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ABBOT ÆLFRIC AND HIS OPPOSITION TO TRANSUBSTANTIATION.

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IN the present state of disturbance of financial and political circumstances, and the troubles that they bring on us in our personal affairs, little interest appears to be taken in ancient Church History. Yet the flow of the stream of novels from the press seems to be undiminished. If we had eyes to see and ears to hear, the Story of the Church of God would be quite as interesting as any novel. The lives of great men, and of saintly writers and workers are fascinating subjects for study, and to trace the influence of the Holy Ghost inspiring spiritual movements is very animating as an encouragement to ourselves. Moreover, we cannot adequately understand the questions arising in the Church of to-day, without knowledge of the past. A further consideration may be added, change of thought is restful, and a few excursions into ancient times may be fairly regarded as a relief from the contemplation of our present political anxieties. In this point of view I invite attention to the state of the Church of England in the tenth century. The life and writings of the Anglo-Saxon Ælfric (pronounced Alfric) have been studied by English and by German students, yet to our Churchpeople they are little known. Bishop Browne, formerly of Bristol, has rendered valuable help by bringing down his expert knowledge of that period to the level of popular books,[1] but he does not appear to have as yet written about Abbot Ælfric. I propose in these few pages to indicate to the reader the main features of interest in the Abbot's life and work. A brief outline of his life is necessary for the understanding of his writings.

The exact year of his birth is not known, it was somewhere near A.D. 955. He was educated in the monastery of Winchester, under Æthelwold, at one time Abbot of Abingdon, afterwards Bishop of Winchester. Of Æthelwold he remarks that it was a pleasure to him to be occupied in teaching young men and boys, and to render books into English for them, and to exhort them with humorous talk to rise to better things. He desired to win

[1] Published by the S.P.C.K.

them, and not merely to drive them, and while he maintained a strong hand, and exact discipline, he was full of genuine kindness. He taught the boys by translating the Latin into English so as to facilitate their study. For this he has been criticized in our own day by Dean Hook, who remarks, " though a popular master, we may doubt whether he was a good one, for one of his practices was to turn Latin books for them into English. We have heard of the use of *cribs*, but this is perhaps the only instance of their being provided by the master." We may, however, observe that copies of books in those days were inevitably few, and no doubt Æthelwold read out the Latin and construed it into English, and the boys learnt to repeat what he read and said. Ælfric was deeply impressed by his kindly spirit, and afterwards imitated the benevolence of his teacher, as is shown by the colloquy between master and boys which he wrote later on. Eventually, he wrote a life of Æthelwold.

From Winchester, where he had become a fully instructed monk, he was sent to Cerne Abbas in Dorsetshire, to guide the monks in that monastery in the adoption of the Benedictine rule. On returning to Winchester he brought out two volumes of Sermons for the Clergy, dedicated to Archbishop Sigeric, and called *Catholic Homilies*. After that his interest in boys led him to publish a Latin Grammar in the Anglo-Saxon vernacular. Another set of Sermons followed, and some translations from Holy Scripture.

In the year 1005, Ælfric was appointed Abbot of Eynsham, near Oxford, by the ealdorman Æthelmaer, when the latter refounded that monastery, and desired the introduction of the Benedictine rule. Here he remained for the rest of his life, influencing the neighbouring thanes by his personal character, and by his writings, and he never seems to have sought any higher position, realizing that it was his special vocation to help on his countrymen by writing on educational and religious subjects.

He has been supposed to have become Archbishop of Canterbury, and several of our historians have described him as such. But it is clear that there were many persons bearing the name of Ælfric, one of these was Archbishop, and our Ælfric was never given that title by his contemporaries, but simply that of " Abbas." The German writer, Dietrich, proved conclusively years ago that he could never have been Archbishop. Our Professor Skeat, an

expert in Anglo-Saxon, agrees with Dietrich. He was devoted to what he felt to be his own special vocation, the task of making known to the Anglo-Saxon thanes, and to the humbler classes, in their own language, the truths of the Faith. He was filled with the desire to promote vital religion and good works among his countrymen, by the sermons and translations, and hortatory writings that he supplied to them. Had he sought promotion to the episcopacy, or accepted it, he would have been immersed in official business, and the exercise of his special gifts must have ceased. He had the wisdom to know what he was most suited to doing, and the faithfulness to adhere to his task. His earnest and devoted life came to an end about the year 1025.

This outline of his career may prepare the reader for some fuller consideration of his writings.

Three great aims pervaded his efforts. In the first place he was above all else anxious to provide Christian teaching for all classes, for old and young, for rich and poor. Secondly, he was bent on temperance reform, for habits of drinking were widely prevalent; and thirdly, he lamented the indolence of his countrymen in resisting the call to military efforts against the cruel Danes. For he was not inclined to peace at any price, but regarded the defence of the land as a duty incumbent on every citizen. These three great objects shall now be noticed.

To understand his writings we must look back, and find the foundations for them in an earlier period. Latin, brought in by missionaries, both Irish and Roman, was the language of scholars, but in Wessex the native tongue had come into prominence, and the great King Alfred (871–901) had been so wide-minded as to desire to extend knowledge as far as possible among all classes of his people. Therefore, with the assistance of learned men, he brought out some of the treasures of literature in the Anglo-Saxon language for all who could read. A work by Pope Gregory on the clerical office was translated by his scholars, and a copy was sent to every bishop in England. One of these, for the Bishop of Worcester, is now in the Bodleian Library. Another translation intended to suit the tastes of the people, was that of the *Dialogues of Gregory the Great*, a series of stories and anecdotes. For Church History a part of Bede's work was rendered into the Anglo-Saxon tongue, and for general knowledge the Geography of Europe and

Asia by Orosius followed. In a translation of the *Consolations of Philosophy* by Boethius, Alfred inserted many reflections of his own, which are vigorous and helpful. We must not, however, linger over the great King's literary labours. But the impulse that he and his scholars gave was followed out by other writers, especially by Homilies in the language of the people for the use of the clergy. These are called the Blickling Homilies, and the Homilies of Wulfstan. In the latter, the unwillingness of the English to defend their country against the Danes is severely scourged. These sermons, intended for the popular ear, gave a precedent for the most prominent labours of Ælfric's life. He realized that few of the clergy were preachers, and set to work to publish two volumes of Homilies for their use. He based them on Holy Scripture, and the writings of the Latin Fathers. Yet he was very far from being a mere copyist, for he introduced many racy observations of his own, and cast the discourses into the style most suitable for unlearned audiences. Later on, he drew up two more volumes, which were teachings from the Lives of the Saints. All these were dedicated to Sigeric, Archbishop of Canterbury. Besides their hortatory value, they are of great interest to students who desire to know what the doctrines of the English Church were in those days, and being dedicated to the Archbishop, we may fairly regard them as decisive as to the tenets of that age.

A few quotations from the Homilies shall now be given. These were translated by Mr. Thorpe, F.S.A., in 1846.

"The Saviour fled from worldly honour, when He was chosen King, but He fled not from reproach and scorn when the Jews would hang Him on a cross. He would not encircle His Head with a golden crown, but with one of thorns, as it was done at His passion. He would not reign for a while in His life, Who rules eternally in heaven. This world is not our country, but is our place of exile; therefore should we not set our hope in this deceitful life, but should hasten with good deserts to our own home-land for which we were created, that is, to the Kingdom of heaven. Verily it is written, 'Whosoever will be a friend of this world, he shall be accounted a foe of God.' Christ said in a certain place that the way is very narrow and steep which leads to the Kingdom of heaven, and it is very wide and smooth which leads to hell torment. The way which leads to the Kingdom of heaven is narrow and steep, in order that we should with difficulty gain our country. If we desire to obtain it, we should love mercy and chastity and truth, and righteousness and humility, and have

true love to God and to men, and give alms according to our means, and be moderate in our food, and observe all other holy things. These things we cannot do without difficulties, but if we do them, then may we with those labours, through God's support, ascend the steep way which leads us to eternal life. Peter the Apostle said, 'Christ suffered for us, and gave us an example that we should follow His footsteps,' that is, that we should suffer something for love of Christ, and for our sins. Well suffers the man, and acceptably to God, who strives against wickedness and promotes goodness, as best he may. He who will suffer nothing in this life, shall suffer against his will in the life to come" (p. 117).

On the equality of all men before God.

"All Christian men, whether high or low, noble or ignoble, and the lord, and the slave, are all brothers, and have all one Father in heaven. The wealthy is not better on that account than the needy. As boldly may the slave call God his Father as the King. We are all alike before God, unless any one excel another in good works. The rich for his wealth is not to despise the poor, for the poor is before God often better than the rich. God is our Father, therefore should we all be brothers in God, and hold the brotherly bond unbroken; that is true peace, so that each of us love others as himself, and command to no one that which he would not another should command to him. He who observes this is a child of God, and Christ, and all holy persons who thrive to God are his brothers and his sisters" (p. 119).

On recognition.—In the next world.—"There will be known those who were known before, and those who were unknown, dwelling in brotherly love with God, ever to eternity" (p. 121).

Again—*of the recognition of our dear ones.*

"When God's chosen come to death, then they find our heritage. A great company of faithful friends will await us there, secure for themselves, yet anxious for our salvation. Let us therefore hasten to our country, that we may see our friends, and greet our kinsmen" (p. 138).

For Septuagesima Sunday.

"My brothers, what justification can we have if we abstain from good works, we who from the child-cradle came to God's belief? My brothers, behold your conduct, and see if ye yet are God's workmen. Let everyone consider whether he labours in God's vineyard. He who in the present life toils for himself, and not for God, is not yet come within God's vineyard. They truly toil for God who seek not their own gain through covetousness, but meditate on God's tillage, how they may suppress unrighteousness and further righteousness, and benefit other men with the diligence of true love, and they who care with wakeful mind how they may gain the souls of men to God, and lead them to everlasting life. He who lives for himself, and he who lies in his fleshly

lusts, is rightly accused of idleness, for he cultivates no fruit of divine work."

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost.

"In Ezekiel the four beasts had eyes on every side of their bodies, because God's chosen should consider their deeds beforehand, on every side, so that they ever desire good, and guard themselves against evil."

A prayer.

"Lead us, Almighty God, to the number of Thy chosen saints, with the everlasting bliss of Thy kingdom, which Thou hast prepared from the beginning of the world for those who love Thee, Thou who livest and reignest with the Eternal Father, and the Holy Ghost for ever and ever. Amen."

The years from 991 to 994 were full of trouble from the Danes. Ælfric remarks: "With sorrowful mind, distressed by the many evils received from wicked pirates, we have, lest we should be found false to our promise, completed this book." It is probable that it was finished in the terrible year whose horrors are sufficiently indicated in the *Saxon Chronicle.*

The next work of Ælfric was directed to the teaching of boys. For higher Christian education King Alfred had already advised the teaching of Latin, and in the days of Ælfric it was in any case necessary for youths who were to become parish priests, or to go into monasteries. Therefore he prepared a Grammar and Glossary for them. With the common sense that pervaded all his efforts he decided to compose this in the English language, so as to facilitate the studies of beginners. Grammars had usually been left entirely in the Latin in which the Italian grammarians Donatus and Priscian had edited them. Those had been days when in Italy the Latin language was still in common use. But so obstructive has been the conservatism of educationists that because Roman boys had their grammars in Latin, the custom was maintained for ages, and only recently have our public school boys been freed from the needless difficulty of learning the elements of Latin through rules given in that language only. Yet as far back as A.D. 995, Ælfric shows his common sense by composing for his Anglo-Saxon boys explanations of Latin grammar in their own vernacular. Knowing that this departure would expose him to criticism, he thought it prudent to apologize in his preface. In his preface he writes:—

"I Ælfric, as one of slight wisdom, have chosen these extracts from the smaller and from the larger work of Priscian and have translated them into your own language for you little boys of tender years, that having read through the eight parts of speech of Donatus, you may be able to receive both languages into your tender minds, while you progress towards higher studies. I know that many persons will blame me for having been willing to occupy myself with such work as the turning of grammar into the English language. But if my method displeases anyone let him criticize my translation just as he likes; we are content to follow the teaching we have received in the school of Æthelwold, the venerable prelate who inspired many with goodness."

The colloquy between the Master and his boys, which has been already alluded to, is extremely interesting.[1] It shows the pleasant relations which existed between them, and the boys speak with more freedom to their teacher than has been usual in later ages. Besides this, a most spirited account is given of the various occupations to which boys passed on in those early times, each boy being questioned by the Master as to what he has begun to do. One has the honour of being a huntsman to the King, another is a merchant, another a fisherman, another a ploughboy, while the rest follow other still existing trades, and the last who speaks is preparing to be a monk.

After this effort, returning to his labours on behalf of older readers, Ælfric brought out two more volumes of Sermons, called *Lives of the Saints*. In these he included some of our English martyrs, such as St. Alban and St. Edmund, and with a view to encouraging the indolent among his countrymen to resist the Danes, he quoted the example of the brave Maccabees. Yet he did not omit to lay stress on higher efforts than those of earthly warfare, and he urges on monks and clerics the importance of the spiritual warfare, of which bodily contests are a type.

His efforts were not thrown away. Notable men such as Æthelmaer and Æthelweard became his friends, and requested religious translations from him. They were ealdormen. The word *ealdorman* is, of course, identical with our word *alderman*. But in those days the name implied a much higher position. The ealdormen were nobles, and were often great landowners. In relation to the King they were in their county position somewhat similar to our

[1] In my book, *An Anglo-Saxon Abbot*, I have translated from the Latin this interesting and amusing Colloquy. Full quotations will also be found there on the subject of the opposition to the doctrine of transubstantiation, p. 88 ff. (Messrs. T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh. Price 4s.)

Lord-Lieutenants. Æthelweard is greeted with respectful friendliness by Ælfric. He says, "Ælfric humbly greeteth ealdorman Æthelweard, and I tell thee, beloved, that I have now collected in this book such Passions of the Saints as I have had leisure to translate into English, because that thou, beloved, and Æthelmaer earnestly prayed me for such writings, and received them at my hands, for the confirmation of your faith by means of this history, which ye never had in your language before." He afterwards translated portions of the Old Testament for Æthelweard, the Gospels and parts of the Psalms being already available in the Anglo-Saxon language. In the year 1005, Æthelmaer showed his esteem for the earnest and industrious Ælfric by appointing him Abbot of the monastery that he was re-establishing at Eynsham, in Oxfordshire, and where he was introducing the Benedictine rule.

Being raised to the rank of Abbot, Ælfric was now the social equal of the landowning thanes of the neighbourhood. Several of his letters to them still exist. They appear to have been good fellows in their way, but liable to the common weakness of liking a glass too much. To Wulfgeat of Ilmington he writes that "the Word of God forbids drunkenness, we ought to teach the foolish and the careless, else God will require their souls at our hands. God grant us to tell you often of His holy love, and to you to turn our teaching into good works." To Sigward of Asthall he writes, complaining "that thou wouldest fain have persuaded me to drink for pleasure more than was my custom. Our Saviour Christ hath forbidden drunkenness to all who believe in Him. Suffer then every man that will, to obey the ordinance of Christ." From these words it is clear that Ælfric was no prohibitionist, but he adds, "holy teachers since the Saviour have forbidden this evil habit, and have taught that men should do no injury to themselves, for drunkenness surely destroyeth both a man's soul and his health." While thus admonishing with due moral courage the friends who needed it, he urges them to good works in proof of the reality of their religion, and he continues to encourage them by making translations from the Bible into their own language.

Of these a recent student remarks,[1] "that Ælfric is incontest-

[1] See a very readable and valuable book, by Dr. Caroline Louisa White, *Yale Studies in English : Ælfric* (Lamson, Wolffe & Co., Boston, New York and London).

ably a master in the portrayal of Biblical story, understanding well how to weave into the narrative his own practical application and comments. Avoiding as far as possible superstitious additions to the legends of the earlier Church, he places before his readers the more important and primary truths. He sets forth with vital freshness and sincerity the mystery of redemption and the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for man." Ælfric's style was the expression of his character. It is evident that he was not thinking of himself when he wrote, he was not aiming at fine compositions that might advance his literary reputation. It is clear that he had two main thoughts in his mind, as to his style, how he could most suitably adapt himself to his hearers or readers, and how best to represent the ideas of his authors in the language of the people. Humbly as he speaks of himself, he was far from being a mere translator; while faithful to the sense, his sentences were cast in the mould of his own keen and earnest mind, and many racy comments were added by himself, to impress the lessons that he was conveying. He had a wholesome horror of being prolix, and he abridges freely to sharpen the matter in hand. Hence simplicity, clearness and vigour are his characteristics. He valued his learning not so much for his own personal satisfaction, as for the benefit of the clergy and laity to whom he could make it useful in a popular form.

What, it may be asked, was the attitude of Ælfric to the Church doctrines and questions of his day? A clear answer can be given from his writings. He took his stand on the teachings of Holy Scripture and the early Western Fathers, and deprecated unauthorized additions of legendary matter into which some recent writers had fallen. The Anglo-Saxon Church had in the main taken its doctrinal beliefs from Gregory the Great, through Augustine, and *we cannot honestly say that all these were free from superstition.* But Ælfric was well aware of the danger that existed of dangerous doctrinal developments, and a conspicuous instance of this attitude of his mind is to be found in his *opposition to the approaching theory of transubstantiation.* His writings on this subject did not escape the notice of our Reformers, and in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Archbishop Parker, with thirteen of his suffragans, republished the views of Ælfric with the intention of showing that the Anglo-Saxon Church had not held the Roman tenets existing in their day as to the

Holy Eucharist, though they added that they did not wholly agree with Ælfric's teaching. As to this question, some notice of it must be entered on, even in the present short paper on Ælfric's life.

If we go back to the Greek Fathers of the East, we shall find that some of them expressed themselves in words that went very near to transubstantiation, but no doctrinal decision had then been imposed on the mysterious subject of the Eucharist. On the other hand, some of the Alexandrian Fathers, such as Clement, had held a purely spiritual view, as put forth by Our Lord Himself, "It is the Spirit that quickeneth, the Flesh profiteth nothing, the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life."[1] But as sacerdotalism invaded the simplicity of the earlier Church, the material aspect of the Holy Communion came to be regarded as the vehicle of the spiritual, and by the time of Ælfric it is evident that both the Celtic Church and the Anglo-Saxon Church held, that after consecration by the celebrant there came into the sacred elements on the altar a mysterious though spiritual presence of the Body and Blood of Christ. A further step was now taken in the Western Church. Paschasius Radbert, Abbot of Corbey in France in 844 composed a treatise for the younger monks, in which he expresses the opinion that the bread and wine cease to exist in their own nature, and were changed into the same Body and Blood of Christ that was born of the Virgin Mary. This teaching was opposed by Rabanus Maurus, Abbot of Fulda in 825, who remarks, "the flesh of Christ rising from the tomb was so glorified that it could no longer any way be eaten." Similar opposition was offered by Ratramnus, Abbot of Orbais in 870, to whom King Charles the Bald addressed himself inquiring as to the views of Paschasius. The reply of Ratramnus, which still exists, was at considerable length; the leading idea being expressed in the words—"In the mystery of the Sacrament it is spiritual food and spiritual drink, spiritually feeding the soul, and bestowing the life of eternal satisfaction."

In a sermon for Easter Day, Ælfric closely follows the expressions of Ratramnus, and sums up at the close by saying, "This mystery is a pledge and a symbol, it is, as we said before, Christ's Body and His Blood, not bodily, but spiritually." The teaching of Paschasius was adopted and pressed forward by Lanfranc and others, and in

[1] St. John vi. 63.

1050 this doctrine was maintained by a Council at Rome. At a still more important Council at Rome, in 1216, the doctrine of transubstantiation was declared obligatory by Pope Innocent III, and from this time it became established as part of the Creed of the Roman Church. In 1551, the Council of Trent decreed that "by consecration there is a conversion of the whole substance of the bread and wine, into the substance of Christ's Body and Blood," and an anathema was pronounced on all who should deny such change of substance. Our own Church declares that this change alleged by the Romanists "overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions." Yet not long ago I saw a leaflet placed in the seats of one of our Churches, "Hail true Body, born of Mary," etc., translated from the Latin of Thomas Aquinas. As our Article witnesses, so our Rubric declares, "the Sacramental Bread and Wine remain still in their very natural substances, and therefore may not be adored; for that were idolatry, to be abhored of all faithful Christians, and the natural Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ are in Heaven and not here; it being against the truth of Christ's natural Body to be at one time in more places than one."

It is evident that Ælfric did not hold the change of substance implied by the idea of transubstantiation, for in the dedication of his Homilies to Archbishop Sigeric he humbly requests the Archbishop to correct any doctrinal error into which he may have fallen, and as no such correction was made, we may confidently assert that the change of the bread and wine into the actual Body and Blood of Christ was not a tenet held by the Anglo-Saxon Church. This is still further proved by the fact, that Ælfric in his letter to Bishop Wolfsine of Sherborne says that Christ is not present "bodily, but ghostly," and in his communication to Wulfstan, Archbishop of York, his statement is similar: "this sacrifice is not to be regarded as the body in which He suffered for us, nor the blood which He poured out for us, but it is made spiritually His Body and Blood." In the Bodleian Library a publication of Parker and his suffragans is dated 1567. It is entitled, "A testimonie of Antiquitie showing the ancient faith of the Church of England touching the Sacrament of the body and bloude of the Lord, here publicly preached, and also received in the Saxon tyme, above 600 years ago." Parker points out that this is quite opposed to the ideas of the Church of Rome.