

ST. LINUS AND THE CHURCH OF THE FIRST CENTURY

(For the *N.Z. Tablet* by the REV. J. KELLY, PH.D.)

On September 23 we keep the feast of St. Linus, the first successor of St. Peter. Of this saint very little is known to us. However, his feast serves as an occasion to bring our minds back to the beginnings of the Church; and while we try to get a comprehensive view of its history during the first century of the Christian era, we will recall all there is to be told of St. Linus.

First, a word as to the Christian Era itself. In the year 5239 of the Julian Period, or 1280 after the foundation of Rome (A.U.C.), Dionysius Exiguus introduced the system of calculating the years from the Birth of Christ, or rather from His Incarnation, both of which, according to him, occurred in 754 A.U.C. Later writers are agreed that Dionysius was wrong in fixing the beginning of the Christian Era so late. The most probable date for the Nativity seems to be December 25, 747, A.U.C., so that Christ was already in His seventh year at the date from which Dionysius began to count. It is important to remember this fact and to take account of it in fixing the events of our Lord's life according to the chronology of the Dionysian era now followed. Thus, if it were true that Christ died in the year 33 of our era, He would then have been in His thirty-ninth year. The year of His death is commonly supposed to be the year 29, A.D.

After such a lapse of time and in such dearth of historical documents to fix the important dates is no easy task. Some it is possible to determine with a fair amount of certainty, and they in their turn help us approximately to assign others. Thus we can accurately get the date of St. Paul's imprisonment at Jerusalem, 53, A.D. From the Acts of the Apostles we know that the Council of Jerusalem was held about five and a half years before this, that is in 47, A.D. Ancient martyrologies tell us that St. Paul's conversion occurred the second year after our Lord's Ascension, i.e. 31, A.D. These dates fit in with what St. Paul tells us himself in Gal. i. 15, sqq, that seventeen years elapsed from his conversion until his second coming to Jerusalem.

About the year 35, St. Peter is supposed to have become Bishop of Antioch. This is borne out by the tradition that he held that see for seven years: for the year 42 seems beyond doubt the date of his journey to Rome. On the feast of Pentecost, 53, St. Paul was imprisoned at Jerusalem. Thence three days later he was brought to Caesarea, where he was detained two years under Antonius Felix. In the summer of 55, Pontius Festus succeeded Felix. By him Paul, having appealed to Caesar, was sent to Rome. In the 27th and 28th chapters of the Acts, St. Luke tells us of the dangers and vicissitudes of the Apostle's voyage. He arrived in Rome in the spring of 56, was delivered up to Burrus, then praetorian prefect, and detained in custody until the beginning of the year 58.

At this time the population of Rome was about two millions. In the beginning the Christian religion was not proscribed by law, and amid the unspeakable corruptions of the great city it quickly gained adherents. That in St. Peter's time there were many thousands of Christians in Rome is certain: that they belonged to every class of society, slaves as well as nobles, is clear from many documents of these early years. And from Rome there went forth into Spain and Gaul and Africa and the islands of the Mediterranean preachers of the Gospels who brought the Faith to every shore washed by the waves of the great water highway of the Empire. Paulinus preached in Lucca, Romulus in Fiesole, Photinus in Benevento, Maurus in Bari, Philip and Marcan in Secetea, all sent by St. Peter.

Rome had long fallen from her primitive austerity of morals. She had conquered the world, and to her own gods had added those of the conquered nations.

Her gods, and the worship of her gods, had become sources of debauchery and license. Public and private life was rotten to the core. Her greatest philosophers, her tenderest poets, her proudest matrons were all tainted by the universal corruption. Through Rome, and through Rome's immorality, the powers of hell had gained on earth a stronghold that no human power could overthrow. For vice had become a religion, and as such was bound up in a hundred ways with the national, social, and domestic life of the people. And no human power did overthrow it. The power lay in the Fisherman of Galilee, who came to Rome as the representative of Him Whom a Roman governor had crucified on Calvary.

The Church was founded in Rome in peace. But the peace was of short duration. Tacitus tells how Nero burned Rome, and how, to escape the popular fury, he threw the blame on the Christians—'*Ergo abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos, et quæsitissimis poenis affecti, quos per flagitia invisos Christianos vulgus appellabat.*'

July 19, 64, was the date of the burning of Rome. Over the conflagration the insane monster Nero, dressed like an actor, chanted of the burning of Troy. But his mad delight changed to terror when he discovered that he had gone too far, and that the people were likely to call him to account for the awful destruction of the city. Skilfully he made the Christians the objects of the popular fury. And there ensued a day of carnage and bloodshed, the solemnest in our annals after the day of Calvary. The great massacre took place about the 4th August, 64.

The gardens of Nero in the Vatican quarter were the scene of these barbarities which I will let Renan, a writer who had no bias in favor of Christianity, describe:—'Roman annals had known few days so extraordinary. The *ludus matutinus*, usually devoted to fights between animals, saw an unheard-of procession. The victims, covered with the skins of wild beasts, were driven into the arena, where they were torn to pieces by dogs, others were crucified, while yet others, clad in tunics soaked in oil, pitch, or resin, found themselves tied to stakes and reserved to light up the evening festivities. . . . By the light of those hideous torches, Nero, who had made evening races fashionable, showed himself in the arena, now mingling with the populace in jockey costume, now driving his chariot and seeking for applause. . . . Matrons and virgins were included in these horrible sports, and the nameless indignities which they had to undergo formed part of the entertainment. . . . The most honored Christian ladies had to lend themselves to these monstrosities. . . . Some of the Christian women sacrificed in this manner were of feeble strength: their courage was supernatural, but the infamous rabble had eyes only for their bodies rent open and their torn bosoms.'

No such day ever dawned again in the history of the Church. But thenceforth and long after it persecutions continued, and in spite of them and through them the Church grew in numbers and in strength.

If not in this same year it was not long after till St. Peter and St. Paul watered the seed they had sown with their own blood. The year 64, or more probably 67, A.D., was the date of the crucifixion of the first Pope. And so eminent a writer as Grisar thinks it not unlikely that he was martyred beneath the obelisk which still stands on the site of Nero's gardens, in front of the grandest of the world's basilicas, beneath which his remains now rest.

'After the martyrdom of Paul and Peter, Linus first received the episcopacy of Rome,' says Eusebius. 'He,' says the same historian, 'is mentioned by Paul in the Epistle which he wrote from Rome to Timothy, amongst the greetings which are read at the end of the epistle: Eusebius greets thee, and Pudens, Linus, and Claudia.'

St. Linus was an Italian by birth. He reigned eleven or twelve years. Probably he was associated with St. Peter in the government of the Church. By his direction it was constituted that women should