On the Church

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according to the norm of the divine canon. (3) Because the Papists themselves deny that the authority of the fathers is always authentic. (4) Because the fathers do not agree on every point either in doctrines or in the interpretation of Scripture. (5) Because many writings of the ancients have perished. (6) Those that are still extant have been distorted and corrupted in many places. (7) Because in the writings of the fathers dross is found joined with gold, straw with jewels, and the leaven of human opinions with the dough of heavenly doctrine. We can prove the individual parts of this declaration of ours in great detail, as we have shown partly in our treatise On the Interpretation of Scripture [1610 Loci Theologici, locus 2], §§ 84ff. Also, we shall prove them in greater detail and more fully in the second and third points a bit later [§§ 205–30].

Bellarmine’s arguments in favor of that consensus.

§ 204. To prove that agreement in doctrine with the ancient church is a mark of the church, Bellarmine sets forth two fundamental points:

(I) The true church is called apostolic, according to Tertullian (De praescription.), not only because of the succession of bishops from the apostles but also because of a kinship of doctrine, namely, because it retains the doctrine that the apostles handed down. And it is certain that in its first five hundred years the ancient church was the true church and thus had held on to the apostolic doctrine. (II) Emperor Theodosius is praised by Sozomen (Hist., bk. 7, ch. 12) because he said to the heretics of his time: “Let us examine your doctrine according to their writings. If it is agrees with them, let it be kept. If not, let it be rejected.”

We respond. (1) Agreement in doctrine with the church that was at the time of Tertullian and Theodosius is a mark of the church in no other way except insofar as that doctrine agrees with apostolic doctrine and that church with the apostolic church exactly and accurately. You see, there is only one norm and rule according to which every doctrine must be examined, namely, the voice of Christ and the apostles sounding forth in Scripture.

(2) We can learn whether and to what extent the church at the time of Tertullian and Theodosius retained apostolic doctrine only from the apostolic documents, because they set forth the doctrine of the apostles exactly.

(3) Tertullian is correct in asserting that the church is called apostolic not so much because of a personal and local succession as because of a kinship of doctrine. From this, however, one cannot infer that local succession and kinship of doctrine with the apostolic doctrine always walk together at equal pace and are inseparably joined together. After all, there are many churches in which a local succession once flourished which today lack the purity of apostolic doctrine. We can even prove this about the Roman church on the basis of the writings of the apostles.

(4) It is indeed certain that the ancient church in the first five hundred years was the true church and retained apostolic doctrine. Meanwhile, no one can deny that the straw of human traditions and opinions began to be mixed with apostolic doctrine, as can be shown from the writings of the fathers. (About this, see the Centuriae hist. Magdeburgensis, ch. de inclinatione doctrinae.) Hegesippus (as found in Eusebius, bk. 3, ch. 29) says: “While the apostles were still alive, the church was a virgin. After their
death, however, she was astonishingly corrupted by false and lying doctrine, and, as for the rest, with a bare head (as they say), dared to set herself against the pure word of truth." Chrysostom (on 1 Corinthians, homily 36) compares the church of his time to a woman who perished after the first flowering of her virginity. Jerome (De vita Malchi) speaks as follows: "I intended to write from the coming of the Savior to our age, that is, from the apostles to the dregs of our time, how and through whom Christ's church was born and grew to adulthood by persecutions, was crowned with martyrs, and, after it reached Christian princes, became greater in power and riches but lesser in virtues." Augustine (Letter 119 ad Januar.) complains about the heap of traditions and observances. Yet all of these lived during the first five hundred years. And furthermore, while the apostles were still living, the Antichrist began to work the mystery of iniquity [2 Thess. 2:7] and the false prophets began to sow their false dogmas. Hence one can learn only from the writings of the apostles what doctrine is truly divine and apostolic. Therefore we must always go back to the "Ancient of Days" [cf. Dan. 7:9, 22].

(5) Theodosius acted correctly in ordering that heretical doctrine recently brought into the church be examined according to the writings of the predecessors, because the article on the Trinity, about which there was a question at that time, was explained correctly in those writings of the ancients. From this, however, one cannot infer that the writings of the fathers are per se and simply the norm and rule of doctrine in all things, because the fathers subject their own writings to the canonical authority of Scripture. Not only do they allow, but they even order, that everything they teach be proved and examined on the basis of Scripture. Thus they acknowledge that Scripture is the universal, primary, and principal norm; whatever does not agree with it cannot be acknowledged as divine but is a fiction humanly devised by whomever it is advanced. Therefore, though we do not disapprove of the counsel of Theodosius (or, rather, of Sisinnius, who supplied it to Theodosius), yet we prefer the counsel of Constantine the Great at the Council of Nicaea, as reported in Theodoret, bk. 1, ch. 7: "Here are the evangelical and apostolic books and the utterances of the ancient prophets. They teach us clearly what we must think about divine matters. Thus let us get rid of our discord and take the solution of our questions from divinely inspired statements."

(6) By no means do we reject the testimonies of those fathers who wrote during the first five hundred years. Yet we weigh them on the basis of Scripture and evaluate them all according to that norm alone.

The fathers themselves require this. Against "the argument that some of the fathers taught that people before the flood did not eat the fruit of trees nor meats," Justin (Quaest. ad orthodox., q. 119, p. 365) sets forth the fact that the apostle—whom he calls "the father of fathers and teacher of godliness"—taught something else. Basil, De Sp. s., ch. 19: "What our fathers said we also say, that the glory is common to the Father and to the Son. But it is not enough for us that this is a tradition of the fathers, for they also followed the authority of Scripture." Dionysius of Alexandria (in Eusebius, bk. 7, ch. 23) says about Nepos: "Among many others I esteem and love Nepos, but actually, we should love and prefer truth more than everyone. We should praise and approve someone without envy, if anything is said correctly. We should discuss and discern it, if anything is said unsoundly." Jerome, Letter ad Minerium: "It is my intent to read the ancients, to
test everything they wrote, to keep those things that are good, and not to depart from the faith of the catholic church.” Letter ad Theoph.: “I know that I regard the apostles differently than all other writers. The former always speak the truth; the latter, as men, err in some things.” He writes similar things also in his commentaries on Psalm 86, on Isaiah 19, on Ezekiel 36, on Micah 2, on Zephaniah 2, etc. When Augustine (Letter 19 ad Hieronymum) was being pressed by the authorities of eight ancient fathers in the controversy on the pretence of Peter, he appeals to the apostle Paul and says:

From all these writers of literature who believe otherwise I appeal to the apostle himself. May all those who think differently forgive me, but I believe so great an apostle more, etc. I have learned to defer this fear and honor to those books of Scripture alone that are now called canonical; I believe most firmly that no author of them made any mistake in writing. I read others in such a way that, regardless of how much they shine in holiness and doctrine, I do not think that they are true because they believe that way, but because they could persuade me either through those canonical writers or by probable reason that it does not differ from the truth. And I do not think that you, my brother, believe anything different. Certainly, I say, I do not think that you want your books to be read as those of the prophets or apostles, about whose writings it is wicked to doubt that they lack all errors.

Letter 48: “Do not be willing to gather false accusations against the divine testimonies from the writings of bishops, because this kind of literature must be distinguished from the authority of the canon. For they are not so read as though testimony were taken from them in such a way that it would not be right to believe in any other way—lest perchance they believed otherwise than the truth demands.” Letter 111: “Nor do we consider the disputations of anyone at all, even of catholic and praiseworthy men, as we do the canonical Scriptures: that, if the honor due to those men is to be preserved, we would not be permitted to disapprove of and reject anything in their writings, even if we have found that they believed otherwise than the truth holds.” De bapt. cont. Donat., bk. 2, ch. 3:

Who does not know that the holy, canonical Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments is contained within its own limits and is placed so far ahead of all the later letters of bishops that one can have absolutely no doubt about it, nor can one debate whether what has been written in it is true and correct? But we are allowed to censure bishops’ letters, which were written after the canon was confirmed or are being written, through the wiser discourse of someone with greater experience in this subject, and through the graver authority of other bishops and the prudence of teachers, and through councils, if anything in them has accidentally deviated from the truth.

Contra Faustum, bk. 11, ch. 5:

In the works of later writers, which are contained in innumerable books but are by no means the equivalent of the canonical excellence of the Holy Scriptures—even in whichever of them the same truth is found, yet their authority is far different. Therefore if some things in them are deemed to differ from what is true because they are not being understood as they were spoken, nevertheless the reader or listener has free judgment either to approve of what pleased him or to reject what offended him, etc.
Contra Crescon., bk. 2, ch. 31: “We do no wrong to Cyprian when we distinguish any writings of his from the canonical authority of the divine Scriptures. It is not without cause that the ecclesiastical canon has been established with such wholesome vigilance. To it belong certain books of the prophets and apostles, books that we dare not judge at all and according to which we pass judgment about the other writings of both the faithful and the faithless.” Elsewhere he says:

Let us use that liberty to which the Lord has called us. Of those men to whose praises we cannot attain, to whose many books we do not compare our writings, whose abilities we love, in whose speech we delight, at whose charity we venerate—if those men we must not accept as canonical anything that they understood differently. And we are doing them no wrong when we distinguish any of their sayings or writings from the canonical authority of the divine Scriptures.

We could cite many more statements like this from Augustine.

In fact, the Papists themselves admit that the writings of the fathers are not the first and immovable norm of heavenly doctrine. The statements of Augustine we have just given are cited in [Ius canonicum,] dist. 9, c. noli, c. neque, c. ego solis, c. quis nesciat, c. negare.\(^1\) Thomas, [ST,] part 1, q. 1, art. 8: “Sacred doctrine uses the authorities of canonical Scripture properly in arguing from necessity. It uses the authorities of other teachers of the church not as if arguing from things proper but as with probability. For our faith relies upon the revelation given to the prophets and apostles who wrote the canonical books, but not upon the revelation made to other teachers, if there was any such thing.” Gabriel Biel, Can. missae, lect. 41: “The authority of the holy fathers compels no one to assent to their statements unless it is founded on Holy Scripture or is based on divine revelation.” Roffensis, Confut. proem. Luth., § et nos: “We, too, do not deny that the fathers erred at different times, for they were men even as we.” Cajetan, preface to his commentary on Genesis: “If ever there has occurred a suitable sense of the text, even though it be foreign to the flood of teachers, let the reader show himself as a fair censor. No one should despise him because he differs from the ancient teachers. God has not bound the exposition of Scripture to the minds of the ancient teachers; otherwise our hope of explaining Scripture would be removed except in transferring, as they say, from the book into the notebook [*de libro in quinternum*].” Erasmus, Annot. N. T., Matthew 2, p. 13: “Christ alone is called the truth; He alone was free of every error. The divine Spirit also was present with Cyprian, as is probable; yet the orthodox must reject some of what he wrote. He was also with Jerome, but some of what he said is rejected, and he himself recanted some of his own statements.” On Matthew 11, p. 41: “I know that Jerome, Augustine, and many others along with them interpret this differently. But one may somewhere dissent from the most excellent authors, seeing that they were not only men but even allowed themselves at times to abuse the testimonies of Scripture in their figurative language.” On Luke 22, p. 157: “There are those who instantly take it as an insult if anyone differs from the accepted authors, though not even the latter demand

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\(^1\) Decretum Gratiani 1.9.4–5 and 1.9.8–10, in Aemilius Friedberg, ed., Corpus Iuris Canonici, editio Lipsiensis secunda (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1959), vol. 1, cols. 17–18.
so much honor. In fact, it is more insulting, I believe, if anyone tries to defend against the truth those who, in the manner of men, have slipped somewhere.” Villavincencio, De rat. stud. theol., bk. 4, ch. 6: “It is clear that all the fathers, however outstanding in innocence of life and in learning they may have been, made mistakes in speaking and writing.” Melchior Canus, Loc. comm., bk. 11, ch. 6: “Not everything that the great authors wrote is perfect everywhere, for at times they slip, as that one says, and fall under the burden. They indulge the pleasure of their own abilities, and sometimes they even indulge the common crowd.” Ambrosius Catherinus, Contra Cajet.: “That man certainly does not please Augustine whom Augustine pleases so immoderately that he is unwilling to say that Augustine ever wandered from the truth.” Pererius, on Genesis, bk. 3, ch. 1, q. 5: “Irenaeus declares that what he teaches about paradise he learned from the presbyters of Asia, who were disciples of the apostles, but what then? Must whatever those presbyters told him be considered as a certain and undisputed dogma of doctrine? Is it not certain, according to that same Irenaeus, that those very presbyters taught some things that were false and contrary to Holy Writ?” The theologians of the academy at Douai (in their Censura Bertrami that they put into the Index expurgator.) openly admit that they “in other ancient catholic writers besides Bertramus endure very many errors, diminish and excuse them, think up some fiction and deny them, and attach a convenient meaning to them when they are set forth against them in debates.” Baronius, Annal., anno 34, vol. 1, § 213: “In the interpretation of Scripture the Catholic church does not always nor in all things follow the most holy fathers whom we deservedly call ‘doctors of the church’ because of their lofty erudition, no matter how clear it is that they were endowed with the grace of the Holy Spirit more than all other men.” Gregorius de Valenta (Annal., p. 18) admits that “the writings of the fathers are, in their own way, weapons common to both sides.” Salmeron (on the Epistle to the Romans, disp. 6, shortly before the end) says:

In reading the fathers, it seems to me that we must preserve the judgment of Quintilian, who writes as follows: “Let not the reader be immediately persuaded that all the things that the great authors said are surely perfect. At times they slip and yield to the burden and indulge the pleasure of their own abilities. They are the greatest, but they are men. And it occurs to readers that they think that whatever they discover in them is a law of speaking, so that the worse things should be imitated, for this is easier. Also, they think they are quite like the great if they achieve the faults of the great.” This he says prudently and acutely.

Bellarmine, De concil., bk. 2, ch. 12: “The writings of the fathers are not rules, nor do they have the authority to bind.” De verb. Dei, bk. 3, ch. 10: “Who denies that the fathers were richly endowed with the gift of interpreting, and yet even the greatest of them slipped?” And yet if the fathers sometimes slip and err, how will we be able to accept their writings as a norm of doctrine?

Does the Roman church agree in doctrine with the ancient church?

§ 205. The second section. Does the Roman church of today agree in doctrine with the ancient church that was nearest to the time of the apostles? Bellarmine declares that this can be proved in two ways: “(1) If we cite the statements of the ancients that confirm
Section IX: On the Ninth Mark of the Church Assigned by Bellarmine: Efficacy of Doctrine

Whether efficacy of doctrine is a mark of the church.

§ 256. The first section. Is efficacy of doctrine a genuine and proper mark of the church? Bellarmine argues this from the fact that

the church alone has the true doctrine, which is not only spotless but also converts souls (Ps. [19:7]), and the living Word that pierces to the division of soul and spirit (Heb. 4[:12]). The ancient philosophers, on the other hand, never could draw even the neighboring towns to their rules, as is taught by Athanasius (De incarn. verbi) and Theodoret (De legibus). This is because their words were not living words but dead, not of the Spirit of God but of the spirit of men. The Muhammadans indeed have attracted many, but by terror of arms, not by the strength and efficacy of doctrine. For they teach in the Qur'an (chs. 18 and 19) that people must be coerced to their faith by war. We do not read that heretics ever converted any heathen or Jews to the faith but that they merely corrupted Christians, which Tertullian notes (De praescript.).

We respond. (1) Efficacy of doctrine can be understood in two ways: Either that it persuades many and is received by many, or that it salutarily converts people to God. If efficacy of doctrine is taken in the prior sense, then it is not a mark of the church, because even false doctrines sometimes persuade many and are received by many. If efficacy of doctrine is taken in the latter sense, we admit that in the church alone that doctrine thrives which salutarily converts people to God. However, that efficacy cannot always be evaluated on the basis of the multitude of those who accept that doctrine, “for never do things go so well in human affairs that the better things please more people,” according to the statement of Seneca. By nature people have a greater proclivity to accept errors than true doctrine, just as they are inclined rather to vices than to virtues, and even “false things are more readily embraced than true things,” as Stapleton writes (De princ. fidei doctrin., bk. 8, ch. 2). “People are prone to go down to the broad and easy way that heretics open,” as Bellarmine here admits.

(2) Sometimes heretical doctrines are more effective, that is, are accepted by more people, than the heavenly truth. 1 Kings 22:22: “A lying spirit is in the mouth of all the prophets,” and Micaiah alone stood up against them. The Lord says to that lying spirit: “You will go forth, and you will prevail.” Becanus writes in clear language (De ecclesia, q. 3, concl. 11, no. 124): “In the Old Testament an almost infinite number of people followed the false prophets. But one could not conclude from this that God had sent them or that their prophecies were divinely inspired.” How, then, will effectual persuasion in and of itself be a mark of the truth? 2 Thess. 2:9–11: “The coming of the Antichrist is by the working of Satan with all power [κατ᾽ ἐνέργειαν τοῦ Σατανᾶ ἐν πάσῃ δυνάμει] . . . because they refused to love the truth that they might be saved. Therefore God will send upon them the working of deception [ἐνέργειαν τῆς πλάνης].” (Note well!) Here
effectual persuasion is attributed to the anti-Christian errors. Rev. 13:8: “All who dwelt on earth worshiped the beast.” Concerning the doctrine of the false apostles, the apostle complains in 2 Tim. 2:17 that “it spreads like gangrene,” and in 2 Tim. 3:13: “Evil men and seducers shall grow worse, erring and driving into error.” In Gal. 3:1, errors are conferred by bewitching, by which wretched people are effectually driven mad. Justin (De monarchia Dei) shows from the beginning that the efficacy of idolatry and corrupt custom in the minds of the heathen is great. He says: “Although at the beginning human nature had received the combination of wisdom and salvation for the knowledge of the truth and the worship of one and same Lord of all, an envy to make images gradually crept in and destroyed the excellent greatness of humans. That broad custom lasted for a long time and handed down error to many people as something natural and true.” Tertullian, De praescript. adv. haereticos, ch. 1: “Vainly and rashly many people are scandalized by this very thing: that just as many heresies thrive as exist.” Chapter 2: “Because they are scandalized, they are surprised that those heresies are so strong, as if they came from a truth. Clearly, it is a wonder that evil has such strength, except that heresies are very strong among those who are not strong in the faith.” Chrysostom (or the author of the Opus imperf. in Matth., homily 19) says about heretics: “They openly and freely subvert even the leading churches. Thus they have multiplied on the opposite side, so that Christians rather than they appear to be doubtful.” Vincent of Lerins (Adv. haer., ch. 7) says: “Almost the entire world has now been stricken by a sudden storm of heresy.” Like a flood, Arianism once filled almost all the world, as we have shown earlier [§§ 181–82]. How great an increase Muhammadanism enjoys not only by force of arms but also by “the working of deception”! Surely, in the beginning it could not be propagated by arms. Those who accept it today think they are believing heavenly truth. How, then, can efficacy of doctrine be a genuine and proper mark of the church, when errors and heresies are sometimes more effective, that is, are accepted by more people?

(3) What Bellarmine declares absolutely and boldly is false: “Heretics never converted any heathen or Jews to their faith.” What Lessius (Consult., p. 42) concludes from this is also false: “That is the true religion to which there has been a conversion of the heathen.” He cannot deny that a conversion of many heathen to the Jewish religion, as it was at the time of Christ’s coming into the flesh, took place. In Matt. 23:15 Christ testifies about the scribes and Pharisees that “they traveled across sea and land to make a single proselyte.” Acts 2:5: “There were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven.” Nonetheless the Jewish religion at that time was very corrupt and depraved. At the time of Emperor Valens the tribe of the Goths was converted from paganism to Arianism by Ulfilas and other Arian ministers (according to Freculphus, Chronic., vol. 2, bk. 4, ch. 20). Bellarmine makes the following exception to this example: “The Goths were not converted by the Arians but deceived, for the Goths had wanted to become Christians and had asked for bishops for this reason. The emperor, however, sent Arians.” Then he adds: “The majority of those Goths were Christian.” It is enough for us, however, that the Arians deceived the Goths, for from this it is evident that not every religion to which heathen are converted is true and pure. Also, one cannot prove from church history that the majority of the Goths already before had been Christian, because Socrates (bk. 4, ch. 27) and Sozomen (bk. 6, ch. 37) call
them before that conversion “barbarians.” They also say that the occasion of war first made them aware of the doctrine of the Christians. Furthermore, many people once left Muhammadanism and heathenism and accepted the confession of the Greek churches, yet the Papists do not admit that that is catholic.

(4) Finally, if efficacy of doctrine is a mark of the church, our position will stand: that true doctrine which is in harmony with the prophetic and apostolic books is a mark of the church. In fact, we must pass judgment on that efficacy of doctrine on the basis of the Holy Scriptures. Not every efficacy proves the truth and purity of doctrine unless it is combined with the power and ability of a saving conversion to God. Otherwise it will be a “working of deception” rather than “the working of divine truth.”

Whether the doctrine of the Roman church is effectual.

§ 257. The second section. Does the doctrine of the Roman church have the salutary efficacy for conversion combined with it? Bellarmine asserts a threefold conversion of the heathen, about which clear pronouncement must be made. In the first place he puts “the conversion of the heathen that occurred through the apostles,” which Augustine (De civit. Dei, bk. 22, ch. 5) correctly numbers among the chief miracles. After all, the apostles were few in number, despised in outward appearance, lacking the strength of human power and eloquence. Yet through their preaching of the Gospel they converted the entire world to Christ. But what does this conversion of the heathen have to do with today’s Roman church? That happened through the preaching and teaching of the apostles, from which the Roman church of today has departed in many chief articles. Our doctrine, on the other hand, is the very one that the apostles preached, and we are prepared to prove this from their writings.

In the second place Bellarmine lists “the conversions of heathen that occurred in later centuries through Gregory, Kilian, Boniface, Adelbert, Vincent, etc.” We respond. The conversions that occurred after the sixth century of the church most certainly must be distinguished from those that took place in the earlier centuries of the church through the apostles and apostolic men. For at that time—that is, after the sixth century of the church—purity of doctrine began to be undermined as superstitions gradually crept in and as the leaven of human traditions became mixed with the doctrine of the apostles. Yet in the meantime, because God was able to beget spiritual sons and daughters for Himself even through a corrupt ministry and because at the time of Gregory, Kilian, and Boniface there was not yet as great a doctrinal corruption as followed in later times, that conversion of the heathen did not cease being a work of divine kindness, and “the precious” must always be separated from “the vile” [Jer. 15:19]. Those conversions occurring in later centuries also differ from the conversions that took place in earlier centuries through the apostles and their disciples in that they happened more by fear of weapons and by the violence of warfare than by the efficacy of doctrine. Boniface converted the Thuringians by terror of arms (as is mentioned in the Chronic. Isenacens., cent. 8, Eccles. hist., ch. 10). By means of destructive wars Charlemagne dragged the Saxons to the Christian faith, etc. Furthermore, those heathen who, as Bellarmine declares, were converted to the Roman church through Gregory, Boniface, etc., already had been Christians earlier. As far as Britain is concerned, Polydorus Vergilius (De rer. invent., bk. 1, ch. 1)
testifies: “By the work of Joseph of Ariminum, it was the first of all the provinces to accept the Gospel publicly.” Gilfridus (De gestis Britann., bk. 8) relates: “At that time, when Gregory sent the monk Augustine into Britain, Christianity was thriving because there were in Britain seven bishoprics and one archbishopric.” Thus Bellarmine asserts that through Kilian the Franks were converted to the faith and through Boniface, the Thuringians. But Tertullian and, before him, Irenaeus mention “the Germanic churches.”

In the third place, Bellarmine brings forth the conversion of the Indians and of other peoples in the New World. Earlier we explained extensively (§ 188, point 4) what conclusion should be reached about that. Against the conversion of the heathen to Muhammadanism, Bellarmine says that “this took place by terror of arms.” Yet this is also true of the conversion of the Indians, according to Ludovicus Granatensis, Petrus Martyr [Anglerius], and many others whose testimonies we cited earlier. The same method of conversion of Marranos and heretics by the Inquisitors is observed in Spain and elsewhere. Cornelius Agrippa writes (De vanit. scient., ch. 96): “Our inquisitors exercise their jurisdiction, based on decrees of the popes, very savagely. They set up as the object of faith the one Roman church, which, as they say, cannot err, by asking those who argue against them nothing else but whether they believe in the Roman church. If anyone tries to defend his own opinion, they reply that one must battle against heretics not with arguments from Scripture but with fire and bundles of wood,” etc. If it had not been for this Spanish Inquisition; if not for the prohibition of the reading of the Evangelical books and, in fact, of Holy Scripture itself; if not for the more than tyrannical threat of proscription, exile, and loss of property, there would be no doubt that the Papist religion would be extinguished in the hearts of many people and that the light of the Gospel’s truth would be shining in them.

As an addition, Bellarmine adds: “Every year some Jews and Turks are converted and are baptized both at Rome and elsewhere.” But these are particular conversions of certain persons, many of which occur in our churches in various places through a grace of God.

** Moreover, against the boasting about the annual conversion of Jews and Turks we set forth the statement of Erasmus (Annot. on Matthew 23):

Perhaps this, too, pertains to the behavior of those of us who think it is some great thing to have enticed a Jew into being baptized. Not that we should not desire for all Jews to come to their senses, but some people take their boasting from this, and they do not entice them in the way that they ought. Once they have enticed someone, they do not teach him the things that involve true Christianity. For how can it happen that we make others Christians if we ourselves have not first been Christian? It frequently happens, therefore, that as far as the Jewish wickedness is concerned, we would consider a Christian more wicked. We can find witnesses for this even in Spain. Also, there are some who by a strange example make Christians by means of weapons under the pretext of spreading religion, but are looking out for their own wealth and power. In regard to these things, nothing will be done unless the task is undertaken with a purely Christian spirit. **
Whether the doctrine of the Evangelical churches is effectual.

§ 258. The third section. Does the doctrine of our churches have a salutary efficacy for conversion combined with it? Bellarmine absolutely denies this. He says: “The Lutherans have barely converted one or two, though they compare themselves with the apostles and evangelists and though they have more Jews in Germany, and in Poland and Hungary they have the Turks as their immediate neighbors.”

We respond. (1) The negation of the primary actuality\(^1\) cannot be inferred from the negation of a secondary actuality.\(^2\) If our people have converted no one or only few, this is not to be attributed to the doctrine, which is the same as the apostolic doctrine. Rather, this should be attributed: to the persons of those who preach it, to whom God has not allotted the same measure of faith and gifts as He allotted to the apostles; and to the persons of those who listen, who are unwilling to receive the seed of the Gospel in the field of their hearts. Thus the teachers of the church who came after the times of the apostles did not convert as many as did the apostles, yet the truth of doctrine loses nothing because of this.

** Bellarmine is contradicting himself, for he says, first: “Heretics never converted any heathen or Jews to their faith but only corrupted them” (ch. 12, art. 1). But then he says (ibid., last art.): “The Lutherans have barely converted one or two.” Yet if they have “converted one or two,” that is, “very few,” at least they have converted some. And if they have converted some, it is false to say that they “never converted any.” **

(2) Whatever conversions once occurred through the preaching of the apostles, those happened through the doctrine that sounds forth in our churches, for it is completely the same as the doctrine of the apostles. If Bellarmine goes on to deny that, let him come down into the arena with us and argue the truth of doctrine only from the writings of the evangelists and apostles, with which the writings of the prophets are to be counted because they are of the same kind.

(3) Through the light of Gospel truth, which was rekindled in the previous century, whole provinces and kingdoms have been torn away from the Antichrist’s dominion. This is something that Bellarmine will understand if he is willing to count up the receipts of the papal treasury as they were a century ago and as they are now. Can he deny with any appearance of truth that the efficacy of Evangelical doctrine has been great, that it has grown in many provinces while popes and rulers vainly resisted and raged against it?

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1 “Primary actuality” refers to a power or potential that is not currently actualized. It can be taken in two ways. Sometimes it means “potentiality,” which is contrasted with “actuality.” For example, “The boy is a grammarian in primary actuality” because as time passes he can become a grammarian, though he is not actually one now. But sometimes it means an inherent quality or habitus that one possesses but that does not exert itself. “Primary actuality” in this sense is contrasted with “secondary actuality” or “operation.” For example, “Priscian, even in his sleep, is a grammarian in primary actuality, though he is not exerting this grammatical knowledge in secondary actuality.”

2 “Secondary actuality” is the actual operation of a thing. For example, “Priscian, when exercising his grammatical knowledge, is a grammarian in secondary actuality.”
A man without the might of sword, with the might of the Word, with an unarmed army
A man without possession, without hope, subdued the resources of the world.\(^3\)

To propagate our religion we use neither violence nor deceit. We do not frighten
those who disagree with us by means of prison, proscription, plundering, etc., nor do we
attract them with flattering promises of honors, riches, and high office when we invite
them to embrace it. They are converted to our church by the efficacy of our doctrine
alone.

(4) The efficacy of Evangelical doctrine is clear from the fact that it supplies solid
and effectual comfort in pangs of conscience and in temptations. It strengthens and sus-
tains the minds of people on the brink of death. From this principle Christ Himself (John
8:51) proves the truth of His teaching. For examples of this, see our treatise On Good
Works [Commonplace XX], Loci, vol. 4, toward the end of § 107.

(5) If Bellarmine demands that we show a conversion of heathen to our churches,
we refer him to Iceland, Greenland, Lapland, Livonia, etc., where by the preaching of the
Gospel many thousands of people were converted to the true God from heathen idolatry.
(See also what we cited from the histories earlier in § 186.)

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\(^3\) See p. 403 n. 16.