

Our Catholic Heritage

Dissent in the Early Church

Enemies From Within the Church

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"The time is sure to come when, far from being content with sound teaching, people will be avid for the latest novelty, and collect themselves a whole series of teachers according to their own tastes, and then instead of listening to the truth, they will turn to myths." (II Tim. 4, 3-4)

It is one of the consistent facts of our history that the Church never gets to deal with her enemies one at a time. At the very moment the Romans were battering the Church from without, she was beset by enemies from within.

Two of the earliest difficulties the Church had to face were the problems of millenarianism (the expectation of an immediate return by Jesus) and charisms (the special gifts of the Holy Spirit.) As early as the year 50 A.D. St. Paul was grappling with the practical implications of these dog-

matic facts. (cf. I and II Thessalonians and I Cor. 12-14)

These things found a home in the Church then, as now. The eventual return of Jesus in glory and the gifts of the Spirit cannot be denied. In the second century, however, the Church was engaged in a process of adjustment to the fact she might have to be in the world, and dealing with the world's affairs, for a long time to come. The episcopate and presbyterate were growing to their full authority, while the frequency and intensity of charisms were diminishing.

As early as the letter of Pope St. Clement (c. 100) we see the transfer of power from the apostolic to the subapostolic Church in terms of bishops.

"The apostles went from place to place and village to village preaching the Good News. They tested their first fruits and appointed

bishops and deacons for the future believers."

The book known as the "Didache" (c. 100) notes:

"Elect for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, gentlemen, who are not greedy, good men and true."

A violent reaction to this process of hierarchical organization came from a man named Montanus (c. 135-75): We know nothing of him personally. His system of thought grew in an atmosphere of Judaeo-Christian millenarianism. He attempted to set up a Church of the Spirit in opposition to the Church of the Bishops. He opposed any attempt by the Church to acquire a permanent form for the purpose of entering upon a long process of historical development.

He placed great emphasis on charismatic gifts. His followers emphasized possession by the Spirit to the point that Montanus was identified with the Holy Spirit and installed in

the Trinity! Two of his followers, Maximilla and Priscilla, became very influential.

"They magnify these two ladies above the apostles and every gift of grace, even going so far as to say that there is in them something more than Christ." (Sp. Eusebius c. 140)

Montanus' ethical teaching was as troublesome as his doctrinal observations. According to him, the Holy Spirit came to establish a discipline rather than a teaching. He attempted to stampede the Church into a rigorous moral severity.

Montanus' chief importance is that he stimulated the Church to clarify its nature and build its structure, finding its guarantee of the Spirit not in a future coming of Jesus, nor in the presence of charisms, but in the three-fold authority of: — the apostolic canon, — the apostolic creed, — the apostolic episcopate.

St. Irenaeus — A Curious Explorer

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"He was a curious explorer of all kinds of learning." (Tertullian, d.c. 220)

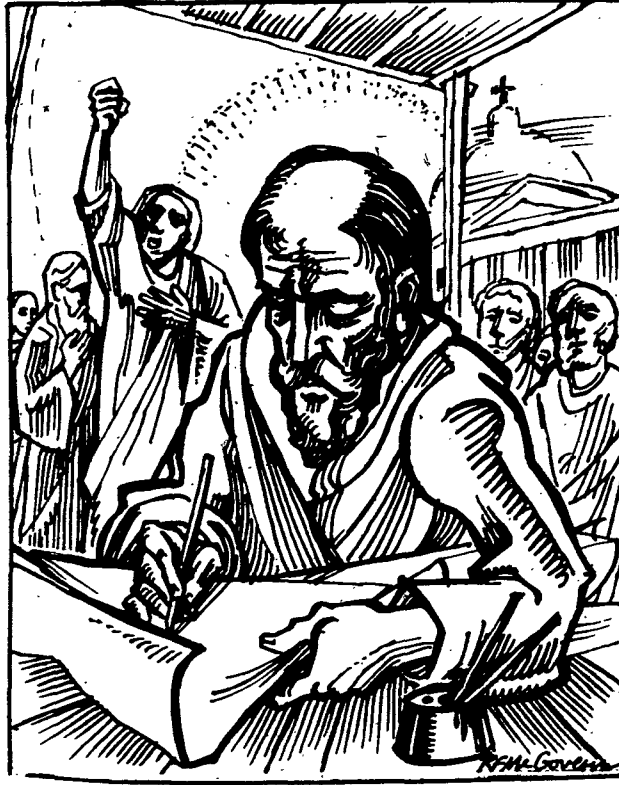
That brief comment on St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, is almost all the personal information we have on this great doctor and father of the Church. Irenaeus lives chiefly in his work.

He represents the watershed between the early Fathers, whose theology was almost purely scriptural, and the great speculative thinkers of the fourth century. The Church was realizing that the coming of Christ was not to be immediate, and that it had better prepare for a long history in the world. Irenaeus and other thinkers began to organize and authenticate the apostolic title deeds of the Church.

The Church draws its teaching and the guarantee of its authenticity from the Scriptures. Irenaeus is an important link in our knowledge of the formation of the Canon of Scripture.

"Matthew wrote the Good News in the Hebrew language while Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel and founding the Church at Rome. After they died, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, wrote down for us what Peter had preached. Luke, the companion of Paul, enshrined in his book the Gospel as preached by Paul. Afterward, John, the disciple of the Lord . . . wrote down the Good News while living at Ephesus in Asia." (Irenaeus, "Against Heresies")

In answer to the challenges of heretics the Church formulated her beliefs in the first Creeds. Irenaeus records one of the first of these "rules of Faith."



St. Irenaeus (Art by Robert F. McGovern)

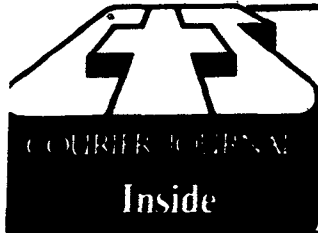
"The Church, planted throughout the universe to the ends of the earth, accepts this faith from the apostles and their disciples: There is one God, the Father Almighty, who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them. There is one Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God, Our Lord, incarnate for our salvation. There is the Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets and foretold the coming of Jesus Christ, His birth from the virgin, His suffering and resurrection from the dead, His bodily ascension into heaven and His return from heaven in the glory of the Father to gather all things to Himself." (Against Heresies)

Canon and Creed are in the care of a Church founded upon the apostles and governed by their successors, the Bishops. Irenaeus again provides early testimony to the apostolic authority of the hierarchy.

"We can enumerate among us those whom the apostles instituted as bishops and their successors . . . They wished that these righteous and good men, left by their successors, perpetuate their own teaching office." (Against Heresies)

Irenaeus passed his life in scholarly combat and spiritual peace, and died about the year 202.

"It is impossible to enumerate the gifts which the Church has received from God throughout the world . . . Every day she puts them to use for the brothers, deceiving none, profiting by none. Freely has the Church received, and freely she gives." (Against Heresies)



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