Slavery and Christianity

How numerous the slaves were in Roman society when Christianity made its appearance, how hard was their lot, and how the competition of slave labour crushed free labour is notorious. It is the scope of this article to show what Christianity has done for slaves and against slavery, first in the Roman world, next in that society which was the result of the barbarian invasions, and lastly in the modern world.

The Church and Roman slavery

The first missionaries of the Gospel, men of Jewish origin, came from a country where slavery existed. But it existed in Judea under a form very different from the Roman form. The Mosaic Law was merciful to the slave (Exodus 21; Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15:21) and carefully secured his fair wage to the labourer (Deuteronomy 24:15). In Jewish society the slave was not an object of contempt, because labour was not despised as it was elsewhere. No man thought it beneath him to ply a manual trade. These ideas and habits of life the Apostles brought into the new society which so rapidly grew up as the effect of their preaching. As this society included, from the first, faithful of all conditions — rich and poor, slaves and freemen — the Apostles were obliged to utter their beliefs as to the social inequalities which so profoundly divided the Roman world. "For as many of you as have been baptized in Christ, have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28; cf. 1 Corinthians 12:13). From this principle St. Paul draws no political conclusions. It was not his wish, as it was not in his power, to realize Christian equality either by force or by revolt. Such revolutions are not effected of a sudden. Christianity accepts society as it is, influencing it for its transformation through, and only through, individual souls. What it demands in the first place from masters and from slaves is, to live as brethren — commanding with equity, without threatening, remembering that God is the master of all - obeying with fear, but without servile flattery, in simplicity of heart, as they would obey Christ (cf. Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:22-4; 4:1).

This language was understood by masters and by slaves who became converts to Christianity. But many slaves who were Christians had pagan masters to whom this sentiment of fraternity was unknown, and who sometimes exhibited that cruelty of which moralists and poets so often speak. To such slaves St. Peter points out their duty: to be submissive "not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward", not

with a mere inert resignation, but to give a good example and to imitate Christ, Who also suffered unjustly (1 Peter 2:18, 23-4). In the eyes of the Apostles, a slave's condition, peculiarly wretched, peculiarly exposed to temptations, bears all the more efficacious testimony to the new religion. St. Paul recommends slaves to seek in all things to please their masters, not to contradict them, to do them no wrong, to honour them, to be loyal to them, so as to make the teaching of God Our Saviour shine forth before the eyes of all, and to prevent that name and teaching from being blasphemed (cf. 1 Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:9, 10). The apostolic writings show how large a place slaves occupied in the Church. Nearly all the names of the Christians whom St. Paul salutes in his Epistles to the Romans are servile *cognomina*: the two groups whom he calls "those of the household of Aristobulus" and "those of the household of Narcissus" indicate Christian servitors of those two contemporaries of Nero. His Epistle, written from Rome to the Philippians (iv, 22) bears them greeting from the saints of Caesar's household, i.e. converted slaves of the imperial palace.

One fact which, in the Church, relieved the condition of the slave was the absence among Christians of the ancient scorn of labour (Cicero, "De off.", I, xlii; "Pro Flacco", xviii; "pro domo", xxxiii; Suetonius, "Claudius, xxii; Seneca, "De beneficiis", xviii; Valerius Maximus, V, ii, 10). Converts to the new religion knew that Jesus had been a carpenter; they saw St. Paul exercise the occupation of a tentmaker (Acts 18:3; 1 Corinthians 4:12). "Neither did we eat any man's bread", said the Apostle, "for nothing, but in labour and in toil we worked night and day, lest we should be chargeable to any of you" (2 Thessalonians 3:8; cf. Acts 20:33, 34). Such an example, given at a time when those who laboured were accounted "the dregs of the city", and those who did not labour lived on the public bounty, constituted a very efficacious form of preaching. A new sentiment was thereby introduced into the Roman world, while at the same time a formal discipline was being established in the Church. It would have none of those who made a parade of their leisurely curiosity in the Greek and Roman cities (2 Thessalonians 3:11). It declared that those who do not labour do not deserve to be fed (ibid., 10). A Christian was not permitted to live without an occupation (Didache, xii).

Religious equality was the negation of slavery as it was practiced by pagan society. It must have been an exaggeration, no doubt, to say, as one author of the first century said, that "slaves had no religion, or had only foreign religions" (Tacitus, "Annals", XIV, xliv): many were members of funerary *collegia* under the invocation of Roman divinities (Statutes of the College of Lanuvium, "Corp. Inscr. lat.", XIV, 2112). But in many circumstances this haughty and formalist religion excluded slaves from its functions, which, it was held, their presence would have defiled. (Cicero, "Octavius", xxiv). Absolute religious equality, as proclaimed by Christianity, was therefore a novelty. The Church made no account of the social condition of the faithful. Bond and free received the same sacraments. Clerics of servile origin were numerous (St. Jerome, Ep. lxxxii). The very Chair of St. Peter was occupied by men who had been slaves — Pius in the second century, Callistus in the third. So complete — one might almost say, so levelling — was this Christian equality that St. Paul (1 Timothy 6:2), and, later, St. Ignatius (Polyc., iv), are obliged to admonish the slave and the handmaid not to contemn their masters, "believers like them and sharing in the same benefits". In giving them a place in religious society, the Church restored to slaves the family and marriage. In Roman law, neither legitimate marriage, nor regular paternity, nor even impediment to the most unnatural unions had existed for the slave (Digest, XXXVIII, viii, i, (sect) 2; X, 10, (sect) 5). That slaves often endeavoured to override this abominable position is touchingly proved by innumerable mortuary inscriptions; but the name of *uxor*, which the slave woman takes in these inscriptions, is very precarious, for no law protects her honour, and with her there is no adultery (Digest, XLVIII, v, 6; Cod. Justin., IX, ix, 23). In the Church the marriage of slaves is a

sacrament; it possesses "the solidity" of one (St. Basil, Ep. cxcix, 42). The Apostolic Constitutions impose upon the master the duty of making his slave contract "a legitimate marriage" (III, iv; VIII, xxxii). St. John Chrysostom declares that slaves have the marital power over their wives and the paternal over their children ("In Ep. ad Ephes.", Hom. xxii, 2). He says that "he who has immoral relations with the wife of a slave is as culpable as he who has the like relations with the wife of the prince: both are adulterers, for it is not the condition of the parties that makes the crime" ("In I Thess.", Hom. v, 2; "In II Thess.", Hom. iii, 2).

In the Christian cemeteries there is no difference between the tombs of slaves and those of the free. The inscriptions on pagan sepulchres — whether the *columbarium* common to all the servants of one household, or the burial plot of a funerary *collegium* of slaves or freedmen, or isolated tombs — always indicate the servile condition. In Christian epitaphs it is hardly ever to be seen ("Bull. di archeol. christiana", 1866, p. 24), though slaves formed a considerable part of the Christian population. Sometimes we find a slave honoured with a more pretentious sepulchre than others of the faithful, like that of Ampliatus in the cemetery of Domitilla ("Bull. di archeol. christ.", 1881, pp. 57-54, and pl. III, IV). This is particularly so in the case of slaves who were martyrs: the ashes of two slaves, Protus and Hyacinthus, burned alive in the Valerian persecution, had been wrapped in a winding-sheet of gold tissue (ibid., 1894, p. 28). Martyrdom eloquently manifests the religious equality of the slave: he displays as much firmness before the menaces of the persecutor as does the free man. Sometimes it is not for the Faith alone that a slave woman dies, but for the faith and chastity equally threatened — "pro fide et castitate occisa est" ("Acta S. Dulae" in Acta SS., III March, p. 552). Beautiful assertions of this moral freedom are found in the accounts of the martyrdoms of the slaves Ariadne, Blandina, Evelpistus, Potamienna, Felicitas, Sabina, Vitalis, Porphyrus, and many others (see Allard, "Dix leçons sur le martyre", 4th ed., pp. 155-- 64). The Church made the enfranchisement of the slave an act of disinterested charity. Pagan masters usually sold him his liberty for his market value, on receipt of his painfully amassed savings (Cicero, "Philipp. VIII", xi; Seneca "Ep. lxxx"); true Christians gave it to him as an alms. Sometimes the Church redeemed slaves out of its common resources (St. Ignatius, "Polyc.", 4; Apos. Const., IV, iii). Heroic Christians are known to have sold themselves into slavery to deliver slaves (St. Clement, "Cor.", 4; "Vita S. Joannis Eleemosynarii" in Acts SS., Jan., II, p. 506). Many enfranchised all the slaves they had. In pagan antiquity wholesale enfranchisements are frequent, but they never include all the owner's slaves, and they are always by testamentary disposition — that is when the owner cannot be impoverished by his own bounty, (Justinian, "Inst.", I, vii; "Cod. Just.", VII, iii, 1). Only Christians enfranchised all their slaves in the owner's lifetime, thus effectually despoiling themselves a considerable part of their fortune (see Allard, "Les esclaves chrétiens", 4th ed., p. 338). At the beginning of the fifth century, a Roman millionaire, St. Melania, gratuitously granted liberty to so many thousand of slaves that her biographer declares himself unable to give their exact number (Vita S. Melaniae, xxxiv). Palladius mentions eight thousand slaves freed (Hist. Lausiaca, cxix), which, taking the average price of a slave as about $100, would represent a value of $800,000 [1913 dollars]. But Palladius wrote before 406, which was long before Melania had completely exhausted her immense fortune in acts of liberality of all kinds (Rampolla, "S. Melania Giuniore", 1905, p. 221).

Primitive Christianity did not attack slavery directly; but it acted as though slavery did not exist. By inspiring the best of its children with this heroic charity, examples of which have been given above, it remotely prepared the way for the abolition of slavery. To reproach the Church of the first ages with not having condemned slavery in principle, and with having tolerated it in fact, is to blame it for not having let loose a frightful revolution, in which, perhaps, all civilization would have perished with Roman

society. But to say, with Ciccotti (Il tramonto della schiavitù, Fr. tr., 1910, pp. 18, 20), that primitive Christianity had not even "an embryonic vision" of a society in which there should be no slavery, to say that the Fathers of the Church did not feel "the horror of slavery", is to display either strange ignorance or singular unfairness. In St. Gregory of Nyssa (In Ecclesiastem, hom. iv) the most energetic and absolute reprobation of slavery may be found; and again in numerous passages of St. John Chrysostom's discourse we have the picture of a society without slaves - a society composed only of free workers, an ideal portrait of which he traces with the most eloquent insistence (see the texts cited in Allard, ''Les esclaves chrétiens", p. 416-23).

The Church and slavery after the barbarian invasions

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the legislative movement which took place during the same period in regard to slaves. From Augustus to Constantine statutes and jurisprudence tended to afford them greater protection against ill-treatment and to facilitate enfranchisement. Under the Christian emperors this tendency, in spite of relapses at certain points, became daily more marked, and ended, in the sixth century, in Justinian's very liberal legislation (see Wallon, "Hist. de l'esclavage dans l'antiquité", III, ii and x). Although the civil law on slavery still lagged behind the demands of Christianity ("The laws of Caesar are one thing, the laws of Christ another", St. Jerome writes in "Ep. lxxvii"), nevertheless very great progress had been made. It continued in the Eastern Empire (laws of Basil the Macedonian, of Leo the Wise, of Constantine Porphyrogenitus), but in the West it was abruptly checked by the barbarian invasions. Those invasions were calamitous for the slaves, increasing their numbers which had began to diminish, and subjecting them to legislation and to customs much harder than those which obtained under the Roman law of the period (see Allard, "Les origines du servage" in "Rev. des questions historiques", April, 1911). Here again the Church intervened. It did so in three ways: redeeming slaves; legislating for their benefit in its councils; setting an example of kind treatment. Documents of the fifth to the seventh century are full of instances of captives carried off from conquered cities by the barbarians and doomed to slavery, whom bishops, priests, and monks, and pious laymen redeemed. Redeemed captives were sometimes sent back in thousands to their own country (ibid., p. 393-7, and Lesne, "Hist de la propriété ecclésiastique en France", 1910, pp. 357-69).

The Churches of Gaul, Spain, Britain, and Italy were incessantly busy, in numerous councils, with the affairs of slaves; protection of the maltreated slave who has taken refuge in a church (Councils of Orléans, 511, 538, 549; Council of Epone, 517); those manumitted in ecclesiis, but also those freed by any other process (Council of Arles, 452; of Agde, 506; of Orléans, 549; of Mâcon, 585; of Toledo, 589, 633; of Paris, 615); validity of marriage contracted with full knowledge of the circumstances between free persons and slaves (Councils of Verberie, 752, of Compiègne, 759); rest for slaves on Sundays and feast days (Council of Auxerre, 578 or 585; of Châlon-sur-Saône, middle of the seventh century; of Rouen, 650; of Wessex, 691; of Berghamsted, 697); prohibition of Jews to possess Christian slaves (Council of Orléans, 541; of Mâcon, 581; of Clichy, 625; of Toledo, 589, 633, 656); suppression of traffic in slaves by forbidding their sale outside the kingdom (Council of Châlon-sur-Saône, between 644 and 650); prohibition against reducing a free man to slavery (Council of Clichy, 625). Less liberal in this respect than Justinian (Novella cxxiii, 17), who made tacit consent a sufficient condition, the Western discipline does not permit a slave to be raised to the priesthood without the formal consent of his master; nevertheless the councils held at Orléans in 511, 538, 549, while imposing canonical penalties upon the bishop who exceeded his authority in this matter, declare such an ordination to be valid. A council held at Rome in 595 under the presidency of St. Gregory the Great permits the slave to become a

monk without any consent, express or tacit, of his master.

At this period the Church found itself becoming a great proprietor. Barbarian converts endowed it largely with real property. As these estates were furnished with serfs attached to the cultivation of the soil, the Church became by force of circumstances a proprietor of human beings, for whom, in these troublous times, the relation was a great blessing. The laws of the barbarians, amended through Christian influence, gave ecclesiastical serfs a privileged position: their rents were fixed; ordinarily, they were bound to give the proprietor half of their labour or half of its products, the remainder being left to them (Lex Alemannorum, xxii; Lex Bajuvariorum, I, xiv, 6). A council of the sixth century (Eauze, 551) enjoins upon bishops that they must exact of their serfs a lighter service than that performed by the serfs of lay proprietors, and must remit to them one-fourth of their rents.

Another advantage of ecclesiastical serfs was the permanency of their position. A Roman law of the middle of the fourth century (Cod. Just., XI, xlvii, 2) had forbidden rural slaves to be removed from the lands to which they belonged; this was the origin of serfdom, a much better condition than slavery properly so called. But the barbarians virtually suppressed this beneficent law (Gregory of Tours, "Hist. Franc.", VI, 45); it was even formally abrogated among the Goths of Italy by the edict of Theodoric (sect. 142). Nevertheless, as an exceptional privilege, it remained in force for the serfs of the Church, who, like the Church itself remained under Roman law (Lex Burgondionum, LVIII, i; Louis I, "Add. ad legem Langobard.", III, i). They shared besides, the inalienability of all ecclesiastical property which had been established by councils (Rome, 50; Orléans, 511, 538; Epone, 517; Clichy, 625; Toledo, 589); they were sheltered from the exactions of the royal officers by the immunity granted to almost all church lands (Kroell, "L'immunité franque", 19110); thus their position was generally envied (Flodoard, "Hist eccl. Remensis", I, xiv), and when the royal liberality assigned to a church a portion of land out of the state property, the serfs who cultivated were loud in their expression of joy (Vita S. Eligii, I, xv).

It has been asserted that the ecclesiastical serfs were less fortunately situated because the inalienability of church property prevented their being enfranchised. But this is inexact. St. Gregory the Great enfranchised serfs of the Roman Church (Ep. vi, 12), and there is frequent discussion in the councils in regard to ecclesiastical freedmen. The Council of Agde (506) gives the bishop the right to enfranchise those serfs "who shall have deserved it" and to leave them a small patrimony. A Council of Orléans (541) declares that even if the bishop has dissipated the property of his church, the serfs whom he has freed in reasonable number (*numero competenti*) are to remain free. A Merovingian formula shows a bishop enfranchising one-tenth of his serfs (Formulae Biturgenses, viii). The Spanish councils imposed greater restrictions, recognizing the right of a bishop to enfranchise the serfs of his church on condition of his indemnifying it out of his own private property (Council of Seville, 590; of Toledo, 633; of Mérida, 666). But they made it obligatory to enfranchise the serf in whom a serious vocation was discerned (Council of Saragossa, 593). An English council (Celchyte, 816) orders that at the death of a bishop all the other bishops and all the abbots shall enfranchise three slaves each for the repose of his soul. This last clause shows again the mistake of saying that the monks had not the right of manumission. The canon of the Council of Epone (517) which forbids abbots to enfranchise their serfs was enacted in order that the monks might not be left to work without assistance and has been taken too literally. It is inspired not only by agricultural prudence, but also by the consideration that the serfs belong to the community of monks, and not to the abbot individually. Moreover, the rule of St. Ferréol (sixth century) permits the abbot to free serfs with the consent of the monks, or without their consent, if, in the latter case, he replaces at his own expense those he has enfranchised. The statement that

ecclesiastical freedmen were not as free as the freedmen of lay proprietors will not bear examination in the light of facts, which shows the situation of the two classes to have been identical, except that the freedman of the Church earned a higher *wergheld* than a lay freedman, and therefore his life was better protected. The "Polyptych of Irminon", a detailed description of the abbey lands of Saint-Germain-des-Prés shows that in the ninth century the serfs of that domain were not numerous and led in every way the life of free peasants.

The Church and modern slavery

In the Middle Ages slavery, properly so called, no longer existed in Christian countries; it had been replaced by serfdom, an intermediate condition in which a man enjoyed all his personal rights except the right to leave the land he cultivated and the right to freely dispose of his property. Serfdom soon disappeared in Catholic countries, to last longer only where the Protestant Reformation prevailed. But while serfdom was becoming extinct, the course of events was bringing to pass a temporary revival of slavery. As a consequence of the wars against the Mussulmans and the commerce maintained with the East, the European countries bordering on the Mediterranean, particularly Spain and Italy, once more had slaves — Turkish prisoners and also, unfortunately, captives imported by conscienceless traders. Though these slaves were generally well-treated, and set at liberty if they asked for baptism, this revival of slavery, lasting until the seventeenth century, is a blot on Christian civilization. But the number of these slaves was always very small in comparison with that of the Christian captives reduced to slavery in Mussulman countries, particularly in the Barbary states from Tripoli to the Atlantic coast of Morocco. These captives were cruelly treated and were in constant danger of losing their faith. Many actually did deny their faith, or, at least, were driven by despair to abandon all religion and all morality. Religious orders were founded to succour and redeem them.

The Trinitarians, founded in 1198 by St. John of Matha and St. Felix of Valois, established hospitals for slaves at Algiers and Tunis in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and from its foundation until the year 1787 it redeemed 900,000 slaves. The Order of Our Lady of Ransom (Mercedarians), founded in the thirteenth century by St. Peter Nolasco, and established more especially in France and Spain, redeemed 490,736 slaves between the years 1218 and 1632. To the three regular vows its founder had added a fourth, "To become a hostage in the hands of the infidels, if that is necessary for the deliverance of Christ's faithful." Many Mercedarians kept this vow even to martyrdom. Another order undertook not only to redeem captives, but also to give them spiritual and material assistance. St. Vincent of Paul had been a slave at Algiers in 1605, and had witnessed the sufferings and perils of Christian slaves. At the request of Louis XIV, he sent them, in 1642, priests of the congregation which he had founded. Many of these priests, indeed, were invested with consular functions at Tunis and at Algiers. From 1642 to 1660 they redeemed about 1200 slaves at an expense of about 1,200,000 *livres*. But their greatest achievements were in teaching the Catechism and converting thousands, and in preparing many of the captives to suffer the most cruel martyrdom rather than deny the Faith. As a Protestant historian has recently said, none of the expeditions sent against the Barbary States by the Powers of Europe, or even America, equalled "the moral effect produced by the ministry of consolation, and abnegation, going even to the sacrifice of liberty and life, which was exercised by the humble sons of St. John of Matha, St. Peter Nolasco, and St. Vincent of Paul" (Bonet-Maury, "France, christianisme et civilisation", 1907, p. 142).

A second revival of slavery took place after the discovery of the New World by the Spaniards in 1492. To give the history of it would be to exceed the limits of this article.

It will be sufficient to recall the efforts of Las Casas in behalf of the aborigines of America and the protestations of popes against the enslavement of those aborigines and the traffic in negro slaves. England, France, Portugal, and Spain, all participated in this nefarious traffic. England only made amends for its transgressions when, in 1815, it took the initiative in the suppression of the slave trade. In 1871 a writer had the temerity to assert that the Papacy had not its mind to condemn slavery" (Ernest Havet, "Le christianisme et ses origines", I, p. xxi). He forgot that, in 1462, Pius II declared slavery to be "a great crime" (*magnum scelus*); that, in 1537, Paul III forbade the enslavement of the Indians; that Urban VIII forbade it in 1639, and Benedict XIV in 1741; that Pius VII demanded of the Congress of Vienna, in 1815, the suppression of the slave trade and Gregory XVI condemned it in 1839; that, in the Bull of Canonization of the Jesuit Peter Claver, one of the most illustrious adversaries of slavery, Pius IX branded the "supreme villainy" (*summum nefas*) of the slave traders. Everyone knows of the beautiful letter which Leo XIII, in 1888, addressed to the Brazilian bishops, exhorting them to banish from their country the remnants of slavery — a letter to which the bishops responded with their most energetic efforts, and some generous slave-owners by freeing their slaves in a body, as in the first ages of the Church.

In our own times the slave trade still continued to devastate Africa, no longer for the profit of Christian states, from which all slavery had disappeared, but for the Mussulman countries. But as European penetrations progresses in Africa, the missionaries, who are always its precursors — Fathers of the Holy Ghost, Oblates, White Fathers, Franciscans, Jesuits, Priests of the Mission of Lyons — labour in the Sudan, Guinea, on the Gabun, in the region of the Great Lakes, redeeming slaves and establishing "liberty villages." At the head of this movement appear two men: Cardinal Lavigerie, who in 1888 founded the *Société Antiesclavagiste* and in 1889 promoted the Brussels conference; Leo XIII, who encouraged Lavigerie in all his projects, and, in 1890, by an Encyclical once more condemning the slave-traders and "the accursed pest of servitude", ordered an annual collection to be made in all Catholic churches for the benefit of the anti-slavery work. Some modern writers, mostly of the Socialist School — Karl Marx, Engel, Ciccotti, and, in a measure, Seligman — attribute the now almost complete disappearance of slavery to the evolution of interests and to economic causes only. The foregoing exposition of the subject is an answer to their materialistic conception of history, as showing that, if not the only, at least the principal, cause of that disappearance is Christianity acting through the authority of its teaching and the influence of its charity.

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