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## PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AND THE ANCIENT CHURCHES OF ITALY.

BY THE MOST REVEREND CHARLES F. D'ARCY, D.D.,  
Lord Archbishop of Armagh, Primate of all Ireland.

*We have received the kind permission of the Archbishop of Armagh to print this summary of a lecture given to the Armagh Clerical Union.—THE EDITOR.*

**N**O one can visit Italy, and give some attention to the structure and arrangements of the ancient churches there, without observing certain respects in which they differ from our churches here, and indeed from the churches of Northern and Western Europe generally. Let it not be imagined that these differences arise from the fact that the ancient churches of Italy are under the rule of the Roman Catholic Church. The features I have in mind are as distinct from those of the cathedrals of Northern France, for example, as they are from those of the familiar cathedrals and parish churches of England and Ireland. I have visited Italy many times in the course of my life, and have seen very many of the ancient churches, in all parts of that beautiful and wonderful country, from the Alps to Sicily, and I am quite convinced that the points I shall bring to your notice have a historical significance which has been too little realized. It may be that these points have been dealt with fully by competent scholars. Some, indeed, have been set forth with knowledge by great authorities. But, so far as my researches have gone, I have not found any sufficient effort to co-ordinate them, and explore their real meaning.

Briefly, my theme is that, in arrangements still surviving in the ancient churches of Italy, can be detected certain characteristics of primitive Christian worship which cannot be so clearly discerned in our customs. And let me say that I am not now dealing with anything controversial. Whether as regards the Roman communion or our own Church, I have nothing to say "for or against." I want to take you back to the early days of Christianity, long before those developments, and subsequent controversies, out of which our modern divisions arose.

Few to-day can realize the amazing change which passed upon both the Church and the world when the first Christian Emperor triumphed over all his foes and established what has been called

ever since "the peace of the Church." Constantine was certainly, both as soldier and as statesman, one of the greatest personages in history. No man, among earthly potentates, has left deeper marks upon the world and upon mankind. Read Books IX and X of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, and you get some idea of what the conversion of Constantine meant for the Church of that age.

One of the first acts of Constantine was to promote the building of churches. No such founder of churches ever lived. The first Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem was his work. At Rome he built the original St. Peter's, the original St. Paul's, the original St. John Lateran (called Basilica Constantiniana) the cathedral of Rome, the original San Lorenzo outside the walls, and, I believe, others as well. He also erected churches in his new Capital of Constantinople; and, as we know from Eusebius, he promoted church-building in other cities throughout the Empire.

An edict of Diocletian, ordering the destruction of Christian churches, shows that there were churches before the time of Constantine. Some of Constantine's decrees prove it also. But we must remember that the period immediately before Constantine, indeed the greater part of the third century, was the period of the bitterest and most sustained persecution. The catacombs, those amazing subterranean cities of the dead, with their passages which run into several hundred miles in extent, became hiding places for the living, though modern research seems to prove that they could never have provided permanent habitations. It must have seemed, when Constantine triumphed, and espoused the cause of Christianity, that the Faith had literally emerged from under ground.

For the first time in history, great churches were built with State approval and assistance. And the model for the Christian Church was a type of building which was, at the time, familiar to every dweller in Rome, and in the other cities of the Empire. The Basilica is commonly said to have been a Roman Court of Law. But that is hardly correct. It was really a public meeting-place where business and social intercourse could be carried on. Magistrates held courts there, just because the Basilica was a place of public resort. That was the custom of the time. The original Basilica, like the great Basilica Julia in the Roman Forum, was

a rectangular enclosure surrounded by a covered portico, but probably uncovered in the centre. Later Basilicas were entirely roofed over, like the enormous Basilica of Constantine, also in the Forum.

When this type of building was adopted as the model of the Christian Church, it was not much altered. A rectangular building with an arcade on each side, making a central nave, with aisles, with a low-pitched roof and sometimes a flat ceiling, to which was added an apse at one end, became the usual form. The apse, like the rest of the building, was taken over from the civic architecture of the Roman Empire. It is not found in the earlier examples, but it became common in the later Basilicas, and was the place where the magistrate, or judge, presided over his court.

In Southern Italy there are many churches which have preserved this simple form. They are sometimes bare and ugly as barns, except, perhaps, for some ancient mosaic in the apse, or, it may be, a pulpit of rare workmanship. The only respect in which these churches often depart from the primitive model is in having three apses side by side, the central one being much the largest; the others, at either side, are often used as vestries or places for storing small properties of the church; sometimes they have been made into side chapels.

There are, of course, magnificent Basilican churches. The grandest, I suppose, is St. Paul's outside the Walls, at Rome. It was destroyed by fire in 1823, and restored with great magnificence, preserving as much as possible the features of the ancient church. This Basilica has transepts, which are, to us, peculiar. They do not project much beyond the walls of the nave. The apse is in the furthest transept wall facing down the nave, through the great arch in which the nave ends.

It should be noted that, in Rome, the word "Basilica" is now used in a special sense for those ancient churches which are supposed to possess exceptional importance and sanctity. They were all, originally, strictly Basilican.

I now ask you to leave Rome and turn to Milan. Here the vast and amazingly ornate cathedral, of late Gothic type, often absorbs attention. But there is a church which is of infinitely deeper interest—San Ambrogio. It is the ancient cathedral, and there is no more interesting church in the world. Built by the great Ambrose, in the fourth century, it was here that he baptised

St. Augustine in 387, and here that he shut out the Emperor Theodosius after the cruel massacre at Thessalonica. Here, in later times, the Lombard Kings and many of the mediæval Emperors were crowned with the iron crown of Lombardy. Before the gate stands a pillar at which the Coronation oath was made.

Before the door of the church is an Atrium, the most perfect of its kind in the world, exactly like that described by Eusebius in his account of the great church at Tyre, built in the time of Constantine: "an extensive space between the church and the entrance—with four porticoes all round—a quadrangular space with pillars on every side—open in the middle, so that the heavens can be seen."

The Church of San Ambrogio was restored in the ninth century, and again in the twelfth. It was modernized in the seventeenth, but was brought back, as much as possible, to its earlier form by a very careful and learned restoration in the nineteenth century. The church is of early Basilican type, with a high gallery.

Now I come to the points which will help to lead to my main argument. That part of the church which we should call the chancel is a deep apse. In Italian it is called the *Tribuna*—a word which takes us back to early Roman times. It is elevated very considerably above the nave, but does not contain the High Altar. This Altar stands below, in the nave, and is approached by a flight of steps leading down from the Tribuna to what we might be inclined to call the back. And, curiously, the top of the Altar is exactly on a level with the floor of the Tribuna. Further, the Archbishop's throne, a very ancient thing indeed, is in the centre of the apse, facing down the church, and on either side of it, round the circular curve, are seats for the assisting clergy. Mark, the Altar is in the body of the church, among the people, and the clergy are ranged in a semi-circle behind the Altar, as we should say, facing the congregation.

Now, it is important to note that you will find this arrangement, or something very like it, in almost every ancient church in Rome, so far as I have had opportunity to observe. In St. John Lateran the High Altar is so arranged that it can only be approached from the side of the Tribuna, and the celebrant must face the congregation. The present St. Peter's is, of course, a Renaissance church, dating from the sixteenth century. But it is on the site of old St.

Peter's, a great Basilica founded by Constantine, and the old arrangement has been preserved. St. Peter's chair, as it is said to be, is in the middle of the apse, while the High Altar is far away under the great dome. When the Pope celebrates, he faces down the church. I could give you many illustrations of this arrangement. You will, indeed, find it in nearly all the ancient churches of Italy. The main points are these: the High Altar is not pushed away to the far end of a long chancel; it is down in the church, among the people. If we say that the congregation are facing up towards the Altar, then the seats for the clergy are facing downwards towards the people. The Altar is in the middle.

Now, where did this arrangement come from?

In recent years some very interesting and remarkable discoveries have been made in connection with the Catacomb of San Sebastian. This catacomb has been, for centuries, one of the best known of all the catacombs. It is strange that anything new should be discovered in it or near it. Close to it is the Church of San Sebastian. It is not an ancient church, but it is built on the site of a very ancient church. It has long been known that under it was some kind of deep vault; and an ancient tradition affirms that near here the bodies of St. Peter and St. Paul were laid for a time, after their martyrdom.

Now it turns out that the old church was built on the top of an ancient Roman house. The rubbish which filled this house has been cleared away, and the house disclosed, the church still standing above. Excavations are still going on. Many questions are still undecided. But it seems clear that at a very early date the house was inhabited by Christian people: it communicates with the catacomb, and is in close relationship with certain early tombs, and there is an inscription which marks it as the house of M. Clodius Hermes. One of the rooms seems to have been used for Christian worship. The learned antiquarian who is over the excavation is of opinion that the Hermes who was owner of the house may be reasonably identified with the Hermes mentioned by St. Paul in the sixteenth chapter of Romans; for he believes that the house is a first century house. Others put it later, giving it a date early in the second century, about A.D. 120. It is believed by some that the tombs adjoining the house were those of St. Peter and St.

Paul before their bodies were moved to the places of their martyrdom, the sites of the churches bearing their names. On these, and many other questions which have been raised, I offer no opinion.

I mention all this to bring before you certain rude and primitive drawings which have been disclosed upon the walls of one of the rooms. These show a scene which can hardly be anything else than a primitive Celebration of the Holy Communion. There is a table, as it seems; it is of a rudely oval shape, or, rather a very much rounded pear-shape. At the smaller end is the President, drawn larger than the rest to mark his importance. All round are the communicants. On the table are a great cup, and, as it would seem, bread. The cup is also drawn very large, to mark its importance. As the learned custodian pointed out these drawings, he said, "That was how they celebrated the Eucharist in those primitive times." I think he was right. The marked simplicity, the absence of symbolism, the crudeness of the drawing, the obvious sincerity—these characteristics seem to point to a time much earlier than that of the abundant drawings of more symbolic type which are found throughout the catacombs. There is only one objection which could be made here. It might be imagined that these drawings represent some of those pagan, or semi-pagan, feasts for the dead which St. Augustine deploras, and which were strictly forbidden by Councils at a later date. But the evidence seems to point in the opposite direction. Those pagan feasts seem to have had a character very different from the simple rite indicated by the drawings I have described, and to have been a comparatively late development.

Let us now interpret the picture. At the head of the table is the President (as Justin Martyr calls him), Bishop or Presbyter, let us say. If there are other clergy, they are ranged on either side, the general congregation of the faithful completing the circle. In the centre are the Elements for the Sacrament.

Here we may ask, Do the catacombs supply any other evidence? They certainly contain many tombs which probably served as "altar tombs," to use a later expression. They have many *cubicula*, which were, doubtless, used as mortuary chapels. But there is one large excavation which may be reasonably described as a church. It is in the catacomb of St. Agnes, and is a series of five chambers opening widely into one another, the uppermost, as we may call

it, having a stone chair in the centre of the end wall, with a bench on either side in a line with it. Place a table in front of the stone chair, and you have exactly the arrangement that you find in all the ancient churches of Italy. Only, as churches of large size were built, the Episcopal throne was moved back, the seats for the assisting clergy on either side were moved with it, the congregation spread out into the spacious nave and transepts, when there were transepts, and the Holy Table maintained its position in the centre. That is exactly what is found in all, or nearly all, the ancient churches of Italy to-day. It is a survival from the earliest times.

A signal proof of the accuracy of this explanation is provided by the accounts which are given by Eusebius of the church built by order of Constantine at Jerusalem and of the church of Paulinus at Tyre. The former is in the *Life of Constantine*, the latter in the *Ecclesiastical History*. Of the church at the Holy Sepulchre he writes that "three doors facing towards the rising sun admitted the entering crowd," and "opposite to these doors was the apse, the head of the whole work." Of the church at Tyre he writes that it had "three gates on one side towards the rising sun," and that "at the top," which I take to mean the highest position in the interior, or, in other words, the apse, it was "adorned with thrones for the Presidents," and other seats, and that the "Holy Altar" was placed "in the middle."

These two churches, built so soon after the peace was established, and so particularly described by Eusebius, give us exactly the link we need between the persecuted Church of the catacombs and the victorious Church of the Christianized Empire.

You will have observed that Eusebius states clearly that in the two important churches he describes the great entrance doors were towards the rising sun. He says this twice about the church at Tyre.

With us, and throughout Northern and Western Europe, the arrangement is exactly the opposite. The great entrance doors are towards the West; the Sanctuary is towards the East. Now, it is a curious fact that, with the ancient churches of Italy, the order described by Eusebius prevails.

The late Mr. George Gilbert Scott, father of the architect of Liverpool Cathedral, and himself a distinguished authority on architecture, went into this question thoroughly, and, by systematic

examination, reached remarkable results. There are 47 churches in Rome which are either ancient or built on the sites of ancient churches, and which carry on their old traditions. Of these, 7 have an Eastward Sanctuary, like our churches, and 40 have the Sanctuary towards the West, the great entrance doors being towards the East. Among those which have Westward Sanctuaries are St. Peter's, St. John Lateran, Sta. Maria Maggiore—the three greatest churches in Rome. St. Paul's without the walls is the only one of the greater churches which has an Eastward Sanctuary. I should add that I am much indebted to the work of Mr. G. G. Scott for many of the particulars I have given you.

Why the primitive church builders placed their doors to the Eastward and their Sanctuaries to the West is not clear. In each case Eusebius mentions the rising sun. Writing of Tyre, he describes the sun as shining in through the open doors. Perhaps people who had been worshipping in hidden places, even underground, liked the sun to shine in upon their early Services. Perhaps they liked the celebrant to face towards the East, and, at the same time, had no thought of changing the accustomed order with the Holy Table in the middle. It is clear, however, from the number of exceptions, that they had no cast-iron rule as regards orientation.

On this question I lay no stress. But the custom of the primitive Church as regards the positions of the ministers, the congregation and the Holy Table is well worth pondering. The Communion is the Feast of the Lord. The Bishop, as a father, calls his family round the Table of the Lord, quite literally. The Reformers tried to restore this beautiful custom; but the effort was not a success: Gothic churches, built in the Middle Ages, do not lend themselves easily to such a change. Nor does it appear that the way the Reformers took to carry out the change was wisely directed. It is a curious point, not always realised, that the arrangement they made is still ordered in our Prayer Books.

Here in Ireland, I believe it is the fact that our primitive churches preserved the original custom until influences from outside changed it. Although they were square ended, and not apsidal, there was a stone bench for the clergy across the end wall of the little chancel, and the Holy Table stood between this bench and the congregation. So I read. If this be so, there is an additional historic reason, as well as sentiment, to inspire a hope that, at some time, or in some

way, we of the ancient Church of Ireland may have opportunity of enjoying fellowship, in order and arrangement, with those glorious heroes of the Faith who suffered and triumphed in the great days of old.

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The fifth volume of the World Call to the Church contains "The Call from Our Own People Overseas" (2s. 6d. net). It is described as "Being a comprehensive statement of the facts which constitute the Call from our own People Overseas to the Church of England, prepared by a Commission appointed by the Missionary Council of the Church Assembly." The Bishop of Salisbury contributes a preface and the Bishop of St. Albans a concluding chapter. The Foreword by the Members of the Commission explains the construction of the Report. The first four chapters deal with needs and problems in relation to our people overseas in almost every part of the world; the next nine treat of special circumstances and needs in nine geographical sections. The aim is to bring home to the Church of England the work which the Anglican Church overseas, and specially in Canada and Australia, "cannot yet accomplish without aid, e.g., the provision for the spiritual needs of the new settlement now going on." The volume contains six maps which serve to illustrate special points concerning our people overseas. This brief description of the volume must suffice to indicate the wide range of work concerned, and the importance of the subject to churchpeople will without doubt lead them to study the interesting details given of the growth and present position of our Church throughout the world. Evangelical churchpeople will be specially interested in the references to the Colonial and Continental Church Society which is described as by far the most extended in its operations of the Societies working exclusively for our own people. We should have been glad to see more detailed information of the work which this Society has accomplished during the hundred years of its existence, and more particularly of its contribution to the development of our Church in Western Canada, where but for its workers large areas would be left without any representatives of the Anglican Communion. A special chapter is given to the important work among the 330,000 men and women on the sea carried on mainly by The Missions to Seamen.

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*Fitly Framed Together* is the title of the shilling volume issued as the story of the year's work of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society, showing how the work of the Society fits into the building of the mighty Temple of God. It is a record of work done by women in India, China and Ceylon on behalf of those who can only be reached by such a Society as this, and is a challenge to prayer, and more self-sacrifice, on the part of those who stay in the Homeland.