Rufinus' Apology in Defence of Himself

Rufinus of Aquileia (c. AD 345–411)

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Sent to Anastasius, Bishop of the City of Rome

This document was called forth by accusations against Rufinus made, soon after his accession, to Anastasius, who held the Roman see from 399 to 401. The authority of the Roman Popes at this time was not what it afterwards became, and it is improbable that Anastasius should have summoned Rufinus, as some suppose him to have done, from Aquileia, where he was living on confidential terms with the Bishop Chromatius, to come to Rome to answer a formal accusation or to be judged by him But since Rome was the centre of information, a Christian would not wish to be ill-thought of by its Bishop. Those who accused Rufinus were the friends of Jerome at Rome, especially the noble widow Marcella and the Senator Pammachius. They had endeavoured to gain some condemnation of Rufinus from Siricius before his death in November 398; but Siricius befriended Rufinus ("his simplicity was imposed on," according to Jerome) On the election of Anastasius, however, in 399, they accused Rufinus of having, by his translation of Origen's Peri 'Arxwn introduced heresy into the Roman church. Jerome thus speaks Marcella, Ep. cxxvii. 10. "She was the cause of the condemnation of the heretics: she brought witnesses who had been at a former time under their instruction, and thus imbued with error and heresy; she showed how many there were who had been deceived; she had the volumes of the Peri 'Arxwn brought in, and pointed out the alterations which the Scorpion had made in them:

till at last letters were written, and that more than once, summoning the heretics to come and defend themselves, but they did not dare to come. So great was the force of conviction brought to bear on them that, to prevent their heresy being exposed in their presence, they chose to stay away and be condemned. From the letter of Anastasius to John of Jerusalem about Rufinus we gather that, while he strongly disapproved the translation of Origen, he left Rufinus himself to his own conscience, and did not care to know what had become of him. The letter of Rufinus, though called an Apology, bears no trace of being an answer to a summons or judgment of the Pontiff, but merely a reply to statements which were likely to prejudice him in the Pontiff's opinion. The year in which the Apology was written was 400 a.d.

1. It has been brought to my knowledge that certain persons, in the course of a controversy which they have been raising in your Holiness' jurisdiction on matters of faith or on other points, have made mention of my name. I venture to believe that your Holiness, who have been trained from your infancy in the strict principles of the Church, has refused to listen to any calumnies which may have been directed against an absent person, and one who has been favourably known to you as united with you in the faith and love of God. Nevertheless, since I hear it reported that my reputation has been attacked, I have thought it right to make my position clear to your Holiness in writing. It was impossible for me to do this in person. I have just returned to my family after an absence of nearly 30 years; and it would have been harsh and almost inhuman to come away again so soon from those whom I had been so late in revisiting. The labour also of my long journey has left me too weak to begin the journey again. My object in this letter is not to remove some stain of suspicion from your mind, which I regard as a holy place, as a kind of divine sanctuary which does not admit any evil thing. Rather, I desire that the confession I am about to make to you may be like a stick placed in your hands to drive away any envious persons who may be barking like dogs against me.

2. My faith, indeed, was sufficiently proved when the heretics persecuted me. I was at that time sojourning in the church of Alexandria, and underwent imprisonment and exile which was then the penalty of faithfulness; yet for the sake of any who may wish to put my faith to the test, or to hear and learn what it is I will declare it. I believe that the Trinity is of one nature and godhead, of one and the same power and substance; so that between the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost there is no diversity at all, except that the one is the Father, the second the Son, and the third the Holy Ghost. There is a Trinity of real and living Persons, a unity of nature and substance. 3. I also confess that the Son of God has in these last days been born of the Virgin and the Holy Spirit: that he has taken upon him our natural human flesh and soul; that in this he suffered and was buried and rose again from the dead; that the flesh in which he rose was that same flesh which had been laid in the sepulchre; and that in this same flesh, together with the soul, he ascended into heaven after his resurrection: from whence we look for his coming to judge the quick and the dead.

4. But, further, as to the resurrection of our own flesh, I believe that it will be in its integrity and perfection; it will be this very flesh in which we now live. We do not hold, as is slanderously reported by some men, that another flesh will rise instead of this; but this very flesh, without the loss of a single member, without the cutting off of any single part of the body; none whatever of all its properties will be absent except its corruptibility. It is this which is promised by the holy Apostle concerning the body: It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. This is the doctrine which has been handed down to me by those from whom I received holy baptism in the Church of Aquileia; and I think that it is the same which the Apostolic See has by long usage handed down and taught.

5. I affirm, moreover, a judgment to come, in which judgment every man is to receive the due meed of his bodily life, according to that which he has done, whether good or evil. And, if in the case of men the reward is to be according to their works, how much more will this be so in the case of the devil, who is the universal cause of sin? Of the devil himself our belief is that which is written in the Gospel, namely, that both he and all his angels, will receive as their portion the eternal fire, and with him those who do his works, that is, who become the accusers of their brethren. If then any one denies that the devil is to be subjected to the eternal fires, may he have his part with him in the eternal fire, so that he may know by experience the fact which he now denies.

6. I am next informed that some stir has been made on the question of the nature of the soul. Whether complaints on a matter of this kind ought to be entertained instead of being put aside, you must yourself decide. If, however, you desire to know my opinion on the subject, I will state it frankly. I have read a great many writers on this question, and I find that they express divers opinions. Some of those whom I have read hold that the soul is infused together with the material body through the channel of the human seed; and of this they give such proofs as they can. I think that this was the opinion of Tertullian or Lactantius among the Latins, perhaps also of a few others. Others assert that God is every day making new souls, and infusing them into the bodies which have been framed in the womb; while others again believe that the souls were all made long ago, when God made all things of nothing, and that all that he now does is to plant out each soul in its body as it seems good to him. This is the opinion of Origen, and of some others of the Greeks. For myself, I declare in the presence of God that, after reading each of these opinions, I am up to the present moment unable to hold any of them as certain and absolute; the determination of the truth in this question I leave to God and to any to whom it shall please him to reveal it. My profession on this point is therefore, first, that these several opinions are those which I have found in books, but, secondly, that I as yet remain in ignorance on the subject, except so far as this, that the Church delivers it as an article of faith that God is the creator of souls as well as of bodies.

7. Now as to another matter. I am told that objections have been raised against me because, forsooth, at the request of some of my brethren, I translated certain works of Origen from Greek into Latin. I suppose that every one sees that it is only through ill will that this is made a matter of blame. For, if there is any offensive statement in the author, why is this to be twisted into a fault of the translator? I was asked to exhibit in Latin what stands written in the Greek text; and I did nothing more than fit the Latin words to the Greek ideas. If, therefore, there is anything to praise in these ideas, the praise does not belong to me; and similarly as to anything to which blame may attach. I admit that I put something of my own into the work; as I stated in my Preface, I used my own discretion in cutting out not a few passages; but only those as to which I had come to suspect that the thing had not been so stated by Origen himself; and the statement appeared to me in these cases to have been inserted by others, because in other places I had found the author state the matter in a catholic sense.

I entreat you therefore, holy, venerable and saintly father, not to permit a storm of ill will to be raised against me because of this, nor to sanction the employment of partisanship and of calumny-weapons which ought never to be used in the Church of God. Where can simple faith and innocence be safe if they are not protected in the Church? I am not a defender or a champion of Origen; nor am I the first who has translated his works. Others before me had done the very same thing, and I did it, the last of many, at the request of my brethren. If an order is to be given that such translations are not to be made, such an order holds good for the future, not the past; but if those are to be blamed who have made these translations before any such order was given, the blame must begin with those who took the first step.

8. As for me, I declare in Christ's name that I never held, nor ever will hold, any other faith but that which I have set forth above, that is, the faith which is held by the Church of Rome, by that of Alexandria, and by my own church of Aquileia; and which is also preached at Jerusalem; and if there is any one who believes otherwise, whoever he may be, let him be Anathema. But those who through mere ill will and malice engender dissensions and offences among their brethren, and cause them to stumble, shall give account of it in the day of judgment.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.