

## LETTER XXV.

*THAT this and the following letter were addressed to the same person is clear from their contents, especially from the commencement of Letter xxvi. Whether Studius and Irenaeus were two names of the same person, as the Benedictines suggest, or whether there is any error in either title, cannot be ascertained for certain. Is it not most probable that the name of Irenaeus, to whom a long series of letters follows, has been affixed to one immediately preceding them by mistake, and that we should put 'Studio' for 'Irenaeo' at the head of xxvi?*

*The letter deals briefly with the question which Studius, a layman apparently and a judge, puts to S. Ambrose, whether he did violence to his duty as a Christian in sentencing criminals to death. S. Ambrose replies that it is lawful, but recommends merciful dealing wherever possible, in hope of amendment of life.*

### AMBROSE TO STUDIUS.

I RECOGNIZE in your application to me a pure intention of mind, zeal for the faith, and fear of our Lord Jesus Christ. And indeed I should fear to reply to it, being checked on the one hand by the obligation of the trust committed to you for the maintenance of the laws, and on the other by claims of mercy and clemency, had you not in this matter the Apostle's authority that he who judgeth beareth not the sword in vain, for he is the avenger of God, upon him that doeth evil. <sup>138</sup>

2. But although you knew this, it was not without reason that you have thought fit to make the enquiry. **For some there are, although out of the pale of the Church <sup>139</sup>, who will not admit to the divine Mysteries those who have deemed it right to pass sentence of death on any man. Many too abstain of their own accord, and are commended, nor can we ourselves but praise them, although we so far observe the Apostle's rule as not to dare to refuse them Communion.**

3. You see therefore both what power your commission gives you, and also whither mercy would lead you; **you will be excused if you do it, and praised if you do it not. Should you feel unable to do it, and are unwilling to afflict 183the criminal by the horrors of a dungeon, I shall, as a priest, the more commend you.** For it may well be that when the cause is heard, the criminal may be reserved for judgment, who afterwards may ask for pardon for himself, or at any rate may suffer what is called mild confinement in prison. **Even heathen are, I know, wont to boast that they have borne back their axes from their provincial government unrestored by blood. And if heathen do this what ought Christians to do?**

4. But **in all these matters let our Saviour's answer suffice for you.** The Jews apprehended an adulteress and brought her to the Saviour, with the insidious intent that if He were to acquit her He might seem to destroy the law, though He had said, *I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil the law,* <sup>140</sup> and on the other hand, were He to condemn her, He might seem to be acting against the purpose of His coming. Wherefore the Lord Jesus, foreseeing this, stooped down and wrote upon the earth. And what did He write but that word of the prophet, *O Earth, Earth, Write these men deposed* <sup>141</sup>, <sup>142</sup> which is spoken of Jeconiah in the prophet Jeremiah.

5. When the Jews interrupt Him, their names are written in the earth, when the Christians draw near, the names of the faithful are written not on the earth but in heaven. For they who tempt their Father, and heap insult on the Author of salvation, are written on the earth as cast off<sup>143</sup> by their Father. When the Jews interrupt Him, Jesus stoops His head, but not having where to lay His head, He raises it again, is about to give sentence, and says, *Let him that is without sin cast the first stone at her.*<sup>144</sup> *And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground.*<sup>145</sup>

6. When they heard this they began to go out one by one beginning at the eldest, and this either because they who had lived longest had committed most sins, or because, as being most sagacious, they were the first to comprehend the force of His sentence, and though they had come as the accusers of another's sins, began rather to lament their own. |184

7. So when they departed Jesus was left alone, and lifting up His head, He said to the woman, *Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee, go, and sin no more.*<sup>146</sup> Being the Redemption, He refuses to condemn her, being the Life He restores her, being the Fountain He washes her. **And since Jesus, when He stoops down stoops that He may raise up the fallen, He says, as the Absolver of sins, *Neither do I condemn thee.***

**8. Here is an example for you to follow, for it may be that there is hope of amendment for this guilty person; if he be yet unbaptized, that he may receive remission, if baptized that he may do penance<sup>147</sup>, and offer up his body for Christ. See how many roads there are to salvation!**

**9. This is why our ancestors thought it better to be indulgent towards Judges; that by the terror of their sword the madness of crime should be repressed, and no encouragement given to it. For if Communion were denied to Judges, it would seem like a retribution on their punishment of the wicked. Our ancestors wished then that their clemency should proceed from their own free-will and forbearance, rather than from any legal necessity.** Farewell, and love us, as we on our part love you.

## LETTER XXVI.

THAT this letter is addressed to the same person as the preceding, in spite of the discrepancy in the address, is clear from the first sentence (See Introd. to xxv.). It resumes the subject, and dwells in detail on the example of our Lord's dealing with the woman taken in adultery.

### AMBROSE TO IRENAEUS. [STUDIUS?]

1. **ALTHOUGH** in my previous letter I have resolved the question which you proposed to me, I will not refuse your |185 request, my son, that I would somewhat more fully state and express my meaning.

2. **Much agitated has ever been the question, and very famous this acquittal of that woman who in the Gospel according to John was brought to Christ accused of adultery.** The stratagem which the equivocating Jews devised was this, that in case of the Lord Jesus acquitting her contrary to the Law, His sentence might be convicted of being at variance with the Law, but

if she were to be condemned according to the Law, the Grace of Christ might seem to be made void.

3. And still more warm has the discussion become, since the time that bishops <sup>148</sup> have begun to accuse those guilty of the most heinous crimes before the public tribunals, and some even to urge them to the use of the sword and of capital punishment, while others again approve of such kind of accusations and of blood-stained triumphs of the priesthood. For those men say just the same as did the Jews, that the guilty ought to be punished by the public laws, and therefore that they ought also to be accused by the priests before the public tribunals, who, they assert, ought to be punished according to the laws. The case is the same, though the number is less, that is to say, the question as to judgment is similar, the odium of the punishment is dissimilar. Christ would not permit one woman to be punished according to the Law; they assert that too small a number has been punished.

4. But in what place does Christ give this decision? For He generally vouchsafed to adapt His discourses to the character of the place wherein He was teaching His disciples <sup>149</sup>. For instance while walking in the porch of Solomon, that is, of the Wise man, He said, *I and My Father are One*; and in God's Temple He said, *My doctrine is not Mine, but His that sent Me.* <sup>150</sup> It was in the Temple also that He gave the sentence of which we now speak, for in the verse following it is thus written, *These words spake Jesus in the treasury, as He taught in the Temple, and no man laid hands on Him.* <sup>151</sup> What is the Treasury? It is the place of offering for the faithful, the bank of the poor, the refuge of the needy, near which Christ sat, when, according to Luke, He declared that the widow's two mites were to be preferred to the gifts of the rich, thus bearing Divine testimony to a zealous and cordial charity as preferable to the offerings of an affluent munificence. <sup>152</sup>

5. Now let us consider what He Who passed such a judgment as this contributed when sitting near the Treasury, for not without a purpose did He prefer the woman who threw in two mites. Precious was her poverty, and rich in the mystery of faith. These are the same two pieces of money which the Samaritan in the Gospel left with the host in order to cure the wounds of the man who had fallen among thieves. <sup>153</sup> So too this woman, outwardly a widow, but mystically representing the Church, thought it right to cast into the sacred Treasury this gift whereby the wounds of the poor might be healed and the hunger of the strangers satisfied.

6. Now then it behoves you spiritually to consider what Christ bestows; <sup>154</sup> for He distributed among the people silver tried by the fire of the heavenly oracles, and to the desires of the people He told out money stamped with the Royal image. No one could give more than He Who gave all. He satisfied the hungry, He replenished the needy, He enlightened the blind, **He redeemed the captives**, He raised the palsied, He restored the dead, nay, what is more, **He gave absolution to the guilty and forgave their sins.** These are the two pence which the Church cast in, after having received them from Christ. And what are the two pence but the price of the New and Old Testament? The price of the Scripture is our faith, for it is according to the intelligence and will of each that what we read therein is valued. So then the remission of sins is the price of both Testaments, and is announced in type by the Lamb, and accomplished in verity by Christ.

7. You understand therefore that the purification of seven days<sup>155</sup> brought with it also the purification of three days.<sup>156</sup> The purification of seven days is according to the |187 Law, which, under the semblance of the sabbath that now is, announced a spiritual sabbath; the purification of three days is according to Grace, and is sealed by the witness of the Gospel, for the Lord rose on the third day.<sup>157</sup> Where a penalty for sin is prescribed there also must penitence be, where remission of sins is accorded there follows Grace. Penitence precedes, Grace follows. So that there can neither be penitence without Grace, nor Grace without penitence, for penitence must first condemn sin, that Grace may abolish it. Wherefore John, fulfilling the type of the Law, baptized unto repentance,<sup>158</sup> Christ unto Grace.

8. Now the seventh day denotes the mystery of the Law, the eighth that of the Resurrection, as you have in Ecclesiastes, *Give a portion to seven and also to eight.*<sup>159</sup> In the prophet Hosea also you have read that it was said to him, *Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms for fifteen pieces of silver,*<sup>160</sup> seeing that by the double price of the Old and New Testament, that is, by the full price of faith, that woman is hired who was attended by a vagrant and licentious train of sojourners.

9. *And I bought her to me,* saith the prophet,<sup>161</sup> *for fifteen pieces of silver, and for an homer of barley, and an half homer of barley and a measure<sup>162</sup> of wine<sup>163</sup>.* By barley is signified that the imperfect are called to the Faith that they may be made perfect, by the homer is understood a full measure, by the half homer a half measure. The full measure is the Gospel, the half measure is the Law, the fulfilment of which is the New Testament. Thus the Lord Himself saith, *I am not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfil.*<sup>164</sup>

10. Nor is it without meaning that we read in the Psalms of David of fifteen degrees, and that the sun had risen fifteen degrees, when Hezekiah the righteous king received a new supply of life.<sup>165</sup> Hereby was signified the coming of the Sun of Righteousness, Who was about to enlighten by His presence these fifteen steps of the Old and New Testament whereby our faith mounts up to life eternal.<sup>166</sup> And |188 this leads me to believe that what was read this day from the Apostle of his remaining fifteen days with Peter has a mystical meaning;<sup>167</sup> for it appears that while the holy Apostles held various discourses among themselves upon the interpretation of the Divine Scriptures a full and bright light fell upon them, and the shades of ignorance were dispersed. But now let us come to the absolution of the woman taken in adultery.

11. A woman accused of adultery was brought by the Scribes and Pharisees to the Lord Jesus with the malicious intent, that, if He was to acquit her, He might seem to annul the Law, if He condemned her, that He might seem to have changed the purpose of His coming, since He came to remit the sins of all men. To the same purport He said above<sup>168</sup>, *I judge no man.* So when they brought her they said, *This woman was taken in adultery, in the very act; now Moses in the Law commanded us that such should be stoned, but what sayest Thou?*<sup>169</sup>

12. While they were saying this, Jesus stooped down and wrote with His finger on the ground. And as they waited for His answer, **He lifted up His head and said, *He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.***<sup>170</sup> **What can be more Divine than this sentence, that he should punish sins who is himself free from sin?** For how can we endure one who takes vengeance on guilt in another and excuses it in himself? When a man condemns in another what he commits himself, does he not rather pronounce his own condemnation?

13. Thus He spake, and wrote upon the ground. What then did He write? This, *Thou beholdest the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye.*<sup>171</sup> For lust is like a mote, it is quickly kindled, quickly consumed; the sacrilegious perfidy which led the Jews to deny the Author of their salvation declared the magnitude of their crime.

14. He wrote upon the ground with the finger with which He had written the Law. Sinners' names are written in the earth, those of the just in heaven,<sup>172</sup> as He said to |189 His disciples, *Rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.*<sup>173</sup> And He wrote a second time, that you may know that the Jews were condemned by both Testaments.

15. When they heard these words they went out one after another, beginning at the eldest, and sat down thinking upon themselves. *And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. It is well said that they went out who chose not to be with Christ. Without is the letter, within are the mysteries.* For in the Divine lessons they sought, as it were, after the leaves of trees, and not after the fruit; they lived in the shadow of the Law, and could not discern the Sun of Righteousness.

16. Finally, when they departed Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. Jesus about to remit sin remains alone, as He says Himself, *Behold the hour cometh, yea is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave Me alone;*<sup>174</sup> for it was no messenger, no herald, but the Lord Himself Who saved His people. He remains alone, because in the remission of sins no man can participate with Christ. This is the gift of Christ alone, *Who took away the sins of the world.*<sup>175</sup> The woman too was counted worthy to be absolved, seeing that, on the departure of the Jews, she remained alone with Jesus.

17. Then Jesus lifted up His head, and said to the woman, *Where are those thine accusers, hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee, go, and sin no more.*<sup>176</sup> **See, O reader, these Divine mysteries, and the mercy of Christ. When the woman is accused, Christ stoops His head, but when the accusers retire He lifts it up again; thus we see that He would have no man condemned, but all absolved.**

18. By the words, *Hath no man condemned thee?* He briefly overthrows all the quibbles of heretics, who say that Christ knows not the day of judgment. He Who says, *But to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give,* says also in this place, *Hath no man condemned thee?*<sup>177</sup> How is it that He asks concerning that which He saw? It is for our sakes that He asks, that we might know the |190 woman was not condemned. And such is the wont of the human mind, often to enquire concerning that which we know. The woman too answered, *No man, Lord,* that is to say, *Who can condemn when Thou dost not condemn? Who can punish another under such a condition as Thou hast attached to his sentence?*

19. The Lord answered her, *Neither do I condemn thee. Observe how He has modified His own sentence;* that the Jews might have no ground of allegation against Him for the absolution of the woman, but by complaining only draw down a charge upon themselves; for the woman is dismissed not absolved; and this because there was no accuser, not because her innocence was established. How then could they complain, who were the first to abandon the prosecution of the crime, and the execution of the punishment?

20. Then He said to her who had gone astray, **Go, and sin no more. He reformed the criminal, He did not absolve the sin.** Faults are condemned by a severer sentence, whenever a man hates his own sin, and begins the condemnation of it in himself. **When the criminal is put to death, it is the person rather than the transgression which is punished, but when the transgression is forsaken, the absolution of the person becomes the punishment of the sin. What is the meaning then of, Go, and sin no more? It is this; Since Christ hath redeemed thee, suffer thyself to be corrected by Grace; punishment would not reform but only afflict thee.**  
Farewell, my son, and love me as a son, for I on my part love you as a parent.

### Notes

138. Rom.xiii. 4.

139. <sup>a</sup> The Benedictine Editors consider him to be referring to the Novatians.

140. S. Matt. v. 27.

141. Jer. xxii. 29, 30.

142. <sup>b</sup> S. Ambrose's Latin is 'scribe hoc viros abdicates.' The Vulg. has 'scribe virum istum sterilem.' The LXX.  $\gamma\rho\alpha\ \tau\omicron\ \nu\ \alpha\ \nu\delta\rho\alpha\ \tau\omicron\ \nu\ \epsilon\omicron\kappa\kappa\ \&\ \rho\upsilon\kappa\tau\omicron\ \nu.$

143. <sup>1</sup> abdicati

144. S. John viii. 8.

145. ib. 9.

146. S. John viii. 10, 11.

147. <sup>c</sup> Fleury remarks on this, 'We must remember that the canonical penances inflicted for great crimes were at that time so very severe, that they were equal to a rigorous punishment.'

148. <sup>a</sup> See note *g* on Letter xxiv.

149. <sup>b</sup> S. Ambrose makes the same statement again, De Spirit, in. 17. 'It is important then to notice *where* the Lord maintained this argument, for oft-times His oracles derive their value from the quality of the place where He was.'

150. S. John x. 30. ib. vii. 16.

151. Ib. viii. 20.

152. S. Luke xxi. 2.

153. ib. x. 35.

154. Ps. xi. 7.

155. Exod. xii. 3.

156. Lev. xii. 2.

157. S. Luke xxiv. 7.

158. S. Matt. iii. 11.

159. Eccles. xi. 2.

160. Hosea i. 2.

161. Ib. iii. 2.

162. <sup>1</sup> nevel.

163. <sup>c</sup> These words are not in the Heb. In LXX they take the place of the half-homer of barley,  $\gamma\omicron\mu\omicron\ \_r\ \kappa\rho\iota\eta\omega\ \sim\ n\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \ \nu\epsilon\ / \ \beta\epsilon\lambda\ \omicron\iota\ \iota\ \nu\omicron\upsilon.$  S. Ambrose combines both.

164. S. Matt. v. 17.

165. Isa. xxxviii. 8.

166. Mal. iv. 2.

167. Gal. i. 18.

**St. Ambrose of Milan, Letters (1881). pp. 137-213. Letters 21-30.**

168. <sup>d</sup> It was said just afterwards, if this story of the woman taken in adultery be in its right place, which is doubtful.

169. S. John viii. 15. Ib. 4, 5. Lev. xx. 8.

170. v. 7.

171. S. Matt. vii. 3.

172. Jer. xvii. 13.

173. S. Luke x. 20.

174. S. John xvi. 32.

175. Ib. i. 29.

176. Ib. viii. 10.

177. S. Matt. xx. 23.

178. Exod. viii. 26.

179. Gen. xlvi. 34.

180. <sup>a</sup> Leah means 'wearied,' and the name is supposed to refer to her 'tenderness' or weakness of eyes. (Gen. xxix. 16). S. Ambrose gives a mistaken meaning to the name Rachel, which really means 'ewe.'

181. Gen. xxxi. 14, 15.

182. Ib. v. 16.

183. Isa. liv. 17.

184. Ps. cxix. 57. Ib. 111.

185. Ps. xviii. 26.

186. Gen. xxxi. 14.

187. Gen. xxxi, 27.

188. Ps. xii. 7.

189. Gen. xxx. 32.

190. Ib. xxxiv. 25. sqq. Ib. xxxii. 24.