

THE ROMAN CATACOMBS.

THE word *catacomb* is not of Christian origin, and all derivations of its meaning are conjectural and uncertain. Subterranean Christian cemeteries, similar in general design to the Roman ones, and which it is agreed by archæologists to designate by the generic name of catacombs, existed all over the Roman empire. They have been discovered, explored and described in the east at Antioch, Alexandria, the island of Cyprus; in Africa, in the cities along the Mediterranean coast; in the west, at Naples; at Messina, Syracuse and other towns of Sicily; in Tuscany, particularly at Chiesi; in the island of Malta, in Spain, as at Elvira, Saragossa, Seville; among the Gauls, as at Agannum (now *Saint-Maurice*), at Cologne, at Treves. The name of catacomb was originally applied only to the cemetery of Saint Sebastian on the Appian way, outside of Rome; and because this one was the only subterranean Christian cemetery which was never entirely closed, blocked up and lost, but was visited by pilgrims all through the Middle Ages, as other cemeteries were rediscovered, they were all called catacombs.

The earliest of these cemeteries were small and were private property, existing under the surface of some *area* or overground tomb. In the beginning and, in general, with rare exceptions all along, nothing could be more secure for the Christians than the catacombs, because Roman law was distinguished for its protection of every kind of real property—property in or on the soil, and more particularly still, for its severity in defending the inviolability of tombs and burial-places, which was a part of their natural religion. At the beginning of the third century, most of the catacombs became semi-public; that is, were held not merely under the general law of the Church received by all the faithful, but while the *dominium* still continued to be vested in some particular individual, they were possessed by the Church called officially *Ecclesia Fratrum*, as a recognized corporation for burial purposes; although the Church was at no time during the ages of persecution a legalized institution of the empire as other religious denominations were. This state of affairs was an attempt to reach some *modus vivendi* between Church and State. The representative or recognized head of these burial corporations in every diocese, was the bishop; consequently in Rome, it was the Pope. We therefore come to the strange but well-proven fact that at Rome, along with the official lists of the prefects of the city and of other state officers,

along with the official membership of the legalized colleges of priests with the Pontifex Maximus at their head, there was kept an official series, in the public archives, of the bishops of Rome who were there inscribed as *Antistites Ecclesiæ Fratrum*. Incredible as it seems—but “truth is stranger than fiction”—these official lists and other matter connected with the early Papacy, preserved in the departments of pagan Rome, were at times consulted by the Apostolic prothonotaries, in writing or correcting the “Acts of Martyrs” and other documents of interest to the Church, and were freely used by the very ancient but now unknown author upon whose collection Anastasius the librarian composed, in the 9th century, his invaluable “*Liber Pontificalis*”; or Lives of the Popes. The first general edict against these Christian cemeteries was published by the Emperor Valerian in the year 257; but even this was directed rather against their use as places of secret assembly or of congregating for worship, than as burial places. In the year 260, Gallienus revoked the edict of his predecessor and ordered by an imperial rescript that throughout the empire the *loca religiosa* (“religious places”) in their widest sense, which had been confiscated of all the Christians, should be restored to the bishop of each church. Also when Maxentius put a stop for a time to the persecution in the year 306, the property of the Church in Rome was given back to the then reigning Pope, Melchiades, who, we may here remark, was the last Pope interred in the catacombs. From the pontificate of Saint Fabian, in 236, each one of the twenty-five titles or parishes of Rome had its own cemetery or catacomb outside of the city precincts. The most famous of all the Roman catacombs—and sixty have already been discovered—was that of Saint Callixtus, because it contained the papal crypt or official tomb of the Popes from Zephyrinus, in 220, to Melchiades, in 314. The special titles or names of the catacombs were derived chiefly from one or other of three sources: the name of the original proprietor of the soil, as the cemetery of Priscilla; the name of the most celebrated martyr interred there, as the cemetery of Prætextatus; the name of the Pope who made, enlarged, renewed or decorated it, as the cemetery of Callixtus. The catacombs were the ordinary burial places of the early Christians, but not their usual and habitual places of divine worship. They were used for purposes of religious congregation and of concealment only at times of active persecution or for other urgent reasons. Thus Popes Pontian, Antherus, Fabian and Cornelius, taking refuge in these underground hiding-places, remained concealed there; and despite the impious edict of the Emperor Valerian, of which we have spoken, Popes Stephen I. and Sixtus II. lived some time in the catacombs, and being discovered were both

put to death there, while in the act of officiating in the presence of a number of the faithful. With Pope Sixtus II. four deacons suffered martyrdom. Saint Gregory of Tours tells us in his treatise on the "Story of the Martyrs," that in the year 284 a multitude of the faithful also had been seen entering the crypt on the Via Salaria to venerate the tombs of Saints Chrysanthus and Daria, recently put to death; the entrance was quickly closed up by order of the Emperor Numerianus; and when, after the lapse of years, the catacomb was reopened, there were found not only the skeletons of men, women and children lying around, but also the silver cruets which these worshippers had taken down with them for the celebration of the holy mysteries. When peace was given to the Church by the famous Edict of Toleration issued by the Emperor Constantine, at Milan, in the year 313, the catacombs still continued for some years to be used by the Christians as their burial places. Later on, this was done only exceptionally in order to rest after death near the venerated remains of some martyr. This legitimate regrettable devotion has sometimes occasioned, to the inexpressible distress of antiquarians, the cutting into and the partial destruction of ancient mural paintings. After the capture of Rome by Alaric the Goth, in the year 410, burial in the catacombs almost entirely ceased; yet they were frequented as places of pious resort, especially on the anniversaries—*Natalitia*—of martyrs for some centuries still. Saint Jerome, in prose, and Prudentius, in verse—authors of the 5th century—have left us their vivid impressions and some descriptions of these holy places.

From the fifth to the eighth century, the catacombs were searched, rifled, despoiled, broken up and ruined by the barbarians—Goths, Vandals, Huns, and Lombards—in quest of buried treasure. The love of lucre, however, was not always the motive which moved these, in some cases, heathens, in others, Arian heretics, to their work of destruction; it was often hatred of the Catholic Church. The Goths, particularly, under king Vitiges, in 537, destroyed all the churches and oratories built over the more celebrated tombs of martyrs, and violated the underlying bones of the saints. This is so true, that it was for this reason, rather than for the burning of the palaces, porticoes, and other monuments of the imperial city, that the term *Gothic* came to signify whatever was supremely rude and barbarous; for, among all people, the desecration of sacred edifices and the disturbance of the dead, have been accounted the climax of impiety. It was now that the touching, and, even in point of mechanical execution, really elegant metrical inscriptions, composed and set up by Pope Damasus in the fourth century, were broken to pieces, and would have altogether perished but for the care of one of his successors, Vigilius,

to gather the fragments, and when nothing sufficient was found, to set up copies in the place of the originals after the devastating hordes had retired. One of these Damatine inscriptions on marble was recently discovered, broken into one hundred and twenty-six pieces, which have been skilfully put together, and the whole set up again *in situ*. Under Pope John III., in 568, other restorations in the catacombs were undertaken, and every Sunday the Holy Sacrifice was offered in each one of them, with sacred vessels, vestments, and liturgical books, sent expressly from the pontifical palace of the Lateran. But to restore the catacombs was useless; and after the deplorable devastations of the Lombards, under king Astulphus, Pope Paul I., in 757, reluctantly determined to remove from their original resting places, and out of the reach of harm, some of the most illustrious and more easily accessible bodies of martyrs, and distribute their relics among the churches of Rome. We learn from an ancient inscription, put up in Saint Praxedes, that on July 20, 817, Pope Pascal I. removed two thousand three hundred bodies from the catacombs. A little later, under Pope Boniface IV., the Pantheon, a deserted heathen temple, which had remained up to this time uninjured, was consecrated as a Christian church, and having received within its ample space a great number of sacred remains borne from the catacombs with religious pomp, and a long procession of triumphal cars that had been heirlooms in senatorial and patrician families, acquired its modern name of *Saint Mary and the Martyrs, Sancta Maria ad Martyres*. From this period until the sixteenth century, the very existence of the catacombs, always excepting that of St. Sebastian, was unknown save by vague tradition. This one, or more properly a small portion of this one, continued open and accessible all through the Middle Ages, and witnessed the prayers of Saints Bridget of Sweden, Catharine of Sienna, Philip Neri, and Charles Borromeo. On the 31st of May, 1578, a casual breaking in of part of the catacombs of Priscilla, on the Via Salaria, about two miles outside of Rome, revealed to the astonished view of thousands who flocked to the spot, paintings, inscriptions, sculptured stone coffins, and lengthy galleries, of which even the learned—and these were few—had only indistinct ideas, gathered from old Itineraries, Martyrologies, and Missals in which the *Stations* were marked on certain festivals. Let us here quote what we wrote a quarter of a century ago, on the very spot, and on the very anniversary day of such a discovery, in which a new Rome and a new world were revealed to archæology: "Just at that time, when the Protestant movement was completely in the ascendant throughout the north of Europe, and the bloodstained sword which had wounded our Holy Mother was victoriously sheathed, and the pen was taken

up to excuse the revolt, just then, when the spirit of argument was most rife, and the successors of the Reformers, half-ashamed of their violence, were loudest in their appeal to antiquity, invoking on their side the Primitive Church, the earth opened, and the depths gave up their dead and buried treasures of painting, sculpture, inscription, phials of martyrs' blood, instruments of martyrs' torture, monuments of every kind; each, in succession, of the sixty catacombs around the Eternal City protesting, through the silence and oblivion of eight hundred years, against those who falsely accused Rome of change, and of corruption in doctrine and in practice. To the indictment of Rome's enemies, these subterranean and apostolic witnesses gave a prompt, unanimous, and peremptory denial." This was the beginning of ardent studies in these venerable cemeteries. A Maltese layman, named Bosio, who was then residing in Rome as Procurator of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, made many explorations among them, and worked with so much success that he has been called the Columbus of the Catacombs. Among the successors of this great man, the study of Christian antiquities was, in most cases, made less upon actual and personal investigation of monuments than on the text of ancient documents, now being brought daily to light in ransacking monasteries, chapter-houses, and the archives of private families. A new and happier, because more practical, direction was given to the study of the catacombs about fifty years ago, by a learned Jesuit, Father Marchi, whom we had the honor of knowing when, in his later years, he was Curator of the famous Kircherian Museum in the Gregorian University, commonly called the Roman College. His most illustrious and successful pupil was the gentle layman, Commendatore John Baptist de Rossi, who, besides his monumental works on the Roman catacombs, on the Roman mosaics, on the Christian inscriptions anterior to the seventh century, still continues to edit the "Bulletin of Christian Archæology," which has appeared regularly since the year 1863. From Italy, the study of the catacombs spread to France, England, Belgium, Germany, and even to Russia, in all which countries professional works on the subject have been published. In this connection we should not omit to mention that the success of de Rossi, and of his disciples, in this department of learning, for over twenty-five years, was due in great part, to the zeal, the encouragement and the munificence of the late Pope Pius IX., who established a Commission of Sacred Archæology, and founded the rich and rare museum in the Lateran palace for the preservation, display and study of all newly-discovered remains, inscriptions, and monuments of Christian Rome.

The Roman catacombs merit our attention, because we find in

them the earliest examples of Christian art ; architecture, painting, sculpture, gilded glass ; the earliest figured scenes and persons of the sacred Scriptures ; Moses striking the rock, Jonah thrown up by the whale, Job, Isaiah, the sacrifice of Isaac, the adoration of Christ, the worship of the Mother of Jesus, veneration of relics, invocation of saints, middle state or purgatory, resurrection of the body, souls in bliss immediately after death, esteem of virginity, and holy widowhood, etc., etc.

The soil in the immediate vicinity of Rome is formed of materials which are of igneous or volcanite origin. There are three distinct kinds of formation, each of which varies in surface, depth and position relative to upland and lowland, vicinity to water and other conditions. These are, first, the *Tufa litoide* of geologists, which is very hard and admirably suited for building purposes ; second, the *Pozzolana*, which is much less compact than the tufa, and is very friable and sandlike. It is used to make the famous Roman cement. The pozzolana was always carefully avoided by the Christians in digging the catacombs, because on account of its tendency to crumble and fall in, neither galleries, chambers or graves could be cut out of it. When they struck a stratum of it, this point was instantly receded from, or if it were necessary or very convenient to go through it, the sides and top of the gallery or tunnel were supported by brick masonry. The catacombs, let it be said, once for all, were not abandoned sand-pits, much less burial places used promiscuously by poor Christians and pagans. Our good friend, Michele de Rossi, only less well known to the learned than his brother, the Commendatore, being an expert geologist and topographer, has particularly devoted himself to this aspect of the Roman catacombs and has shown the differences that have always existed between these places of Christian burial and the *arenarie* or sand-pits of the heathens. The next kind of soil met with in the Roman Campagna is the *Tufa granulare*, which combines adhesion of particles and facility of working. It is in this sort of very hard earth and semi-rock that the Christian subterranean cemeteries called catacombs were hollowed out. It is too soft for building purposes, and not fine enough for cement ; but it possesses just enough consistency to admit of being cut without caving in, and is of such a porous nature that any water quickly drains off, leaving the galleries dry, warm and healthy. It was, therefore, admirably adapted for the reception of the dead and for the purposes of reunion, for which it was used after being excavated with much labor and ingenuity, into the proper forms. We believe that it was a special Providence which put ready to the hands of the persecuted Christians such a material, for whereas all the works, paintings, inscriptions, sculptures of the early Christians

above ground—and there must have been many such if only in the inviolable mansions of the great patrician convert families—have perished without leaving a trace behind them, this buried mine of archæological treasure, by its very obscurity and difficulty of access and facility of being lost or forgotten, has been preserved to all future generations. In the form or internal arrangements of the catacombs, we distinguish galleries, graves, crypts, shafts for admitting light and air, stairs and chambers. The average height of the galleries is about eight feet; but it is sometimes from twelve to fifteen. Their width is usually no more than three feet, so that two persons approaching from opposite directions could hardly pass one another except by backing up to the approaches of the oratories and other places of assembling, which were very numerous. There are several, sometimes as many as five galleries running one above the other, and connected by steps cut into the tufa; light and ventilation being ingeniously provided by funnel-shaped apertures running up and opening into the Campagna above. Artificial light, by lamps and tapers, was, however, always required to dispel the gloom in which only the general outlines and direction of things could be otherwise distinguished. Father Marchi, whose special study was the catacomb of Saint Agnes, calculated that if all its galleries were put together, they would measure a length of sixteen miles; and Michael de Rossi gives it as his opinion (which is that of an expert and the first authority in the world on the subject), that if all the galleries of all the catacombs around Rome were protracted on one line, they would extend to five hundred and eighty-seven miles, or in other words would stretch from one end of Italy to the other. Father Marchi has also calculated that the catacombs contain seven million graves. But many new discoveries have been made since his time, and his figures are probably much below the mark. It was only in times of persecution and on unusual occasions, that the offices of religion were performed in the catacombs. Ordinarily the Sacrifice was offered in some vast hall in a noble's house. After the conversion of Constantine, oratories and churches were erected near the entrance to the principal catacombs; thus was raised Saint Peter's over the cemetery on the Vatican hill, Saint Paul's over that of Lucina on the Ostian way; thus rose the basilicas of Saints Lawrence, Sebastian, Agnes and other athletes of the Faith and other virgins. In laying the broad and deep foundations of these edifices, many graves and many mural paintings had, unfortunately, to be sacrificed, because the workmen had to cut down from an upper to a lower level until the actual tomb of the martyr was reached; and if this tomb had been constructed during one of the later persecutions it would be in one of the lower galleries. For, in exca-

vating a catacomb originally, the work was always commenced with the uppermost gallery ; then the next lower, and so in the same order till the lowermost gallery was completed. Should the tomb, therefore, which was to become the nucleus of a subsequent basilica, by being made its confession or crypt, have been in a lower gallery, it is plain that the graves in the galleries above had to be sacrificed in order to bring the tomb referred to prominently into view in the new church. This tomb was often far from the entrance, as visitors to Saint Agnes and to Saint Lawrence have observed. Pope Saint Damasus who governed the Church from 366 to 384, was the great explorer, embellisher and lover of the catacombs. Himself a poet, he composed many beautiful metrical inscriptions which he set up over or near the bodies of the saints whom he commemorated in his verse. He was fortunate in having the services of an intelligent, artistic and faithful subject named *Furius Dionysius Filocalus*, by whom these Damasin inscriptions were executed with a mechanical faultlessness and an elegance of lettering which proves him to have been a man of excellent taste. Nothing like their style has ever been found in any other Christian inscriptions, and they can be recognized at a glance as all coming from the same skilful hand. Pope Damasus built many tombs over the remains of martyrs, repaired many galleries, and caused many paintings and decorations to be executed in the catacombs. Pius IX., of happy memory, nobly imitated him ; and in the history of subterranean Rome his name will be conspicuous above all other names, alongside of that of his illustrious predecessors ; and as Damasus had his faithful *Filocalus* to second his learning and his zeal, Pius had his *de Rossi* to bear the same relations to himself.

The galleries and chambers of these wonderful subterranean cemeteries received their light either from the open air above through shafts called *luminaria*, or from earthen-ware and sometimes bronze lamps which were either suspended by chainlets from the ceilings or vaulted roof, or were set in little niches cut for this purpose into the walls. These terra-cotta lamps (few were of any other material), consumed olive oil in which a twisted wick was immersed. A great many such lamps have been discovered, and they are very curious either for the words and figures stamped upon them or for the figures into which they are moulded as a whole. The lamps used in the catacombs are all of Christian origin and made for this purpose. A ship—symbol of the Church—is often represented on the face or flat upper part of such lamps, and sometimes the lamp itself has the form of a vessel. The heads of the apostles Peter and Paul—face to face generally—are very common subjects. Other subjects are purely symbolical, as the palm, the

dove, the anchor. The monogram of Christ, under one or other of its varied forms is frequently stamped on these lamps. Some of the square-shaped apertures for light, which beginning at the surface were cut down through the several stories of the catacombs especially at the intersection of galleries, were made at a much later period than the catacombs themselves; but the greater number were cœval with them. We read in the *Acts* of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, of a certain Candida who was thrown headlong down one of these shafts and then crushed with stones. The graves in the catacombs were cut horizontally into the sides of the galleries and chambers in rows or tiers like berths in a passenger ship. These graves thus super-posed are sometimes as many as fifteen. As each grave was occupied, it was closed either with a marble slab or with some flat tiles or bricks, and carefully fastened at the edges with cement. The name of the deceased was either cut on the marble or hastily scratched on one of the bricks at the moment of closing the tomb. Sometimes also a symbol, as a heart, an egg, a fish, an anchor, a dove, a palm tree was more or less rudely cut or scratched there. The graves were called *loculi*. Some are small, evidently for children, while others are long enough for adults. Some are of sufficient depth to hold two, three or even four bodies laid beside one another. The little chambers cut out of the tufa in the catacombs were of various forms: circular, semi-circular, square and even triangular. They were very numerous. Father Marchi penetrated into as many as sixty, in exploring only about one-eighth of the catacombs of Saint Agnes. Very often these chambers were like modern family vaults, used for the burial of some particular group of persons. At one end of every chamber there was the principal tomb called from its arch shape an *Arcosolium*. Beneath it generally reposed a martyr; and it was the desire of those at whose expense the chamber was opened, enlarged or decorated, to be laid to rest beside these sacred remains. When the chamber had no more space left in the sides, the graves of those having the privilege of the family or the association which owned it, were opened in the nearest untouched galleries, care being taken to record by an inscription that although separated from the main body, they belonged to that group of persons buried there. At other times, sad to say, the wall or side of the chamber above and around the martyr's tomb which was generally covered with paintings and inscriptions, was cut into for graves and irreparably damaged through an unreasonable devotion to repose in holy company. Each one of these chambers could contain on an average, seventy graves and one hundred bodies of old and young. The arcaded tombs of the more illustrious martyrs were generally opened at the expense of the Church, at one side of a chamber of

larger size which served for the reunion of the faithful. The Holy Sacrifice was offered—especially and always on the anniversary—on the marble slab or table covering the tomb. Thus the arcosolium was a fixed altar. In order that as many as possible should assist at the celebration of the holy mysteries on the anniversary of the martyrs, two, three, or often four of these chambers were made close together, or opening into one another like a suite of apartments, and receiving light and air from a common shaft leading down into the principal room or into the intersecting gallery that separated it from the next one. “In this way as many as a hundred persons might be collected in some parts of the catacombs to assist at the same act of public worship; whilst a still larger number might have been dispersed in the neighboring chambers and galleries and there received the Bread of Life, brought to them by the assistant priests and deacons.” (Northcote and Brownlow). Painting rather than sculpture was followed among the liberal arts by the early Christians; not so much, perhaps, because the latter tended more to sensual forms in representing the human body, as on account of the greater difficulty of working in stone without being detected by the heathens. Images of the Blessed Virgin are not uncommon in the Roman catacombs. De Rossi has published a special work on this group or school of paintings. They are particularly found in the catacomb of Saint Priscilla. This is one of the most ancient of all the catacombs; in fact it is of apostolic origin and intimately connected with Saint Peter. The style of these fresco paintings is equal to the best found in the Baths of Titus (which were studied fifteen hundred years afterwards by Raphael), and in the ruins of Pompeii. Judged with impartial criticism, from the standpoint of art, they must date from the first century of our era. Looked at in their topographical position and archæological connection, they are as certainly found to be of apostolic date, and may have been executed under the supervision of the Apostle himself. Interesting paintings of the Blessed Virgin Mary represent her in the Roman catacombs at the Annunciation, with the prophet Isaiah pointing to a star above her head; at the adoration of the magi; standing with outstretched arms—as an *Orante*—in the attitude of prayer interceding for us, her children. How art, painting and sculpture, although working at such disadvantage in the catacombs, was used by the Church and made her handmaid in teaching the faithful through their senses, is nowhere, perhaps, so clearly perceived, as in the variations of the type of our Lord represented in the character of the Good Shepherd. For instance, after the second century, precisely the one in which certain heretics denied the power of the Church to absolve from certain crimes, the Good Shepherd is shown in the

act of carrying, not a lamb upon his shoulders, but a *goat*: type of the gross sinner. In other representations we see the Good Shepherd between a sheep and a goat, the latter animal occupying the place of honor, on his *right*, as if to recall to the minds of the faithful the general doctrine—then attacked by the Montanists—that there was no sinner but could, if repentant, obtain forgiveness; and also to allude specifically to this text of Saint Luke, “There shall be joy in heaven upon one sinner that doth penance, more than upon ninety-nine just, who need not penance. (xv., 7). The time and the occasion of such a painting and the extreme care with which these Christian artists worked under hieratic directions, precludes the possibility of a mistake here and an intention to represent the Judgment, when, as our Lord says, the sheep shall be on his right and the goats on his left (Matthew xxv., 33). Let us in conclusion recall, in connection with the catacombs, the humanizing influence of the Catholic Church. The servile or freedman’s condition of the dead was always jealously noted by the pagans; but only six out of eleven thousand Christian sepulchral inscriptions mention the deceased as having been a slave. Again, whereas the pagans with proud exclusiveness rejected the servile or the enfranchised from contact with the free-born even in death, the Christians buried all in the same place and in the same company. A few years ago there was discovered among the plainest and poorest graves—*loculos*—that of the wife of a Roman senator.
