

CATHOLIC ACTION IN APOSTOLIC DAYS¹

AQUILA AND PRISCILLA

1.

The Churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house; with whom I lodge. All the brethren salute you. (I Cor. xvi, 19, 20.)

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2.

Salute Prisca and Aquila my helpers in Jesus Christ (who have for my life laid down their own necks; for whom not I only give thanks but all the Churches of the Gentiles) and the Church that is in their house. (Rom. xvi, 3, 4, 5.)

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3.

Salute Prisca and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus. (II Tim. iv, 19.)

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4.

Departing from Athens he came to Corinth. And finding a certain Jew named Aquila born in Pontus lately come from Italy with Priscilla his wife (because Claudius had commanded all Jews from Rome) he came to them.

And because he was of the same trade he remained with them and wrought. Now they were tent-makers by trade. (Acts xviii, 1, 2, 3.)

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5.

Paul . . . taking his leave of the brethren sailed thence into Syria and with him Priscilla and Aquila . . . and he came to Ephesus and left them there. (Ibid., 18.)

¹ In publishing this article, which Fr. Vincent wrote about a year before his death and which is one of the few remaining papers he had actually prepared for the press, we seize the opportunity of drawing the attention of the readers of BLACKFRIARS to the MEMORIAL which has been begun for the author. It is proposed to found a BURSE for the post-graduate studies of English Dominican priests, providing a foundation scholarship to enable a succession of student priests to go to Rome, Louvain, Frihourg, Paris, or Oxford. As BLACKFRIARS owes such a great debt to the pen of Father Vincent McNabb it is hoped that readers will show their appreciation by contributing towards this MEMORIAL. Donations, enquiries, etc., to be sent to the Treasurer, W. A. STUART, 16 Glenmore Road, N.W.3, or to MISS D. FINLAYSON, 24 Primrose Hill Road, Hampstead, N.W.3.—EDITOR.

6.

A certain Jew named Apollo, born at Alexandria, . . . came to Ephesus . . . whom when Priscilla and Aquila had heard they took him to them and expounded to him the way of the Lord more diligently. (Ibid., 26.)

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We have set down these extracts in the time-order in which they were written and not in the time-order of the recorded facts. Thus St. Luke's record comes last. Yet it narrates facts earlier than those recorded in the three earlier Epistles of St. Paul.

The principle here involved is of fundamental importance in deciding the value of facts omitted by an earlier writer but recorded by a later.

The first extract is from the first letter St. Paul wrote to the much-trying converts in Corinth. This unique letter—almost the most characteristic of his letters—remains the bridge between the Epistle to the Galatians in all later epistles. When we reflect that it gives St. Peter a place of primacy four times, that it has the very form of consecrating the Blessed Sacrament, and that it discusses almost in philosophical terms the doctrine of bodily resurrection—we may wonder why St. Paul sends the salutation of a man Aquila and (presumably) his wife Priscilla.

But, indeed, these salutations sometimes sent by St. Paul in his Epistles, are not only of interest but even of value in confirming dates and deciding ecclesiastic positions in the early Church.

Amongst the most interesting and suggestive salutations are those to and from Aquila and his wife Priscilla. Amongst the many who receive such salutations Aquila and Priscilla alone receive these salutations twice. (Romans and II Timothy.)

From this salutation of Aquila and Priscilla 'to the Church of God that is at Corinth' we gather that this man and his wife must have been Christians of unique importance. The context is noteworthy: *The Churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord with the Church that is in their house (with whom I lodge). All the brethren salute you.*

From their place immediately after all the Churches of Asia and before all the brethren it may be gathered that in the Church at Ephesus this man and his wife had a unique position.

As if to answer the question—'What gave Aquila and Priscilla this unique position in the early Church?'—St. Luke gives us the necessary details of their life.

Aquila was a Jew. His wife Priscilla (or Prisca) seems to have been a Roman, and, indeed, a Roman of an aristocratic family.

Aquila was an Asiatic, born in Pontus, by craft a maker of tents and, no doubt, of sails.

His trade had carried him to Rome where, according to a tradition supplementing St. Luke's account, he had a house on the Aventine Hill, at the foot of which flowed that part of the Tiber where Rome had its docks.

One of the venerable Roman traditions connected with the Church of St. Prisca and the Catacomb of St. Priscilla may be given in the words of Fr. Chandlery, S.J., in his *Pilgrim Walks in Rome* :—

‘Returning to the head of the Clivus Publicus we follow the Via di S. Prisca leading to the present Church of S. Prisca and S. Saba . . . Close by lived Aquila and Priscilla, Jewish converts of St. Peter. . . . St. Peter is said to have received hospitality from them and to have first exercised his sacred ministry in Rome in their house. (p. 184.)

‘The steep lane leading from the riverside and the docks up the Aventine to S. Sabina is the ancient *Clivus Publicus*. Up this very road must have come St. Peter on his way to the house of Aquila and Priscilla.’ (p. 276.)

In A.D. 49, when the decree of Claudius banishing all Jews from Rome had driven Aquila the tent-maker to Corinth, it is not fanciful to think that their Jewish guest St. Peter went with them. Nor could it be thought fanciful if St. Peter, making a virtue of necessity, took occasion to cross into Palestine. Strangely enough it was in this year 49 that St. Peter presided over the First General Council at Jerusalem, which had thus been largely made possible by the help of his fellow-Jew and fellow-exile, Aquila.

In A.D. 51-52, when St. Paul came to Corinth, he found that Aquila had, like St. Peter, made a virtue of necessity by organising his craft of tent-making. As St. Paul was also a tent-maker and as Aquila had given a home to St. Peter in Rome, nothing seemed more natural than that he should give a home to St. Paul in Corinth. In that home of the exiled tent-maker of Pontus we have the first record of St. Paul making a lengthy stay in any one place. ‘He stayed a year and six months.’

St. Luke is at pains to show us that when St. Paul left Corinth in order to pay an official visit to Jerusalem, he left in company with Aquila and Priscilla. At Ephesus they parted, Aquila and Priscilla remaining at Ephesus whilst St. Paul went up to Jerusalem.

Before St. Paul's return to Ephesus the Christian group had begun to take root. The convert tent-maker and his wife could not await in idleness St. Paul's return from Jerusalem and from his apostolic journey through the country of Galatia and Phrygia. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that St. Paul's two lay 'helpers in Christ Jesus' (Rom. xvi, 5) were responsible for a conversion only second to that of St. Paul himself. St. Luke's minute description of the event is a sign that the conversion of the learned Alexandrian Jew, Apollo, was an event of great moment.

Aquila's and Priscilla's influence in Apollo's conversion was not just the influence of a good life over a soul seeking the truth. It was also the influence which only intelligence can exercise over intelligence. St. Luke describes something akin to a course of instruction in the words. 'Priscilla and Aquila took him to them; and expounded to him the way of the Lord more diligently' (Acts xviii, 26).

In reading these words we are nearer than we think to even the modern Ritual for Baptism. Immediately before pouring the Baptismal water over the head of the person to be baptised the priest puts into the form of three questions the whole of the Apostles' Creed. Only when the right answers are given is Baptism given. But a time of instruction—or catechesis—has enabled the baptismal candidate to give the right answers.

It is now commonly admitted that this ritual of Baptism spread from Rome; which had been taught directly by St. Peter for some five and twenty years. But it will also be admitted that the lodging which St. Peter had in the house of Aquila and Priscilla would have given them expert training as Catechists. No wonder that their diligent instruction of Apollo in the way of the Lord is a unique Biblical reference to what we cannot refuse to call 'Catechists.'²

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We are on something firmer than conjecture when we think it likely that soon after Aquila and Priscilla had fully instructed Apollo in the way of the Lord they moved eastward to Aquila's birth-land, Pontus.

Soon news came to them from Rome that Claudius was dead, and

² Whilst I was writing these last sentences on the Catechist, Aquila, the following passage came to hand, written by one who has unique experience in England's Missionary work, the V. Rev. Owen Dudley. Speaking of the need of Catholic colonies in England, he says: 'In every colony there should be a Catechist officially approved by the Bishop' (*The Catholic Gazette*, June, 1942, p. 1). Such Catechists might well have SS. Aquila and Priscilla as their official patrons.

his edict against the Jews was withdrawn. My own personal conviction is that this news was brought by Silvanus whom St. Peter sent from Rome with the historic Letter (Epistle) addressed 'to the strangers dispersed through Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia' (I Pet. i, 1).

Even if Aquila and Priscilla did not at once leave Pontus after the death of Claudius in A.D. 54, they would have had time to be in Rome when St. Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans in A.D. 56.

St. Paul's salutation to Aquila and Priscilla is without parallel in his many salutations. In no other salutation is there anything equivalent to these deliberately written words: 'Salute Prisca and Aquila . . . who have for my life laid down their own necks, to whom not I only give thanks but *all the Churches of the Gentiles.*'

The full significance of this can be seen when we remember two things. First that Aquila was a Jew; secondly, that only a few years previously Claudius had ordered that Jews as Jews should be expelled from Rome. From what we know of human nature we can hardly think that all the Gentile Christians disagreed with the Emperor's anti-Semitism! The anti-Semitism of some modern Catholics is an historic survival. No wonder that the undying Semitism of St. Paul is behind the emphatic request that thanks are due to Aquila, the Jew, 'and his wife Priscilla by all the Churches of the Gentiles.' St. Paul's emphatic words were perhaps as much a reprimand as a reminder.

An even greater proof of the unique position of these two lay converts may perhaps be found in the words: 'and *the Church which is in their house.*'

It is the only mention of the great Church of Rome; and it is in the house of the Jew Aquila and Roman wife Priscilla!

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One last mention of these tireless helpmates of St. Paul hides for all but the searcher's eyes the tragedy of 'the two witnesses,' SS. Peter and Paul.

In St. Paul's second Epistle to St. Timothy, who was at Ephesus, are the simple words: 'Salute Prisca and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus.'

Aquila and Priscilla are once more in Ephesus but not in their own home! A worse than Claudius has ascended the Imperial throne. Nero is not expelling Jews as Jews, but martyring Christians as Christians. Rome is no longer safe for the Jewish husband of a Roman aristocrat, still less for a husband and wife who are actively Christian. Once more the brave couple are giving up all rather than

give up the faith. Soon they will hear that when St. Paul saluted them their old guest and father in the faith, St. Peter, was crucified or was preparing for crucifixion. Perhaps, too, before the salutation of St. Paul reached them in their lodging at Ephesus, the sword of Nero, like the sword of Herod, had silenced the hero-tongue of a Jewish prophet.

The inspired Word tells us no more, though it has told us so much of these pioneers of Catholic Action. But we have seen that Roman tradition and Roman ruins or Catacombs tell us that when the death of Nero stilled the sword of Nero, Aquila and Priscilla came back to the memories and tombs of the two Saints who owed more to them than to any other of the early converts.

But there is another early tradition which whets our appetite for research :—

‘ The Jews buried Christ ; and guarded and sealed His tomb. But he rose again as He had said from the beginning.

‘ And they found the linen early in Christ’s tomb, whither Pilate and his wife came. When they had found it, Pilate’s wife asked for the linen, and went away quickly to her house in *Pontus* and she became a believer in Christ. Some time afterwards the linen came into the possession of St. Luke, who put it in a place known only to himself.

‘ Now they did not find the shroud (*sudari*).³ But it is said to have been found by Peter, who kept it ; but we know not if it has ever been discovered.’ (*Life of St. Nino*, translated from the Georgian by Marjory, and J. O., Wardrop ; *Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica*, Vol. v, p. 11.)

The manuscript data of this extract is very likely contemporary with St. Nino, the Apostle of Georgia, who died in A.D. 338.

The soberness of this narrative, the entire absence of the almost hackneyed marvels of similar narratives lend an air of truth which further corroboration makes hard to reject.

Internal corroboration is to be found in the fact that this reference to Pontus is in a manuscript written in and about a neighbouring country, Georgia. As a rule neighbouring countries are somewhat sparing of facts redounding to the glory of their neighbours.

Corroboration, stronger than meets the eye, may be found in a famous letter, which gave Christianity its first official place in Roman history. Somewhere about A.D. 111-113 the Emperor Trajan received an official letter from the Governór of one of his most distant

³ The *sudarium* or face-cloth which St. Peter (not St. John) saw folded and apart from the Shroud (John xx).

Provinces. The letter gave a substantially accurate account of Christian rites and practices; warning the Emperor that these Christians were already so strong in towns and villages that the temples were deserted. But for the student (and admirer!) of Aquila and Priscilla the unique interest is that the Governor is Pliny, the Roman historian, and the far-off Province is no other than Pontus, the birthland of the Jew Aquila who had given a home to SS. Peter and Paul, as St. Peter had given a home to his Master.

FR. VINCENT McNABB, O.P.

DEMOCRACY: SHOULD IT SURVIVE? By John A. Ryan, Luigi Sturzo, Jacques Maritain and others. (Bruce Publishing Co.; \$2.00.)

This book—speaking to Mr. Common Man—is a collection of essays by prominent writers demonstrating the basic structure of a true democracy. Taking as their starting point the underlying principle of the Declaration of Independence—the inherent dignity of man—the contributors to this symposium present a lucid and comprehensive analysis of the dangers which beset true democracy in the world to-day. Don Luigi Sturzo gives an incisive examination of totalitarianism in his usual distinguished style, follows secular education (a whole system subject to State regulation, supervision, examination and test; compulsion producing a mechanical uniformity which tends to a paralysis of the faculty of distinction), capitalist exploitation, racial discrimination, penitentiary systems and all manner of social injustice.

Man has freely elected to live a communal life under government. Is there then a perfection of system which can be attained by those who are the leaders and the planners of the State? We are in no doubt as to the answer to that question. 'Gouverner,' says Lacordaire, 'c'est diriger des êtres libres vers leur fin.' To guide with intelligence and power—those two essentials of government—the brethren of Christ through the tortuous channels of an industrial age, without imperilling their dignity or sacrificing their rights, towards the true end of man which is the Beatific Vision; here is the true democracy which will save the post-war world from the apostles of materialistic democracy.

The reader will not fail to appreciate the relevance of this work to conditions prevailing in the United States. The general public, however, here in this country will be disappointed if they seek in any of these essays a final analysis of democracy and a definition of its meaning on which to base consistently the doctrine of the distinguished contributors.

J. F. T. PRINCE.