

RE-UNION OF CHRISTENDOM.

(A Series of Lectures delivered in St Joseph's Church, Temuka, by the Very Rev Father LE MENANT DES CHESNAIS, S.M.)

LECTURE XVIII.—THE CHRISTIAN'S FLAG.

"We preach Jesus crucified" (I Col. i, 23)

EVERY well organised society has a sign, a standard, a banner, by which it may be known. This distinctive sign is what we call a flag. There is the royal standard or flag of Great Britain and the British ensign, the tricolour flag of France, the black eagle of Prussia, the yellow flag of India, the lion of Persia, the triple crescent of Egypt, the crescent and two crossed swords of Japan, the yellow crescent and star of Arabia, the white cross of Switzerland, the white crescent and white star of Turkey, etc. Not only has every nation its flag or standard, but also every army, every regiment, every ship. An admiral, in the navy flies his flag at the main top-gallant masthead; a vice-admiral, at the fore; and a rear-admiral at the mizzen. A black flag is a sign that no mercy will be shown the vanquished; a white flag is a flag of truce; a red flag is a sign of defiance; a flag hoisted half mast is a sign of mourning; to strike or lower a flag is a sign of respect or surrender. The Christian society has also its flag or royal standard. This flag is the cross of Jesus, of which I wish to entertain you this evening. The subject, as you will soon see, perhaps to your surprise, is most interesting and practical. Let us first briefly trace out the

ORIGIN OF THIS FLAG.

From all eternity God resolved to send His beloved Son on earth that He might redeem and save us by His sufferings and death on the Cross of Calvary. Jesus crucified is the model man, the ideal man. Tertullian informs us that when God fashioned the body of Adam He formed on the model of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, Who was the prototype of the whole human race. "Quodcumque limus exprimebat, Christus cogitabatur homo futurus" (Tert. Lib. De Resurr. Carn.). But, because Jesus was to die extended on a cross for our salvation, to the end that man might never forget his crucified Saviour, He made him a living cross, for whenever man extends his hands he expresses the image of a cross. The sign of the cross was the sign of salvation from the beginning of the world. All the blessings granted to men from the commencement of the world have been granted through Jesus crucified. All those who lived before the death of the Son of God on the cross could be saved only by faith in this Saviour Who was to suffer and die for them. According to St Thomas many of the patriarchs and prophets had a clear idea of the mystery of redemption; for others it was enough to believe that God would save them as He had revealed it to these holy patriarchs and prophets. This holy doctor also thinks that many of the Gentiles knew Christ crucified by a special revelation. "Quantum ad Gentiles dicendum est quod multis Gentilium facta fuit revelatio de Christo, ut patet per ea quæ prælixerunt" (IIa, 2æ, Quest. 2). As to those who were saved without a special revelation they were not saved without an implicit faith in the Redeemer. "Credentes Deum esse liberatorem hominum a cunctis modis sibi placitis" (St Thomas Ubi supra). St Paul affirms the same when he says: "The world was made for man, man for Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ for God" (I Cor. v, 2-3). Whence it is evident that from the commencement of the world Jesus crucified was the source of every blessing bestowed upon men, and that His cross was the ensign or emblem of salvation. This is why the Apostle of the Gentiles cried out: "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. vi, 14). Among the Jews, whenever the supreme Pontiff blessed the people he spread out his arms in the shape of a cross and said: "May the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob bless you and your children unto the third and fourth generation," because the supreme Pontiff among the Jews represented Christ the fountain of every supernatural blessing. Again, when a sacrifice was offered, the priest first raised the victim from the ground and lifted it on high; he next turned it towards the east, then to the west, that is, he formed with it the sign of the cross, to signify that all the victims of the old dispensation were only images and figures of Jesus, the Lamb of God, Who was to die on a cross for our redemption, and from Whom only the sacrifices of the Jewish Law derived all their virtue and efficacy. When the Amalekites opposed the passage of the children of Israel in the wilderness, Moses stood up on the top of Mount Horeb, having the rod of God in his hand. And when he lifted up his hands, Israel overcame; but if he let them down a little Amalec overcame. . . . so Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands until the victory was won (Exodus, xvii, 9-14). Moses standing on the top of the Mount of Horeb is an image of Jesus crucified standing with both his hands spread out as a cross, through Whom alone we can obtain victory over the enemies of our salvation, by the merits of His sufferings and death on the Cross of Calvary, and enter one day the promised land of Paradise. Leaving the old dispensation let us come to the New Testament. Speaking without any figure we may say that Jesus Himself is the sign of the cross offered for the salvation of mankind.

By His sufferings and death on Mount Calvary or Golgotha He washed away our sins, and threw open to us the portals of Paradise. "Blotting out the handwriting of the decree that was against us, fastening it to the cross" (Col. ii, 14). The sign of the cross is the mysterious sign Tau, "T" spoken of by the prophet Ezechiel, preserving the followers of Christ from the sword of the destroying angel (Ezechiel, ix). It is for these reasons that the Apostles, guided by the Holy Ghost, made choice of the cross as the fit emblem to distinguish the true followers of Christ. If you were in the midst of pagans, Turks, or Jews you could distinguish a Christian from thousands of infidels and heretics by the sign of the cross. Every one who makes the sign of the cross is known all over the world as a Christian or follower of Christ. The sign of the cross is therefore the most natural and explicit manifestation of the Christian faith; to say it in one word, it is the standard or flag of the Christian, just as the Royal Standard is the flag of Great Britain, the tricolour flag that of France, the black eagle that of Prussia, the lion that of Persia, and crescent and two crossed swords that of Japan, etc. Let us now study the advantages of that flag.

ANTIQUITY OF THE SIGN OF THE CROSS.

It is a pious belief that Jesus Himself taught His Apostles the sign of the cross. When, on Ascension Day, He ascended to heaven by His Almighty Power, full of glory and majesty, with His arms spread out as a cross, it is thought that He imparted to them His last blessing by tracing over them the sign of the cross in the air. "Et elevatis manibus benedixit illis." "And lifting up His hands He blessed them" (Luke xxiv, 50). See: Tertul. De Cor Mil C. iii; Eusebius of Caesarea Demonstr. Evang. L. iv; Vita Const. L. iii; C. ii; St Crysostom of Jerus. Catech. xiii, N. 36, etc. The Apostles themselves, as we are informed by Nicephorus, made use of the sign of the cross. Thus, St John the Evangelist traced upon himself that salutary sign before his death (Nicephorus Hist. l. ii; c. xlviii). Through it St Paul restored sight to a blind man (Surius ix, Oct.). St Augustine says that all Christians practised the sign of the cross from the days of the Apostles (S. Aug. De Bapt. l. iv; c. xxiv). The constant, uninterrupted tradition is that Jesus Christ Himself instructed the Apostles about the sign of the cross, the Apostles made use of it, and taught it to the early Christians, and from the commencement we find it established in all Christian churches, whether of the East or of the West. Besides the authorities we have already quoted, we might add, St Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in his Epistle to Phil; Tertullian, who said:—"At every step and change of place, whenever we come in or go out, when we put on our sandals, or wash, or take our meals, or light our lamps; whether we are about to recline or sit down, or whenever we begin a conversation, we impress on our forehead the sign of the cross." "Ad omnes progressum atque promotum, ad omnem aditum et exitum, ad calcatum, ad lavacra, ad mensas, ad lumina, ad cubacula et rediit, quando cumque nos conversatio exercet frontem crucis signaculo terimus" (Tert. De Cor Mil C. iii, 4). The great doctor of the Western Church, St Jerome, writing to Rustochium, advised her, in imitation of the early Christians, to make frequently the sign of the cross. "Before every action," he said to her, "at every step, let your hand form the sign of the cross" (S. Hier. Epist. xviii, ad Eust.). If the Jews had such veneration for the Ark of the Covenant, because it contained the tables of the law, a vessel of manna of the desert and the rod of Aaron, at greater veneration should Christians have for the cross of Jesus, which was the instrument of our redemption? The worship of the Catholic Church for the cross, whether it be the real cross on which our Lord was crucified, or a representation of it, in gold, silver, ivory, or any other material, is a relative worship of Latria. We do not adore the gold, silver, or ivory; we do not believe that in the image itself there is any virtue, that it can hear and help us. The object of our adoration is Christ crucified, made present to us through these holy images or crucifixes. Every Catholic child knows that it would be sinful and idolatrous to worship a piece of gold, silver, or wood, or any other material. However, we hold those objects in veneration, especially when they have been blessed, because they remind us of our crucified Lord, and we cannot think too much of Him, and because, when they are blessed, we promise to use them only as a help to pray to Him and to adore Him.

SIGNS—NATURAL, ARTIFICIAL, SACRED.

II. A sign is that which, besides the thing represented by it, conveys to our minds the idea of another. There are three kinds of signs:—(1) natural, (2) artificial, (3) sacred. (1) A natural sign is that which, by itself, apart from every agreement or previous understanding, brings to our mind the existence of a certain phenomenon or fact, e.g. You are travelling on the sandy deserts of Africa; you see a footprint on the sand, and you conclude that a lion, a tiger, an elephant, a camel, or a man has passed that way; the footprint is a natural sign to you of what has taken place, and brings to your mind the idea of the living creature which left it behind it. (2) An artificial sign is that which presupposes a previous agreement or understanding, e.g. It is Sunday morning; the church bells are ringing, and you say "It is time to go to Mass."