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THE PROPER USE OF IMAGES

NOTICE

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St. Augustine and St. Jerome,¹ who had been so critical of images and lavishly decorated churches, lived to see the fall of Rome in 410. It was an event whose significance was not lost on them: from the fifth century on, power in Europe fell more and more into the hands of barbarian kings. The Latin church, showered with imperial gifts during the fourth century, entered upon a period when her resources were stretched thin as a consequence of missionary expansion and barbarian invasion. From then on the building of churches and their maintenance became a difficult matter, which was often achieved only at the cost of great sacrifice and was understandably considered to be a labor worthy of saints. Under such conditions there was little occasion to reiterate St. Jerome's opinions about ecclesiastical luxury. The use of images and of large and splendidly decorated churches formed a distinctive part of Roman customs. Churchmen whose main goal was the preservation and propagation of these customs could hardly be expected to be critical. It is interesting to see how Pope Gregory² attacks the iconoclastic bishop of Marseille for his imprudent deviation from generally accepted habits. There were also other reasons for St. Gregory to defend the proper use of images in the church. Their usefulness for the instruction of illiterates had already been pointed out by Paulinus of Nola.³ They were believed to be even more important in the conversion of pagans. When St. Augustine of Canterbury, Pope Gregory's envoy to Britain, went to meet King Ethelbert, he carried with him a cross and an image of the Saviour.⁴

St. Gregory the Great to Bishop Serenus of Marseille

The beginning of your letter demonstrated to such a degree your priestly benevolence that we were highly pleased by your fraternal sentiments. But its end is so different from its beginning that we wonder whether the epistle proceeded from one mind or from two. Your doubts about the [authenticity of the] letter we sent you made you seem very rash. For if you had really paid attention to our fraternal admonishments, you would not only have had no doubts, but you would have known what your priestly dignity ought to compel you to do. The former abbot Cyriacus⁵ who carried our letters was of such deportment and learning as

¹ See above, pp. 37-44.

² Pope Gregory I (590-604).

³ See above, pp. 17-23.

⁴ St. Augustine of Canterbury landed in Kent in 597, where he was welcomed by King Ethelbert (560-616).

⁵ Pope Gregory's messenger.

to make it difficult to suppose that he would have dared to do what you thought, or that he could possibly have been an imposter. Your neglect of wholesome admonition has made you guilty of this doubt, in addition to being guilty of a bad action. Word has since reached us that you, gripped by blind fury, have broken the images of the saints with the excuse that they should not be adored. And indeed we heartily applaud you for keeping them from being adored, but for breaking them we reproach you. Tell us, brother, have you ever heard of any other bishop anywhere who did the like? This, if nothing else, should have given you pause. Do you despise your brothers and think that you alone are holy and wise? To adore images is one thing; to teach with their help what should be adored is another. What Scripture is to the educated, images are to the ignorant, who see through them what they must accept; they read in them what they cannot read in books. This is especially true of the pagans. And it particularly behooves you, who live among pagans, not to allow yourself to be carried away by just zeal and so give scandal to savage minds. Therefore you ought not to have broken that which was placed in the church not in order to be adored but solely in order to instruct the minds of the ignorant. It is not without reason that tradition permits the deeds of the saints to be depicted in holy places. If you had tempered your zeal with discretion, you could certainly have better achieved what you wanted, and rather than scatter the flock that was collected, you could have collected the flock that was scattered, and so have enhanced the glory of your name of pastor rather than acquired the guilty name of a disperser. But by following your own rash impulse you, as I hear, have so scandalized your flock that the larger part of it is no longer in communion with you. How will you lead wandering sheep to the Lord's fold if you are not able to keep in it those you already have? Therefore we exhort you to lay aside false pride, and immediately to do all you can to call back, with paternal love, those disaffected souls that all you can to call back, with paternal love, those disaffected souls that you know to be outside the unity of your communion.

For these dispersed children of the church must be called back, and those passages of Holy Scripture should be shown to them that prohibit the adoration of man's handiwork, for it is written, "Thou shalt adore the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve."⁶ But then you should add that because you saw that those painted likenesses, made for the instruction of the ignorant, so that they might understand the stories and so learn what occurred, were being adored, you were so enraged that you ordered them to be broken. And you should also tell them: "If you wish to have images in church in order to gain from them the instruction for which they were formerly made, I freely permit them to be made and placed there." And explain that it was not the sight of the story there

related in a painted text that angered you, but the worship which had been paid to them illicitly.⁷

⁶ Luke 4 : 8.