

The Church Calendar, a Help against Time, by Frederick William Faber.
(1840).

THE
CHURCH CALENDAR,
A
HELP AGAINST TIME.

BY THE REV.
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He made the moon also to serve in her season for a declaration of times and a sign of the world. For the moon is the sign of feasts. The month is called after her name, increasing wonderfully in her changing, being an instrument of the armies above.—ECCLUS. xliii. 6.

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THERE are many days in a year; and in every one of them we are all of us thinking and saying either how quick the time passes or how slow. Those who are engaged in business, and have almost more to do every day than one day will hold, are continually complaining how quick the time passes: those who are idle, languid, useless people, who are weak enough and ignorant enough to believe they have nothing to do but to amuse themselves, are continually complaining how slow the time passes. Again: those who are in strong bodily health, and are from that in good spirits and cheerfulness, wonder at the quiet way in which time runs past them, like a summer stream that makes no noise in its going; but those whom age or sickness has confined to their weary chambers, who lie awake all night, in pain and fretfulness, listening to the different hours as they come heavily one after another, and murmuring for the day,—these are miserable because time goes so sluggishly. When we are looking forward to any pleasure or enjoyment, we are eager for the time to pass away quickly; and, in like manner, when we are in sorrow and suffering, we are equally anxious for the rapid flight of time. So, too, there is scarcely a day in which parents do not teach their children, and masters their scholars, and friends warn their friends, and the Church warns all men, not to lose their time, because it passes away. Thus we are for ever thinking about time, speaking about time, and acting with reference to time. And as the Church calendar was invented of old to help us against time, it may not be unpractical to ask ourselves a question—simple, indeed, to all appearance, yet by no means easy to answer—*What is time?* What is the meaning of this word that is always in our mouths? What is this strange power, or economy, or tyrant, or whatsoever it be, which, like the air we breathe, insinuates itself into all our thoughts and actions, makes itself felt every where, and felt as a hard master over us? What is time? Think of it as we will, place it in whatever light we will, there is but one answer to the question—*It is a mystery.*

Now, let no one think that this is a mere matter of speculation, a question, curious and interesting, but not affecting our practice. If it be true that time is so continually in our thought, it must be practical to get some true notions about it, and to give it a religious meaning. We shall then be more strongly impressed with the recollection that it is one of the most fearful of those talents for which we shall have to give account at the judgment-seat of Christ; and also when we begin to see what time is, we shall be more anxious to take refuge from its tyranny, its unreality, and its

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changings in the fulness and the substance of eternity.

Time is not a reality, because it is not and it cannot be eternal. It would be a contradiction to say it was. We may talk of past, present, and future. To us they may seem widely different things, though they are not really so: they are but the outsides of things; the outside of eternity, under which is the eternal on-flowing of all things and spirits, whether of earth or heaven; a flowing which has no motion, fast or slow, no colour, dark or light, no sound, or tide, or change, or resting; part of the unseen, unheard Will of God, not to be comprehended or spoken of. Past, present, and future, are men's names for the outside of all this; different names, because they have different colours. The past has a dark and gentle light upon it, and the future is in sunny, shifting mist, and the present is colourless; for we are yet too near to see how memory will paint it, and too much busied with it to remember how we once saw it with the light of hope upon it. There is but one past; and that is all we leave behind when we are judged; and what else is that but sin? "That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been;"—this is the *nature* of time;—"and God requireth that which is past;" and this is the *meaning* of time to ourselves.¹

Now let us think of some of the ways in which we are influenced and affected by time. We see that the whole external world is regulated by it. The sun rises and sets within his proper limits; and the moon is a faithful witness in heaven. The great sea keeps its own calendar by its tides; the earth by her seasons, spring and autumn, summer and winter, seedtime and harvest. Now all these are so many ways of marking time; for when twelve months are over, all things begin again as before. We are compelled, whether we will or not, to follow these changes, to obey them, and adapt ourselves to them. Our toil, our business, our pleasures, our dress, our way of living, are all forced to accommodate themselves to the changes of the year. We cannot help ourselves. Time is a law of God, and therefore it is too strong for us. We should often be glad to shorten one season or lengthen another; but it may not be. So here is one way in which we are affected by time.

But it is not only the natural world which is regulated and governed by time. The world which we make for ourselves,—the world of sin and sorrow, the world of trouble and pleasure,—this is also most completely beneath the hand of time. We have fixed days and hours, and weeks and months, for doing all things. We contrive instruments for telling us how our very minutes are passing. We divide time into the smallest portions; and in every one of those portions we have something to do or suffer. So here is another way in which we are put beneath the dominion of time.

But more than this, time possesses an almost irresistible authority

¹ Eccl. iii. 15.

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over our feelings, our affections, and our happiness. It is a sad thing to be in sorrow; yet there are many of us who have lost parents, or children, or friends, who would fain have kept alive within our hearts the same keen and lively memory of them, as we had when first they died. But time will not let us: it hurries us along; and our impressions grow fainter and fainter, till at last they almost die away. Then in our friendships and our loves time grievously interferes with us. It will not allow the glow of our affection to continue. We cease to love friends we have loved before, for no other reason than that the lapse of time has cooled our love, and we were not able to withstand its power. And as it interferes with our affections so does it with our happiness. Time is so unsatisfactory a thing when it is with us, that we are always discontented with the present. Young men are always wishing to be old, and old men to be young. Men can love the future, and they can love the past: scarcely any can rest contented in the present. Besides which, it often comes across us as a melancholy thought, that all this will go on just as well, just as happily, when we are dead and gone. Men will have our houses and our gardens, and will be glad and happy therein. They will walk about the same streets, and have the same joyous meetings, when we shall be slowly and neglectedly falling back into the cold earth out of which we came; and they who loved us will have hid us therein, shed a few slight tears upon our coffin, gone to their pleasure or their toil, and straightway forgotten all about us. And yet they are not unfaithful or unaffectionate. It is time's fault, not theirs.

Surely these thoughts about time are very profitable to us; or at any rate they may be made so: for they show us what a tyrant time is; how it bears us onward with an unfeeling violence, not allowing us one hour's respite for the quiet indulgence of our holiest and most natural affections. They show us, too, which is a great thing, that time is something quite distinct from ourselves; they point out that there is something within us which is continually craving for rest, which is weary of following time up and down in all its changes, and is miserable in that perpetual agitation and hurry and motion into which it is thrown by time. Nothing can prove to man more strongly his own immortality, than his dislike of time and his unhappiness while beneath its power.

Thus a thoughtful mind might have got so far towards seeing what a mystery time is, independent of the Bible. He might have seen that it was something which influenced all his thoughts and actions; something from which he could not escape, and which would leave him in the end he knew not where, only it would be helpless, and hopeless also. Thus it was, to get rid of this mystery, that the heathen of old days made time into a god; that is, they believed, or tried to make themselves believe, that time was eternal. Yet we, who are made heirs of heaven and partakers of the divine nature, who

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can die no more,, because Christ has once died for us all; who have bread from heaven, even the Flesh of the Incarnate Word, whereon we feed, whereby we receive fullest remission of sins, and take into ourselves the seed and the earnest of a blessed resurrection;—we who are thus from mere mortals made by holy Baptism into sons of God, think far less about time, about what it is, and what it means, and what we have to do with it, than the heathen did. They wondered at it: we let hour after hour slip by, and take no account of the mystery. They were uneasy and unhappy about it: it never disturbs us in our business or our pleasure; it never disturbs us even in our sins. They made a god of it, and worshipped it, and did all they could to propitiate its awful power: we never remember that it is a messenger of the one true God, that it tells us that the world's end keeps hastening, and that the fire of judgment draweth nearer and nearer to us day by day, and night by night. So far, then, independent of the Bible, we could see that time was a mystery.

Now in the Bible no explanation is given at all: but mystery is made far deeper. We know that the world was 4000 years old when God gave His only begotten Son to take upon Him our nature and to be miraculously born of a pure Virgin. Yet the Bible calls Him the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. Abraham had been long dead and buried, and his sepulchre was in the Holy Land in the days of Christ's humiliation. Yet the Lord tells us that Abraham rejoiced to see His day and was glad. Nay, more than this, we are taught that Christ could not come before He did, that it was not well He should come before He did, because it was not yet the fulness of time. So you see time had power to keep back our blessed Lord from coming. And when He was on earth, He speaks of His time not being yet come; so that time had something to do with His death. Moreover, in the Scriptures we learn that time has nothing to do with God; that His power and wisdom are not bounded by what men call past, present, and future; that He is the first and the last, Who was and is, and is to be, in Whom and by Whom, and through Whom do all things consist, from Whom they spring, and upon Whom they most entirely and utterly depend. But the Bible not only deepens the mystery of time, but extends its power. The dead, that is, our friends and relations and forefathers who have left this world—the spirits, are under the influence of time. For their souls beneath the altar cry unto God, and say, "How long! O Lord, how long!" Lastly, we learn from the Bible also, that there shall be a very great day, whereon an Angel² shall go forth and swear by the God Who made all things and liveth for ever, that there shall be time no longer.

These things are very mysterious. But they are written for our

² Rev. x. 6.

The Church Calendar, a Help against Time, by Frederick William Faber. (1840).

instruction. We live in time, we shall be judged for what we do in time; we shall still live on, we shall still be alive, when time shall be no longer. With us eternity depends on time. Now then, if the Bible tells us all these mysteries about time, and many more which I have not mentioned, what does it tell us of time as connected with ourselves—as practical to ourselves? First of all these mysteries themselves are very practical; they make us afraid of time, of letting it slip away from us unseen, of misspending it. Secondly, God puts time before us as a witness, for or against us, as the case may be. The years go round and round. They make no noise as they go. Night steals quietly upon the day; and morning light breaks in the east in beauty and in silence. But every year, as it passes away from us, goes to lay its long and sad account at the foot of the throne of God. That throne is set up in its own place somewhere in the world. We cannot tell where it is; perhaps nearer ourselves than we imagine, perhaps in the midst of us. To this throne does each year come to testify of all things which it has seen, all the sins, no matter how secret, which all the men in all the nations of the earth have committed; that God may note them in His Book. It is a faithful witness: it forgets nothing, it conceals nothing; it is God's minister going up and down among men to spy out all their actions. We cannot hide ourselves from time. It is like the eye of Him Who made it. It does not close: it does not sleep: it does not weary of its task: it is awake for evermore.

But time is more than a witness against us, it is our enemy. It cuts off the wicked, very treacherously giving them no warning. It shortens our repentance; it will not wait, or give us respite, while we try to repair whatever we have done amiss. But the Church of Christ gives us protection against the enmity of time. It disarms it. It sanctifies it. It takes us beneath its wing, and teaches us, if only we are obedient, how to make time witness for us, instead of against us, at the throne of God.

Let us think of some of the ways in which the Church does this. Time is the property of the world: at least it seems so; for the world takes it, and fills it quite full, full even to wearying us, full even beyond what it will hold of business, schemes, cares, toils, labours, trades, vanities, pleasures, politics, literatures, sciences, sins of its own. The Church will not allow of this. She insists upon all time being hers. She takes every morning for her own, and every evening for her own; and calls them hours of prayer. In old times, when her faith was stronger, and her sons more loyal and less mingled up with a literary or money-making world, she had seven hours of prayer a day, the seven canonical hours. Alas! we need not wish for her old seven: we do not keep her modern two! She takes the first day of every week, and will not allow the world to have any share in it. She will not think of poor people being made to work, or rich people left to their own vain employments; on the day when her Spouse rose from the dead, and finished our redemption.

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(1840).

More than this, she gives every year days to the Blessed Virgin, days to each of the Apostles, and other saints of God, whereon their memories shall be kept holy, and her children shall be glad of heart. So too does she remember the Holy Angels, and above all, the great and marvellous acts of her dearest Lord while He was yet on earth. These are her own days. She calls them holy-days. She has made them for our sakes, for her children's sake, to help them in redeeming the time, because the days are so very evil and profane. Further she is so very jealous of the world, that she will not leave it quiet even on its own working-days. She establishes days of fasting, painful mortification, hardness, self-denial, and great weeping for sin. She kills the world in all our hearts year after year by her long, hard, forty days of Lent. And all this for the love she bears us. Now, this is one way in which the Church helps us against time: and how are we obedient to her authority? Remember she has her authority, not of man, but of God: the Holy Ghost is with her and within her; her words are not to be regarded lightly. She is the Bride of Christ, and the Bride, as well as the Spirit, say "Come." She is the representative of Christ. How have we used the helps she gives us against the tyranny of time? Did you, for example, during last year, during 1839, in a humble and childlike spirit observe her fasts and festivals, Sundays and great feasts—such as Easter and Christmas, Ascension Day, and Whitsuntide—I do not say strictly, but as well as you could, and with much grief that you have not observed them better? Have you always when you could—I know it is not always possible,—but have you when you could, come to church on Saints' days; and at least marked fasts by some self-denial for Christ's sake? Have you not preferred the world; and with the church-bells sounding in your ears, have dosed them against the charmer, and gone rather to business than to religion, to folly, sin, mirth and levity, than with a solemn heart of prayer to the foot of the Cross of Christ? How many a one is there in our foreign colonies, in far-off lands, serving their country amid dangers and disease, hardship and solitude, who would give worlds to hear that sound which they remember in their childhood, or to see the decent and beautiful solemnities of their mother Church again! How many a missionary is there in lonely places, who sinks to his bed with no one to join his evening prayer, but the stars in the heavens above him, and the wind of night sounding about him on some far Indian shore; and he too would weep for joy if he might join the godly company of worshippers in his own land, to keep the holy days, and the joyful festivals of the saints. The Church has done what she could. Her holy years pass one by one from us to the throne of God. Have they no evil tale to tell of you, of broken fasts and the memories of the Saints of Jesus neglected and despised, and Jesus neglected too?

The Church is of course a help against time in other ways beside her calendar. Let us note one or two of them. The Christian Priesthood with its

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Apostolical succession is one of the chief ways in which the Church defends herself and us against time. That very high and holy institution keeps the deposit of sound doctrine, and the right and due administration of the justifying Sacraments, from the harm which time might do them. Generation after generation from the Apostles, and with a perpetual Apostolate in the order of Bishops, the Priesthood has kept descending, guarding the pure Word of God, and teaching out of the ancient creeds, founding churches, baptizing nations, and showing forth the worship of God in the beauty of holiness. The Sacraments, again, are a still higher way in which the church helps us against time; not so much by seizing upon it, hallowing it, driving the world out of it, and making it her own, as by bringing heaven forward upon earth, by fetching eternity out into time, by bringing great gifts from far and by them, in the midst of time, substantially anticipating eternity. Thus the weak element of water is sanctified by Christ's pure Flesh in "the river Jordan, to the mystical washing away of sin,"³ in order to cure the wound and hide the scar our race has had almost since time began, even since Adam fell. Time is indeed a mystery. We cannot hear it flowing. It will make no noise, lest we should hear it and be afraid, and it should be a summon to us. Time is a wonderful and fearful thing, stealing swiftly over us and drawing us along. We cannot swim against it. We are at the bottom of the river. It is flowing above our heads and we do not feel it. We are going down with sad speed, little time to save our souls, little time to cry for help. This is our mortal life. But the Church arrests it. The Sacraments arrest it. In the Sacrament of the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ "are verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful."⁴ They save our bodies and souls from time, and preserve both of them "unto everlasting life."⁵ They make us one with Him, who is not subject unto time, and make Him mysteriously one with us, Who wears our nature on Him now. That Body and Blood are through faith, "by the operation of the Holy Ghost," so "wrought in the *souls* of the faithful," that "their souls live to eternal life," and their "*bodies* win a resurrection to immortality."⁶ Thus then, by her priestly succession, and her two chief mysteries of Baptism and the Eucharist, is the Church Catholic continually helping us against time, staying its plague, and putting limits to its wasting.

The observation of the Church Calendar, and the putting our lives under it, will continually disclose to us meanings and uses and singular fitnesses for our spiritual wants, which we should never have conceived before, and which it is scarcely possible to overvalue. It is the growth of

³ Baptismal Service.

⁴ Catechism.

⁵ Communion Service.

⁶ Homily on the right receiving of the Lord's Supper.

The Church Calendar, a Help against Time, by Frederick William Faber. (1840).

ages, of religious ages, ages of faith and obedience, and eminent heights of sanctity. It grew together under the hands of men who lived when the Church “dwelt at large;” men “who praised the Holy One Most High with words of glory, and with their whole heart sang songs; who set singers before the altar, and beautified their feasts, and set in order the solemn times until the end, that they might praise His holy name, and, that the temple might sound from morning.” It contains the old wisdom of western Christendom. It keeps somewhat of the spirit of her magnificent ritual.

It both embodies and imparts the catholic temper. Its being a help to us against time, and the world which is the dwelling-place of time, is only one of its offices; but it is an important one. Its alternations of vigil, fast, abstinence, and feast; its ordering of days, and seasons, and commemorations, take from time the power, alluded to before, of blunting our affections and making our feelings dull. The Birth, the Resurrection, or the Ascension of the Lord might indeed be, as they ought to be, familiar to us; but, if we celebrated them equally at all times, or specially at such times only as accident or the wayward movements of our own thoughts brought them uppermost, it is too probable we should think of them coldly and dully, or occasionally with too much excitement. The calm, stirring way in which they are brought round by the Church calendar, after due intervals and ritual preparations, affects us very differently, and much more deeply. Holy seasons are then like so many low, invisible, but strong pulsations upon the spirit, re-awakening, prolonging, and carrying forward the distinct note of joy and sorrow proper to each, without hurry, without intermingling of sounds, making the heart as it were the dwelling-place of a perpetual echo from voices sounding in heaven: “There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification.”⁷

Besides which, the modest, dutiful observance of the Church calendar has more to do with the soundness and harmony of our belief than would at first sight appear. Many a doctrine and holy truth has too much faded out of men’s minds from neglecting the seasons when the Church calls us to meditate upon them, and praise God for them. Many a doctrine, where it has not faded in the mind, has lost its proper place, and been disadjusted, from the same neglect; and so a wrong been done to the uncorrupt creed of the Church. The Christian Sunday has with many lost its free, joyous, evangelical character, and passed into the dull, solemnity of the Jewish Sabbath, because humiliation and deep sorrow for sin must come some time, and they have forgotten that the Church has appointed Friday for it. Thus men, in trying to be over-spiritual, have come to Judaize. The doctrine of angels and communion with the dead, the awfulness of the priestly office,

⁷ 1 Cor. xiv. 10.

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and the like, are not in that place, in many minds, where they would be, if they observed, as it is really binding upon their consciences to do, St. Michael's and all Saints' Day, and the fasts of the Four Holy Seasons. The joy of Easter, and the doctrines connected therewith, would be both raised and deepened in us, did that queen of festivals come to all of us really, and not in almanacs only, at the end of the purifying days of Lent. But it is enough to point this out. To be catholic in faith, we must be ritual catholics: there is no other way.

THE END.