

CHAPTER V.

THE AGGRESSIVE SOCIAL ACTION OF THE
CHURCH—*continued.*

A NEW era dawned on both the Church and the Empire, bringing with it new social conditions, when the Roman Cæsar, the founder of Constantinople, recognised Christianity as the religion of the State. We have no occasion to discuss the character, and the policy, imperial and ecclesiastical, of Constantine. The story of the six centuries which followed the peace that he proclaimed is eventful and troubled. But it is outwith the limits of our review to do more than glance at these periods of storm and stress, of dissolution and reconstruction. The object aimed at in this chapter is merely an illustration of the aggressive action of the Church on the social life of humanity. And we revert to the times between the fourth and the tenth century on whose threshold we take our stand, only in so

far as they shed light on the Christian civilisation which from this vantage-ground we survey, tracing thence some features of the bent given to public sentiment and life, prior to that mighty moral upheaval which has made the sixteenth century one of the outstanding epochs in the world's history.

I.

What was the religious and social position of the world and the Church at the beginning of the tenth century? To understand this, we must glance at the periods anterior to it, especially at those usually designated "The Dark Ages."

From the day of Constantine's peace, with the exception of a brief period, the Roman Empire was a Christian Power, and the beneficent effect of the change was marked in the spirit of legislation. The Code and Institutes of Justinian are the sign of the immense advance which had been made in the policy, and, indeed, in the whole conception, of government.¹ A new consciousness of the worth of life, of the rights of the individual, of the honour due to woman, of

¹ "The grand legacy of Roman law as reformed by Christian ideas."

the duty of protecting the weak, and of promoting public morality, had been developed. The Church had given the State new social ideals, and had created a higher platform of citizenship. "Christianity," says Mommsen, "was the friend, not the enemy, of the Empire."¹ The Empire became stronger when the emperors became Christian. It contained in it the seeds of disruption, but the germination of these seeds was delayed by the power of religion. Faith in God was a more potent bond of cohesion than the deification of the emperor. And Christian worship, disciplines, and benevolences, softened manners, and, to some extent, improved morals. The State gained; it may be that the Church lost. If the former received a deeper force from the latter, possibly the latter appropriated too much from the former. There were better emperors; there may have been worse bishops. Though the Church christened, it failed to regenerate, the Empire.

We observe with interest the influence of the missionary efforts of the Church in a direction which was destined to affect the Empire. The Gospel had penetrated at an early date into the regions which were inhabited by hordes of barbarians, who hung like a dark cloud on the

¹ Quoted in Ramsay's 'Church in the Roman Empire,' p. 193.

frontier of the Roman State. It found its way into these regions through Christian captives. A bishop of the Goths attended the Council of Nicæa. In 341 Ulphilas was consecrated to labour among them. A sermon of Chrysostom, preached in 398, pointed to Goths, one of whom had addressed the congregation, as "the most savage race of men, but standing there together with the lambs of the Church."¹ Mission bands had travelled through the forests of Germany and introduced a civilisation concerning which it has been said that "if modern life has not decayed like ancient, and pure family life still supplies fresh forces to races a thousand years old, this is due above all to the teachings of Christ acting on German barbaric virtue."² Now the fruit of all this labour, as regarded from a social view-point, was apparent when Goth and Hun and Teuton found their opportunity in the condition of Rome—its aristocracy enervated by luxury, its population burdened by taxation, and a vast proportion of it sunk in slavery. The northern armies swept through the sunny plains of Italy and ravaged the Eternal City. But a double spell laid its arrest on them. They were awed by the indefinable sense of the majesty of

¹ Neander's Church History, vol. iii. p. 182.

² Gesta Christi, p. 119.

Rome, as that was evidenced to them in the splendour of its buildings, and the tokens of an opulence of life which contrasted with the rude simplicity of their Fatherlands. They were impressed still more by the Christian sanctuaries; and the obligations of the august name which they had been taught to adore disposed them to moderation, to respect women and children, and to recognise the sanctity of the places of Christian worship. No temple or church was desecrated, and none who claimed the protection of the Church were injured.

Associated as the Church was with the Empire, the lines of its development, as an organised social force, were to some extent parallel to those of the Empire. As the latter power had absorbed nationalities and welded differences of race and government into a vast, though not entirely homogeneous, unity, so the Church gradually reduced ancient local independences, crushed out diversities which seemed to menace the solidarity of the system, and stiffened rule and ritual into hard uniformities. The arrangements of the Empire were largely adopted by the Church. The provinces, with their proconsuls or procurators, were frequently accepted as dioceses whose chief officers were the bishops. In Roman administration, above the proconsuls, there were

dignitaries of patrician rank, the keystone of the political edifice being the emperor. Similarly in the Church, above the bishops there were archbishops, metropolitans, patriarchs, the supreme elevation being, after a time, accorded to the Bishop of Rome. His claims were supported by the prestige of the great city, by the sacredness which was attached to the chair of St Peter, by the need of a head in the complexity of interests which the advances of the Church caused, and, it must be added, by unblushing mendacities.¹ When, in 476, the boy, Romulus Augustus, was compelled to resign the shadow of Roman sovereignty, the way was cleared for the indisputable supremacy of the Roman See. The bishop now took the place of the heathen Pontifex Maximus. The emperor used to provide alimentations for the poor, the bishop henceforth did so. For three centuries, the see "sat as the ghost of the deceased Empire crowned on the grave thereof."

Thus the Papacy assumed the most prominent place in the organisation of the Church. But, in occupying the standpoint which the beginning of

¹ *E.g.*, the forgery of the Donation of Constantine, "whereby it was pretended that power over Italy and the West had been granted by the first Christian emperor to Pope Sylvester and his successors in the chair of St Peter."—*The Holy Roman Empire*, p. 40.

the tenth century presents, we are reminded of great developments, great struggles that synchronised with this gradual assumption, and that impressed themselves on the political and religious condition of Europe. The Frankish-Roman Empire had waxed and had waned. It originated in the felt necessity of a strong arm to protect the Church and Italy from external pressures and from internal dissensions. Pepin, son of Charles Martel, was, in 754, invested with the purple of patrician of the Romans—"the first of a long line of Teutonic kings who were to find the love of Rome more deadly than her hate." The mystic medieval Roman Empire was fully inaugurated when Charles, Pepin's son, better known as Charlemagne, kneeling before the altar of St Peter's, received from the Pope the crown of the Cæsars.

There is no occasion to follow the course of events, as that was shaped by this attempt to unite Western Christendom. Charlemagne, *mag-nus et orthodoxus Imperator*, bequeathed a diadem which sat uneasily on the brow of his successors, and the benefits of which, to the nations of the West, were more than doubtful. "The epoch of the Carolingian dynasty," says Mr Hallam, "was the worst that Europe has ever known, and the social misery of that epoch extended into

generations following.”¹ It is more relevant to our present purpose to note the determination of the Church’s policy which coincides with this epoch.

In the earlier part of the new *régime*, the theory was that the spiritual and the temporal monarchies were co-ordinate, the spiritual ruling the souls, the temporal the bodies, of men. But, on the principle that the soul is superior to the body, the Church, at a later date, asserted a sovereignty superior to that of the emperor—an assertion which reached its climax in the pontificate of Hildebrand (Gregory VII.) The theory no longer was the union of Church and State, but the ascendancy of the Church over the State. The first duty of the State was to serve the Church by repressing schism, by making the judgments and acts of the Pope effectual, and by rendering obedience in all things; and the artillery by which the Church enforced its behests consisted in the terrors of excommunication and the release of subjects from allegiance to their rulers. An ecclesiastical despotism

¹ The State of Europe during the Middle Ages, p. 23. It is right, however, to say that it was the Church that, even in the dark ages, kept learning alive, and that rendered possible the institution of the schools of Charlemagne (under Alcuin of York), and thus secured to some extent both a learned clergy and an educated laity.

that reached its height between the tenth and the twelfth centuries is the most prominent feature in the external estate of the Church.

II.

Surveying the scene, then, as it is presented in the ages loosely called the Middle Ages, the situation is briefly this: The fusion of nations has resulted in confusion, which there is no power strong enough to remedy. Not the old Empire, whose seat had been transferred to the Bosphorus, for it was too weak even to control its centre. Not the Holy Roman Empire, which was parting from its mystical ideal. The ancient barbarian unities had been shaken, but they had not been replaced by a higher unity. New combinations were called for, but the answer to the call was slow to come. The old had died, but it had died hard; the new had a difficult birth, and a still more difficult growth. And the Church, which should have been the unifying force, shared in the general corruption. Outwardly, it was a magnificent and compacted system. And in the interests of civilisation this was good. Whatever of gentleness, of culture, of higher life, was in these ages—and there was much—was shielded from violence by it, and was

nourished within it. But it failed to educate a pure public morality, as it should have done; and this for two reasons. First, in borrowing the clothes of the Empire, it exchanged the imperialism of truth for that of worldly power. And second, in assimilating to its discipline fragments of the paganisms which it conquered, it appropriated not only things picturesque, venerable through association with national histories, and in themselves harmless, but other elements that were foreign to the simplicity in Christ and that bred superstitions. In respect of its action on the deeper life of man, all that was great and powerful in it issued from the elect spirits—the saints, missionaries, and learned theologians and doctors like Aquinas—who, with a few exceptions, had no share in the guidance of its outward policies. On the occasion of a papal jubilee heaps of silver and gold were borne into the treasury of St Peter. The Pope said to Thomas Aquinas, “Peter could not say now, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’” “No,” replied Thomas; “No, your Blessedness, nor could he say now, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.’”¹

These middle ages were full of contradictions.

¹ Gore, *The Mission of the Church*, p. 169.

We call them dark; and so, in some respects, they were: but in them universities were founded, many lamps were kindled by fire from Rome, if not from heaven, and schoolmen and scholars, whose pedantries must not render us forgetful of their wonderful learning, traversed the Continent propounding theses, holding disputations, laboriously writing treatises.¹ We think of them as disordered; and so they were: but in them cathedrals, and abbeys, and churches, were reared whose architecture is the admiration of our day. We look on them as lacking in moral cohesion and social organisation; and so they were: but their guilds and fraternities, though impossible in later periods, regulated trades, established relations of protection and sympathy between employers and employed, and were surrounded by things beautiful and picturesque. We speak of them as rough and rude; and so they were: but the reverence for gentleness and humility was widely spread, woman was elevated, the care of the orphan and

¹ Between the tenth and the twelfth centuries there was a gradual awakening of intellect. To this the Crusades, and, towards the close of the time, the rediscovery of the whole writings of Aristotle, contributed. From the thirteenth century to the Renaissance the scholastic philosophy dominated. The doctors were supreme. The decline of scholasticism developed a spirit of freedom, and thus prepared the way for the Reformation.

the widow was secured by the *noblesse oblige* of chivalry. A spiritual, poetical element was infused into social life, and showed itself frequently in unexpected ways. They were heroic ages, on whose canvas are thrown the figures of mighty men, men of renown. They were ages of enthusiasm, as the Crusades abundantly testify. They were ages of faith. They were ages of art. In respect of social condition, though the mass of the people was exploited, mankind was slowly moving towards emancipations. From the tenth century, the manumission of serfs became ever more frequent, "the principal cause," writes an old chronicler, "being piety and love towards God." One of the Mendicant Orders established in the thirteenth century—the Franciscan—had for its object the tending of the poor.

Regarding the social fabric in general, the most characteristic feature of the centuries we are reviewing was the system of Feudalism. Possibly, the root of this system was the Roman conception of the *patronus*. Be this as it may, under the Frankish-Roman Empire, it spread and dominated over Europe, gradually displacing older German organisations and other codes. In the first instance, feudalism was not so much a political as a social development.

In times when the executive was too weak to make the State in its unity powerful in all districts and over all elements of the nationality, it was a rough-and-ready way of ensuring a kind of order, a semblance at least of protection based on the principle of reciprocal service. From the ninth until the fourteenth century, it grew and prevailed; and in its growth it assumed such proportions, and ramified in so many directions, that a description of it is impossible. Let it suffice to say that the soil of the country was held on the two conditions—that the owner was responsible for the people resident on or cultivating the soil, they, on the other hand, being bound to follow his lead in war, and to render obedience to him as their lord; and, further, that the lord or owner was under obligation to give a like obedience to his suzerain, who, in his turn, extended authority and protection to him. Over all suzerains or superiors was the sovereign—the supreme and paramount lord, the pulse of the machine, to whose call the feudal chiefs, in every degree, were under covenant to respond. Thus, as the years passed, there arose territorial aristocracies and squirearchies, with many gradations, each grade reproducing the essential idea of the system, and forming a ruling class so widely spread that a

kingdom represented an indefinite number of small kingships, the monarch being, not so much the one king and judge, as the head of all the petty sovereignties, he their chief and they his vassals. It is easy to see what scope for the exercise of both virtues and vices such a state of matters allowed. The good despot could do much for those under his care, though, if he were in the inferior ranks, his efforts might be neutralised by the action of those above him. The ambitious and unscrupulous kept vassals and serfs alike in a thralldom which cut off all occasions and even desires of social or material improvement. The institution, as a whole, prevented social life from "making increase to the edifying of itself in love." Justice was a baron's affair. The uses and wonts of a rougher and earlier day had disappeared. The superior of a domain had or took jurisdiction in it, even to the extent of inflicting capital punishment. It was not until the middle of the fourteenth century that the majesty of imperial law asserted itself.

The Church fulfilled a mission of benevolence to those whom feudality oppressed. It was so far under the yoke, for its prelates and abbots were feudal lords. But its influence was, on the whole and vigorously, on the side of the villeins or serfs.

In the estates which were held as its patrimonies or baronies, the conditions of tenure were more favourable to liberty and enterprise than in the estates of barons or lairds obliged to do military service. The bishop's riggs, or the abbey lands, often presented a marked contrast to the riggs and lands of the lay neighbours. In more direct ways, however, Christianity interposed. The condition of the *Theous* or serfs was deplorable. They were fixed to the soil so that they could not remove from it. They were the absolute property of their master. "They were not reckoned among the people." The Church protested and laboured against this servitude. "That Christians should be removed from it," the Council of Chalons in the middle of the seventh century declared to be "the demand of the highest pity and religion."¹ A historian of the middle ages asserts, as has already been noticed, that *pietas et caritas ergo Deum* was the more frequent cause of the liberation of serfs; and the forms of manumission witness to the penetration of society by a Christian spirit. The Crusades aided the movement. They realised the ideal of a Christian commonwealth in which high and low were equally sharers. The enthusiasm which they inspired tended to break down the barriers between class and class.

¹ *Gesta Christi*, p. 128.

Feudal chiefs, before joining in the crusade, released their slaves. How far Christian sentiment operated in diffusing the sentiments of humanity is evidenced in a proclamation of the Emperor Sigismund towards the middle of the fifteenth century. "It is an unheard-of thing," so runs the proclamation, "that in the holy Christianity one should be so proud as to say to a man, 'Thou art mine.' He is against Christ, and all the commandments of God are lost on him."

In the Latin Church (as distinguished from the Eastern), the most characteristic trend of the mediæval period was the expansion, followed by the decadence, of monachism. In this we recognise a spirit and a habit which were imported into the Church. Palestinian Essenism left its mark on some of Christ's disciples. But, ages before the day of Christ, the ascetic spirit was prevalent in the East. It came into Christianity, and it came to stay. It was fostered by the antagonism, which pious souls keenly felt, of a world that seemed to them to be lying in the wicked one. The cliffs and sandhills of Syria and Egypt were perforated by the cells of eremites, endeavouring, in solitary contemplation, to realise the peace for which they sought in vain in the haunts of men. And since man, even when ascetic, is a social animal, companies of Christians flying from

the world, and giving themselves wholly to God, were formed. Before the thirteenth century there were many orders of monks, including the order of St Benedict with all its branches. From the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, the Dominicans, with their subdivisions, were organised. Time would fail for even the most cursory account of the spread of the conventual system. The monastery and the convent were everywhere in evidence. They were regarded with special favour. Charlemagne called abbots the chivalry of his empire. Lands and gifts were lavishly bestowed on them. In the earlier half of the middle ages, all that was most devoted in the ranks of ecclesiastics was connected with them. The regular clergy—that is, the clergy under conventual rule—were, taken as a whole, superior in learning, zeal, and piety to the secular or parochial clergy.

Justice compels us to acknowledge the debt of Christian civilisation to the religious orders. The monastery was not merely a refuge for the indolent or the feeble or those who were weary of life. It was much more; it was a home for those who, under conditions of society that were unfavourable to the cultivation of piety, sought in it that opportunity of living religiously which they desired. It was, as the ministry of the Church through all the centuries was, an equal-

ising institution. All classes from the highest to the lowest found a place in the orders of St Benedict or St Dominic. The Regulars were the intermediaries between the rich and the poor. "The friendship of the poor," says St Bernard, "constitutes us the friends of kings, but the love of poverty makes kings of us."¹ If we ask, Who were the erudite men of the time? we find that a large majority, including Aquinas, Duns Scotus, &c., was composed of monks. The preachers, some of them mighty in eloquence, were monks. The great missionaries were monks. From the orders of Benedictines came those who laid the foundations of the Christian society in England, Germany, and Belgium. In days of fierce warfare and bloody feuds, the Regulars promoted the truces and peaces of God. They were friends of the people in their revolts from oppression: the monks of Cluny, for instance, rose against the abuses of feudalism. They were the engineers, the architects, the farmers, the builders of their generations. They undertook journeys through Europe, preaching Christian brotherhood in many lands. Even when the first love was lost, when wealth on the one hand and superstition on the other caused "the white to grow

¹ The Monks of the West, vol. i. p. 54.

murky," there were those of them of whom the world was not worthy, those to whom the word written concerning Benedict might be applied, "*Ipse Fundator placidæ quietis.*"¹

But—to quote the words of Count Montalembert, the panegyrist of the monks of the West—"there came a time when the abuse of monachism overpowered the law, when the exception eclipsed the rule," when "life ebbed away from the monastic foundations, not religious life only, but life of every kind."² Dante represents St Benedict himself as saying to the poet, who craves to look on his form "by no covering veiled"—

" My rule

Is left a profitless stain upon the leaves ;
The walls for abbey reared turned into dens ;
The cowls to sacks choked up with musty meal.
Foul usury doth not more lift itself
Against God's pleasure than that fruit which makes
The hearts of monks so wanton."³

The champions of monachism say that the houses should have been reformed and the orders reconstituted. But the reformer who had power to give effect to his plan did not appear. Instead of him was heard the sterner voice, "Cut down, why cumber they the ground?" "When," exclaimed Bossuet, "a religious order becomes

¹ The Monks of the West, vol. i. p. 87.

² Ibid., pp. 132, 142.

³ Paradiso, Canto 22.

inferior, it is no longer anything but a spiritual corpse and its own living tomb.”¹ As the era of Reformation dawned, the conventual fellowships were proved to be spiritual corpses, tombs, not nurseries, of life. And thus it fares with all attempts of men “to wind themselves too high for mortal man beneath the sky.” The social life which Christianity takes to its heart is a robust and hardy plant that needs the fresh free air of heaven, and the regulation, not the suppression, of the affections implanted in the heart. We feel that the swift witness against monachism was both stern and just, whilst at the same time we recognise that “if we follow the furrows which monastery and order have dug in history we shall find everywhere the traces of their beneficence.”²

The decline of the papacy may be dated from the fourteenth century. Its authority was weakened by flagrant scandals, by the removal of the papal court to Avignon and the residence of popes there for several decades, by the election of rival popes, the nominees of rival empires, and by the general deterioration of morals among the clergy. Other influences were also active. Europe was beginning to awake from a long and deep intellectual

¹ *The Monks of the West*, vol. i. p. 149.

² *Ibid.*, p. 163.

slumber. Classical learning revived. Individual minds were stirred. Preachers, keenly perceptive of the evils of their time, waxed bold. Associations, inspired by a more free and evangelical spirit than that of the orders, were originated, and their influence spread. As the fifteenth century advanced, the signs of a coming day of the Lord became more and more clear. That day came in the sixteenth century.

But here we approach the border-land of modern history, and this marks the limit of the present survey.

Our object has been to indicate some of the principles, features, and issues, of the aggressive action of the Church, as an institution with a definite social character and mission. We have followed its onward way through the storms which beset it in earlier days, and the confusions which resulted from the decline and the ultimate disruption of the great Roman Empire. We have seen it gathering nations under its wings, and planting civilisations in the lands of Europe and beyond. The dark shadows on its history it is easy to trace; but these must not be so projected as to thrust out of sight the social benefits which were wrought. It is no exaggeration to affirm that, but for the Church and municipal government, Italy would have

been wrecked, and Europe would have presented the spectacle of a multitude of states more or less barbarous, everlastingly at feud, and without any bond of unity. If the Church could not curb the ambitions of princes and the feuds of nobles, if, too often, in its policy it played the part of a power more wily than any world-power, yet, in the labours and services of its clergy, its missionaries, its fraternities, it vindicated the cause of the weak and asserted the rights of the something that is in all men—the rights of humanity. By its communications, by the communions between peoples which it established, by the witness which it bore to a good of which all nations were partakers, it realised in dim outline “a parliament of man, a federation of the world.” Why it did not more rapidly and surely Christianise the continent which owned its sway, is a question the reply to which is manifold. But it brought in large measures of good, and it prepared for still larger measures in future times. It gave ideals of virtue, freedom, love. It infused the spirit of reverence into the civilisation it guided. It opened up idealisations of life that checked the scramble for mere material and territorial gain, that softened the coarseness of manners, that inculcated the dignity of womanhood, that pro-

claimed the sanctity of the home, that enjoined the duty of the strong to support the weak. The tares indeed grew in rank luxuriance, threatening often to choke the wheat, but the wheat remained—pure grain and wholesome—in the midst of manifold corruption.