

# ROME LETTER

(From our own correspondent.)

## ON THE LATERAN HILL.

As one stands on the Lateran Hill to-day and reads the inscription on the facade of the Pope's Cathedral, which tells that this is 'the Mother and Head of all the Churches of the City and the World,' he feels he is treading on historic and holy ground. For here stood the palace of Lateranus, the wealthy patrician whom Nero put to death for the sake of his possessions in 64 A.D.; here lived Constantine the Great and Fausta; and here, again, stood the palace which the conqueror of paganism when he led the Christians from the Catacombs in 313, presented to Pope Melchides. From this palace the Popes ruled for a thousand years, and in the basilica built by Constantine (at which the Emperor labored, it is said, with his own hands) they preached until 1870. And only last month Cardinal De Lai inaugurated a seminary for the Levites of the diocese of Rome which Pius X. had erected right beside his Cathedral. So on the Lateran Hill is the history of the Church well exemplified—ever ancient, ever new.

## THE OLD LATERAN EDIFICES.

Constantine, as we have seen, gave his own palace to the Pope, which edifice served till its destruction by fire in 1308 as the residence of the Popes. He then erected a basilica, and near it the octagonal baptistry which is still in use. On what a royal scale he decorated the Pope's Cathedral! Silver and gold statues, vessels, and ornaments were seen there in such profusion that men called it 'the Golden Basilica.' The joint yearly endowments to this, S. Peter's, S. Paul's, and S. Laurence's, came to a sum equal in money of the present day to about £100,000. No wonder Dante speaks in 'Il Paradiso' of how 'the barbarians from the North stood in silent wonder amid the works of Rome, when to their view the Lateran arose in greatness more than earthly.' But what a series of vicissitudes! Ravaged by the vandals of Genseric in the fifth century, it was soon restored by Pope Leo the Great. Almost levelled to the ground by an earthquake in 894, it was rebuilt by Pope Sergius III. after a decade. In 1308 a three days' fire ruined it, and Clement V. sent money from Avignon to restore it. But fifty years later saw the Cathedral again burned to the ground. Rebuilt in 1364, not a Pope has lived since who did not enlarge or beautify the hallowed edifice, the last being Leo the Thirteenth, who spent on it no less than £190,000.

## THE NEW EDIFICES ON THE LATERAN HILL.

Than Sixtus V., the Franciscan, the Church has had no greater builder. The palaces, churches, fountains, and monasteries in Rome at this hour sustain this thesis. The old Lateran Palace, which I have said was laid in ruins in 1308, he rebuilt as a summer residence for the Pope and as a place in which all the cardinals living in Rome should take up their abode. But it was never inhabited for any length of time owing to the malaria, and soon the tireless Pontiff was erecting the Quirinal Palace, the very one in which King Victor Emmanuel lives to-day. Now, however, when this scourge has been driven away from Rome it serves as a Papal Museum, though otherwise the huge building is almost empty. In the basilica of St. John Lateran, which Leo XIII. restored so well, what treasures are gathered, treasures not of silver or gold. Within its walls are preserved the table of the Last Supper, on which the Blessed Sacrament was instituted the night before Jesus Christ died; the wooden altar on which St. Peter used to say Mass when a guest in the house of the Senator Pudens, and upon which none but the Pope himself is ever permitted to offer up the Holy Sacrifice; the heads of SS. Peter and Paul in silver busts, and that of the brave boy-martyr St. Pancratius, who laid down his life for the faith at the

age of twelve, and many other relics. And its sacristy holds gifts from Popes, Emperors, and Kings, one of the chief benefactors being Charlemagne. How much the Catholic world ought to revere the Lateran because of its connection with the saints we know and love! Here the Poor Man of Assisi and St. Dominic came to Pope Innocent III. and had the rules of their illustrious Orders approved. Here St. Gregory the Great wrote homilies and presided while the choristers of Rome practised Gregorian chants. St. Aloysius loved to pray here. And at the Third Lateran Council the voice of St. Laurence O'Toole, Archbishop of Dublin, was heard in the august assembly.

## THE STONE OF ABERCIUS.

Though space will not permit a visit to the Lateran Palace, still there is an object there which must be mentioned in these days of controversy. This is the fragment of the inscription of Abercius, Bishop of Hieropolis in Phrygia in the days of Marcus Aurelius, which bears witness in symbolic language to how firm was the belief of the Christians in the Blessed Eucharist. A translation of the inscription on the block of stone runs:—'I am Abercius, the disciple of the immaculate Pastor who feeds his sheep on the mountains and in the valleys, who has great eyes that see everything. He taught me the doctrine of life and sent me to Rome to contemplate a kingdom and a queen robed in gold and having golden shoes. And there I beheld a purple ornamented with a splendid sign; and I saw the fields of Syria and Nisbia beyond the Euphrates. And everywhere I found brothers united together. . . . And the faith was always a guide to me and it gave me for food the great fish which the chaste Virgin took from the fountain and gave to her friends to eat with excellent wine and ministering to them mixture of wine and water together with bread.' No wonder De Rossi, the prince of Roman archaeologists, called this the 'Queen of Inscriptions.' What glorious spectacles the Lateran has seen on the day of the coronation of the Pope there! Speaking of the day on which Boniface the Eighth was crowned and of the procession from the Vatican to the Lateran, a non-Catholic attests to its magnificence. 'In the great festal procession,' he writes, 'which wound its way through the decorated streets as the Pope went to take possession of the Lateran, the magistrate and the city prefect, now no more than a powerless shadow, took part. Boniface rode a snow-white palfrey covered with a hanging made of Cyprus plumes, the crown of Sylvester on his head, and wearing the most solemn pontificals; beside him, clad in scarlet, walked two vassal kings, Charles and Charles Martel, holding the bridle of his horse. Only half a year before the same kings had walked beside a Pope (Celestine V. who resigned) who wore a hermit's tunic, and rode upon an ass. They must now remind themselves how little they had been humbled by the service they had then rendered.'

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