the latter half of the first century and the early part of the fifth century of the Christian era, with a few additions of later dates. The work of Wilpert is the admirable outcome of close and persistent study and observation carried on during fifteen years in the depths of the galleries and chambers of the Catacombs by the faint flickering of the tapers' light or by the more brilliant but briefer illumination of incandescent magnesium wire. The laborious investigations, the results of which are chronicled in this great book, have been carried on by the author in person, and every author whose writings might contribute to the elucidation of the pictures and the stories they reveal has been carefully consulted. In the preface to his work the author declares that the first idea of it came to him from the lamented Giovanni Battista de Rossi, "whom," he says, "I cannot sufficiently thank for the encouragement and counsel given to me. I accepted the more willingly the suggestion of the ever-to-be-remembered master, the more so as from the beginning of my archæological studies I was deeply persuaded that the copies of the cemeterial [or Catacombs] frescoes previously published had need of a radical revision on account of their lack of fidelity."

The Italian edition of Wilpert's work—there is another edition in German—bears on the title page, "Roma Sotterranea. Le Pitture delle Catacombe Romane, illustrate da Giuseppe Wilpert. Con 54 incisioni nel testo e 267 tavole. Roma, Desclée, Lefebvre & Co. (Librai-editori), 1903." This epoch-making work consists of two folio volumes, the first containing the text, the second the 267 illustrative plates, half of this number being reproduced in colors. Taken all in all, the whole production, text and plates, constitutes a noble example of Roman learning and Roman art. The researches of students who trace the history of the arts that are in a special way the growth and the flower of Christianity lead them back to the Catacombs as the cradle and source of Christian art. Here the simple direct symbolism of that art begins, and from here it may be followed onward through the centuries until our own times, when we see several attempts made to return to the spirit and methods of the antique period as the most sincere and expressive.

The character of early Christian art, and especially that of the Catacombs, has been regarded by English historians of art as of little esthetic account. "The gradual decay of pictorial skill during the centuries which preceded the fall of the Western Empire," says the newest edition (1903) of Crowe & Cavalcaselle's "History of Painting in Italy," "has been variously attributed to the degeneracy of the Romans and the spread of Christian doctrines." Less prejudiced writers treat the question with more consideration. Who

is it, asks Father Vincenzo Marchese, the learned author of "Memoirs of the Most Illustrious Painters of the Dominican Order," "that does not admire the sublime origin of Christian art, beholding it making its first step forward amidst the gloom of the sepulchres; scattering flowers on the tombs of the martyrs; following religion in the midst of weapons and executioners, and handing down their names and their deeds to the remotest posterity?" One of De Rossi's pupils, the late Mariano Armellini, has noted that the origin of cemeterial painting coincides with the origin of the Christian cemeteries; therefore it goes back to the period in which classic art was in full flower. Thus it is that the most ancient Christian cemeteries, or Catacombs, feel all the influence of classicism, in beauty of style, in simplicity of conception, in elegance of decoration and in delicacy of ornament. Thus it happens that the sight of many of these earlier works brings to the mind of the traveler recollections of the paintings he may have seen at Pompeii or the adornments that are still faintly visible on the walls of the Baths of Titus at Rome.

It was the custom amongst the peoples of antiquity to decorate with a certain elaboration of sculpture and painting the tombs of those that were dear to them. The traveler in Italy will find abundant examples of this practice in the necropolis of well-nigh every city of ancient Etruria, and the immediate vicinity of Rome supplies examples of stuccoed or painted tombs. Such method of honoring their dead was in the ordinary practice of the people. There was, therefore, no special reason why the Romans in becoming Christians should forsake this custom of their ancestors, so far as the adornment was innocent in itself and devoid of indications of honor rendered to the gods of paganism then worshiped in Rome. Indeed, some recent writers consider that this practice of art by the Christians in the Catacombs tended to delay the inevitable decline that came upon it later. That scholarly critic and historian of art, M. Georges Lafenestre, notes that it was far from the bright sunshine, in the subterranean cemeteries, where the early Christians interred their first martyrs, that at this same period a proximate renovation of painting, then in its decline, was prepared. Christian art appears in Rome almost at the same time as the Christian faith. The Catacombs—these cemeteries authorized by law, as De Rossi makes evident—have preserved upon the walls of their subterranean corridors and chambers paintings, some of which go back as far as the first century of the Christian era.

The old idea that the Christians were hostile to art has passed away. Not only was that idea a false one, but the older the sepulchral chambers are the more adorned are they. Wilpert de-

clares that Christianity, at the beginning of its propagation in Rome, found art at a relatively high grade. "As it was not within its mission nor its force to find a new language, so it was likewise absolutely impossible for it to create, by a single effort, a thoroughly new art." And there was no reason why it should not make use instead of the old language and the prevailing art, so far as these were not in contradiction with its doctrine and its morals. During the early period Christian art differs in little from pagan art: the same style, the same methods and sometimes even the same subjects are common to both. The *cubicula* of the Catacomb of Saint Domitilla, says Lafenestre, are almost contemporary with the tombs of the Via Latina and the sepulchre of the Nasones on the Flaminian Way. They present almost the same decoration. How can we be surprised at this resemblance when we remember that certain artists, newly converted, continued to work for pagans at the same time that they were working for Christians? Besides, this style of decoration, on account of the scruples and hesitancy which the horror of idolatry would inspire, continued for a considerable time to be simply ornamental or decorative. Wreaths of flowers, amidst which little genii are dancing, architectural fantasies and imaginary landscapes such as are frequent in Pompeian pictures, are the prevailing motives. Sometimes real figures appear, but these generally are allegorical, such as gardeners, reapers, vine-gatherers and olive-gatherers, as representatives of the four seasons. Then there are other designs which fill up what would otherwise be vacant spaces in vaults: gazelles, panthers, dolphins, hippocampi, painted on a red or white ground between colonettes, festoons and symmetrically placed vases. Bearded tritons and winged cupids are also introduced. These were the ordinary adornments of the time, and they continued in use down to the fourth century, as may be seen on the walls of the house of SS. John and Paul on the Coelian Hill, excavated a few years ago by the Rev. Father Germano di S. Stanislao, Passionist, where pagan and Christian subjects adorned the rooms inhabited by these noble Christian martyrs.*

The time is past, as Wilpert points out, when these Catacomb paintings were described as "wretched creations, in which the poverty of invention was equaled only by the defect of execution." And he insists that, as artistic creations they have a right to special consideration, not only because they constitute an important link in the chain of the universal history of art, but also because they enter into the field when the wall paintings of Herculaneum and Pompeii cease, and they mark, in uninterrupted succession during four centuries the progress, or rather the decline, of Roman paint-

* La Casa Cellmontana dei SS. Martiri Giovanni e Paolo, etc. Roma 1894.

ing. Mr. Dalton, in his learned Guide to the Early Christian and Byzantine Antiquities in the British Museum, points out that the style of art in the Catacombs is that of contemporary pagan Rome adapted to new conditions and modified in accordance with Christian ideas. It participated in the gradual decay of Roman art.

The art of the Catacombs is almost solely that of painting. Painting has had the honor of expressing the first Christian inspirations, and in spite of ruin and decay and irreparable losses, it has handed down to our days numerous suggestions of the pious fervor prevailing in the age of the martyrs. These paintings, which are entirely in fresco, a process of painting on freshly-laid plaster lime whilst it remains damp with colors that resist the caustic action of the lime, may be regarded as written hieroglyphs by which, as Wilpert puts it, "the Christian manifested by preference his religious ideas relative to the future life, his faith and his hopes." These constitute the scope and limit of this art of the cemeteries. Symbolism, the characteristic of all ancient religious teaching, was the bond which held the artists of the Catacombs in the unity of composition and treatment of the subjects they painted in these subterranean corridors and chambers. It constituted a language for them and for those for whom they wrought. The ordinary visitor to Rome nowadays, who descends for half an hour or so into the depths of these subterranean cemeteries, his path lighted by a few feeble tapers, and led along these strange galleries by a monk, is probably possessed by fear mingled with awe. The faint frescoes on the walls of chambers here and there are not striking works of art; their symbolism may not be clear to him by his lack of familiarity with its mode of expression; and thus the impression left upon his mind is that an unpleasant duty, with strange memories associated with it, has been duly fulfilled. It is only by repeated visits and by a study of the symbols made use of by the early Christians in these frescoes that the full joy of a visit to the Catacombs is reached, when the visitor reads with readiness the meanings of the symbols, recognizes at a glance the subjects of the pictures and then feels the religious sentiments that underlie them and make them so memorable.

In a previous work ("Ein Cyclus Christologischer Gemälde") Wilpert presents us with the account of what feelings might animate a visitor to the Catacombs in the early ages and the meanings he would read in what he beheld there. "Let us suppose," he wrote, "that a son should visit the sepulchre of his mother which is found in *cubiculum* 54 of the Catacombs of SS. Peter and Marcellinus. His eyes look upon the paintings; in the midst of the vault he sees Christ the Judge dominant, surrounded by saints; and around he

sees the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, the Baptism of Christ, the Magi led by the star and the offering of their gifts, the Good Shepherd and the Orante or figure standing in prayer with the arms spread out; he beholds the three miraculous healings: of the blind man, of the woman with the issue of blood and of the paralytic, and together with that the scene at the well of Jacob. The individual pictures raise in his mind ideas of what they relate to; the thoughts are translated into words, and the words assume the form of prayer. This prayer might closely resemble one of the following tenor: O Lord Jesus, light of the departed, remember my dear mother! Permit not that darkness may ever encompass her soul. She has believed in Thee; all her hope is in Thee, since Thou art the promised Messiah. Thou art the Light of the World, the true God, to whom alone belongs honor and adoration. In order that we might be illuminated and redeemed—we who were faithless—Thou didst assume a human body of the Holy Virgin Mary, and wast baptized in the Jordan. Thou hast heaped upon humanity abundance of benefits, Thou hast given health to the lame and the paralytic; refresh likewise the soul of my dear mother! Be not a severe Judge to her, but benignantly regard the glorious merits of the saints, who at Thy tribunal intercede for her. As Thou hast carried the lost sheep on Thy shoulders to the sheepfold, so receive her soul also in the company of the elect and lead her into the fields of eternal light. Dear mother, live in God and pray for me.”

It must be borne in mind that the aim or scope of the sacred representations of the Catacombs is not didactic; “they contain an exhortation and a guide to pray for the dead reposing in the sepulchres whose names are recorded in the inscriptions.” They express also the *credo* of those who had them painted. To interpret their meaning truly it should always be borne in mind that these paintings adorn graves, and that funeral symbolism is wholly dominated and penetrated by the idea of eternal salvation. “Everything, mediately or immediately,” says our author, “is referred to the person dead, for whom the frescoes were painted. . . . This person is the centre around which all moves; from him should depart the interpretation and ever return again to him. . . . That which the painters of the Catacombs figure forth is naturally almost always easily and commonly understood; the contents of the work should correspond to the simple form of the composition. Hence, so much the more does an interpretation abandon simplicity and so much the more intricate is it, the less probability it has for itself.”

The subjects of the paintings are derived from the Sacred Scriptures. They deal principally with death and eternal life. The very

simple symbol of the anchor, painted in so many varieties, suggested hope to the Christian eyes that looked upon it. The sheep or lamb, also frequent, is a figure either of our Blessed Lord, "the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world," as Northcote describes it in his enumeration of symbols; or of ourselves, who are God's sheep; and the dove, as representing the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, and also the holy souls sanctified by His indwelling presence. The dove is frequently painted with a branch of olive in his mouth, and this suggests the everlasting peace of heaven which the just man has reached. These symbols have been adopted far beyond the limits of the Catacombs, and are readily recognized wherever they are employed. It is not so with others, for example, with that of the fish, which as a sacred symbol is common in the Catacombs, and is of supreme importance. The fish, as Northcote, interpreting De Rossi, puts it, entered into the cycle of Christian thought and art in primitive times, partly because Christians owed their new and spiritual birth to the element of water; partly because Christ Himself was commonly spoken of under the mysterious name of the fish. It is believed that this symbol was in use even in Apostolic times, and that it suggested that famous acrostic quoted by Eusebius and St. Augustine from the so-called Sibylline verses—now recognized as the work of an Egyptian Jew of the epoch of Marcus Aurelius—which gives us, by taking the initial letters of so many successive lines, the Greek words: *ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΕΙΣΤΟΣ ΘΕΟΥ ΥΙΟΣ ΣΟΤΗΡ*, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour;" and then the initials of these several words taken together make up the *ΙΧΘΥΣ*, or "fish." It is constantly presented in the symbolical representations of the Eucharist, and is perhaps the most important amongst the various Catacomb pictures.

The most ancient representation of the Eucharist, as Wilpert makes known, is that of the "Fractio Panis," or "Breaking of Bread," which he brought to light after three weeks' labor in washing off with acids the calcareous incrustations covering the wall on which it had been painted, and which were the slow growth of centuries. It dates from the beginning of the second century, and is above the sepulchre altar in the "Greek Chapel" of the Catacomb of Saint Priscilla on the Salarian Way—that altar on which the holy sacrifice was offered. "A benign disposition of Providence," writes the learned discoverer of this most interesting fresco, "had spared it from the fate of the greater part of the well-preserved frescoes, which were victims of the avidity of seekers of antiquities and so perished; it was hidden beneath a thick crust of stalactites, from which I delivered it. The picture places before our eyes the very moment in which the Bishop *breaks the consecrated bread* to give it,

together with the wine, likewise consecrated, in communion to the faithful present at the ceremony." Here, the author tells us, we are in presence of a liturgical painting which goes back to the time in which the Apostolic term "the breaking of bread"—*fractio panis*—was still in use. The scene, however, is not exclusively realistic; the painter, with great ability, has made use of the Eucharistic symbol of the miraculous feeding of the multitude, to explain with determined clearness the actual subject, painting together with the liturgical chalice *two plates*, one with *two fishes* and the other with *five loaves*, and at the left extremity *four* and at the right *three* baskets of bread filled even to the brim. He represents the *faithful* with the multitude (five men and one woman) reclining at table; therefore the woman appears with her *head covered*, whilst the women who participate in the heavenly banquet have always their heads *uncovered*. Finally, the "president" who breaks the bread is not reclining as the others are; but, separated from the others, *he sits more forward* in presence of the Eucharistic chalice. In such a way the picture was characterized as liturgical—Eucharistic with a precision which excludes all doubt. This interesting account of the earliest representation existing in the Catacombs of the Eucharistic Sacrifice presents the picture to the eyes of the mind, and those who may not see the actual picture can form an image of it to themselves. The fish and the loaves in the miracle by which our Lord fed those who came out to listen to His words form the themes of many pictures. In the Crypt of Lucina, an early section of the great Catacomb of St. Callixtus, are seen the two fish with the Eucharistic species. In the ancient Chapels of the Sacraments in the Callixtian Catacomb the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and the feeding of the multitude, are repeated several times. Then again there is the banquet of the seven Disciples at the altar table. The account of this banquet is given by St. John, who precedes it with that of the miraculous draught of fishes. And so the theme is told over and over again.

The frequent repetition of the same subjects indicates how deeply these had entered into the thoughts of the people as suitable symbols for sepulchral adornment. They had created a new cycle of subjects, taken from Biblical incidents, which had never previously been represented in art. Nor did they think of representing the Biblical fact as such—as a historical painting—but only in its relation to those who slept in the tombs which were adorned with these paintings. These themes over and over again are represented by: Moses striking the rock whence the spring of water flows—he is one of the few personages of the Old Testament represented in the costume reserved in Christian art to sacred figures; Noah in the Ark; Daniel

in the den of lions; the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, to whom the Angel of the Lord descended to save them from the flames; the paralytic, who, when healed by our Lord, took up his bed and walked; the resurrection of Lazarus, indicating that the Christian who has passed away and is laid in the tomb awaits the resurrection through Christ victorious over death; and the sacrifice of Abraham, in which the patriarch is represented holding the knife in his right hand and with his left laid upon the shoulder of Isaac.

Amongst other frequent subjects are those in which Christ is the chief figure, what Wilpert terms "Christological Pictures." In the representations of Jesus Christ together with the Blessed Virgin, the series opens with that very celebrated picture, "The Prophecy of Isaiah." Wilpert considers that its "principal mission is to make luminously evident the Incarnation of the Son of God." Isaiah predicted the birth from a virgin. "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel." The same prophet glorifies the *light* which will arise upon Jerusalem at the birth of Emmanuel and Kings will walk in its brightness. "These prophecies inspired the celebrated picture of the Catacombs of Saint Priscilla," says Wilpert. De Rossi, in a special publication issued in 1863 described and illustrated this notable work, and the Rev. Dr. Shahan, of the Catholic University, has summarized in a charming little volume, "The Blessed Virgin in the Catacombs," the leading features of this "earliest and most important" of the frescoes of the Blessed Virgin in these cemeterial recesses. The picture, as Dr. Shahan describes it, "represents a female figure seated and nursing a little child. She is dressed as a matron, with pallium and veil. Before her stands a youthful figure holding in his left hand a scroll and pointing with the right to a star." The star is above the head of the female figure, and has eight rays, which signify the *light* predicted by Isaiah; and as Wilpert describes it, "it is the symbol of Christ, the true light, who came into the world to enlighten the human race." In two other frescoes the star has the form of the monogram of Christ. This picture is, as Dr. Shahan described it, "of the highest antiquity," and by common consent deemed no later than the age of the Antonines (A. D. 150-180), while, he adds, "there is every reason to believe that it belongs to the latter half of the first century (A. D. 50-100). Its artistic conception, the bold and free execution, the accurate drawing, the anatomical skill, the large and ample treatment of the details, strike the transient observer." De Rossi in his very rare "Images de la T. S. Vierge choisies dans les Catacombes de Rome," 1863, relates that the picture was much clearer when he saw it for the first time in 1851. And he also tells here that "the fall of the plaster has almost

destroyed the lower part of the picture; the rest of it is not so much effaced as blackened by the smoke of the tapers necessary to visitors to the Catacombs." The present writer may add to this story of destruction that De Rossi told him years ago that visitors to this Catacomb of Saint Priscilla took a particular delight in knocking off from the wall fragments of the plaster on which the picture was painted.

Until a short time ago this picture of the Prophecy of Isaiah was the only one of its kind known. In the April of 1902 Monsignor Wilpert, as he tells us in his great work, had the good fortune to discover some fragments of a replica of the same subject in the ruins of an *arcosolium* of the Catacomb of Domitilla. However fragmentary they may be, he says, yet from these patches of painted plaster one may reconstruct with all certainty the entire group.

Amongst other examples of Christological pictures are the Adoration of the Magi—the first homage paid by the Gentile world to the Son of God, and one of the most touching and tender subjects in the whole range of Christian art. Then follows the Magi seeing the star, and the star in three scenes of the Adoration of the Magi. In this same class come Balaam's Prophecy, discovered by Wilpert under the stalactites which partially concealed what was supposed by Bosio to be the giving of the Law to Moses; the Prophecy of Micheas; the Magi with the Shepherds in one picture, and then the Presepio, or Manger. "The Catacomb of St. Sebastian, so poor in pictures, preserves for us one characteristic fresco," writes Wilpert. It is that of the manger, first announced by De Rossi, in which the Child Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes, is laid in a simple manger supported on four posts, and the heads of the ox and the ass so generally introduced into this scene overlook the rude receptacle in which the Infant reposes. A head of a full-grown Christ, with nimbus around it, dominates the scene and gives it character and explanation. The Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin is comparatively rare in the Catacombs. M. André Peraté, in "L'Archéologie Chrétienne," relates that this gracious scene, which the artists of the Middle Ages treated with such affection, is represented only once in the Catacombs on a ceiling of the Cemetery of Priscilla; it dates from the second century, and should be beautiful, but to-day it is almost unrecognizable. This was the only Annunciation known in the Catacombs until Wilpert in his "Cyclus," already mentioned, published in 1891, gave to the world the other similar Annunciation, of the third century, discovered by him in *cubiculum* 54 in the Cemetery of SS. Peter and Marcellinus, and which has, as he says, rendered impossible every objection put forward against the attribution of the similar picture—the Annunciation in the Catacomb of Pris-

cilla—by certain erudite Germans. The only thing which distinguishes the one from the other of the two frescoes is the form of the back of the chair on which the Blessed Virgin sits, which in the Priscilla picture terminates in a straight line, whilst in the other it is rounded.

The Blessed Mother with the Child Jesus in her lap is seen at the imposition of the veil on a virgin consecrated to God, a very important picture in the Catacomb of Saint Priscilla. Mary represented as an *Orante* holding the Child Jesus in her arms is one of the most notable frescoes in the Cemeterium Majus, known until recently as that of Ostrianus. The attribution here also was questioned, but further investigation has confirmed the accuracy of the first title. Again, as one studies the evidences of these subterranean galleries, other indications of the belief and faith of their framers and of those who were laid to rest in them come to light. Here is a series of frescoes showing Christ as the worker of miracles, healing the woman with an issue of blood, the paralytic, the man blind from birth, the leper and the demoniac; in other pictures Christ is manifested as the Messiah in conversation with the Samaritan woman, and again in scenes taken from the Passion, such as that of the Crowning with Thorns—a simple composition, but conceived in a style thoroughly classic, dating from the second century, and hence very different from later representations. Christ is seen also as the Shepherd, Master and Legislator: in the first office with His flock, a favorite theme, full of many artistic possibilities which have been used with picturesque variety, and as the Good Shepherd who carries the lost sheep home on His shoulders. Christ under the figure of Orpheus is also met with several times. The Christian people of Rome in the first age of the Church accepted this representation, taken from the old mythology, as innocent of tendencies towards idolatry and as befitting Him who subdued the stubborn hearts of sinners and brought peace into the world. This is the myth which Shakespeare embodies in the exquisite verses:

Orpheus with his lute made trees,
And the mountain tops that freeze,
Bow themselves when he did sing;
To his music, plants and flowers
Ever sprung; as sun, and showers,
There had been a lasting spring.

The Sacred Scriptures seemed to suggest a likeness between the work of Orpheus and of Christ, says Wilpert, the Prophet Isaiah describing the kingdom of the Messiah in terms which involuntarily recall to mind the fabulous achievements of Orpheus. Then, says the Prophet: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb; and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion and the sheep shall abide together, and a little child shall lead them."

Christ as Master of the Apostles, showing the Saviour in the midst of them, belongs to the fourth century, when more figures were used in the compositions. Christ teaching the Evangelists, in the Catacomb of SS. Marcus and Marcellianus, is a fresco in which Christ, according to the general acceptance of archæologists, is seen with four personages, recognized as the Four Evangelists. Christ consigning the law to Peter is of singular importance. "The grand plenitude of powers," says Wilpert, "with which the Saviour, when He founded the Church, distinguished the Prince of the Apostles above the other Apostles furnished a motive to the composition which represents the *consigning of the Law to Peter*, a subject which though relatively frequent in the sculpture of the sarcophagi, appears once only in the paintings of the Catacombs, in the ceiling of a *cubiculum* excavated in Saint Priscilla about the middle of the fourth century. "But two-thirds of this fresco are destroyed; and it is only recorded in a drawing which De Rossi had directed to be made of it and which is to be seen in his "Bullettino" for 1877. The loss of this picture is compensated for by the discovery made by Wilpert of a fresco in a *cubiculum* brought to light by himself, and dating from the second half of the third century, in the Catacomb known as "*ad duas lauros*," or SS. Peter and Marcellinus, on the Labican Way. "It represents S. Peter seated upon a low chair (*cathedra*), who is reading from a scroll. In this scene we have the first picture in which the Prince of the Apostles appears not as part of a group, but *alone*, as an independent figure. The artist, in painting him thus, wished to characterize him as the special mediator of the Lex Christi, as 'the legislator of the new alliance.'"

It would be a long task to follow the author of this great work through the many sections into which his most interesting text is divided. The isolated representations of Christ, which were created separately by the artists who wrought in these subterranean galleries, are mentioned in detail, from that in the Catacomb of Preteytatus—the most ancient of all—where He is seen reading from a scroll, to the latest in the fourth century. Then follows a full account of the Representations of Baptism, showing: The Act of Baptism; the Baptism of Christ; the Baptism of the Catechumen; the Symbols of Baptism, and the subjects so closely and intimately connected with it, such as the Evangelical Fisherman; the Healing of the Paralytic at the "*piscina probatica*," and the miraculous source of water flowing from the rock when struck by Moses. The scenes that express faith in the resurrection of the dead have an all-absorbing interest for Christians and therefore a prominent place in the series of Catacomb pictures. The resurrection of the dead is the first postulate for the future life. "But if there be no resurrection of

the dead," writes St. Paul, "then Christ is not risen again. And if Christ be not risen again, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain." Hence the resurrection of Lazarus, in the number of its repetitions—being found over fifty times—is one of the most important themes met with and one of the most ancient. Monsignor Wilpert furnishes a complete guide to the *fifty-three* existing representations of the resurrection of Lazarus in the Roman Catacombs. The seasons of the year, which are occasionally met with, are considered an ancient symbol of the resurrection of the flesh. The resurrection of Jairus' daughter, of which only one representation exists in the Catacombs, is also of this series. Scenes relating to sin and death are afterwards described, and amongst these is the not infrequent picture of the sin of our first parents in the earthly paradise, and the denial of our Lord by St. Peter. Of the first subject sixteen specimens are recorded. The latter picture is in the Catacomb of St. Cyriacus on the tomb of a virgin dedicated to God. Christ, on the right of the spectator, is seen holding up His right hand, of which the three first fingers are extended, indicative of the number of denials; on the left is Peter, a smaller figure, with his right hand elevated as though in protest of fidelity; between the two, on a high column, the cock is seen crowing. The meaning of the picture is fully expressed, and with the most limited means.

The many themes that Christian art has treated in these simple, direct and fully intelligible compositions—intelligible to those for whom they were painted and by the light shed upon the story of Christianity in its beginnings, intelligible to students to-day—constitute a marvelous illustration of the beliefs and the hopes, one may say, of our ancestors in the faith. Representations of the judgment after death are also to be seen: the soul recommended by the saints at the tribunal of Christ, "the Communion of Saints;" the soul alone before the judgment seat; prayer for the admission of the dead to eternal bliss; Elias borne up into heaven, and the dead received into eternal rest from the Bark of the Church, which is sorely tossed by tempest. These and other pictures of ideas and subjects too numerous to be dwelt upon here furnish indications and even unmistakable evidences of the beliefs that animated the minds and the hopes that filled the hearts of the Christian people of Rome during the first four centuries of our era. Their identity with those which are the sustenance and inspiration of the Catholics of this twentieth century is so luminously evident that it could be mistaken only by one who is ignorant of the history of Christianity. The resemblances and similarities between the past and the present, which are made so clear to every one who thinks while reading Wilpert's great work, some home more pertinently to the reader at

a time when strange claims of continuity of doctrine and practice are made by many who reject the Catholic Church.

The actual condition of the paintings in the Catacombs, which are so admirably reproduced and so lucidly described in this great work, is characterized as "very deplorable." It is a question of secondary importance whether the fault of this lamentable state of things lies in the fresco or in the plaster in which the fresco is painted. Even De Rossi foresaw a not distant period when these valuable remains of ancient art would, "like the baseless fabric of this vision," dissolve and "leave not a wrack behind." He lamented this inevitable loss, declaring that in the Catacomb of St. Callixtus, the paintings when first discovered were dear in outline and brilliant in color, became, through the influences of alternate heat and cold, united with dampness, less and less distinct as the years passed. Within three years the frescoes on the walls of the Church of Santa Maria Antiqua in the Roman Forum, though every possible care has been taken to preserve them, have been reduced from their original brilliancy to a state bordering on color chaos. With Monsignor Wilpert's work the destructive march of time, so far as the fading of the Catacomb frescoes is concerned, may be said to be brought to a standstill. As the pictures have been during these last years they appear in the plates that adorn his book. Their actual likeness, no less than their memory, is preserved within these pages; and many eager inquirers into the life of early Christianity in Rome or into the origins of Christian art, who may never visit the Eternal City, will find in this splendid work much valuable material for their studies so as almost to supersede a visit to the actual localities in which the pictures of the Catacombs were painted.

P. L. CONNELLAN.

Rome, Italy.

GREGORY THE GREAT.

TO THE PATRIARCHS, PRIMATES, ARCHBISHOPS, BISHOPS AND
OTHER ORDINARIES IN PEACE AND COMMUNION
WITH THE APOSTOLIC SEE.

PIUS X., POPE.

Venerable Brothers, Health and the Apostolic Blessing:

THE memory of that great and incomparable man, Gregory the First, the thirteenth centennial of whose death we are on the eve of celebrating with all due solemnity, brings to us, Venerable Brothers, great joy. Amid the almost innumerable