ROME LETTER

(From our own correspondent.)

THE CRUCIFIX IN THE CATACOMBS.

In the first years of the life of Christianity the Cross, the symbol of our redemption, was unreservedly spoken of and portrayed without fear. But gradually a certain amount of reticence on the part of the Christians was born. They soon found that it became a source of danger to themselves, the butt of pagan ridicule, and accordingly subterfuges had to be resorted to for the sake of blinding the enemies of the Cross to the real significance of the sacred sign. How infamously the Sign of the Cross was travestied by the pagans is well exemplified in the well-known caricature, which was found in a chamber of the palace of Caligula on the Palatine Hill in 1857. Describing this blasphemous caricature, Liddon, in one of his lectures, says: 'The lowest order of the populace were as intelligently hostile to it (the Cross) as were the philosophers. Witness that remarkable caricature of the adoration of our crucified Lord, which was discovered some ten years ago beneath the ruins of the Palatine palace. It is a rough sketch, traced, in all probability, by the hand of some pagan slave in one of the earliest years of the third century of our era. A human figure with an ass's head is represented as fixed to a cross, while another figure in a tunic stands on one side. This figure is addressing himself to the crucified monster, and is making a gesture which was the customary pagan expression of adoration. Underneath there runs a rude inscription—"Alexamenos adores his god." Here we are face to face with a touching episode in the life of the Roman Church in the days of Severus or Caracalla. As under Nero, so, a century and a-half later, there were worshippers of Christ in the household of Caesar. But the paganism of the later date was more intelligently and bitterly hostile to the Church than was the paganism which had shed the blood of the Apostles. The Gnostic invective which attributed to the Jews the worship of an ass was applied indiscriminately to Jews and Christians. Tacitus attributes the custom to a legend respecting services rendered by wild asses to the Israelites in the desert: "And so, I suppose," observes Tertullian, "it was thence presumed that we, as bordering upon the Jewish religion, were taught to worship such a figure."' Such a story, once current, was easily adapted to the purposes of a pagan caricaturist. This memento of persecution days is now kept in the Kircherian Museum, Rome, where it can be seen daily.

No wonder, then, with such beliefs abroad, the early Christians did their utmost to baffle unbelievers in their attempts to get a clear idea of the symbol of our redemption. The figure of an anchor was used to represent the Cross, as the traveller sees exemplified repeatedly when wandering in the Roman catacombs to-day. In the crypt of St. Lucina an inscription on a *loculus* aptly illustrates this. Upon the slab covering the abode of the dead one is engraved the name 'Faustinianus,' and beneath it are carved figures of an anchor with a lamb lying dead beside it. What did the pagan eye see in all this? Simply nothing. But to the faithful it represented the Cross and the dead Christ. A more interesting example is furnished in the 'Chapel of the Sacraments' in the Catacomb of St. Callixtus on the Appian Way, which every visitor to Rome must have seen. Here, besides pictures of the Eucharistic banquet and the punishment of the prophet Jonas, we find represented a trident, from the middle prong of which a dolphin is seen hanging. To the uninitiated such a strange combination was meaningless; to the Christian it spoke volumes. We know that Greek was the language of the Church in her early days, and that in this tongue was written the inscription on the tomb of every Pope for the first 250 years of Christianity. To Greek, then, the elders of the Church went for a word that would stand for the full title of the Saviour. How beautifully they worked it out! 'Ichthus,' the Greek word for 'fish,' veiled what they wished to be hidden from the Gentiles, the initial letters of the five Greek words meaning—'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour,' being in, English, i, ch, th, u, s, the elders grouped them together and formed the Greek word 'ichthus'—'fish.' Thus, the Christians kept a profound secret in the sign of the fish that which the pagans so vainly sought after. Thanks to the 'Disciplina Arcani'—the discipline of the secret, so well had the Christians concealed from unhallowed eyes the truths and teachings of their religion, that in the fourth century S. Jerome's words summed up the situation in its entirety: 'Blasphemant quod ignorant.' 'They blaspheme that of which they know nothing.' And even in Tertullian's day, the day of 'the fierce Tertullian,' so ridiculous were the ideas pagans held of the Christian religion that with the most perfect truth he wrote in his own cutting style: 'Somniastis caput asininium esse Deum nostrum'—'You are maudlin about an ass's head being our God.'

But the darkest night, no matter how long it may be, must give place to dawn. Yet with the freedom of the Church clear representations of the Crucifix came not into being. Strangely enough, in all the Roman catacombs only a single painting of the Crucifixion has been found, and this of a date not anterior, in the opinion of Marucchi, to the seventh century. This precious fresco was all but destroyed by a piece of stupid vandalism: for the wall on which it was painted was bored right through for the purpose of transforming the place into a wine cellar. Truly, in Italian wine-growers the vandals of old had brothers to whom ancient remains mattered little for a couple of centuries. However, thanks to Christian archaeologists, the precious fresco on the wall of clay has come down to us in its sacred surroundings. And Marucchi, the archaeologist, who has spent half his life down in the catacombs, and whom Popes and kings have honored, describes it as follows, writing of the Catacomb of S. Valentine: 'It represented,' says the Roman savant, 'the Redeemer fastened to the Cross, clothed with the *colobio*, or long sleeveless tunic. At each side of Him stood the Virgin Mother in an attitude of prayer, and S. John, the beloved disciple. This last figure, which is the only one that survives uninjured, is represented as clad in a tunic and mantle, having on its breast the Book of the Gospels. The Cross was not very high, and the Christ was nailed to it by four nails. A support rested under the feet. Above the head the title was affixed, and at either side of the dying Lord were painted heads representing the sun and moon, to signify the Paschal full moon during which occurred the death of Christ. At the lower part of the fresco appeared the battlements of Jerusalem. Of all this little now remains. Besides the figure of S. John, one sees only the left arm of the Crucifixion, some traces of the head, part of the tunic, and below the staves that served to keep the cross firm in the soil. The Crucified belongs undoubtedly to the ancient style, since it is festooned by four nails, has a rest under the feet, and is clothed in a tunic. Although the figure cannot be called a good one, it does not possess that crudeness which we see in works of art pertaining to the ninth century and afterwards. The type of the Crucified and the whole group possesses a similarity to the miniature of the Syrian Codex, or to the mosaics of John VII. . . . and also to the few remains in the Vatican grottos, the Lateran Museum, in S. Maria in Cosmedin, and in S. Mark's, Florence.'