XIII

DIOCLETIAN AND CONSTANTINE. CHRISTIANITY

(285-337)

Diocletian (285–305). **The Tetrarchy.** — Forty-five emperors had already worn the purple. Of this number twenty-nine, not to mention the thirty tyrants, had been assassinated. Four or five others had perished by violence. Only eleven or twelve had met natural deaths. Such was the organization of supreme power in the Roman Empire!

Diocletian imposed upon himself the double task of reëstablishing order at home and security on the frontiers. While the tyranny of the governors of Gaul drove the peasants of that province to revolt, the Alemanni crossed the Danube and ravaged Rhætia; the Saxons pillaged the coasts of Britain and Gaul; the Franks went as far as Sicily to plunder Syracuse, and Carausius, on being ordered to arrest those pirates, caused himself to be proclaimed emperor in Britain (287). Alarmed at this critical situation Diocletian took as colleague Maximianus, one of his former comrades in arms (285), who assumed the surname of Herculius as Diocletian had assumed that of Jovius. Disorder and invasion threatening everywhere, the two Augusti associated with themselves two inferior rulers, the Cæsars Galerius and Constantius Chlorus (293).

In the partition of the empire Diocletian kept the East and Thrace; Galerius had the Danubian provinces; Maximianus Italy, Africa and Spain, with Mauritania; Constantius Gaul and Britain. The ordinances issued by each prince were valid in the provinces of his colleagues. Diocletian remained the supreme head of the state and by his skill and conciliatory spirit maintained harmony among princes who were already rivals. He was the first Roman emperor to surround the throne with all the pomp of an Asiatic court. He adopted a diadem, clothed himself in silk and gold, and compelled all, who obtained permission to

approach, to adore on their knees the imperial divinity and majesty. He began to establish that regulated hierarchy so necessary in a monarchical administration to protect the prince from military revolutions, and also that despotism of the court, that seraglio government, which slays public spirit and makes service rendered to the person of the prince more esteemed than service rendered to the state. But successful wars justified the measures of Diocletian.

In the East, the Persians had driven a partisan of the Romans from the Armenian throne and were threatening Syria. Galerius marched against them. A defeat which he suffered was gloriously redeemed, and Narses ceded Mesopotamia, five provinces beyond the Tigris and the suzerainty of Armenia and Iberia at the foot of the Caucasus (297). This was the most glorious treaty which the empire had yet signed. Diocletian erected numerous fortifications there to preserve the conquest. At the other extremity of the Roman world, Constantius, after having expelled the Franks from Gaul and Batavia, made a descent on Britain and vanquished the usurper Alectus (296) who had succeeded Carausius.

Tranquillity having been everywhere restored, Diocletian sowed discord among the barbarians. He armed Goths and Vandals, Gepidæ and Burgundiones, against each other. Then he repaired all the fortifications on the frontiers and constructed new posts. In these few years the empire regained a formidable footing. These successes were celebrated by a splendid triumph, the last which Rome beheld (303).

Unfortunately Diocletian was persuaded by Galerius to order a cruel persecution of the church. A conflagration, which burst out in the imperial palace and with which the Christians were charged, increased his wrath. Throughout the empire, except in the provinces where Constantius Chlorus reigned, the victims were hunted down and tortured.

Shortly afterward Diocletian grew weary of power and abdicated at Nicomedia. Maximianus unwillingly followed his example and laid down the diadem the same day at Milan. The former chief of the Roman world retired to a magnificent villa, which he had built near Salona on the Dalmatian coast, and passed his old age in peaceful pursuits. One day when Maximianus was urging him to reascend the throne, he replied: "If you could only see the splendid

vegetables which I raise myself, you would not talk to me of such worries." He died there in 313. The ruins of his palace are still to be seen.

New Emperors and New Civil Wars (303–323). — Galerius and Constantius assumed the title of Augustus and chose two new Cæsars. These were Maximinus, who received the government of Syria and Egypt, and Severus, who had Italy and Africa and who became Augustus after the death of Constantius. Constantine, the son of this last prince, whom a brilliant destiny awaited, succeeded his father with the title of Cæsar.

The scheme of Diocletian, apparently so cleverly contrived to prevent usurpation by sharing the power in advance with a few ambitious men and rendering the supreme authority almost everywhere present, was in reality impracticable. This empire, so vast and now so menaced, could be held together for a moment by a firm and experienced hand like that of Constantine or Diocletian, but ultimate dismemberment was sure. Rome herself gave the signal for new wars. Incensed at the desertion in which the new emperors left her, she bestowed the title of Augustus upon Maxentius, son of Maximianus (306), who took his father as his colleague. Thus the empire had six masters at once: the two Augusti, Galerius and Severus; the two Cæsars, Constantine and Maximinus; and the two usurpers, Maxentius and Maximianus. Severus was the first to fall, vanquished and slain by Maximianus. The latter was the next to disappear, banished by his son and put to death by his son-in-law Constantine, whom he was attempting to overthrow (310). In the following year Galerius died in consequence of his debauches. Maxentius succumbed in turn to the blows of his brother-in-law, Constantine, near the Milvian Bridge which spans the Tiber. For this expedition Constantine had gained the support of Christianity by placing the cross upon his standards (312).

Licinius, the successor of Galerius, had at the same time vanquished Maximinus who took poison (313). Thus the empire had now only two masters, Licinius in the East and Constantine in the West. This was one too many for these ambitious and perfidious princes, who sought each other's destruction. Licinius fomented a conspiracy against his rival. The latter in reply declared war, defeated his enemy and imposed upon him an onerous peace.

This peace lasted nine years, during which Constantine introduced order into the administration and gained glory and power by a victory over the Goths, 40,000 of whom entered his service under the name of Fœderati. Under pretext of protecting the Christians, Constantine attacked his colleague and took him prisoner after two victories. He stripped him of the purple promising that he would respect his life, but some time afterward put him to death (323).

Christianity. — Pagan morality had risen to a great height with Seneca, Lucan, Persius, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. The activity of the philosophers had some effect upon the intellect. But the brilliancy with which certain intellects still shine in our eyes prevents our seeing the state of spiritual infancy in which the greater part of the human race then lay. For it the fairest doctrines wrought by human reason remained without effect, because they were not sustained by creeds born of faith alone. The philosophers talked grandly of their scorn for fortune, pain and death; but they knew little concerning the life to come or the pains and rewards in store. Their haughty virtue suited hopeless wise men, like some of those Roman nobles who, having lost the dignity of the citizen, had taken refuge in the dignity of the man. For the masses such marvels were required as impress the imagination and impose certainty without being understood.

Credo quia absurdum, Tertullian says. Religion alone can provide those beliefs with which reason has nothing to do. Placed between Egypt and Persia, that is to say, between the two countries which have professed the most ardent faith in a life to come, Judæa had finally added to the grand Semitic idea of divine unity the idea of the resurrection and of the judgment of the dead. The simple purity of the parables of Jesus, his invincible faith in God and in his justice, his teaching, which devoted itself to ardent charity for all the suffering and wretched, went to the heart of the lower classes. Meanwhile the Fathers and the Doctors, constructing with Platonic ideas the most rational and hence the most philosophical system of metaphysics which the world had ever known, won gifted minds to the cause of the new Gospel.

Jesus was born five years before our era in the town of Bethlehem in the midst of Jews who, overwhelmed with misery, awaited the advent of the Messiah promised by their

prophets. In the fifteenth year of Tiberius he began to journey throughout Judæa, teaching love of God and man, purity and justice, the reward of the good and the punishment of the bad. The Pharisees, the strict sectaries of the Mosaic law, caused the holy victim of humanity to be condemned and nailed to the cross. After the Passion the apostles dispersed among the provinces where many Jewish colonies had been established. The Church welcomed a multitude of pagans who were disgusted with their marble gods and many slaves and miserable people, who at last heard a human voice whisper in their ears words of consolation and hope. In the time of Nero there were already enough Christians in Rome to excite persecution. Some suffered under Domitian. A larger number were condemned under Trajan. That emperor forbade search being made after them but, applying the ancient decrees of the senate, he punished whoever were convicted of holding secret meetings or of showing contempt for imperial authority by refusing to sacrifice to the gods, the worship of whom the emperor as pontifex maximus was bound to protect.

Nevertheless as the Church grew her doctrines became better known. The pagans set up in opposition the pretended miracles of Vespasian and of Apollonius of Tyana, philosopher and wonder-worker. They also tried to purify paganism, thereby rendering it less unworthy of contending with the religion of Christ. They introduced into their worship mysterious forms, such as initiations and expiations, calculated to impress the popular imagination. These innovations did not succeed in preventing men from embracing a doctrine which was both more simple and mild. Christianity encountered another danger. Like philosophy it had its different schools or heresies. The four Gospels, the Epistles, the Apostles' Creed, maintained union, and Aristides and Justin presented to Hadrian and Antoninus two Apologies, which gained for the believers a little repose. But the sophists induced Marcus Aurelius to decree fresh persecutions in which Justin, Polycarp and many others were martyred. The Christians were generally tranquil until Severus, a rude disciplinarian, took alarm at their secret assemblies and ordered a persecution (199–204) to which the sympathetic tolerance of Alexander Severus put a stop. Under Decius the calamities of the empire were attributed to the wrath of the gods on account of Christian-

ity, and the last persecution, that of Diocletian or rather of Galerius, deserved to be called the era of martyrdom (303-312). It was all the more severe because the Christians were then very numerous in the empire. Constantine determined to make himself the head of this increasing party, and to this resolution owed his victory.

In his expedition against Maxentius (312) he declared himself the protector of the new faith. The following year he published at Milan an edict of toleration. As long as Licinius lived Constantine used discretion with the pagans. Beginning with the year 321 he granted the Church the right to receive donations and legacies. He repaid the assistance which it had afforded him against his last rival by lavishing upon it at the expense of the state property which he guaranteed to it in perpetual possession. He transferred to the Christian priests all the privileges which the pontiffs of paganism enjoyed, that is to say, the right of asylum for their temples, and for themselves exemption from public service, statute labor and imposts. Even the humblest ecclesiastic could not be put to torture, and rest on Sunday was prescribed, a great boon to the slaves.

To multiply conversions he made it plain in what quarter imperial favors were to be found, bestowing offices on Christians and privileges on the cities which overturned the pagan altars. On the other hand he tried to destroy paganism by frequent exhortations to his peoples, and afterward when triumphant Christianity no longer feared dangerous tumults, by severe ordinances which in many places closed the temples and overthrew the idols, without however shedding the blood of those who remained attached to the ancient worship. The Council of Nicæa, convoked by Constantine in 323, finally drew up the creed of Christianity. When it had dispersed, the emperor wrote to all the churches "that they were to conform to the will of God as expressed by the Council."

Reorganization of the Imperial Administration. — The revolution had been accomplished in the religious order. He completed it in the political order. Diocletian had only outlined the organization which was destined to put an end to military revolutions. Constantine resumed this enterprise. The first thing he did was to abandon Rome, still filled with her gods with whom he wished nothing to do, and to found another capital on the banks of the Bosphorus between Europe and Asia. Constantinople rose upon the site of Byzantium, far enough from the eastern frontiers to have small fear of hostile attack, while sufficiently near them to assure their being better watched and defended. The site was so well chosen that for ten centuries every invasion passed her by. In 330 Constantine inaugurated the new city as capital of the empire. He established a senate, tribes and curiæ. He erected a Capitol, consecrated not to the Olympian gods, now dethroned and dead, but to learning. He built palaces, aqueducts, baths, porticoes and eleven churches. It was like Rome a seven-hilled city and divided into fourteen regions. Gratuitous distributions of corn were made. Egypt sent thither her grain and the provinces their statues and finest monuments. Rome abandoned by her emperor and by her wealthiest families, who went away to establish themselves near the court, "gradually became isolated in the centre of the empire; and, while fighting went on around her, sat in the shadow of her name awaiting her ruin."

The empire was divided into four prefectures and these again into thirteen dioceses. The enormous size of the provinces had often inspired their governors with the idea of mounting higher, even to the imperial power. So the twenty provinces of Augustus were cut up into the 116 provinces of Constantine. A numerous body of administrators, graded in a lengthy hierarchy, was interposed between the people and the emperor, whose will, transmitted by the ministers to the prætorian prefects, passed from the latter to the presidents of the dioceses and descended through the provincial governors to the cities. At the head of this hierarchy seven great officers formed the imperial ministry: the Count of the Sacred Chamber or Grand Chamberlain; the Master of Offices or Minister of State, who directed the household of the emperor and the police of the empire; the Quæstor of the Palace, a sort of Chancellor; the Count of the Sacred Largesses or Minister of Finance; the Count of the Private Domain; the Count of the Domestic Cavalry; and the Count of the Domestic Infantry. The two latter were chiefs of the emperor's guards. Add to these officials the throng of inferior agents who encumbered the palace and were more numerous, says Libanius, than the swarming flies in summer.

The four prætorian prefects of the East, Illyricum, Italy

and Gaul had no longer any military command, but they published the emperor's decrees, made assessments, superintended the collection of taxes and sat as appellate judges over the chiefs of the diocese. Their rich appointments and their numerous staff made them resemble four kings of secondary rank commanding the governors of the dioceses and of the provinces.

The Masters of Cavalry and Infantry had under their orders the Military Counts of the provinces.

Diocletian had already surrounded himself with the splendor of the Asiatic courts in order to exalt the majesty of the prince. Constantine imitated his example. The posts of the imperial court conferred upon those invested with them titles of personal but not transmissible nobility. The consuls, the prefects and the seven ministers were called the illustres; the proconsuls, the vicars, the counts and the dukes were spectabiles; the former consuls and the presidents were clarissimi. There were also perfectissimi and egregii. The princes of the imperial house bore the title of nobilissimi.

This divine hierarchy, as in official language the army of functionaries surrounding and concealing the sacred person of the emperor was called, added to the brilliancy of the court without increasing the strength of the government. Salaries were required for this immense staff, who took much greater pains to please the prince than to labor for the public good. The expenses of administration increased and taxes increased with them while poverty was already draining the richest provinces. Then between the treasury and the taxpayer began a war of ruse and violence, which fretted the people and extinguished the last remnants of patriotism.

The free institutions of former days still lived in the municipal system of government. Each city had its own senate or curia, composed of curiales or proprietors of at least fifteen acres of land, who deliberated on municipal matters and from their own number elected magistrates to administer affairs. It had also its duumvirs who presided over the curia, watched over the interests of the city and judged law cases of minor importance; an ædile; a curator or steward; a tax collector; irenarchs or police commissioners; scribes and notaries. Beginning with the Emperor Valentinian I each had a defensor, or sort of tribune,

elected by the city to defend its interests with the governor or prince.

But the curiales, charged with collecting the tax, guaranteed its payment with their own property. Thus their condition became more and more wretched. They sought escape by taking refuge in the privileged bodies of the clergy or army, but were thrust back by force into the curia, where at their death their sons were to take their place. Their exemption from torture and from certain ignominious penalties was only slight compensation. Thus the number of the curiales was already diminishing in the cities.

The imposts for which they were responsible were very heavy. In the first place there was the indiction or land-tax, which was assessed according to the fortune of each person as indicated in the register drawn up every fifteen years or cycle of indictions; then the twentieth of inheritances; the hundredth of the proceeds of auction sales; the poll-tax, paid by non-landholders and for slaves; the customs dues; and lastly the chrysargyron, levied every four years on petty commerce and petty industry. The aurum coronarium, formerly voluntary when the cities sent crowns of gold to consuls or emperors, had become an obligatory tax.

These charges pressed all the heavier on small or moderate fortunes since they fell upon the rich lightly or not at all. The nobilissimi, the patricii, the illustres, the spectabiles, the clarissimi, the egregii, all the staff of the palace, all the courtiers and the clergy, were exempt from the heaviest of the imposts, which fell wholly upon the curiales. The third class, that of simple freemen comprising those who owned less than fifteen acres, the merchants and artisans, were no less unfortunate. The corporations which the artisans of the cities had formed had, especially since the time of Alexander Severus, become prisons from which exit was prohibited. While destroying industry, the government supposed it could in this way force men to labor. In the rural districts the petty proprietors, despoiled by the violence and craft of the great or by the invasions of the barbarians, were reduced to becoming the dependents of the rich. Thus attached to the soil, they were deprived of the greater part of the rights though not of the name of freemen. The slaves alone gained in the midst of all these miseries. Stoic philosophy and afterwards Christianity had

somewhat humanized ideas and laws concerning them. At last they were regarded as men. They were authorized to dispose more freely of their savings, and it was forbidden to kill or torture them or to separate families when they were sold. As freemen were abased and slaves exalted, a new condition began to take form in serfdom of the soil. This was preferable to slavery, but the discouraged freeman ceased to work. Population diminished, and it became necessary to repopulate with barbarians the abandoned provinces.

The real army whose duty it was to repel invasion was now composed only of barbarians, mainly Germans, to whom the guardianship of the frontiers was imprudently confided. The legions, reduced from 6000 to 1500 men each so that their commanders might be less ambitious, garrisoned the cities of the interior. The palatines, who formed the emperor's private guard, were the best paid and most honored. Otherwise there was the same system in the army as in civil life, of servitude and privilege, which repelled every man of value from the profession of arms. The recruits were obtained from the dregs of society or among the vagabonds of those barbarian nations who were soon to dictate the law. Sense of military honor did not exist. The soldiers were branded like galley slaves. Thus in spite of its 133 legions, its arsenals, its magazines, its magnificent belt of fortifications along the Rhine, the Main, the Danube, the Euphrates and the desert of Arabia, the empire was about to be assailed by despised enemies.

If then the new state of things elevated the classes formerly humble as the slave, the woman, the child, it on the other hand degraded whatever had been strong and proud as the freeman or citizen. As soldiers were wanting, so were writers and artists. Nothing great could issue from the schools, which Valentinian was to reorganize. They had only sophists and rhetoricians like Libanius, or scribblers of light verses and of epithalamia like Claudian. Literature and art, still closely linked with paganism, fell with the creed whose followers were soon to be found only in rural districts.

Faith and life, withdrawing from the old worship and the old society, passed to those that were new. Christianity had developed and received form in the fires of persecution. It had ascended the throne with Constantine, who

heaped privileges, immunities and wealth upon the Church. Thus an influence was added to that which it already possessed through its young and ardent faith, its proselyting spirit and the genius of its leaders. Even heresy had served to strengthen it. From its bosom sprang forth a lofty, passionate, active literature, represented by Tertullian, Saint Athanasius, Saint Ambrose, Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory of Nazianzen, Lactantius, Salvian and many more. Fifteen great councils held in the fourth century bore witness to its activity, and were already regulating its doctrine, its discipline and its ecclesiastical hierarchy. Though empire and ancient social order crumble away, the Church will survive. It will welcome the barbarians to its embrace, sending to the Dacian Goths an Arian bishop Ulphilas, to translate the Bible into their dialect, and other missionaries to convert the Burgundians.

Last Years of Constantine (323–337). — These three mighty facts — the establishment of Christianity as the dominant religion of the empire, the foundation of Constantinople and the administrative reorganization — fill the reign of Constantine. From his defeat of Licinius in 323 to his death in 337, we find nothing in his personal history except the bloody tragedies of the imperial palace, in which by his orders his son Crispus, his empress Fausta and the son of Licinius, a child of twelve, were put to death. Embassies of Blemmyes, Ethiopians and Indians, a treaty with Sapor II, who promised to ameliorate the condition of the Christians in Persia, and two successful expeditions against the Goths and the Sarmatæ (332), caused all these domestic misfortunes to be forgotten. A few days before expiring Constantine was baptized.