is a startling and arresting comment on the nature of Christ's Church on earth and on the reality of her teaching authority. The Church is wiser than we are, and her determination to emphasise by definition this, to the outer world, extravagant doctrine is a guarantee that in the long run the result of her action will be a deepening of faith in the supernatural among those who are capable of it, and will lead them in ways we do not realise to a fuller knowledge of the truth.

I hope that what I have written may be a help.

Yours sincerely,

HENRY ST JOHN, O.P.

THE COLLAPSE OF A CIVILISATION

GERVASE MATHEW, O.P.[1]

SHORTLY after the year 400 the poet Prudentius wrote that the Roman Empire had never been more flourishing nor so happy. All the evidence that we possess tends to show that it seemed eternal and impregnable to its citizens. It was impossible for them to conceive of their life without it. The Western provinces formed a single, carefully administered state, covering modern England, France, the Netherlands, Western Germany, Portugal, Spain, Italy, North Africa, and part of the Balkans. All were joined by a common culture, a common way of life, the common use of Latin. There were close economic links with the Eastern provinces of the Empire grouped round the other end of the Mediterranean. Here, Greek was the common language instead of Latin and great cities like Antioch and Alexandria had come to play roles paralleled today by New York and Chicago.

In the year 400, the young Emperor in the East was brother to the Emperor of the West and was thought of as his partner in a single sovereignty. The partnership seemed indissoluble. In the words of the greatest of fourth-century poets, 'All Roman subjects

1 The text of a talk broadcast in the Overseas Service of the B.B.C.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1950.tb03683.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

were citizens of a single city, children round a single hearth'. The Roman way of life was prized as the common heritage of all free men. During the last forty years there had been a great increase in legislation in the West. For the most part, it had been enlightened and progressive and it regulated to the smallest detail the activities of every citizen.

Education had never been so widespread, and since the edicts of 369 and 376 it had become almost a state monopoly. Even a state health service had been begun by the rescript of 370. There were many interesting, if at times bizarre, experiments in art. It is true that unwise currency manipulations in the late third century had led to inflation and to spirals of rising prices, but these had been at least partly kept in check by an elaborate and steadily increasing system of state controls. Inevitably there was a crushing burden of taxation, but this fell primarily upon members of the middle class and these must have been in some measure compensated by the great increase, both in numbers and prestige, of the Civil Service. The very wealthy had never lived more luxuriously. It must have been realised that there was a serious political menace from the wild tribes to the East of the Danube and of the Rhine. Men could remember in their own lifetime wars with barbarians which had begun with disaster; they had always ended with victory. The Empire had given so much: good order, easy communications, facilities for a solid middle-class education, careful town planning, healthy sanitation. It must have seemed incredible that all this should vanish. But it did.

On New Year's Eve, 406, the Rhine frontier broke under the pressure from the East. German war bands over-ran what is now France and Spain and North Africa, German mercenaries in the Balkans, already mutinous, invaded Italy and took Rome on the 24th August in 412. Some time in those years of chaos, Roman Britain went down for ever. But we can only guess at anything that happened in that anarchy. The sacked towns, the broken trade routes, the recurrent famine; military disaster had brought with it the collapse of a very intricate economic system. Then, in 436, upon all this there came a new wave of invaders: Huns from Central Asia, small yellow men on horseback, bow-legged and with slanting eyes and with beards hanging from their nostrils, and in that final chaos the two props of the old Roman Empire, the civil servant and the magistrate, fade from the West

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1950.tb03683.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

for over six hundred years. Yet, when everything else had broken, Christianity survived.

In the year 400, Christianity was still probably only the religion of a minority in the West. By the year 700 it was almost universal there, and was already beginning to refashion the new barbarian kingdoms into medieval Europe. It was due to Christianity, perhaps to Christianity alone, that those three centuries are not really the first dark age but the age of false dawns. False dawns, first in Ostrogoth Italy, then in Vizigoth Spain, then in Ireland and in Northumbria—each one transiently irradiating the darkness round it; each one presaging the middle ages that were yet to come. Certainly it was only due to Christianity that so much of the old classical culture remained when its material setting had been broken. The idea of universal justice, of intelligible law, of natural right, Cicero and Seneca and Virgil, all the classical Latin poems that reached the middle ages, came to them and at last to us, because they had been copied and re-copied in the monasteries during those three hundred years and Christianity had the power not only to preserve but to transform and to create. The medieval ideals of hero and of heroine, of knight, of saint; all were born during those three centuries from the impact of Christianity on the young barbarian cultures. Yet, if we had only known Christianity in the year 400 we might not have foreseen its vitality in the anarchy that followed. Fourth-century Christianity had suffered very deeply from state patronage, but, as the life and writings of Saint Ambrose illustrate, it still remained in ideal both evangelical and institutional. The triumph of Christianity in the West between the years 400 and 700 was due primarily to the fact that it was both evangelical and institutional. Evangelical in the true sense—the urgent desire to bring Christ to others, the readiness to spend oneself for others as Christ spent himself upon a cross; the constant knowledge of his close presence. If the saints of those centuries walked upon the waves it was because they knew that Christ, too, was on the waters. Beneath all this lay the strength of a personal love. As in the dying words of St Bede, 'My soul desires to see Christ my King in his beauty'. But this evangelical Christianity achieved such lasting results because it was linked with two lasting institutions—the monastery and the episcopate.

In ideal, monasteries were formed from groups of men who had

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1950.tb03683.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

bound themselves by vow to leave all things to follow Christ. They lived together as a single family, tilling their own land, grinding their own corn, making all they needed for themselves. Each monastery, therefore, formed a self-sufficient economic unit and could survive the economic collapse of the state. Monasteries had been established in the West since the fourth century but it was in the sixth century that they reached their full development when the influence of St Benedict gave them the close-knit family spirit which was to be their strength; when the influence of Cassiodorus made them centres of study, when the example of the Celtic saints had shown that some forms of monastic life were compatible with a mobile, preaching apostolate.

The monasteries were closely linked with the episcopate, for so many of the greatest Bishops had been monks. In ideal, the Bishop was conceived as the shepherd of his people, teacher of doctrine, giver of the sacraments, protector of the oppressed. But a Bishop was not an isolated Christian leader. His work was achieved and perpetuated in the visibly united brotherhood of the Catholic Church led by the Bishops of Rome, lasting from generation to generation and conceived as the impregnable city of God. It is this that partly explains the serene self-confidence that seems to underlie the physical courage of the great Catholic Bishops. Pope Saint Leo going out with his two deacons to confront the hordes of Attila, or Saint Remigius standing unarmed among the Frankish axemen and saying to their war-chief, Clovis: 'Bow thy head, Sicamber, adore what thou hast burnt, burn what thou hast adored'; for there was a third factor in the survival of Christianity. Somehow in the last crucial generation of tranquillity the pre-Christian virtues most prized long ago by stoic Roman nobles had become grafted on to Christian morals: a calm fortitude, a sense of the fundamental unity of nature, the inability to flinch. In the hour of disaster the greatest of the Christians could follow consciously Plato the Younger as well as Christ without being aware of any tension between two standards, so that Boethius waiting for death by torture in the dungeons beneath Pavia could look for his consolation not in the Gospels but in the unchanging rhythm of the stars, and Augustine, dying besieged by vandals in a ruined world, could choose for his last words the strangest chosen by a Saint, 'A great man will not think it a great matter that trees and stones should fall or mortals die'.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1950.tb03683.x Published online by Cambridge University Press