

PREFACE

THE AUTHOR OF THE *COMMONITORIUM* was apparently a “late vocation” monk of Lérins Abbey on the Isle of Saint Honorat, off the coast of Nice in France. He wrote this work circa AD 434, about three years after the Council of Ephesus in 431; it is the only writing we have from him for sure. We don’t know the exact date of his birth or his death, but he must have died before 450.

The word *commonitorium* signifies memorandum, aide-memoire, letter of instructions, a means of remembrance (from *commonitor*, one who earnestly reminds). Vincent appears to have written two commonitories but we have only one (see the end of chapter 28 and the summary in chapter 29). The second was to contain the testimonies of the holy fathers, i.e., the fathers of the Church prior to Vincent’s time. Our author fell under the shadow of subscribing to Semipelagianism (against Augustine), but this has not interfered with veneration of him—he is mentioned in the *Roman Martyrology* on May 24—or lessened the great esteem in which his treatise has been held by later generations.

Vincent has no friendly feelings about new ideas and new doctrines. He speaks of “criminal novelties,” “the rashness of profane novelty,” “delight in the dirt of heretical novelty,” and so forth; such candid rhetoric leaves little in doubt. Other things being equal, what is new is suspicious, what is old is trustworthy. Due to the “immutability of holy faith,” “to announce to Catholic Christians a doctrine other than that which they have received was never permitted, is nowhere permitted, and never will be permitted,” etc.; “nothing new is to be accepted; only what has been handed down by tradition.” No wonder St. Vincent of Lérins has ever been a favorite source for Catholic traditionalists!

The *Commonitorium* poses the question: By what rule can we know doctrine to be sound? Here, Vincent famously articulates the Canon or Rule: "In the Catholic Church itself, every care should be taken to hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all." Thus, the "confessors" at the time of the Arian crisis were able to stay faithful *because* they "stay[ed] in line with the decrees and definitions of all the priests of Holy Church as the heirs of Apostolic and Catholic Truth." In spite of the larger numbers ranged against them, they adhered to the Nicene Council of 325. Numbers do not matter; adherence to tradition alone matters. In pursuing this thesis, Vincent helpfully defines what the "consensus of the fathers" consists in—the criteria we should use for determining it. He defines the qualities of "a true and genuine Catholic" and contrasts them with the plight of those who run after novelties. One might say he offers a definition of modernism, 1,500 years *avant la lettre*: the desire to change or update religion, adding and subtracting according to private lights or fashionable beliefs.

But Vincent does still more. He explains why God allows eminent Catholics to go astray into error. His disquisition on the brilliant danger or dangerous brilliance of Origen could easily be translated into contemporary terms by substituting the name Hans Urs von Balthasar. He explains the way in which change is possible and desirable in the Church: there can and should be *profectus*—progress, success (from *proficiscor*, *proficisci*, to depart, set out, proceed)—but not *permutatio*, a substantial change or mutation into something else. He insists that any development must be compatible with what has come before, so that the later formulation may add, but may never contradict, the earlier. He instances the errors of Photinus, Apollinaris, and Nestorius, among others, as opportunities divinely given to the Church for clarifying and defending her own understanding of the two greatest mysteries of faith, the Trinity and the Incarnation: it was precisely these errors

INTRODUCTION

by *Alan Fimister*[†]

LEO XIII DESCRIBED SACRED SCRIPTURE as “a Letter, written by our heavenly Father, and transmitted by the sacred writers to the human race in its pilgrimage so far from its heavenly country.”¹ It is fitting, therefore, that St. Vincent of Lérins should adopt in this work, which is essentially a guide to the correct interpretation of Sacred Scripture, the pseudonym Peregrinus, the Latin for pilgrim (whence our word peregrination).

At the very beginning of Our Lord’s public ministry, Jesus left Capharnaum:

And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him pursued him, and they found him and said to him, “Every one is searching for you.” And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out.” (Mark 1:35–38)

The word used here for “came out,” ἐξῆλθον, is the same as that used elsewhere (John 8:42) by Our Lord to describe His eternal generation by the Father. Jesus’s prayer, His solitude, His eternal existence with God the Father and His coming forth into the world to save sinners, his movement from one town to the next in His public ministry—all are a dwelling in and a sharing of His eternal “coming out” of the Father and therefore also of His eternal breathing forth of the Holy Spirit.

[†] Dr. Alan Fimister is Assistant Professor of Dogmatic Theology at Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut.

¹ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), § 1.

The ideal place, theretofore, in which to attempt this penetration of the sacred page is, Vincent explains, monastic seclusion.² The perfection of charity³ is the proper context for divine reading, because it is through charity and not through some special expertise or secret knowledge that Our Lord makes known the depths of His word, impenetrable to the non-believer.

Judas saith to him, not the Iscariot: Lord, how is it, that thou wilt manifest thyself to us, and not to the world? Jesus answered, and said to him: If any one love me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and will make our abode with him. (John 14:22–23)

Conversely, the absence of charity ensures the failure of the pilgrim's efforts to decipher the missives of our heavenly Father.

The correct starting place for the investigation of Christian doctrines for Vincent is always Scripture, but the Bible will not do on its own: "Holy Scripture, because of its depth, is not universally accepted in one and the same sense. The same text is interpreted differently by different people, so that one may almost gain the impression that it can yield as many different meanings as there are men."⁴ And yet, it is important to observe that the examples St. Vincent then gives of the authors who so thoroughly contradict each other are all heretics: Novatian, Sabelius, Donatus, Arius, Eunomus, Macedonius, Photinus, Apollinaris, Priscillian, Jovinian, Pelagius, Celestius, and

² In his words (p. 5): "Far from the masses that overcrowd large cities, I am living in a very remote spot . . . within the cell of a monastery with nothing to distract me This way of life is well suited to the work I am planning to do."

³ "That perfection of charity to which the counsels are directed . . . consists in man renouncing, as much as possible, temporal things, even such as are lawful, because they occupy the mind and hinder the actual movement of the heart towards God." *Summa theologiae* IIaIIae, Q. 44, art. 4, ad 3.

⁴ Below, ch. 2, p. 9.

COMMONITORY
for
THE ANTIQUITY AND
UNIVERSALITY OF
THE CATHOLIC FAITH,
*AGAINST THE PROFANE
NOVELTIES OF ALL HERETICS*[†]

VINCENT
OF LÉRINS

[†] This is the title of the work in the first edition of Sichardus (Basel, 1528): “In defense of the antiquity and universality of the Catholic faith, [the work] of Vincent of Lérins against the profane innovations of all heretics.” Gennadius states (*De vir. ill.* 64) that the title should be “Of the Pilgrim, against heretics.” Also, in the codices at the end of the work we read: “The explanation of the treatise of the Pilgrim against heretics.” In the Paris codices, the work is simply called “The Commonitories.”

DICENTE SCRIPTURA ET MON-
 ente, *Interroga patres tuos, et dicent tibi; senio-*
res tuos, et adnuntiabunt tibi, et item, *Verbis sapien-*
tium adcommoda aurem tuam, et item, *Fili mi, hos*
sermones ne obliviscaris, mea autem verba custodiat cor
tuum, videtur mihi minimo omnium servorum
 Dei Peregrino quod res non minimae utilitatis,
 Domino adjuvante, futura sit, si ea quae fideliter
 a sanctis patribus accepi litteris comprehendam,
 infirmitati certe propriae pernecessaria, quippe
 cum adsit in promptu unde imbecillitas memo-
 riae meae adsidua lectione reparetur.

Ad quod me negotium non solum fructus
 operis, sed etiam consideratio temporis et
 opportunitas loci adhortatur.

Tempus: propterea quod cum ab eo omnia
 humana rapiantur, et nos ex eo aliquid invicem
 rapere debemus quod in vitam proficiat aeter-
 nam; praesertim cum et appropinquantis divini
 Iudicii terribilis quaedam expectatio augeri effla-
 gitet studia Religionis, et novorum Haereticorum
 fraudulentia multum curae et attentionis indicat.

Locus autem, quod urbium frequentiam
 turbasque vitantes, remotioris villulae et in ea
 secretum monasterii incolamus habitaculum, ubi
 absque magna distractione fieri possit illud quod
 canitur in psalmo: *Vacate, inquit, et videte quoniam*
ego sum Dominus. Sed et propositi nostri ratio in id
 convenit; quippe qui cum aliquandiu variis ac tri-
 stibus saecularis militiae turbinibus volveremur,
 tandem nos in portum Religionis, cunctis sem-
 per fidissimum, Christo adspirante condidimus;

HOLY SCRIPTURE ADMONISHES US: “ASK thy fathers, and they will declare to thee: thy elders and they will tell thee” (Deut. 32:7); and again: “Incline thy ear and hear the words of the wise” (Prov. 22:17); and again: “My son, forget not my law: and let thy heart keep my commandments” (Prov. 3:1). According to these words, it seems to me, Peregrinus,¹ the least of all the servants of God, that it will be rather useful for me to write down, with the help of the Lord, what I have faithfully received from the holy fathers.² Of this I shall certainly be in great need in my infirmity, for my memory may be refreshed by persistent reading if I have these matters down in writing.

I am induced to perform this task not only for the results of the work but also because I have the time and a suitable place to do it.

As for the time: since time snatches away all things human, we ought to snatch from it something which may profit us unto life eternal. We are moved particularly by the terrible fear of the approaching Judgment which urges us to increase our studies of religion, and by the deceitfulness of the new heretics which requires much careful attention.

As for the place: far from the masses that overcrowd large cities, I am living in a very remote spot where, within the cell of a monastery with nothing to distract me, I can practice what is sung in the psalm: “Be still and see that I am God” (Ps. 45:11). This way of life is well suited to the work I am planning to do. Long involved in various unstable and saddening whirlpools of secular strife, I finally arrived, under Christ’s inspiration, at the harbor of religion, always the safest place for everyone. There,

¹ We read in Gennadius that Vincent adopted this name.

² But to this statement the *Commonitories* themselves, so far as they are extant, give only little support, for in them does not appear the collected testimony of the Fathers, but certain notes and rules whereby Catholic doctrine may be distinguished from heresy.

ut ibi depositis vanitatis ac superbiae flatibus, Christianae humilitatis sacrificio placantes Deum, non solum praesentis vitae naufragia, sed etiam futuri saeculi incendia vitare possimus.

Sed jam in nomine Domini quod instat adgrediar, ut scilicet a majoribus tradita et apud nos deposita describam, relatoris fide potius quam auctoris praesumptione; hac tamen scribendi lege servata, ut nequaquam omnia, sed tantum necessaria quaeque perstringam, neque id ornato et exacto sed facili communique sermone, ut pleraque significata potius quam explicata videantur. Scribant ii laute et accurate qui ad hoc munus vel ingenii fiducia vel officii ratione ducuntur. Me vero sublevandae recordationis vel potius oblivionis meae gratia Commonitorium mihimet parasse suffecerit: quod tamen paulatim, recolendo quae didici, emendare et implere quotidie, Domino praestante, conabor. Atque hoc ipsum idcirco praemonui, ut si forte elapsum nobis, in manus sanctorum devenerit, nihil in eo temere reprehendant, quod adhuc videant promissa emendatione limandum.

II

SAEPE IGITUR MAGNO STUDIO et summa attentione perquirens a quamplurimis sanctitate et doctrina praestantibus viris quonam modo possim certa quadam et quasi generali ac regulari via catholicae fidei veritatem ab haereticae pravitatis falsitate discernere, hujusmodi semper responsum ab omnibus fere rettuli, quod sive ego, sive quis alius vellet exurgentium haereticorum fraudes deprehendere laqueosque vitare, et in fide sana sanus atque integer permanere, duplici modo munire fidem

after the storms of vanity and pride have ceased, I may propitiate God by the sacrifice of Christian humility and thus avoid not only the shipwrecks of the present life, but also the flames of the world to come.

But now it is time for me to begin, in the name of the Lord, my work, namely, to describe what our ancestors have handed down and entrusted to us. I shall do this more as an honest reporter than as a presumptuous author. I shall follow this plan in my writing. I shall not cover everything, but only the essential points; not in an embellished and meticulous form, but in easy and popular language. In this way most of the points will appear to be indicated rather than developed. Let those make use of a flowery and precise style who approach such a task either from confidence in their own ability or through a sense of duty. As for me, I shall be satisfied to compose this *Commonitory* for my own use, to aid my memory, or, rather, [to check] my forgetfulness. In any case, with the Lord's help, I shall do my best recalling step by step what I have learned, emending and filling out my knowledge from day to day. I have prefaced my work with this warning so that in case it slips from my hands into those of saintly persons,³ they may not hastily censure certain passages, but remember that I have promised to correct and improve them.

2

WITH GREAT ZEAL AND FULL ATTENTION I often inquired from many men, outstanding in sanctity and doctrinal knowledge, how, in a concise and, so to speak, general and ordinary way, I might be able to discern the truth of the Catholic faith from the falsity of heretical corruption. From almost all of them I always received the answer that if I or someone else wanted to expose the frauds of the heretics and to escape their snares and to remain sound in the integrity of faith, I had, with

³ Of those who have forsaken the world, i.e., priests and monks.

THE VINCENTIAN CANON AND UNANIMOUS CONSENT OF THE FATHERS

Phillip Campbell

IN THE MID-SEVENTEENTH CENTURY English Protestant divine William Chillingworth derided the concept of an unbroken apostolic tradition. In his book *Religion of the Protestants*, Chillingworth asserted that “There have been popes against popes: councils against councils: councils confirmed by popes against councils confirmed by popes: lastly the church of some ages against the church of other ages.”¹ This assertion attempts to negate the force of the Catholic argument that Protestantism is not a fitting expression of Christian unity, since Protestant sects contradict each other. Chillingworth argued that the Catholic “unanimous consent of the fathers” is a mere illusion, a dream of Catholic apologists. It was Chillingworth’s argument in part that prompted Cardinal Newman to write his famous *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Newman, like many Catholic apologists, responded to this attack by referring to the principles of the Vincentian Canon.

In a certain sense, Newman’s *Essay* is nothing other than an elaboration of the principles of the Vincentian Canon. Most traditional Catholics are familiar with the famous Vincentian Canon, named after St. Vincent of Lérins (d. 445). The canon is a threefold test to assess the orthodoxy of an idea, stating that only those things can be considered part of the Catholic deposit of faith which have been believed “everywhere, always, by all.” The famed passage is found in Chapter 2 of his work the

¹ Thomas Birch, *The Works of W. Chillingworth* (Princeton University, 1840), 194.

Commonitorium. Let us begin by examining the passage in context. Having begun by affirming the authority of the Sacred Scripture, St. Vincent goes on to explain why the Bible alone is not a sufficient guide to faith:

But here someone perhaps will ask: Since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church's interpretation? For this reason—because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters. For Novatian expounds it one way, Sabellius another, Donatus another, Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, another, Photinus, Apollinaris, Priscillian, another, Iovinian, Pelagius, Celestius, another, lastly, Nestorius another. Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation. (*Commonitorium*, 2)

Therefore Scripture cannot stand alone; it needs the “standard of ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation” to ensure it is being understood aright.

But does this not involve us in a further difficulty of the same nature? If we need the Church's tradition to rightly interpret the Scripture, how do we know we are rightly interpreting the tradition? In other words, after admitting the necessity of a “standard of ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation,” how do we determine what that authentic standard is?

Taking up this objection, St. Vincent introduces his famous dictum: