

COMPLIMENTS OF THE AUTHOR.

The Pope and the Comet

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THE POPE AND THE COMET.

WILLIAM F. RIGGE.

It seems that no article can be written on Halley's comet without bringing in the oft-told story of the bull which Pope Callixtus III so ineffectually launched against it, or of the Angelus bells which were rung to frighten it away, or of the prayers which were to deliver the Christian world from the devil, the Turk and the comet. The truth-loving reader will, therefore, be probably most intensely surprised when he hears that, as an actual fact of sober history, there is no truth whatever in the story, not even in its least details. And the proof is easy and solid.

First. While Newcomb calls the bull a myth, but along with the Columbian and Chambers Encyclopedias believes that prayers were ordered to be said against the comet, no allusion whatever to the pope, the bells and the prayers is made by Sir John Herschell, Grant, Young, Comstock, Todd, Langley, the American Cyclopedia, the Encyclopedia Americana, the Encyclopedia Britannica of 1902, etc. While this may be a negative argument, it is not, however, an inconclusive one, for why should these eminent authorities, all of them non-catholic, not mention the story if it is true, when so many other writers speak of it?

Second. The Bullarium Romanum is a large series of volumes containing in the original Latin all the official documents ever issued by the popes, from St. Peter down to our own day. Owing to the definiteness of the reference and the short reign of Callixtus III, it was an easy task for me to read all the documents of this pope, and I can attest from my own personal knowledge that not only is there no bull against or concerning a comet, there is not even a paragraph, nor a phrase, nor a word, which might be construed to refer to a comet.

Third. The story is so universally told and is to be found in so many writers, such as Arago, Draper, Babinet, Guillemin, White of Cornell, etc., that most persons are really excusable*

* Note. I lately had the privilege of visiting one of the first astronomers of the country in his own observatory. Seeing some photographs of comets, I remarked pleasantly that it was about time the pope got his bull ready if he

when they are misled into the conviction of its truth, and then simply copy it and pass it on to the next generation. If the reader of these lines is really interested in the matter, I would refer him to an able article entitled "Of a Bull and a Comet" written by John Gerard, S. J., and published in "The Month", London, in February 1907. Here the whole story is traced to its fountain head, and it is shown by the best authorities, nearly all of them non-catholic, that not only no bull was ever launched against the comet, but prayers were not even ordered to be said against it, although the prevailing opinion of the scientific men of the time was that the comet foreboded calamity to the earth. Any one that wishes it may obtain a free reprint of the article in question by applying to the Superintendent of Parish Schools, Broad and Vine Streets, Philadelphia.

Fourth. The article just referred to traces the origin of the whole story about the bull against the comet to this one paragraph of Platina, in his *Vitae Pontificum*, published in Venice in 1479. As this writer was not only in Rome at the time, but was also archivist of the Vatican when he wrote his history, his authority ought to be of the utmost value. These are his exact words:

"A hairy and fiery comet having then made its appearance for several days, as the mathematicians declared that there would follow a grievous pestilence, dearth, and some great calamity, Callixtus—to avert the wrath of God—ordered supplications, that if evils were impending for the human race, He would turn all upon the Turks, the enemies of the Christian name. He likewise ordered, to move God by continual entreaty, that notice should be given by the bells to all the faithful, at midday, to aid by their prayers those engaged in battle with the Turk."

Let us read the words again and study them carefully. 1. The pope did not issue a bull against the comet, he ordered supplications. 2. He ordered these conditionally, "that if evils were impending," prudently neither admitting nor reject-

wished to prevent the return of Halley's comet. "Do you know", he said, "I was foolish enough to give credence to this story lately in a public lecture? I was at once deservedly, yet politely, taken to task for it, and I shall certainly never be guilty of such ignorance again." When I told him I intended to write up this story in *Popular Astronomy*, he urged me: "Do so, by all means, because it is repeated so often and in so many magazines, that people really believe it to be true."

ing the authority of the mathematicians who declared that pestilence, dearth and some great calamity would follow the appearance of the comet. 3. He assumes no authority over the comet nor bids it be gone, he orders supplications, declaring himself to be a suppliant, that if evils were impending, God would turn them upon the enemies of the Christian name. 4. Bells are to be rung to remind the faithful to pray, not to frighten away the comet.

This one quotation from one author, which has been the germ of the whole comet story, weakened as it is by our simple analysis, becomes of no value whatever when we apply the rules of ordinary historical criticism. We have only the word of Platina that the pope ordered supplications to be made and bells to be rung, he neither refers to any papal document, nor does he quote the pope's exact words. Now, as the *Bullarium Romanum* contains all the official documents of all the popes, and as not one of the declarations of Callixtus III alludes in any manner whatever, directly or indirectly, to a comet, we have every reason to dismiss the testimony of Platina altogether. For this same reason we must also reject the testimony of each and every writer that mentions the comet story or any of its details, because not a single one of them has ever given the slightest reference to any official document ever promulgated by Callixtus III whether in the *Bullarium Romanum* or out of it, nor supported his assertion by anything stronger than a quotation from a previous writer who was equally deficient in his historical proofs.

There is, therefore, no foundation whatever for the story that Callixtus III issued a bull against or concerning a comet, that he ordered bells to be rung to frighten it away, and that he ordered prayers to be said to deliver the world from its influence.

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